

Adventures in Fanfiction

Down The Ferret Hole

By Mundungus42

Through the
Foe-Glass
and What Severus Found There

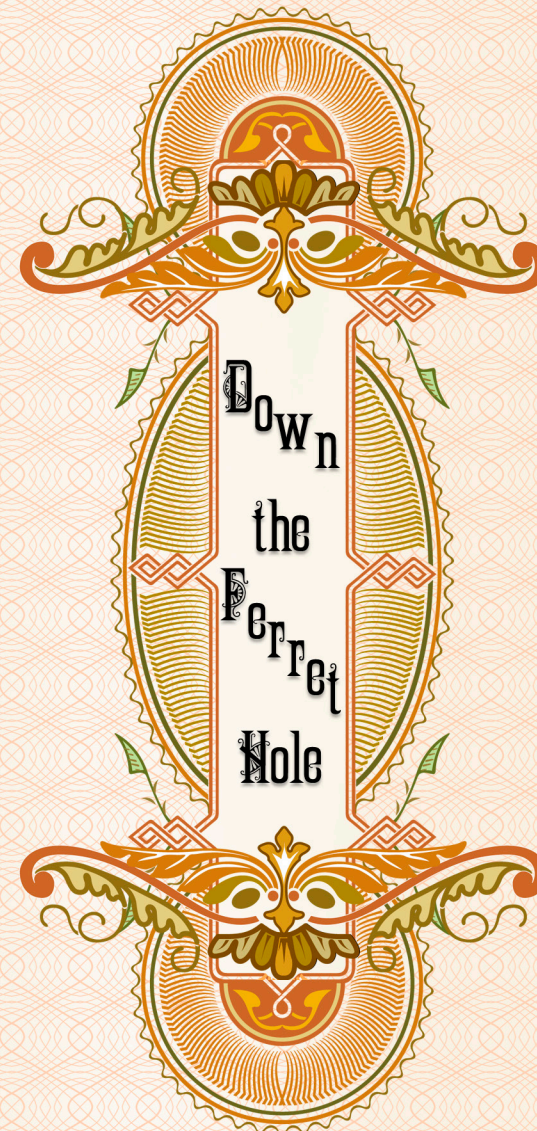
DISCLAIMER: All I claim to own is eight bone hairpins, and that's all I need in life for Lord's sake.

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AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION

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*Alice! A childish story take,
And, with a gentle hand,
Lay it where Childhood's dreams are twined
In Memory's mystic band,
Like pilgrim's wither'd wreath of flowers
Pluck'd in a far-off land.*

— Rev. Charles L. Dodgson



Hermione was beginning to get very tired of sitting on the floor of the Divination classroom with absolutely nothing to do. Ever since Professor Trelawney had been forcibly checked into the Barny the Fruit Bat Ward for Recovering Butterbeeraholics at St. Mungo's, all seventh year students were required to take Divination with Firenze, the centaur. Hermione had circulated a petition among the other houses in an attempt to convince the Headmistress that N.E.W.T.s revisions were much more important than organized napping, but the Headmistress was unimpressed. Worse, she had all but chased Hermione out of her office, but not

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before yelling that it might do Hermione a world of good to turn her brain off for a while.

Hagrid let slip over tea and calcified shortbread that McGonagall's disdain for Divination had evaporated once Professor Trelawney had left. Furthermore, she hoped to aid their allies in the fight against Voldemort with any glimpse of the future the centaur-trained students could provide. The loss of Professors Dumbledore and Snape had hit her hard, and the Order was splintering under the strain. The Headmistress's troubles were still cold comfort to Hermione, whose outrage at being forced to study Divination was augmented by the fact that there were no proper textbooks for the class, only centaur star atlases. What could possibly be the use of a book with no words in it?

All thoughts of the past spring and summer swirled about her mind as she tried to still her body and mind.

"Feel your body connect with the ground," Firenze instructed them. "Allow yourself to take in the smells and sounds of the forest."

"Mock-forest, you mean," thought Hermione fiercely as she clandestinely vanished a particularly sharp root fragment that had been digging into her

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posterior. "It's not a real forest, and this isn't a real class!" However, her irritation wasn't enough to trump thirteen years of schooling, so she did as her professor bade.

She had always meant to ask Professor Flitwick how he had managed to make Firenze's classroom so like a real forest. The smell of loam and decayed leaves was exactly the same as she'd smelled that night she led Umbridge to the centaurs. The trees seemed to spiral up into infinity, even though she had Arithmancy in the classroom directly above Firenze's.

"Empty your minds," he instructed, and Hermione gritted her teeth. He sounded like Trelawney.

"But Professor," Ron protested. "What if one of us has a vision but we think it's a mundane thought and empty it from our minds? Won't that defeat the entire purpose?"

Hermione turned her snort into a cough. Other members of the class did the same, to varying degrees of success. Firenze met Ron's eye calmly.

"You are all as newborn foals, Mr. Weasley. Do not think of jumping over bushes just yet. Try to focus on standing first." He turned to the rest of the class. "You must learn to discipline your minds. Do not let them run rampant at all times. If you cannot

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encourage your conscious mind to rest, you are preventing the most complex and sensitive parts of your mind from participating in your interpretative processes. Now, please be silent. Remember to breathe, and clear your minds.”

Hermione closed her eyes and listened to her classmates settle onto the ground. She hated to admit it, but what Firenze had said made some amount of sense to her, especially after what she had learned about Occlumency from Harry’s brief study. And hadn’t psychology revealed the importance of the subconscious mind? She forcibly expelled memories of reading Freud and Jung, allowed her breathing to slow, and let her body relax completely.

She felt her brain decelerate; tens of thoughts became few. Exhalation after exhalation brought her closer to stillness. Occasionally a sound or muscle twitch would bring her back to herself, or a sudden memory of something she needed to do after class would intrude, but she methodically dismissed them with increasing efficiency. Suddenly, Hermione realized that her mind was quiet. Of course, as soon as she realized it, her mind was no longer still, but having achieved stillness, it was very easy for her to fall back into it again. Unfortunately, it didn’t last long.

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A strange smell reached her nose as a soft whoosh of air blew across her face. She sneezed violently and sat up, looking around for the source of the smell. She spotted it — a small white animal was winding its way through her recumbent classmates. It must have jumped over her head, and now it was shuffling around in a bush near Harry.

Nobody else seemed to have noticed anything, and Firenze was in deep mediation at the front of the class. Not quite knowing what else to do, she aimed her wand at the bush. *“Accio!”*

With a surprised squeak, a small white ferret flew toward her, its tiny claws scrabbling for purchase in the soil. Hermione was so surprised that she dropped her concentration and broke the spell. The ferret recovered quickly and sped off toward the back of the classroom.

She ran after it.

She was shocked to find that the far walls of the room stretched on as infinitely as the ceiling. Before she knew it, she was out of sight of the rest of the class, and she wasn’t quite sure which was the way back.

“Malfoy, you sodding little mustelid!” she yelled after the ferret, who seemed to be choosing the most brambly and overgrown way it could find. “You

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won't get away so easily!"

She could have sworn that the ferret turned and bared its teeth at her before wriggling into a small hole in the ground.

She stopped by the hole, panting. "I'll tell Professor Firenze you're in here," she yelled between gasps. "You can either come out and explain to me what you're up to, or you can explain to the Headmistress what you were doing skulking around Harry."

She received no response from the hole.

"*Lumos.*" She lit her wand and looked into the hole as far as she could see. She was amazed to find that the hole went on for quite a distance and seemed to be significantly larger, once past the initial aperture. More importantly, the ferret was nowhere in sight.

"*Reducto!*" Reddish earth blasted out of the hole, and once the dust had settled Hermione crawled inside, holding her wand in her teeth. After the first several feet, the tunnel began to widen, and when she was not twenty feet beyond the hole, she could nearly stand. She was much cheered by the fact that she could assume proper dueling stance, which she did immediately.

"Malfoy!" she yelled in a much stronger voice. "I'm coming after you, Malfoy!"

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Hermione's mind doubted that it was a good idea to chase an animal into its den, but her feet kept her moving steadily down the tunnel. Her light never faltered, and the tunnel continued to grow wider, though it began to slope rather sharply downhill.

All was well for the next few yards, but then her shoes began to slip on the loose earth. Her arms flailed in the air, and as panic overtook her, her *Lumos* failed. She screamed as she slid into darkness.

After running out of air on her initial scream, Hermione began to doubt the wisdom of mindless wailing. She was still sliding downward at a shocking pace, but she didn't seem to have hit anything just yet. She closed her mouth and attempted to light her wand, morbidly hoping that she would at least see her end approaching.

She slid downwards, farther and farther, and Hermione began to wonder if she might slide all the way to New Zealand. She slid past layers of soil, rock, clay, and some layers that went by too fast for her to identify. To her great relief, she felt the grade of her slide lessen gradually, and she thought she saw a flicker of light ahead. Then, before she was able to process the thought, she was dumped into a metal pipe, which eventually deposited her on the

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cold stone floor of a massive cavern.

She was astonished to see a vast statue at one end of the room, and even more astonished to realize that she must have slid all the way into the Chamber of Secrets. "Unless," she thought to herself, "this is an even more secret Chamber belonging to one of the other four founders." Perhaps Helga Hufflepuff's chamber contained a giant badger that would destroy all the disloyal students in the school. She giggled a bit hysterically, then examined the statue that graced the far wall. It was in terrible shape; she couldn't even tell if the subject was a man or a woman. Great chunks of it had fallen off and littered the floor. She meant to explore the chamber further, but she caught a whiff of the odd smell and sneezed. There was a sudden flash of white in her peripheral vision.

That bloody ferret again!

She ran off to the dark corner where she had spotted it and found that the darkness concealed the entrance to a small square room with a large cabinet at one end. The cabinet door had a tiny opening in it, just the right size for a ferret to wriggle through, but much too small for Hermione. She grasped the handle and attempted to open it, but it was locked.

"Bollocks!" she cursed aloud. "You let that evil git

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Draco Malfoy through, but you won't let me?"

"I did no such thing, lassie!" protested the door in a rough growl.

Nearly as shocking as being taken by surprise by an inanimate object was the fact that she recognized the inanimate object. The ornamental face carved into the door, which she assumed had been as worn as the statue in the other room, was simply a reproduction of a very worn face — one that happened to be missing an eye and a large chunk of nose.

"Professor Moody?" she asked tentatively.

The door eyed her suspiciously. "Who in the name of Bagshot's bloomers are you?"

"It's Hermione Granger, sir. I'm in my final year at Hogwarts."

"Maybe you are, maybe you aren't. I can't tell."

What would convince him? She thought for a moment. "You're in the Order of the Phoenix, or at least you were while Professor Dumbledore was alive."

"Maybe I am, and maybe I ain't. You can't tell."

"The ferret that passed through is really Draco Malfoy. He must have become an Animagus in secret."

"Maybe he is, and maybe he ain't —" began the door.

"Oh for pity's sake," she snapped, stamping her foot for emphasis. "You might as well come out and say

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that you're not going to believe a single word I say."

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't —"

The door stopped midsentence when Hermione pointed her wand between its eyes. "I'm not going to let you stop me catching that ferret. He won't get away with spying on Harry. *Alohomora!*"

To her surprise, the cabinet remained resolutely locked. She ran through every unlocking spell in her not-unimpressive repertoire, but none of them worked. Moody smirked at her.

"You see," said the door nastily, "you're going to have to convince me somehow if you want to get past me. And don't try any funny business. I've seen more than even an obvious swot like you could come up with."

Hermione was about to conjure up a good squirt of household lubricant for the door, when she had a sudden thought. Malfoy had probably squeezed through the tiny opening without having to play Twenty Questions with the door. Why couldn't she do the same?

She bent close to the cabinet to examine the hole and caught a good whiff of the ferret's musk. She sneezed violently.

"Hey now, what are you on about?" cried the door, blinking her sneeze out of its wooden eyes.

"I think — *atchoo!* — I'm allergic to ferrets! *Atchoo!*"

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Oh, of all the times not to carry a handkerchief!

Six sneezes later, the door was swearing at her incoherently, but she had decided that she didn't care. Even wracked with sneezes and streaming tears, Hermione still cast the best Shrinking Charms of any in her form. She turned her wand on herself and closed her eyes.

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Hermione looked up at the door, which was swearing more eloquently now that it had figured out how she planned to get past him, then looked at the bottom of her shoe with dismay.

"I do wish I hadn't sneezed so much," she thought as she cast a quick Scourgify and ducked through the hole.

She was shocked when the cabinet around her vanished, and she found herself alone at the edge of a large swamp, which, she noted with a grimace, was of the same consistency as her sneeze. Disgusting! At least there was a breeze, which meant that after a few more sneezes she could no longer smell the ferret.

To her immense relief, there was a weathered signpost next to a raised path that wound off through the swamp.

"To FRED'S COTTAGE," read one arrow, which pointed

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off to the left. "TO GEORGE'S BUNGALOW," read another arrow, which pointed off to the right. The other arrows read, "TO VLADIVOSTOCK," "TO TEN SECONDS BEFORE MAY 29, 1997," and "TO BEATRICE, WITH LOVE."

Well, that certainly explained how the swamp came to be, but Hermione was completely lost to explain why Fred and George had created such an extensive swamp and why they had chosen to build summer homes there. Then again, her entire adventure thus far had been a trifle on the absurd side, and if anything appealed to Fred and George, it was absurdity.

She looked more closely at the path, and noticed what appeared to be ferret tracks on the path that led to Fred's cottage, so she set off down the left path and disappeared into the mist.

Fred's cottage was handsome, with a thatched roof and brightly painted shutters. Under a tree she saw what appeared to be a statue of Fred and George, dressed up as schoolboys. The resemblance was uncanny, down to the last freckle.

She jumped when one of the figures bent down to examine her.

"If you think we're wax-works, you ought to pay, you know," commented Fred, whom she identified by the F stitched into his collar.

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"Contrariwise," added George, "if you think we're alive, you ought to say 'how d'ye do,' shake hands, and have one of our Augmenting Allsorts, as you're looking a mite on the titchy side."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hermione, realizing she was still a few inches high. "I had to shrink myself to get through the hole in the Vanishing Cabinet. What on earth are you doing here?"

"What are any of us doing here?" asked Fred.

"Contrariwise," added George, "if you were here, you might be, if you might be here you would be, if we were here, we would be, but as you aren't here, you aren't. That's logic!"

Hermione thought on this for a moment. "That isn't logic. That's nonsense."

"What's nonsense?" asked Fred.

"Contrariwise —" began George.

"I don't have time for this. Did you see a white ferret come this way?"

"Do you like poetry?" asked Fred.

"Some, but why does it matter?" asked Hermione impatiently. "I don't have the time. Now, about the ferret —"

"Enough about the ferret!" cried George. "We have something very important to tell you!"

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"I sincerely doubt that," said Hermione with a glare.

"Suit yourself," said Fred loftily.

"It's obvious you know everything you need to know about our swamp," added George.

Hermione ignored his sarcasm. "I fail to see how talking about poetry will help me find that ferret."

"It's a strange place," said Fred with a gravity that surprised her. "Knowledge of how it works can only help you."

"If that's so," said Hermione doubtfully, "then you'd better start talking."

The twins grinned identically, and Hermione began to suspect she'd been had.

They clasped their hands together simultaneously and began to recite:

*The wind was breaking on the swamp,
Breaking with all its heart —
It wanted to bisect the bog
And move the halves apart,
And this is why our fetching fen
Is redolent of fart.*

"That's quite enough of that." Hermione stood and began to walk off. Fred and George took a perfectly coordinated step to the right, blocking her way.



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"That was just the introduction," said George.
 "We haven't got to the important part yet!" protested Fred.
 "Well, get on with it!" Hermione was becoming very cross.
 "You won't learn a thing here if you don't keep your temper," admonished George, and they continued their poem.

*The Phoenix and the Basilisk
 Were walking through a blizzard,*

began Fred.

"Basilisks can't walk. They don't have legs," grumbled Hermione, who, in spite of instructions to listen, was feeling mulish.

"Hang it all, will you just listen for a minute?" bellowed George.

"Keep your temper," she mimicked nastily.
 The twins ignored her and returned to their recitation.

*The Phoenix and the Basilisk
 Were walking through a blizzard,
 Or, if you like, the Phoenix flew,
 The Basilisk, he slithered.
 The frozen morass crunched below,
 And all the reeds had withered.*

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*"Recall last Spring," the Phoenix said,
 "A miracle occurred.
 From frozen waste an algal bloom;
 From one Dugbog, a herd!"
 The Basilisk, he winked one eye
 And killed a passing bird.*

*"Dear Basilisk," the Phoenix said,
 How different you and I,
 I heal all mortals with my tears,
 And when you bare your eye,
 All living creatures viewing it
 Are sure to up and die."*

*"Dear Phoenix," quoth the Basilisk,
 "We compliment each other,
 We're different faces of one coin,
 Akin to Dad and Mother."
 The Phoenix hugged the Basilisk.
 They called each other brother.*

*"Dear Puffskeins, won't you walk with us?"
 The Phoenix did entreat.
 "We'll talk of many lovely things,
 Now, won't you have a sweet?"
 The Basilisk strove to behave,
 And stared at his own feet.*

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Fred shot Hermione a look, as if daring her to make another comment about Basilisk anatomy, but she was beginning to be interested in the poem and gestured for them to continue.

*"The time has come," the Phoenix said,
"To talk of what we please.
Of swords — and cups — and pentacles —
And wands — and diaries —
And why the tea is boiling hot —
And whether bats have fleas."*

*Alas, in time the Basilisk
Began to get annoyed.
The Puffskeins were distracting, and
He found their presence cloyed.
The Phoenix pooh-poohed at his 'plaint,
Since Puffskeins he enjoyed.*

*One day, a Puffskein went astray,
And parted from their trail.
The Basilisk said, "Why seek him,
When we will only fail?"
"What poppycock!" the Phoenix cried,
"We'll search o'er hill and dale!"*

The Phoenix searched exhaustively,

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*Near, far, and night and day.
The Basilisk assisted him,
While grumbling all the way.
They searched until they saw a sight
That brought them both dismay.*

"This is the serious part," said George, in an aside to Hermione.

"Get on with it!" said Hermione, who was vexed at having the story interrupted at such a dramatic juncture.

*The errant Puffskein hung on high
Ensconced in an iron cage.
The Phoenix tried, with no success,
The lock to disengage.
The Phoenix fell upon the ground,
And cried in pain and rage.*

*"Dear brother," cried the Basilisk
In horror at the sight.
"What made you fall? You look quite ill!
What caused this horrid blight?"
"I've erred, it seems," the Phoenix said,
And looked a bit contrite.*

"The lock was cursed," the Phoenix said,

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"And I don't know the cure.

*But if I fall, the Puffskein's life
Alone you can ensure."*

*"What must I do?" the Basilisk
Inquired in tones demure.*

*The Basilisk, with reticence,
Did as his friend advised.
His serpent's tooth was used,
A Phoenix claw was soon excised,
And with its hardened diamond tip
The cage lock soon was prised.*

*The Puffskein hurtled to the ground
And ran off with a shriek.
The Basilisk ignored him,
Phoenix said, "I grow so weak.
Your venom and the cursed lock make
My outlook rather bleak."*

*"Oh, Phoenix," wept the Basilisk,
"Dear friend, you must confide,
Why for that useless Puffskein
You would cast your life aside?"
He then caressed the scarlet head.
The Phoenix smiled, then died.*

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Hermione looked at the twins expectantly.

"Well? Go on!"

"That's the end," said Fred mournfully.

"That's it? That has to be the saddest poem I ever heard!"

"The saddest," George agreed, wiping away a tear.

"Gets me every time," added Fred, handing his brother a handkerchief.

They both blew their noses so loudly that Hermione had to put her hands over her ears.

"That's not quite what I meant," said Hermione. "I meant 'sad' to mean 'terrible.'"

"Terrible, yes," said Fred.

"But great," added George with pride.

"No, I mean 'terrible' in the sense that it's a stupid poem. Phoenixes are immortal. How could one be killed, even by a Basilisk?"

"It's a bleeding metaphor," said Fred, losing his patience at last. "Did you never hear of a metaphor?"

"Honestly, woman," said George. "If you're ever going to learn anything worth knowing, you'd better start thinking less literally."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The ferret went that way," said Fred abruptly, pointing toward a path that Hermione swore had not been there a moment ago.

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"Ta, ta!" sang George. "Brother dear, shall we have a battle?"

Fred pulled a large saucepan from his trousers and began tying it onto his head. "I thought you've never ask."

Hermione was about to tell off the twins for wasting her time but decided better of it when she realized that neither twin was paying attention to her. She tutted in exasperation then ran off down the path Fred had pointed out.

The path twisted and turned until at last it opened into a large clearing, in which stood a dreary-looking manor house. She would have passed it by and continued down the path, but a passing breeze brought a whiff of ferret musk, and she sneezed.

Ah ha! She was close!

She looked over her shoulder and made her way to the front doorstep. The gray stone looked even more depressing up close. She was about to ring the bell, when she realized that she couldn't reach it. Muttering impatiently, she turned her wand on herself and would have returned herself to her normal size if the door had not opened suddenly, revealing the ferret.

Surprise arrested her sneezes, but only for a moment. When her nose caught up with her, the ferret glared at her.

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"There you are, you miserable house-elf," he said, grabbing Hermione by the arm. "I've been looking for you everywhere. Mother ordered me to mince some flowers for her, but I've been running all morning and am too tired."

Hermione tried to protest that she was not a house-elf, but she was unable to get any words out for all of the sneezing.

The ferret dragged her through the entrance hall, past a large dining room, through a sitting room, and into a brightly lit kitchen. Through a wide window she could see an impressive garden. He released her roughly in front of a giant chopping block and pushed a basket of flowers toward Hermione.

"Now, get chopping." The ferret began grooming himself. Hermione turned away in disgust.

"If I were my proper size," she thought, "I'd toss you out the window by your tail." She couldn't quite bring herself to do this, because she was intrigued in spite of herself. There was something very fishy going on. First of all, she'd never heard of a talking Animagus, yet here was a talking ferret that behaved just like Draco Malfoy.

Secondly, she immediately recognized the purple flowers as monkshood, or aconite. Apart from being

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highly poisonous, aconite was used in a number of dangerous and illicit potions, and she wanted to know how the ferrets planned to use it.

The knife that was lodged in the chopping block was nearly as long as Hermione's arm. She grabbed it and managed to wriggle it free. She removed several blossoms from the stems and focused her streaming eyes on them, but the knife was dull, and her first chop merely succeeded in bruising the petals.

The ferret laughed nastily. "You're downright useless, aren't you?"

"What on earth is going on here?" Hermione spun to face a larger, female ferret that had just entered the kitchen. She stifled a giggle. This was too much!

She was gratified to see that the younger ferret twitched. "Oh, er, hello, Mother. I was just, ah, showing this house-elf how to chop flowers."

"You were making someone else do your dirty work again, weren't you?" inquired the female icily.

"I — I —" stammered the ferret.

"I've warned you, boy. I told you that it's high time you started pulling your weight, what with your father being away and then poor, poor..." she trailed off, and Hermione swore she heard a sob.

"Mother, you're overreacting," wheedled the

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ferret. "There's a huge difference between chopping stupid flowers and —"

"DON'T YOU DARE TALK ABOUT IT!" shrieked the female. "You've never had to work a day in your life! You've had everything you've ever wanted since you were born! You'll never understand what sacrifices were made to save your skin!"

"And I'm to blame for that?" inquired the ferret nastily.

The female ferret snarled and attacked her son, who clambered backwards with a surprised squeak. It was only a moment before he recovered, and soon the ferrets were rolling around the kitchen, knocking pots and pans from the cupboards, while white fur flew.

Hermione could no longer endure the combined musk of the two ferrets. Her sneezes were continuous and extraordinarily powerful, but she had the presence of mind to grab the basket of flowers before creeping out the kitchen door into the garden.

She ran blindly away from the house, still sneezing violently, until she could no longer see the house or hear the two scuffling ferrets.

She paused to catch her breath by a tall tree, where she sneezed the last of the ferret smell out of her nose and fell to the ground panting. When she

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had caught her breath, she sighed shakily.

"Horrid creatures," she said aloud.

"Who?" asked a familiar voice from above.

"You mean, 'whom,'" corrected Hermione automatically. She started suddenly, realizing that Harry Potter's voice has just come from the tree.

She looked up and saw a large cat regarding her curiously with emerald green eyes. It suddenly grinned at her, revealing very sharp teeth.



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"H-Harry?" she asked timidly.

"Is that who you're looking for?" the cat asked.

"Well, I'm not exactly looking for anyone."

"Then it doesn't matter who I am, does it?"

"Well, it matters to me," snapped Hermione. She was growing weary of the circular logic that seemed to pervade this place.

"Why?"

"Because I keep meeting people who aren't who I thought they were at all, and it's very confusing."

"Most people aren't who we think they are. Out of curiosity, who did you think I was?"

"My best friend, Harry Potter."

"What makes you think that I'm not Harry?"

"Well, Harry's not a cat. At least, I think he's not a cat. He'd have told me if he was an Animagus. And Harry doesn't speak in riddles, at least, not usually."

The cat looked at her scornfully. "Those aren't very good reasons."

"I know they're not!" shouted Hermione, frustrated. "But why do I need to explain to you that you're not someone I know you aren't?"

"Because you don't know that I'm not who you believe I'm not."

Hermione's head was starting to hurt. "Now I

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know for certain that you're not Harry."

"Why?"

"Harry never would have followed that."

The cat shook its head. "I think you've got a lot of re-thinking to do," it remarked, nosing a pile of slivery fabric that Hermione hadn't noticed before.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because no matter what you think you know, it can always change, and it inevitably does." The cat slipped slowly into the folds of fabric, and Hermione was shocked to realize that the fabric was an Invisibility cloak.

"Please, wait!"

The cat had completely disappeared under the cloak, but for the tip of its tail.

"What is it?"

"I don't know where to go from here. Can you tell me?"

The tail twitched in what Hermione hoped was amusement. "Where do you want to go?"

She nearly answered, "It doesn't really matter," but thought better of it. "I'd like to find out how much re-thinking I need to do."

The tail disappeared as the cat slid forward, exposing its smiling face. "Then you're on the right path. Don't stop until you reach the end."

With that, the cat disappeared altogether.

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Hermione stood up, energy renewed. At last, a real answer! She grabbed the basket of purple flowers and set off down the path.

She passed a number of curious things that nearly lured her away from the path — a tree that bore books instead of fruit, a patch of green and white flowers that insulted her and called her names, a wild croquet game involving human-sized balls that were wrapped completely in pink ribbon, and a stream of foul-smelling smoke figures that took on strange shapes. However, she heeded the Harry-Cat's advice and continued straight down the path.

As she walked, she began to hum a familiar tune, which she began to sing in rhythm with her steps. The trouble was that the words were different than the ones she thought she remembered.

*Round about the cauldron go
In it, great confusion throw.
Fallen gods and traitors too,
Boiled together in the brew.
Vessel hidden in the earth,
Never sacrifices worth.*

*Double, double, toil and trouble,
Triple crossed, the cauldron bubbles.*

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*Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the cauldron boil and bake.
Venom and a shriveled hand
Dangling from a rope of sand.
Whispered wishes never heard,
Flying from a scarlet bird.
Recipe for powerful trouble,
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.*

Hermione paused in her walk, reflecting on the nonsense words she had been singing. She dismissed them with a shake of her head, halfheartedly blaming Fred and George's stupid poem for her confusion. She squared her shoulders and continued down the path, resolutely silent. She refused to give it another moment's thought.

By and by, she came to a clearing in the center of which stood a signpost with a dozen-odd arrows pointing in other directions. To her dismay, the path that she had been following circled around the signpost and came back upon itself, forming a perfect loop.

The Harry-Cat had said to follow the path to the end, but by following its directions she would double back on the path she'd already taken. She scowled at the path and was about to take her frustration out on the signpost, when George's admonishment to keep her temper rang in her ears.



Down the Ferret Hole

She took a deep breath and stilled her wand hand, which twitched to damage something.

When she had recovered herself sufficiently, she looked around at the clearing to see if there was anything that would be useful to her. The signpost had arrows pointing in the cardinal directions, as well as signs to Fred and George's, and a broken arrow that had the words "HEADMISTRESS'S CROQ" on it. The arrow at the top of the post was also the smallest, and Hermione couldn't quite make out what was written on it.

She belatedly remembered that she still had not returned herself to her regular size. She flicked her wand at herself and cast an Augmenting Spell.

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* * * * *

When she opened her eyes, she realized that her nose was at the same level as the top of the signpost. Had she overdone it? She didn't have any points of reference other than the ferret's flower basket, which now fit comfortably in her hand. Perhaps she was the correct size. She knew that in her world, she was five feet, five inches precisely and would be that size when she eventually found her way home.

But which way was home?

Down the Ferret Hole

For the first time since following the ferret, Hermione wondered how long she had been gone and how long it would be before anybody found her.

"There's no sense in that," she admonished herself. "They'll find you when they find you, and not a moment sooner."

Somewhat cheered by her own resolve, she peered at the black arrow on the signpost and nearly fainted with relief. The arrow pointed off to the left and read "SPINNER'S END" in tiny silver letters. *That's* what the Harry-Cat had meant! Not the end of the trail, the End!

She hesitantly stepped off the path into the woods in the direction that the arrow indicated, wand held at the ready, fervently hoping that Spinner's End had nothing to do with Acromantulae. If worst came to worst, she could always make herself bigger.

The woods were darker here, and the trees might have been called creepy by someone more fanciful than Hermione. Fortunately, a faint path seemed to have been worn through the woods, and Hermione followed it.

The air grew cooler, and a light mist began to swirl around her feet. The mist carried with it an unpleasant industrial smell, which, at the very least, did not make her sneeze. After a time, the woods

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began to thin, and she noticed that the path, which she had assumed was somewhat rocky, had smoothed into cobblestones.

Through the trees, she could make out a row of dilapidated houses, only one of which appeared inhabitable. Several of the windows were boarded up, and the brick was weathered and covered with moss. She paused when she realized that there were several figures seated around a long table under a tree in the back yard. The figures did not look as if they would welcome an intrusion. However, the decision was out of her hands when she heard one of the figures yell, "*Accio!*"

She found herself dragged out of the woods, through a garden whose denizens appeared to be all brambles and stinging nettles, and through a gate, which, thankfully, was ajar. The spell ended as abruptly as it had started, and she fell forward on to the ground.

"Aww, did the widdle girl fall down?" came a horrid baby voice that made Hermione's blood run cold.

"Now, my dear, is that any way to treat a guest?" The second voice was no less welcome than the first. "Stand up, girl, and explain yourself."

Hermione raised her face, praying for a quick

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Killing Curse, and gasped.

Where she expected to see Bellatrix Lestrange, she saw a large dark-furred rabbit, which brandished a wand ridiculously between its two front paws.

Professor Snape, or, rather, Snape, was seated at the table and wore a brightly colored frock coat. An oversized top hat was perched jauntily on his head. He waved his wand at her, and she felt herself jerked upright.

"I asked you to explain yourself," he said.

"I'm very sorry to have — er — interrupted your party," Hermione began, noticing that the table held not only a plethora of potion ingredients, but also several places set for tea.

"You were spying," snarled Snape. "Now tell me who you are and who sent you." His wand was pointed between her eyes.

Hermione was seized by blind panic. This was the man that had killed Dumbledore. He would have no compunction now in killing his least favorite student. "I only did what the cat said, sir, I had no idea what Spinner's End was!"

Snape frowned. "Cat? What cat!"

"The cat that I thought was Harry, sir!" She felt tears swell in her eyes, and her heart was in her throat. Snape drew back his wand as if preparing to

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cast a spell, when the rabbit held up a paw.

"Wait."

Snape glared at her. "What is it now? I was about to begin the interrogation in earnest."

"Look what she has!" The rabbit seized Hermione's hand, which still cradled the ferret's basket of aconite.

Snape took the basket from Hermione and studied her face. She tried not to blink.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

Hermione's study did not desert her, though her voice quavered. "Yes, sir. Monkshood, or wolf's bane, also known as aconite."

The sound of shattering china from the table brought a sudden halt to Snape's questions. A large brown rat with a silver paw had managed to shatter the porcelain teapot in which he had been contained.

"Circe's sausage!" swore the rabbit. "I thought I put an Unbreakable Charm on that teapot!"

"It's that blasted paw of his," said Snape, casting a quick Reparo on the teapot. "And I will hang you up by your ears if you put him into the teapot again. That's the third time I've had to repair it today."

"But he won't fit in the sugar bowl!" protested the rabbit.

During this conversation, the rat managed to locate a plate of biscuits and began gnawing.

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"Disgusting!" The rabbit wrinkled its nose. "I couldn't touch a thing on the table now."

"I suspect that was the intent," commented Snape.

The rat continued scurrying around the table, sniffing food, ingredients, and cutlery until it grew tired and curled up around a cup of steaming tea and went to sleep.

"At least that's one thing we can count on," said Snape quietly. "He always goes to sleep. Now," he said, with a sharp look at Hermione, "you were about to tell me how you happened to be in possession of the ingredient that I most needed to complete the potion we've been instructed to make."

"Well, sir, I —"

"SHHHHHHHHHH!" The rabbit made a comical figure with her paw in front of her large front teeth. "Wake him up and I'll hit you with a hex so fast your head will spin!"

She looked at Snape and swallowed hard.

"Well, sir," began Hermione in a much quieter voice, "the aconite blossoms came from the ferrets. I'm very sorry that there wasn't time to chop it."

"Well!" cried the rabbit, "why didn't you say so in the first place! Sit down! Have some tea!"

Hermione glanced at the table, noting that the only teapot had not only housed a rat recently, but

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had also lost all of its contents when the rat had broken free.

"There isn't any tea."

"There isn't any tea," mimicked the rabbit, nastily. The squeaky voice she affected had the unfortunate effect of waking the rat, who violently upset the cup of tea when he twitched awake.

Some of the tea splashed onto Hermione's shirt. Her fear was suddenly replaced by indignation. She seized the rat by the tail and held it out to the rabbit. "This is the stupidest tea party I've ever been to. I'm leaving."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "I think not, Miss —?"

"Granger," she said, automatically. "Hermione Granger." But you know that already, she thought mutinously.

"Granger," Snape repeated in a thoughtful tone that Hermione had never heard from him before. "What a very prosaic name."

Hermione didn't say anything. She merely raised her chin. You don't frighten me, she thought, no matter how many people you've killed. You're just a miserable man in a ridiculous hat.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, what can you tell me about the contents of this table?"

The question surprised her, as did the lack of

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name-calling. She took a moment to examine the table. "There are the remains of a formal tea, along with potions ingredients."

Snape's eyes were shadowed by the brim of his top hat. "Continue."

The rabbit made an impatient noise. "Isn't there something more productive that we could be doing?"

Snape scowled at her. "You could try confining the rodent somewhere else, preferably not in the wine cellar. The little rotter gnawed the cork out of one of my finest bottles."

The rabbit took the sleeping rat from Hermione, then paused. "Aren't I a rodent, too?"

"For the last time, you are not a rodent!" snarled Snape. "You are a lagomorph. Now get out of my sight before I decide on hasenpfeffer for dinner tonight!"

The rabbit managed to turn her squeal into a snarl and shook the rat violently. It had fallen asleep in her hand and awoke with a loud squeak. They disappeared into the house, leaving Hermione standing uncomfortably before her erstwhile professor.

Snape gestured grandly at the table before him. "Recite."

"Sir?"

"What do you see before you?"

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Hermione studied the items on the table and pursed her lips together for a moment before answering. "The fennel root has been chopped diagonally, thus exposing more of the vascular system cross-section. This will add a stronger flavor of anise, as well as augment the compound's antibacterial properties."

Snape rose from his chair and came to stand behind her. "Continue."

"The shrivelfig has been shredded, but the seeds have not been removed," she said breathlessly, feeling unnerved by Snape's proximity. "The seeds are well-known for their ability to prolong the effect of a potion."

"And the flesh of the shrivelfig?"

"Well, shrinking, obviously. But fennel root neutralizes those properties, but makes the resulting potion —" she gulped as words from a textbook floated in her mind's eye — "highly toxic."

"What else do you see?" His breath brushed her ear, and she swallowed hard. None of the other ingredients looked familiar, and she took a deep breath before answering. Miraculously, the names rolled off her tongue seemingly of their own accord.

"Swamp adder flesh." Hermione's breath came slightly faster. "For sudden manifestation of the potion's true intention."

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"Go on," Snape whispered.

"Acromantula venom, suspended in milk."

"Yes." The sibilant in her ear made her shudder. Her gaze fell upon a blue glass bottle filled with whitish powder. Though she had never before encountered it, she knew its name instinctively.

"Mummy dust, a dessicant of unparalleled power."

"More." The word seemed to catch in his throat.

"Death's Tongue mushrooms."

"Which are used for?"

"They are related to mushrooms that are occasionally taken for recreational purposes" Where had she read that? She could no longer recall. "The active hallucinogenic compound acts to inhibit the activity of neurons in the brain, causing disorientation, but also induces powerful muscle cramps and increased body temperature."

"Very good, Miss Granger." The incongruity of the statement coming from Snape made her start. He didn't seem to notice. "What else lies before you?"

Her eyes fell upon a glowing vial of green liquid, and she named it without hesitation. "Firefly luciferase, partially for the resultant glow and partially for purposes of attraction."

Hermione was finding herself more and more

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agitated and confused. Her heart was in her throat, and her mind felt thick, as if something syrupy was being poured into it.

"And?"

There was more? Her eyes snapped shut. "Luciferase..." she trailed off as her mind relaxed into her body's acute physiological reaction to Snape's proximity. "Luciferase is also a mild hallucinogenic." That was it! "The hallucinogenic properties can be enchanced by the addition of —"

"Aconite blossoms!" She lost her balance momentarily when Snape finished her stentence and seized her shoulders.

She felt her body slacken, but his fingers held her firmly.

She pulled herself together. "Th — the last ingredient I see is aconite root, sir."

"And, pray, what does aconite root do?" His mouth hovered above the junction of her neck and shoulder, and she could feel his breath on her exposed neck.

"It's toxic," she said, unconsciously leaning back into him. "It contains poisonous alkaloids with narcotic properties."

His breath stilled. "And the combined purpose of the ingredients?"

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This was the test. Her mind exploded with possibilities, feeding off of his soft breath and the heated presence of his body behind her. She imagined different orders of combinations and different cauldron heats, until the answer flew into her mind as inexplicably as the names of the arcane ingredients. She was suddenly filled with the shining joy that accompanies the solution of a really complex puzzle, and she smiled at him.

"It's a poison, sir, of the most horrific kind," she said, giddiness running counter to her words. "It encourages the drinker to consume a bit, then slowly drives the drinker mad with images of their worst memories. The victim then recovers his or her strength and presence of mind for a few minutes, just long for him or her to realize that death will follow soon, and it will be painful. The Acromantula venom activates, which produces the sensation of one's blood turning to fire in one's veins. Eventually, the victim will die from their hemoglobin's inability to carry oxygen to the rest of the body, slowly and painfully losing consciousness."

A memory was fluttering at the edges of her mind, something important, but it was quickly forgotten when Snape's hand slid up to the side of her neck, cradling

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her chin in her fingers. She hardly dared breathe. She could feel her jugular pulsing under his fingers.

"I could kill you," he said in a dreamy voice.

Hermione was focused on the warm strength of his fingers and little else. "You could," she agreed.

His other hand found her waist and snaked around her.

"I could do worse than kill you."

Guided by the same impulses that gave her the correct answer to Snape's test, she spun around to face him. She stared into his eyes, as if daring him to read her thoughts. He might have done — she wouldn't have known. Her conscious mind had abandoned her.

"No," she said. "You couldn't."

His mouth opened in surprise. She couldn't stop herself. She wrapped her fingers around the back of his neck and pulled his face to hers.

Their mouths met, and Hermione wasn't entirely sure that her head hadn't exploded. While Snape's smooth lips caressed hers, her mind was assailed with words, images, and sounds, all growing brighter and louder. She brushed her tongue against his upper lip, and she felt as though she were sliding down the ferret hole once more.



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When he suddenly took her lower lip in his teeth, her eyes suddenly flew open as all of the broken pieces of her experience began to fall into place. At her gasp, Snape seized the sides of her face, and she felt his mind sliding through her retinas, exploring what lay behind them. This was nothing like Harry had described from his experiences with Occlumency. Tendrils of Snape's mind tickled the edges of hers, teasing up the sensation of his own kiss and her body's reaction to it.

Pleased with what he had seen, Hermione felt him withdraw from her mind only to have her mouth claimed by his lips, more insistent than they had been. Hermione felt something rising in her chest, when her entire body gave a great heated heave, which painfully jerked her upright.

Her eyes flew open, and she was stunned to find herself lying on the ground of the Divination classroom, gasping for breath and utterly disoriented.

Firenze stood a few feet away, watching her.

"You've returned," he said, somewhat unnecessarily.

Hermione sat up, still trying to catch her breath and gather her thoughts. All of her classmates had gone, and she and Firenze were alone.

"It was a dream," she said, feeling her arousal

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and excitement fall to pieces around her, leaving an irrational fury in its place.

"No, it wasn't, child," said her Professor.

"Of course it was!" she snapped. "It was all nonsense, there was no truth in any of it." Her hand brushed her lips unconsciously. "None of it at all," she added to herself. "I'm sorry I fell asleep in class, Professor, but I really ought to be going."

The centaur held up a hand to stop her and looked at her patiently. "The mind speaks to us in riddles when it enters the cosmos, but in the light of wakefulness, we can decipher its meaning, and learn. What did you see?"

She was silent for a minute as she ran through all of what she'd seen, and suddenly, it hit her. She looked Firenze full in the eyes, something she'd never done before. She saw warmth and encouragement there.

The potion — the ferrets — the rhymes — could it all be true? As her mind ticked off her dream experiences, her thoughts poured forth. "I think Draco Malfoy was charged by Voldemort with killing Professor Dumbledore." Her eyes widened in surprise. "That must be how —" she cut herself off — "Somehow, Malfoy's mother convinced Professor Snape to promise to do it himself to protect Malfoy."

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Firenze nodded for her to continue.

"The night he died, Professor Dumbledore drank a deadly poison in order to help Harry retrieve the false locket. Professor Dumbledore asked Professor Snape to kill him that night as a mercy to him and to Draco Malfoy, who would have had the Headmaster's blood on his hands." She swallowed hard. "P-Professor Snape is innocent, sir, at least of the Headmaster's death."

She expected to see incredulity or disbelief in the centaur's face, but she saw only a soft smile.

"Well done, little one. Well done."

The thoughts continued to pour from Hermione as she raked her hands through her hair. "But Professor, if that's really what happened, then we've got to do something to help Professor Snape! The Aurors will be after him, and there's no telling what Voldemort will do to him." She felt tears welling in her eyes. "Harry told me what Professor Snape was yelling at him that night. I should have known that he was still trying to help Harry. But I didn't. I thought he had — well, we all did —"

The centaur suddenly drew her into an embrace. "Hush, child. No one has the ability to interpret events as they happen, and few have the wisdom to

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understand the meaning of true dreams. You have done very well."

Hermione's heart swelled at this unexpected kindness, and she began to sob.

"What are we going to do?" She rubbed her wet cheek on Firenze's chest. "There's no way we can convince anyone of the truth."

Firenze smoothed her hair back from her face. "Dry your tears, dear child. Leave everything to me. The Headmistress will be glad of this news. She will hardly dare to believe it, but believe it she shall. Now, I believe this is yours. You deserve it." He handed her a piece of parchment.

Hermione sniffed and read the note. "You can't be serious."

"I understood that you wished fervently to be excused from my classes."

She thought of the heat of Snape's, or rather, Professor Snape's mouth and suddenly realized what else her dream was trying to tell her. "Maybe I don't mind so much anymore," she said in as casual a voice as she could manage.

Firenze looked puzzled, but his brow cleared. "Even after three hundred years, there are things I shall never understand about humans. Come with

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me, child. I'll see you to your dormitory. It is late."

"Thank you, Professor."

They ascended the stairs to Gryffindor Tower, where the Fat Lady tsked at her disapprovingly. "Promoted to Head Girl and she still comes in at all hours!"

Hermione and Firenze ignored her.

"I will instruct the kitchen staff to bring you some refreshment in your room," said Firenze. "Be sure that you eat something before retiring. May I have your permission to inform the Headmistress of the contents of your vision?"

Any delay could prove deadly for Professor Snape. "Please. Does she have to know where the vision came from?"

"I don't think it will be necessary. May I expect to see you in class on Monday?"

"Yes sir. Anything I can do to help." Anything I can do to help Professor Snape.

The centaur nodded thoughtfully. "Goodnight, Miss Granger."

"Goodnight, Professor."



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Alone in her bed, Hermione lay her quill down on the nightstand, next to the tray of finger sandwiches she had eaten. She idly traced her finger down the sheet of parchment on which she'd recorded her dream. It was all there: Moody, Fred and George's ridiculous poem, the ferrets, Harry, and finally, Snape.

She had written much larger than usual and left so much space at the margins as to make her cringe. It could pass for one of Ron's third-year Divination essays. But the purpose had been to give her enough room to make notes for further insight. There were still enough things in the dream so as to puzzle her, not least of which was what her encounter with Snape meant. Well, it was late. The questions would still be there in the morning.

She reflexively looked over her shoulder, and, finding herself alone, she cast an encryption spell of her own design on the parchment. She followed it quickly with a Disillusionment Charm, then placed it gently in the top drawer of her nightstand.

Exercising the techniques she had learned from Firenze, she slowed her breathing and allowed his face to swim in her mind's eye as she lost consciousness and surrendered to Morpheus's embrace. A small smile curved her lips.



Down the Ferret Hole

Somewhere deep in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries, a small globe of glass appeared on a dusty shelf. Beneath the ball, a label appeared, spidery writing still glowing slightly.

H.J.G. TO F.

SEVERUS SNAPE AND HERMIONE GRANGER



*And so a secret kiss brings madness with the bliss
And I will think of this when I'm dead in my grave.
Set me adrift and I'm lost over there.
But I must be insane to go skating on your name
And by tracing it twice, I fell through the ice
Of Alice.*

— Tom Waits, "ALICE"



The End



Author's Notes

I heartily acknowledge the superb Annotated Alice, Definitive Edition (Martin Gardner, ed.), as my primary source for historical background. If you've ever thought wished for four pages of footnotes on "JABBERWOCKY" and don't already own this book, run, don't walk, to your favorite independent bookseller and buy it.

I borrowed the line "dangling from a rope of sand" from Tom Waits's song "SINGAPORE," and the final quote comes from the title track of his gloriously twisted album "ALICE," from which my interpretation of this challenge sprung full-formed. There are few places where you can find nonsense, sexiness, beauty, and sorrow so intimately connected as in this album.

"THE PHOENIX AND THE BASILISK," is, of course, a bastardized version of "THE WALRUS AND THE CARPENTER." The "DOUBLE, DOUBLE" text, as I'm sure most of you know, is from Shakespeare's

"MACBETH" (4.1), and was also used to very catchy effect in the "PRISONER OF AZKABAN" film. However, the decision to corrupt the texts into semi-topical nonsense comes directly from Lewis Carroll. "ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND" and "THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS," which are full of nonsensified Victorian morality poems, like "THE SLUGGARD" (turned into "'TIS THE VOICE OF THE LOBSTER") and "THE OLD MAN'S COMFORTS AND HOW HE GAINED THEM" (aka, "YOU ARE OLD, FATHER WILLIAM").

Finally, I would like to thank JOdel of Red Hen Publications, whose extraordinary talents, unparalleled vision, patience and kindness to a slow and disorganized author have brought you this beautiful edition. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for this exquisite gift, and congratulations on your fantastic work!

Last-ish but never least, I must thank Mr. 42, my much-beloved beta reader. In the divine words of Brian Wilson, God only knows where I'd be without you.

Thanks to Moonlit River for such a fun challenge, especially for a confirmed cross-over junkie like me!

Challenge Requirements were thus: Hermione is in Wonderland. She comes across all the traditional Wonderland people/creatures, but they all look like Hogwarts students and staff.

1. Severus Snape must be the Mad Hatter (check!)
2. Harry must be the Cheshire Cat (check!)
3. Fred and George must be Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee (check!)

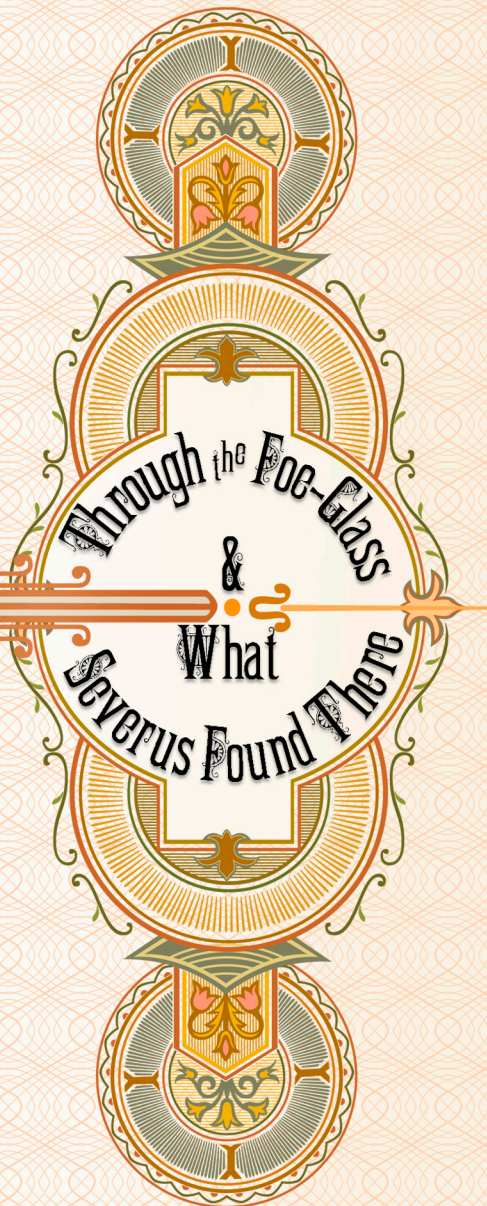
BONUS POINTS —

1. Mad Hatter/Hermione romance (check!)
2. Dumbledore as the Queen of Hearts (Alas, no. I'm HBP compliant.)
3. Umbridge is a croquet ball (check, though you have to look closely!)

Note: This story is a sequel to "DOWN THE FERRET-HOLE," which was written in response to Moonlit River's "Hermione in Wonderland Challenge" on WIKiT.



This sequel takes things a bit further into Snape's perspective and Carroll's "ALICE" books, the second of which has a number of elements that do not appear in the Disney film and some downright weird stuff. Enjoy!





*Come, hearken then, ere voice of dread,
With bitter tidings laden,
Shall summon to unwelcome bed
A melancholy maiden!
We are but older children, dear
Who fret to find our bedtime near.*

— Rev. Charles L. Dodgson



ne thing was certain — it was Wormtail's fault entirely. Had Wormtail not shown up at Spinner's End that day, Severus would never have found the bottle.

A visitor entering Spinner's End — not that Spinner's End ever had guests — might remark to herself that perhaps the place had seen better days, at least until she met her host. Then the visitor would remark to herself that she ought to be going, then back away slowly.

It had been over three months since Severus Snape's flight from Hogwarts, and each day could have been a

Through the Foe-Glass

year for the deep lines that marked his face. His hair, lank and greasy at best, had been unevenly shorn so that it stuck out at odd angles. He was unshaven, and his dark eyes, now bloodshot, seemed to have retreated into his skull. His threadbare robe was missing a number of buttons, and those that remained were fastened unevenly, giving him the appearance of a malevolent scarecrow. The only vestige of his former self that remained in full force was his foul temper.

When Wormtail shook him awake that morning, Severus awoke with a snarl and seized him by the throat, wand pressed firmly into the smaller man's jugular.

"What are you doing in my house, vermin?"

"I —" Wormtail's beady eyes rolled in panic. "I have a message from our master."

Severus tightened his grip. "Liar."

"No, Severus, wait!" he squeaked. "I'm telling the truth!"

"Then why did he not summon me himself? No, Wormtail, you have sought me out for your own ends, forgetting what I told you I would do to you if you ever set foot in my house again."

"You wouldn't!" Wormtail's face had drained of color. "The Dark Lord would kill you."

Severus laughed harshly. "And what a great pity that would be." He released Wormtail with a sneer.

& What Severus Found There

Through the Foe -Glass

"Consider yourself lucky that I don't feel like dealing with your smelly corpse today. Now, leave my house and never come back."

Wormtail was still breathing hard. "It's about Bellatrix and Rodolphus."

"Get out."

"But Severus," Wormtail wheedled, "I know you hate them as much as I do, the way they put on airs. I thought you might —"

"GET OUT!" Severus seized the front of Wormtail's robe and dragged him to the top of the stairs. He put his face very close to Wormtail's. "Remember this, you piece of filth. Until the Dark Lord himself wishes to end my exile, any of his followers who dare approach me for their own purposes will meet the same fate as Albus Dumbledore. Have I made myself clear?"

Wormtail nodded.

"Good." Severus threw the smaller man headfirst down the stairs.

He lingered for a moment at the top of the stair to make sure that Wormtail was still alive — assuredly so from the pitiful weeping that emanated from below — and returned to his room. Squinting against the midday sunlight that poured through a rip in the window shade, he finished off the bottle of cheap whisky that

& What Severus Found There

Through the Foe-Glass

sat on his nightstand and let the empty bottle fall to the floor. The alcohol burned on its way down his gullet, and he welcomed the numbness that followed. Soon the blinding white light would fade, and he could forget.

He laid back on the bed and let his eyes fall closed.

When he awoke, he was in nearly complete darkness, which would have been a relief had his body not chosen that moment to protest his earlier generosity with the whisky. He staggered to the commode and was noisily ill. When he could heave no more, he rinsed the sourness from his mouth with tap water, pointedly avoiding looking at himself in the mirror. He stared at his hands. They had already begun trembling.

He drained the dregs of all the liquor bottles scattered on the floor, but it wasn't enough. His head hurt too much to get to sleep and his stomach was painfully empty. As much as his stomach turned over at the thought, eating something would probably help. Besides, he needed another drink. He pulled his robes up and stumbled down the stairs.

In the sitting room, he lit the sconces with a wave of his wand and blinked in surprise. The room had been completely torn apart. His books had been thrown from

& What Severus Found There

Through the Foe -Glass

their shelves and the pages torn from their spines. The upholstery had been slashed, the legs broken off the chairs, and all of his ink poured on the carpet. His lamp had been smashed, and his father's chess set had been dumped unceremoniously on the floor.

Wormtail.

Severus sat on his ruined sofa and dispassionately surveyed the damage that the rat had wrought. He was lucky that the blithering idiot was so short; otherwise the valuable Muggle books on the upper shelf wouldn't have survived the rat's revenge. Selling them to antiquarian book dealers was his only source of income and he was not keen to sober up or starve. He stood and wandered into the kitchen.

Wormtail had visited the kitchen as well, as evidenced by the empty pantry shelves and the profusion of broken glass and ruined food on the floor. It was then that Severus felt the first stirrings of panic. He tore open the door to the cellar and ran down the stairs to check on his precious liquor stores. When he had illuminated the cramped cellar, he uttered a cry of outrage.

The shelves were empty, and the bottles had all been smashed. Ignoring the broken glass and slick layer of grime under his bare feet, he began frantically searching for an unbroken bottle, but it was to no avail. Wormtail

& What Severus Found There

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had destroyed them all.

Hot, bitter tears welled up in his eyes as he sat down hard on the stairs. There was nothing left. Nothing. His left foot was bleeding, and he didn't care. The tears began to roll down his cheeks, and he began dragging himself up the stairs. From his vantage point on the floor, he was able to find a relatively unspoiled packet of crackers that the rat had missed. They were stale, but he didn't care. It was all he could do to focus on getting them into his stomach.

He felt as if he were moving through treacle, and he reduced a third of the crackers to inedible crumbs before he could maneuver them into his mouth. His hands were shaking in earnest now, and his stomach was roiling. Water. Water should make it better. He cupped his hand under the kitchen faucet, but most of it dripped out of his shaking hands before he could bring them to his lips.

He abandoned the enterprise with a growl. He was so hot and breathless that it made his head swim. He fumbled with his robes and managed to strip down to his smalls, but it didn't help. He needed to lie down. After limping painfully to the sofa in the sitting room, he stretched himself out, growling at the stuffing that snagged on his stubbled jaw.

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He screwed his eyes shut, waiting for unconsciousness to take him.

But it didn't come. All of the things he was trying to forget, that night on the tower, the following night in the Riddle mansion, and every tedious, awful day since, were replaying themselves on the insides of his eyelids. When he could no longer stand it, he opened his eyes. His heart was racing and he was gasping for breath. All his being cried out for a drink, even though he knew it was all gone. Summoning all his energy, he raised his wand.

"Accio alcohol!"

Instantly, something began rattling beneath a floorboard beside the sofa.

He rolled off the sofa and shoved aside the ruined pages and chess pieces that littered the floor. The corner of one floorboard beneath the sofa was slightly raised. He succeeded in pulling up the board with his fingernails, and a brown bottle flew into his hands. The yellowed label read "POISON: LAUDANUM."

Severus nearly fainted with relief. His weakling mother had been good for something after all.

He pulled the stopper from the bottle and let the alcohol scent wash over him. It was entwined with something earthy, something spicy. Hardly stopping to think, he took several large gulps. He leaned back

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against the arm of the sofa and gazed at the back of the door, waiting, willing the laudanum to take effect.

As he lay, his focus shifted to the foe-glass he had installed on the back of the front door — one of the few precautions he'd taken in the first days of his exile. The glass was a cloudy silver swirl from which the shapes of his enemies would emerge as black silhouettes. Still uncomfortably hot, he rose to open the front door and let some air in.

As he reached for the door handle, he found himself face to face with himself. He stumbled backwards in surprise. There was no mistaking it — his own face was clearly reflected in the normally opaque surface of the foe-glass. That couldn't be right. The glass must be broken.

He examined the glass more closely, intrigued by both the anomaly of seeing himself in the glass and the changes to his own face that were so clearly reflected. He raised a finger to the surface of the foe-glass and traced the harsh lines at the corner of his reflection's mouth. The surface of the glass felt cool and oddly pliable, almost like the surface of fluid.

Behind his reflection, the silvery mist of the foe-glass had dissolved, revealing a hazy reflection of the room in which he was standing. But as he drew his gaze from his reflection to the reflected room, he realized that

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things looked subtly different.

Again he nudged the surface of the foe-glass, and it rippled. Applying steady pressure, he pushed his hand through the surface of the foe-glass. His hand looked colorless and gray, but otherwise, exactly the same as he expected to see it. He withdrew his hand and flexed it experimentally. It felt perfectly normal.

Severus gazed into the foe-glass curiously. Why the glass showed him his own face wasn't terribly difficult to discern. Gulping down decades-old laudanum for its alcohol wasn't exactly conducive to good health, and the glass was tuned to show people who meant him harm. But what was behind, or rather within, the foe-glass was a curiosity, and Severus did not understand why had the glass revealed it. His gaze fell to the rickety table inside the foe-glass room, where a seemingly identical bottle of laudanum stood.

Severus threw back his head and laughed. Of course. It wasn't real. It was a hallucination. As if to prove his point, he thrust his index finger into the surface of the foe-glass and watched it ripple. The undulating silver was surprisingly beautiful.

Well, if this was to be his first experience as an opium eater, who was he to refuse the visions granted him? He threw his discarded robe around his shoulders, seized

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his bottle of laudanum to keep the memories at bay if needed, and stuck his hand through the surface of the foe-glass, followed by his arm, and then his shoulder.

He took a deep breath, screwed his eyes shut, and stuck his head through the surface of the glass. He then lost his balance and fell.

Severus fell forward gracelessly through the foe-glass and into the room that lay beyond it. Once he had pulled his legs through, he scrambled to his feet and clutched the bottle protectively to his chest.

His surroundings were as misty and gray as they had appeared from the other side of the foe-glass. The room was somehow darker and lighter than its other-world counterpart, and none of the angles in the room seemed perfectly square. However, the room was no tidier than the room on the other side of the foe-glass.

The glass through which he had come shimmered blankly on the door behind him. All was well, then. Unless being on the inside of the foe-glass meant that his enemies would appear cloudy and those that meant him no harm would be clearly defined. He shook his head. This was a hallucination, not quantum physics.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a flash of

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crimson amid the gray. Upon investigation, Severus was surprised to find that his Muggle father's chess pieces were walking around like their Wizard chess counterparts. He leaned closer and was surprised to hear them speaking to one another in earnest conversation.

The white king seemed to be having a temper tantrum, while a white castle and knight made futile attempts to calm him. Most of the red pieces were avoiding the white pieces altogether, though the red queen seemed to be deriving great enjoyment from zapping the white pawns with a tiny wand when their backs were turned.

"Now, my dear," admonished the red king. "You must be patient. We've not yet begun to play."

The red queen tossed her head. "But the pawns' squealing is so entertaining!"

"Remember," said the king, "we must give the white king ample reason to leave the first square before he can castle."

"I know, I know," said the red queen crossly. "But it'd be so much easier to take him out now."

"And you remember how well that has worked in the past. We must wait for him to come to us. He's far too well protected, even now. Now, have you seen my bishop anywhere? I haven't seen him for a long time."

"You were the one who sent him off," countered the queen. "You find him. At least it seems as if the other

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side is missing a piece as well."

"Only the queen's pawn," sneered the king. "Hardly enough to compensate for the loss of a bishop."

"Very well," sighed the queen. "I'll see if I can locate him."

"See that you do," said the king. "The game must start very soon, and we will need all of our players."

Severus found the pieces' conversations to be largely uninteresting and was soon distracted by the torn page that a white bishop and castle were making their way across. There was a pen and ink rendering of a monster on it that seemed somehow familiar. He seized the sheet, upsetting the pieces, who swore loudly, and attempted to read the unfamiliar language written on it.

LODREMORTY

'Twas lirt and the bellitaur
Did archemune the forbidrest
All gresolved were the lakimers,
And the orphee outgrest.

He squinted at it, attempting to make any sense of it, before realizing that it was written backwards. He snorted. He hoped that not all writing would appear the reverse of how it normally appeared, reflection of the real world or not. He took the page across the room to the foe-glass door, and held it up. This is what he read.

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LODREMORTY

'Twas lirt and the bellitaur
Did archemune the forbidrest
All gresolved were the lakimers,
And the orphee outgrest.

"Beware the Lodremort, my son!
The eyes that burn, the soulesplit
Beware Lecarrowstrange and shun
Naginos Pettinet!"

He took his gryffish sword in hand
And sought the vileunn fragsole far
And found a space in grimmish place
And rubbed his cursiscar.

And as in idlewhile he rests,
The Lodremort with eyes of flame
Burforsted from the forbidrest
And avked as it came!

One, two! Three, four! And more and more
The gryffish blade turned bloddirud;
At last it died and by his side
The orphee prodtor stood.

"We have now slain the Lodremort.
So take my hand, O Prodtor Brave,

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We'll not be friends, but when this ends,
You'll be not revilnave."

'Twas timumph, and the orpheements
Did partabrate in hoggydron,
All dellerpy the wordwize was,
And the prodtor livpollon.

Gibberish. Worse than gibberish. Nonsense. Severus crumpled the paper into a ball and threw it across the room, ignoring the cries of surprise from the chess pieces that were still milling about on the floor.

As there was nothing of interest in the sitting room, he headed toward the kitchen. Crossing the room, he took another pull from the bottle of laudanum, hoping it would brighten up the rest of the hallucination.

He heard something snap and cried out as something sharp pressed into the bottom of his foot. He sat down on the sofa to examine his foot. The skin was unbroken, but little indentations marked where he had stepped on something hard.

A tiny shriek pierced the quiet. He looked down to see the white king hopping frantically across the floor. The white queen was lying at his feet. She had been broken cleanly in half.

He kicked the fragments toward the king and pressed

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his hands into the ruined sofa cushions to steady himself. He decided that the reason for his sudden queasiness was because he was hungry. He was irritated to find that the larder of the foe-glass kitchen was as bare as the one in his world. Feeling thoroughly disgruntled, he kicked aside a biscuit box and wavered, his balance thrown off by the laudanum and oddly angled house. He steadied himself on the door that led to the garden.

The garden.

Now there was a thought. Severus opened the door and stepped outside.

He expected to find it night outside and was surprised to find that it was daytime in the foe-glass world, but the garden and putrid river beyond were enveloped in a dense fog. Severus thought it had never looked better.

This garden looked vastly different from his garden at home. Whereas his was neglected and weed-choked, the plants in this garden contained the largest, most perfect flowers Severus had ever seen. The effect was augmented by the gray sky above them, their vivid colors ranging from deep purple to palest pink. The hollyhocks seemed to spiral endlessly into the sky, and the pansies spread colorfully at his feet. He wandered

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down the rows of flowers feeling both comforted by and completely isolated from the loveliness around him.

Suddenly, he stubbed his bare toe on the root of the squat apple tree that occupied the center of the garden and went sprawling. He scrambled over to where his bottle of laudanum had fallen and was relieved to find it unbroken.

He heard a scornful laugh and pointed his wand in the direction from which the voice had come. It seemed to be coming from a row of lilies.

"Who spoke?" he snarled.

"Nobodee spoke to you," said a dazzlingly white lily. "You must be 'earing things."

Severus blinked. The silvery voice made him suddenly aware that his robe was unfastened, and it had definitely seen better days. "I certainly am now."

A deep red lily next to the white one shook her petals, "Now you've done it. Now he'll want to have a conversation."

"I do not like zee look of him."

"He's certainly begun to wilt."

"Do you suppose 'e has fungus?"

Both flowers began to tremble.

"Now, now, girls," said a kind, motherly voice that sounded vaguely familiar. "He looks so tired. Why don't you have a rest against my trunk?"

Now the tree was speaking. Had Severus's head not

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already been spinning, it certainly would have then.

As he lowered himself to the ground, he heard faint rustling all around him. Apparently, the other plants in the garden were keen to have a look at the newcomer, in spite of the threat of fungus.

"What is he, do you think?" one pansy asked the petunia in the next bed.

"A juniper bush?"

"No, he moves too quickly," piped up a lavender bush. "Everyone knows junipers are sloe."

"I still theenk he is a fungus."

"What rot," exclaimed a narcissus. "He's a nettle if ever there was one."

"Maybe he just needs a drink to remove the sting?" suggested a rose.

"Girls!" said the apple tree a bit more sharply. "He needs to rest. He's going on a long journey and we must do all we can to help him."

Severus turned to look at the tree, half expecting to find a face at which to scowl, but encountered only the lined bark. "I am not doing anything of the sort."

"Of course you are," said the tree in an amused sort of voice. "You can't just go back the way you came."

Severus jumped to his feet. "I don't know what kind of game you and your frilly friends are playing, but

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"I'm not interested." He stalked across the garden in the direction he had come, but the walls of flowers seemed to have shifted. He broke into a run, not caring about the shouts of protest from the flowerbeds he traversed, but he could no longer see his house or anything else that looked familiar. He was lost.

He stopped running, utterly winded, and was surprised to find that he was back by the apple tree.

"Poor dear," tutted the tree.

"Look," snarled Severus, jabbing his wand at the tree, "I don't know what you've done, but I will burn you and the rest of this garden to a crisp if you do not release me instantly."

"Dear boy," said the apple tree as if explaining things to a dim child, "I don't make the rules, I'm simply relating them to you. You're here, and now you're part of the game. You must play your way out. And don't threaten the girls like that. The pansies are particularly sensitive."

Severus capitulated with ill grace. "What blasted game do I have to play?"

"It's a game you know very well," said the apple tree, gesturing with a low branch. "Look."

For some minutes Severus stood without speaking, looking out in the direction the tree indicated. A most curious sight it was. The fog had lifted, revealing a vast

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valley. At first, Severus took it to be a farm from the perfectly square areas that were divided by brooks and hedges. Severus vaguely remembered the conversation between the red king and queen and groaned. The valley consisted of eight rows and eight columns.

"You must be joking."

The apple tree ignored him. "You need to choose a side."

"Neither will have me, so what does it matter?"

"Both red and white are missing pieces," insisted the tree, "and both sides need you in order to win."

"What pieces are missing?" he asked in a bored voice.

"The white queen, the red king's bishop and the white queen's pawn."

Not that Severus would ever admit it, but he felt a twinge of guilt for having broken the white queen. A memory brushed the surface of his consciousness, but between his skill at occlumency and the opium, he squelched it effectively. He took another sip of laudanum for good measure.

"I'll be the queen, then."

"I'm sorry, dear, I don't think the other pieces would accept you as queen. If you want to be queen, you need to earn it."

He sneered automatically at the thought, considered red king's bishop, and paused. There was really no

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choice. Broken piece fixed firmly in mind, he nodded. "Then I'm the white queen's pawn," he said with a finality he did not quite understand.

"Good boy," beamed the tree. "Have an apple for the road. *Malus sieversii*, you know. Not what you're used to, I'm sure, but quite delicious. Now hurry, you have to get to the second square soon. And watch out for her, she's tricky."

Severus took a bite of the apple. It was crisp and tart, but it made him feel a bit odd. Was it the laudanum, or was the apple tree suddenly taller? "Who's tricky?"

His question was answered when the red queen, now of a height with him, came crashing through the rose bushes, smiling at the cries from the flowers. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Severus.

"There you are," she said, looking suspiciously at the apple tree, who rustled her leaves innocently. "We've been looking for you everywhere. The game's about to begin!"

She knocked the partially eaten apple out of his hand, wrapped her hand around his forearm, and began to run. The queen went so fast that Severus was out of breath instantly.

When they were nearing the second brook, Severus managed to yank his arm free.

"What are you doing?" asked the queen, whose face had gone a darker shade of red. "You belong next to the king."

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"This is my space," he managed to get out between gasps.

The queen goggled at him for a moment, then began laughing uncontrollably.

"I knew it!" she crowed. "I knew it all along! Thank you for declaring yourself at last, *pawn*." She spat out the word. "The king will hear of this, and then you will die. Enjoy the game. It will be your last."

She sped off, leaving Severus alone on a grassy hillock with nothing but his wand. As a pawn, it would soon be time for him to move, and he had to decide whether to move one or two squares. After a moment's reflection, he decided that the best way to help the white side would be to replace their queen without being taken himself. That would require aggressive action on his part.

With this in mind, he raised his wand to the ready, cautiously descended the hill and posted himself to jump over the first of the six brooks that stood between him and the eighth square.

There was a deafening GNAB, and Severus found himself flat on the muddy bank as a gigantic chartreuse submarine suddenly surfaced in the middle of the brook. A hatch flew open, and a conductor in a loudly patterned uniform stepped out.

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"Welcome to the SubThgink," he announced, "emergency travel for folks of all stripes, which is good, considerin' you're looking a mite stripey." The conductor eyed Severus's mud-streaked face as he pulled himself to his feet with what little dignity he possessed.

He gratefully accepted a hand up from the conductor and a warm but fuzzy robe.

Severus followed the conductor down the hatch, which closed loudly behind them. "Now," said the conductor, "where are you headed?"

"Fourth square."

The conductor whistled. "Fourth square, eh? We don't get many o' your sort willing to take it on. Well, suit yourself. Keep the robe, by the way. There's not many who'd wear lavender so well. For six pips I'll throw in a pair o' wellies, too."

"I haven't any pips."

"That's all right, I haven't got any wellies, either. Just for that, I'll let you ride free. Now, 'ere's your berth," he said, gesturing to one of four large empty shelves along the side of the sub, "and the head's right around the corner where you'll find a nice hot shower wi' plenty o' soap. Good soap." The conductor winked. "Just give us a shout if you need anything."

Severus took the unsubtle hint and indulged in a

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shower before returning to his berth. A good scouring spell removed most of the mud from his clothes, though it had the unfortunate side effect of dissolving most of his already threadbare robe.

The shower bag that had been thoughtfully provided left him smelling like an English garden, and the lavender bathrobe completed the effect. After a quick shave, Severus skulked into the berth area, hoping to avoid conversing with anyone.

Unfortunately, the berth area was no longer vacant. He found a black dog, a deer, and a bumblebee the size of a raven gathered around the table in raucous conversation. The bumblebee was in the middle of a no-doubt amusing anecdote.

"And then the ice-cream man said, 'Honey? I beg your pardon, I hardly know you!'"

The dog and deer burst out laughing. Severus seized an abandoned newspaper from the table and skulked to his berth, hoping to escape the others' notice. He was disappointed to find that the newspaper was written backwards, just as the poem back at the house had been. Even more disturbing, when he attempted to read it he found that all of the articles were reprints of the same nonsense poem, only in different typefaces.

He tossed the paper aside, grabbed the bottle of laudanum,

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and took a deep pull. The deer glanced his direction.

"Don't you care for poetry?"

"I fail to see how that nonsense could be considered poetry."

"You must be blind," exclaimed the dog. "Everything you need to know is there!"

Severus shot the dog a look of pure venom. "Every other word is the invention of an addled mind."

"Now really," said the bumblebee, speaking for the first time, "isn't that a bit harsh? I'm sure the author had some intention in writing it, apart from making you angry."

"Then why is it utter nonsense?"

"You're new, aren't you?" said the deer suddenly.

"Yes," he answered tersely. The others looked at him with interest.

"Heading for the fourth square?" asked the dog.

"Yes."

"Bold," said the bee, looking over the rims of his compound spectacles. "You wouldn't be trying to reach the eighth square, would you?"

"Perhaps."

The deer whistled in appreciation. "My advice? Don't forget that the king can take you. I was paying so much attention to avoiding a bishop and protecting my pawn that he was able to sneak up on me."

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Severus's curiosity was rapidly overcoming his anti-social tendencies. "You were taken?"

"All of us have been taken," said the dog proudly. "Bumblebee here has been taken twice."

"Were any of you part of the current game?"

"No," said the deer. "I haven't been in a game for ages. Bumblebee was in it most recently."

"I was taken out shortly before the game began," said the bee. "Quite a dramatic thing"

"That's absurd," said Severus. "How can you have been taken before any moves were made?"

"You'll have to ask the red side," said the bee mildly.

"You're too politic by half," said the dog. "It's rubbish, pure and simple. I wouldn't want to take part in this game. It's not the kind of game I fancy. Give me a good old red-and-white situation any day of the week. All of this cloak-and-dagger nonsense is simply not cricket."

"If that's the way the game is being played, then it's best to match strategies," commented the deer to the dog. "I know chasing things up trees is your favorite move, but sometimes a more subtle approach is called for."

"Subtle, schmuttle," scoffed the dog. His devastating comeback was cut short when the sub gave a sudden lurch.

"That'll be the edge of the fourth square," said the bee. "The sub will take you to the middle of the square,

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so we're close to your stop. I sincerely hope you're not planning to go out like that."

Severus glanced down at his bare feet and fuzzy lavender robe. "I haven't much choice in the matter," he said tightly.

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" said the deer. "We should be able to get you properly outfitted for the fourth square, at least."

"There's no need to look so offended," said the bee. "It's not charity. We want to see the white side win. Our old side, you know. Now, in the corner you will find a pair of hip waders. Necessary for where you'll be going. I'm afraid there's a bit of water in them, so you'll have to empty them out before you put them on."

"You should always tip your waders," added the deer.

The dog had been nosing through a pile of clothing on one of the berths and emerged with a long buttoned garment. Severus was pleased that it was his customary color and immediately replaced the fuzzy robe that the conductor had given him.

"I'm sure you'll find it quite durable," said the dog in a satisfied voice. "There's nothing quite like a black lab coat."

"I'm sure it will be satisfactory."

The conductor chose that moment to fetch Severus. The others wished him luck, and he quickly emptied

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and donned the bee's hip waders.

The conductor was waiting for him "We're nearly there. You'll want to brace yourself against the ladder when we surface."

The submarine slowed to a grinding pace, engines straining, but rose perceptibly upward. When they stopped, the conductor ascended the ladder and opened the hatch.

When Severus joined him topside, he found the submarine in the middle of a vast and featureless bog. The conductor gave him a measuring look.

"Well, you look a bit better now. Dunno if it'll help you much in the game, though. I thought the lavender suited you a bit better, but this is more practical like. Well," he said, gesturing toward the ladder. "Off you get."

Severus nodded at the conductor, then climbed down the side of the submarine. As soon as he released the last rung, the SubThgink disappeared beneath the surface of the swamp with a slurping pop. Severus was quite alone.

After a quick survey of his surroundings, Severus fancied he could see a small speck on the horizon to the north. Observing no other distinguishing features, he began slogging through the knee-deep sludge. It was hot work, and Severus found himself unbuttoning the top

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buttons of his coat and occasionally stopping to catch his breath. The speck on the horizon grew steadily larger.

At long last, he approached the object, which turned out to be a signpost with a number of arrows nailed to it.

"TO FRED'S COTTAGE," read one arrow, which pointed off to the west. "TO GEORGE'S BUNGALOW," read another arrow, which pointed off to the east. The other arrows read, "TO OUGADOUGOU," "TO THE VIRGINS," and "TO MAKE MUCH OF TIME."

Severus glanced to the east and west and was surprised to see specks on the horizon that had certainly not been there before. However, his attention was elsewhere, for another memory was trying to manifest itself in his mind. He squelched it firmly and took another mouthful of laudanum. He was beginning to loathe the cloying syrup, but it was better than the alternative. He forced himself to swallow it.

Panting from the effort, he staggered and was surprised to find himself leaning against a tree that hadn't been there a moment ago. Gazing at his surroundings, he found that he was now in a dense forest with a small path leading off to the east. Not really caring where it took him, he followed.

He wandered on, muttering to himself, until, on turning a sharp corner, he suddenly came upon two

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stocky young men dressed identically in knickerbockers and boaters. They were blocking his way.

Severus glanced at them and, judging them to be harmless, stepped around them and continued on his way. He followed the path around another corner and came across the men again. This time, Severus favored them with a glare before continuing on his way.

The third time he came across them, he had had enough. "Why are you following me?"

"Us follow you?" inquired the first man, whom Severus suspected of being the cottage-owning Fred from the F embroidered in his collar. "You've got it all wrong."

"Contrariwise," chimed in the other, whose collar identified him as bungalow-owning George. "You've also got the measure of things."

"I haven't any time for nonsense," barked Severus, pointing his wand at each of them in turn. "Leave me alone."

They gave him identical smirks. "Now that's hardly manners," admonished George.

"And it's hardly the way to play the game," added Fred.

"I'll take my chances." Severus shouldered past the twins and stalked off down the path.

He turned another sharp corner and found the twins waiting for him. He was about to curse whichever was closer, when he suddenly realized what was happening.

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The great oak behind the twins was the same oak that had been behind them when he first saw them. They weren't following him; he was somehow traveling in circles, in spite of the fact that the path wasn't circular.

The twins were gazing at him with expressions of polite disinterest, but their amusement was palpable.

"Well?" he asked crossly.

"Well? what?" asked Fred, with feigned surprise.

"How the blazes do I get out of here?"

"That's an easy one," said George. "Just think, 'how do I stay in the same place?'"

"By walking," answered Fred.

"Hush," admonished his brother, "let him answer one."

"So," prompted Fred, "you get somewhere else by...?"

Severus mumbled something.

"Sorry, couldn't hear that," said Fred. "Try again."

"By staying in the same place," said Severus with violent enunciation.

The twins applauded enthusiastically.

"Bravo! Bravo!"

"A fine deduction!"

"And while you're here," said George with a wink at his brother, "we could be convinced to provide entertainment."

"Spare me."

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Fred gazed at Severus with a measuring eye. "No, this is one you ought to hear. Now make yourself comfortable and prepare to be moved."

Once he had seated himself in the roots of the tree, the twins stood before him.

"We proudly present a lesson in song form: THE YOUNG LADY'S PLEASURES AND HOW SHE GAINED THEM," announced Fred.

"Or, 'YOU ARE YOUNG, LITTLE LION,'" added George, with equal ceremony. The twins breathed simultaneously and began to recite:

"You are young, little lion," the serpent opined,

"And an insolent sniveling brat,"

Yet you came to my aid when my name was maligned,

"Tell me, what was your reason for that?"

"All my friends," said the lion, "will see what they see

For as long as they shutter their minds.

But now I have learned, and I'm sure you'll agree

That the future and dreams intertwine."

"You are dull, little lion," the basilisk lectured,

"With a mane predelicted to frizz,

Yet while others were stymied, you made your conjecture

Recumbent, while taking a zizz."

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*"It is true," said the lion, with a challenging mien,
"That my foresight's eccentric and odd.
But for all that it seemed it was merely a dream,
It quite logically pierced your façade."*

*"You're a fool, little lion," he said with a sneer,
"And your judgment is hardly sublime
You've thought villains were victims and frauds quite sincere;
Now you try to absolve me of crime."*

*"In my youth," quoth the lion, "I was easily fooled
By a shining exterior guise.
By that bias my instincts are no longer ruled,"
She said, seeking the basilisk's eyes.*

*"You're a fool," he rejoined, "as I mentioned before.
"You've no concept of what you are saying.
You could die from my clandestine glance, nothing more;
I suggest you commence with your praying."*

*"You are trying my patience," the lion exclaimed,
"With your doubt and superior airs.
Please desist with the threats that I'll die or be maimed;
I demand that you take me upstairs."*

Severus, who found himself nodding off, sat up suddenly. He was surprised to note that the tree he was

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resting on was no longer in the dense forest, but next to the intersection of a small brook and a low hedge.

"Ah hah," said George, tapping the side of his nose. "That's got you paying attention."

"Good thing, too," commented Fred. "This is where it starts getting exciting."

"I have no desire to hear any more of your sordid little rhymes," said Severus standing. "And I will be on my way."

He turned on his heel and leaped across the junction of the brook and hedge.

The twins turned to look at one another, crestfallen.

"But he can't just leave," fretted George. "He needs to hear the next bit!"

"If the silly sod can't see past the end of his nose, there's not much we can do about it."

"Unless we make his nose bigger."

"Surely we're not that cruel!"

Severus listened as the twins' chatter faded from his hearing. Such rot the people here talked. It was insufferable. He stalked angrily northward, vehemently quashing the pushy memories that were now assailing his mental walls. It was becoming harder and harder to do so. Severus took a deep breath. If he wanted to get to

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the eighth square, he would need all of his focus.

Now, he currently occupied the fifth square — He stopped short.

He hadn't simply jumped the brook; he'd gone diagonally, a move a pawn could only perform if it was taking another piece. What on earth had possessed him? What if the piece was protected?

The woods here were very strange; the trees were all very thin and curved about at ninety-degree angles. In fact, they weren't trees at all, but a jungle of metal pipes. He kept walking and realized he was in a giant bathroom, and the air was filled with fragrant steam that swirled about him. He advanced slowly, keeping to the shadows in the corners of the room. Not hearing or seeing anything of interest, he stepped out into the open to get a better look.

It was then that he heard a soft sound.

Cursing himself for the worst kind of fool, he ducked behind a stone column. When it was clear that the source of the sound was moving no closer, he cautiously peered out.

In the very center of the room was a large pool that was rimmed by a myriad of different taps. By the edge of the pool was a red pawn. To his surprise, the pawn was weeping copiously, his sobs interrupted only by great shuddering breaths.

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Severus cleared his throat.

The pawn looked up at him with a resigned look.

"You're here to take me, then?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Don't be sorry," said the pawn, furiously scrubbing the tears from his cheeks. "I'm just glad to be out of the game. It's been awful."

"What's so bad about it?"

"Everything!" answered the pawn passionately. "First he sent me out to get the white queen. Like that would have ever happened without me getting taken. I managed to thwart a move by the king's knight, but that wasn't good enough. So here I am, out here as bait. I hope he's angry that he only drew a pawn's response instead of a better piece. No offense."

"None taken." Severus regarded the other pawn curiously. "So what happens now?"

"You just kill me, I think," said the pawn. "I really don't know. Being taken's a new experience for me. Can you make it quick?"

An idea sprang into Severus's mind. "Yes, I can make it very quick."

Severus raised his wand. The pawn screwed up his face in anticipation, but no spell came. Instead, the water in the pool next to the pawn began bubbling loudly,

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which was followed by the loud GNAB of a rusty hatch being thrown open.

"Welcome to the SubThgink," came a voice, "emergency travel for folks of all stripes — oh, it's you again, is it? Whatchoo doin' 'ere? We left you one over!"

"Actually, I was hoping you could help my friend here."

The submarine conductor gazed at the pawn in wonder. "Blimey, the queen's bishop's pawn?"

The pawn stood up, surprised to be recognized.

"You know me?"

The conductor guffawed. "Know you? We've been following you since before the game began!"

The pawn blushed. "May I come aboard?"

"Of course you can," said the conductor. "There's bugga all for you to do here now that you've been taken, and there's lots of other good folks aboard that's been taken in previous games. Prepare yourself for a grand journey. Next stop is the Sea of Holes."

"The Sea of Holes?" The pawn's eyes were shining. "I should love to see that."

The conductor took the pawn's hand and helped him aboard.

"Just a moment!" the red pawn called to Severus. "You might need this. I don't know exactly what it does,

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but it'll do no good if it leaves the game with me."

The pawn tossed Severus a small golden key, which he placed in his pocket.

The pawn smiled at Severus. "Thank you for being so kind to me."

"You're welcome," Severus said, "and good luck."

The pawn disappeared down the hatch with a soft smile. When the sub had vanished, Severus breathed a sigh of relief. He had successfully taken his first piece and done so without bloodshed. Now all he had to do was survive three more squares.

He was relieved to see a brook just to the north. Fearing the worst and hoping for the best, he jumped over it.

When he landed on the other side, he was relieved to find himself on a green plain, which rippled in the soft breeze. Cumulous clouds rolled across the bright blue sky, and the smell of grass and clean earth filled his nostrils as he breathed deeply.

His reverie was broken by the sound of hoof beats.

A knight dressed in crimson armor was galloping toward him. The color seemed to be caused by a large amount of dried blood. When he lifted his visor, matted gray hair trailed down to his breastplate. "Check," he

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snarled, gazing hungrily at Severus. To his disgust, a rivulet of spittle rolled down the knight's chin.

The knight raised his sword overhead and spurred his horse toward him, but Severus was ready. But before he had a chance to cast the curse the knight so richly deserved, a white knight appeared and parried the red knight's wild cut.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, mate," said the white knight. "Or did you and your master miss the fact that I was here?"

The red knight snarled furiously. "I'll take you both!"

"Sorry," said the white knight, "you can't take him without getting taken yourself, which would be pretty thick, as you're already down a bishop. Now go back to where you came from and wipe your chin, already. You'll put us off our lunch."

With a howl of fury, the red knight retreated to his square.

"Git," said the white knight.

"He seems more like a psychopath, as far as I can tell."

"I meant you," said the knight. "What were you thinking, taking the red pawn? You nearly put our king in check! Are you playing our game or your own?"

"Of course I'm playing your game," snapped Severus, irrationally hurt by the accusation. "And what do you

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mean, 'check?' Please tell me that fool of king hasn't advanced already. What on earth is he thinking?"

The white knight raised his visor, revealing a fringe of red hair and a rather downtrodden expression. "That's the trouble," he said, dismounting and walking over to Severus. "He's not thinking. He's rushing in without any sort of strategy because he's after you."

"Me? Why?"

"Because, you daft git, you're the reason we're playing without a queen. The king's been inconsolable."

"Wonderful. An irrational king. Just what we need to win."

"You don't know the half of it. Our game strategy involves landing on seven particular squares of the board. They're the sort of squares you recognize only when you're on them, and sometimes only if you search from top to bottom. We've managed to find four. The trouble is that since you joined our side, the king has been barreling after you without giving any thought to the game. If you didn't have a three space lead, he'd have taken you already."

"So the white king is out to get one of his own pieces. This is the most ridiculous game I've ever played."

"Well, if you've got any suggestions, I'd love to hear them."

Severus thought for a moment. "Tell me more about

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these three remaining squares. How do you know the number left to find?"

The knight smiled sadly. "It's a long story."

"If it's crucial to the game, I must know."

The knight sat on the turf and began to recite:

*"I'll tell you everything I can:
Though this is hardly all;
I met an aged aged man,
A-hanging on the wall.
I asked him, "How do you remain,
As you no longer live?"
His answer swirled around my brain.
Like thoughts in a Pensieve.*

*He said, "I hunt for baubles bright
That grave events portend.
I hide them from the knaves that might
Exploit them for their ends.
To they who seek the wide world o'er
I give this wisdom fine
In hopes these trinkets nevermore
Malevolently shine."*

*But I was focused on my plans
For challenges and jousts.
This stalwart stance since I began*

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*I always had espoused.
Bewildered by his muddled words,
I said, "Then tell me why
The lake is filled with flying birds
And fish swim in the sky?"*

*A twinkle lit his eye; he said,
"My boy, an answer lies
Within a home of bricks once red
Now grayed from sooty skies.
In which a magpie had been caged
Until I set him free.
I did not know just how enraged
From this the bird would be."*

*I frowned at him, for this was not
An answer I desired.
He seemed instead to think I sought
New riddles to acquire.
"Have you no answers, hanged man?"
I asked him in a buff.
"I've taken all the tripe I can,
And Riddles, I've enough."*

*He said to me, "I've answers here
To fill the oceans wide.
Your duty is to persevere*

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*And questions to provide.
For instance, answer forty-two
Means little on its own
But with its question I or you
Could know the great unknown."*

*"But I digress," he then demurred,
"And answers you enjoin.
I daresay that you may have heard
Of swords and cups and coins.
You all shall find the final suit,
Encased in hands of rock
And accessed through a downward route
Reptilian rebus lock."*

*I shook my head for I could not
These riddles penetrate.
But now it seemed my every thought
Was new imbued with weight.
I thanked him much for telling me
What questions I should seek,
Suspecting as a side that we
Were up a certain creek.*

*And now pursuing far and wide
The magpie and its kith,
I think on our respective sides*

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*To sever truth from myth.
I sigh, regretting my poor view
Of that old man that I once knew,
Whose eyes were of the brightest blue,
And greatest honors did accrue,
Who often liked a fuzzy shoe,
And garments of the brightest hue,
With whom no subject was taboo,
Whose comments I did misconstrue,
Who sipped the vilest, bitterest brew,
And one night off the tower flew,
Whose enemies we now pursue,
Who gave us every crucial clue,
A-hanging on a wall."*

Severus digested the white knight's words for several long minutes. He would have dismissed it as nonsense if not for the knight's somber recitation and the fact that he could feel his memories stirring beneath the layer of laudanum. He squelched them forcibly. "Do you know what it all means?"

"Yes and no. We figured out the second riddle about the hand of rock, but we haven't yet worked out the magpie riddle."

"How much time would you and your allies need in order to reach the necessary squares?"

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"That's a bit tough to estimate," said the knight, chin in hand. "At the rate we're losing pieces, we could need nine or ten moves."

"Are any other pawns in position to reach the eighth square?"

"None that have made it so far as you have," said the white knight, with a look of dawning comprehension. "I think I can look threatening enough to keep the red queen from taking you, if you can manage to avoid her castle and bishop. Once you become queen, you'll have the mobility to draw our king back to where we can protect him."

Severus remembered the red queen's threat. The red king would not be happy to have lost a piece to the white side. "I have a hunch that the red king will be after me as well."

"So much the better," said the knight. "If you can draw him into one of the squares we control, we might be able to force mate."

Severus looked at the knight with appreciation. "That could work."

The knight pulled down his visor to hide his flush of pleasure. "Well, you've still two squares to go. Don't count your Augureys before they hatch." He mounted his horse noisily. "Well, I'm back to my square."

"Do try not to get yourself taken."

"And you. If you can't make it to the eighth square, I

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may just let the kings fight over you. It's not as if they can take one another, you know."

Severus's snort was lost in the pounding of hooves as the knight galloped off, easily jumping the hedge to the west.

When the knight had gone, Severus set off across the plain, heart considerably lighter. When he reached the next brook, he looked carefully from side to side. Seeing nothing beyond, he took a deep breath and jumped across into the seventh square.

The seventh square was a grim-looking square building that appeared to have been destroyed in a fire. The high railing that surrounded the building was largely intact. Hoping to avoid notice, Severus slunk along the perimeter of the railing until he found a gate, which squealed on rusty hinges. He ascended the steps to the front door, which hung crookedly from its frame.

The entryway opened into a hallway that had once been tiled with black and white porcelain. However, the tiles were scattered haphazardly and stuck up unevenly like broken teeth. The walls were a mess of burned wood and broken plaster, and broken gas pipes were clearly visible in places.

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Ruined though it was, the hallway seemed to continue endlessly on in both directions. Remembering his experience with the twins in the fourth square, he walked for a short time, then paused. A soft breeze whispered through the ruins, and Severus noticed that the hallway had shifted slightly.

All at once, he came to a set of stone steps that were suspended by no visible means. It was curious. Though the fire must have occurred many years ago, this place bore unmistakable traces of more recent violence. There were definite hex marks on the stone, and he spotted a few drops of wet blood on the floor.

As he examined the base of the steps, a flash of silver caught his eye. It was the figure of a lion cast in silver that curved outward in a spiraling shape until the end, where it had been snapped from whatever object it had originally been part. With an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach, he recognized it as being part of a bishop's crosier. A bishop had been here and had done battle, but it was impossible to tell with whom and who had won.

He raised the bottle of laudanum to his lips, but the fortifying sip made him gag. He wiped the liquid from his lips and resolutely placed his foot in the center of the first step. It was reassuringly solid. The first steps were equally steady, and he ascended with increasing

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confidence toward the second story.

The landing of the second floor was pristine, and Severus frowned. The second floor corridor hung unsteadily in the air, as large sections of it had been burned, but the first door in the corridor was as untouched as the landing. He opened the door with a wave of his wand and was surprised to find a windowless room that contained nothing but an iron bed frame and a battered wooden wardrobe. The ceiling was almost all intact, though he could see the gray sky through several openings.

Severus thought for a moment. The place, with its gas pipes and simple tile, had to be Muggle in origin. However, this section of the building had obviously been preserved by magic, and for some purpose. His memories chose that moment to struggle furiously against his mental barriers with such vigor that he could almost hear them humming. He pressed back and managed to silence them, though he didn't know how much longer he would be able to do so, and focus was necessary.

He examined the walls of the room and found them to be free of the hex marks that had marred the downstairs. Upon closer examination, the only part of the room that bore evidence of magic was the wardrobe, which was marked from numerous curses. He waved his wand to open the doors.

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Nothing happened.

"Alohomora!"

Still nothing. He bent closer to examine the lock. It bore heavy gouge marks, as if someone had tried to prise the lock. However, the fact that it remained locked led him to believe that the attempt was unsuccessful.

A Reductor curse had no effect, and neither did any of the dozens of other spells he tried, from burning to crushing. He felt his temper begin to fray, and with it, his control over his memories. He could feel them pounding against the shield in his mind. His stomach turned at the thought of taking more laudanum. He placed his fingertips firmly at his temples and forced his mind back to stillness. Panting, he leaned against the wardrobe and slid to the floor.

After the pressure in his brain relented somewhat, he noticed a pinch coming from a fold in his coat, just below his hip. He fumbled in his pocket and his fingertips brushed against the red pawn's key.

Inspired, he fished it out of his pocket and slid the key into the lock. It opened with a click, and the door swung open.

Severus wasn't sure what to expect, but he was still surprised to find the wardrobe empty. But no, it wasn't completely empty. On the topmost shelf rested a rough

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wooden box. It had a small golden lock that appeared to fit the wardrobe key. Still, something about the gleaming metal that rimmed the aperture made him suspicious. Instead of inserting the key, Severus slid the pins out of lid hinges and opened the box.

In a nest of golden silk lay a dainty porcelain teacup.

He picked up the teacup by its handle to examine it more closely. It was a fine thing, so eggshell thin that he could see the shadows his fingers made, even in the dim light. The lip of the cup was gold, and a curious badger device had been painted on the outside. A memory surged in his mind so violently that he wasn't able to suppress it entirely. It was an image of an elderly woman holding a golden cup out in front of her. He knew this cup, and he had a feeling that it was very dangerous.

Furious with himself for losing control of his mind, he took another mouthful of laudanum, but he was unable to make himself swallow the viscous tincture. He spat it onto the floor, coughing to rid his mouth and throat of the sticky feeling. He was positive that the barrier keeping his memories at bay was failing, and no amount of opium could stop it. He had to get to the eighth square. Then he'd have the rest of the game to occupy his mind.

He shoved his finger through the cup's handle, closed the wardrobe door, and locked it behind him. Without

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warning, the wardrobe burst into flame. Severus leaped backwards, only to find that the door to the hallway had locked behind him, and that the door had no keyhole. Attempting to Apparate accomplished nothing other than giving him a splitting headache. He attempted to douse the flames, but like the wardrobe and door, they were resistant to his magic.

Already, smoke was making it difficult for him to breathe. He had to think. Whoever had created this trap would have been certain to leave no way for him to use magic to escape.

At last, he flung the bottle of laudanum at the wardrobe in frustration. It shattered, and the blaze flared from the alcohol. He was truly and utterly stuck, and all he had to aid his escape was a useless wand and a vaguely threatening cup.

The cup. Of course. He had sprung the trap by taking the cup. The white knight's song rang in his ears. The cup must get to the white knight. He laid the golden key in his palm and transfigured it into a small pigeon. He focused on giving the bird a more complex brain than the average dove and he was pleased with his efforts, even if the bird's feathers still had a distinct gold cast. He bound the cup firmly to the bird's foot.

"Take this to the white king's knight as fast as your

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wings can take you," he instructed the bird.

"You might say 'please,'" remarked the bird in a sulky tone.

Severus gestured to the rising flames. "I might also say 'rotisserie.' Clear off."

When the bird had escaped through a hole in the ceiling, Severus found himself alone in a burning room. He lay down on the floor and covered his face with his sleeve. The flames had engulfed the inside walls and were beginning to spread across the floor. He gazed up at the smoke, opaque and gray as the surface of the foe-glass, and felt suddenly calm.

His meditation was interrupted by the sound of ceiling timbers cracking. He reflexively rolled away from the sound and narrowly missed being crushed by chunks of burning wood. He forced himself to slow his breathing. Even as he pressed himself against the only remaining wall, he knew that there was no sense in dying terrified. Furthermore, there was even less sense in dying without proper reflection on one's life. Bearing that thought firmly in mind, he released the iron grip on his memories.

As the flames grew closer, his eyes fluttered closed and the memories began to pour across his mind's eye. Flashes of green and red, haunted blue eyes, his name, flight, fire. With the images came pain, punishment,

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exile, and the descent into obscurity. His consciousness was sinking deeper and deeper into a kaleidoscopic mandala of the past.

He could feel his skin beginning to blister, and it was becoming more and more difficult to draw breath. Soon it would be over, and he would be at peace with the memories, at peace with himself. This was his absolution. This was his punishment. This was his reward. The fire roared louder, and he prepared himself for the end.

But wait. For the fire to roar, it must have found air. He opened his irritated and watery eyes and saw that the flames were flaring where the ceiling timber had fallen. It had crashed partially through the back wall of the room, and when the black smoke cleared for an instant, he could see daylight on the other side of the wall.

He was vaguely aware of the heat and the acrid smoke displacing the air in his lungs as he crawled toward the broken wall determinedly. His vision was fading to gray and his head felt as if it were being squeezed in a vise. With the last of his strength, he pulled himself to his feet and heaved himself into the burning wall. The last thing he remembered was the sound of splintering wood as his body went limp and the pain disappeared into darkness.

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When he woke, the first thing he noticed was the pressure on his brow.

His eyes flew open, surprised at the odd sensation on his head, and even more surprised to be alive and unscathed. He put his hands up to the heavy something that was wrapped firmly around his head. He lifted it off and held it in front of him to make out what it could possibly be.

It was a golden crown.

He stared at his surroundings and was disoriented by familiarity. He was standing by a window in a room that was filled with all manner of bells, from enormous brass bells to tiny silver ones. He ran his finger along the edge of a particularly fine bronze bell, but the buttery ring was quickly lost in a chorus of irritated squeaks. Apparently this belfry had bats, and lots of them.

Not wishing to disturb them, Severus walked over to the window. Below, he could clearly make out the burning building in which he'd been trapped, just to the south of a tiny brook that sparkled in the sunlight. The reflected sunlight made him start. He'd made it. He was in the eighth square.

From the belfry he could make out the neighboring squares. He was not high enough to see the entire game, but he occasionally saw flashes of movement in the distance, and at one point the white king's knight flashed through

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the treetops of another square and waved enthusiastically. Severus nearly found himself waving back.

It was then that he noticed the red queen sitting in a golden throne not twenty feet away. She was scowling at him over a cup of tea.

"Won't you join me in a cup of tea?"

"Rather stupid of you to offer."

The red queen ignored the insult. "Suit yourself. You won't be going anywhere for quite some time. And when you do, you won't go far." She took a sip of tea and smirked at him.

He didn't answer. The less said to the red queen, the better.

They both stared out over the game. Severus wished he could see more of the action.

"Nice, isn't it?" asked the red queen, daintily nibbling the head off a gingerbread man.

"Only if you can't go anywhere else."

"I'm queen," she said, calm façade cracking. "I can go anywhere, and I can take you if I want."

"You're not about to take me if it means getting taken yourself, and there's that pesky white knight to worry about."

The red queen glared at him. "I wondered who had been helping them strategize. It was you, wasn't it?"

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Finally she sighed. "The game's not the same without you, you know."

"Yes. I noticed that there are still a number of white pieces on the board."

"Not that, you fool. I meant that no-one else stirs me to a violent frenzy the way you used to."

"I'm told I have a similar effect on most."

"Which reminds me," said the red queen with relish, "I hear the white king's no happier with you than the red king."

"The white king can get stuffed for all I care," said Severus. "But I'm going to win this game for him, whether he likes it or not."

"Well," said the queen, enunciating carefully. "You will eventually have to deal with both kings at some point, and that knight won't always be here to protect you."

"I won't need him."

Not pausing to savor the furious look on the red queen's face, Severus took a deep breath, stepped up onto the windowsill, and ran down the side of the bell tower to the southwest.

Never in his life had he moved so swiftly or so easily; not in a car, not on a broomstick. The squares whizzed by in a blur. In the first square, the other white knight stood grimly over the body of a three-legged lion. The

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second square was a circular room with blue candles, where soft light poured forth from an open door. Severus felt drawn to it and nearly stopped running, but he kept his head down and continued. The third square was a graveyard dominated by a large white tomb. The fourth was filled with people singing. The fifth was a dark forest on whose westernmost border was a crenellated wall of stone. He had reached the edge of the board.

Feeling unpleasantly as though he were being watched, he ran south along the wall another square, which was covered with gravel and large boulders. When he felt that he was no longer in danger, he gazed to the north and northeast, trying to decide where to move next. He placed his hand against the cool stone wall and sighed.

"Boy, why are you sighing?" came a voice from behind him.

He spun around to find that on the other side of the brook was a vast library with a flagstone floor. The stone wall that edged the game board had large windows through which sun poured.

The source of the inquiry came from a white rook, who was perched precariously at the top of the closest bookcase. She wore a flowing white blouse that was

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cinched at the waist with a lovely patterned belt and at the neck with a matching cravat.

He raised an eyebrow at the castle — she couldn't have been more than eighteen — and scowled. "Boy?"

"Yes, boy," said the castle, primly closing the book she was reading. "Hardly more sense than a schoolboy, but at least you made it here in one piece."

Severus felt oddly drawn to the queer creature but took exception to being called a schoolboy. "I am queen, you know."

"Yes," she said, gesturing to her lithe form, "and I'm a castle. Funny how these things work, isn't it? If I were setting up the board, I should have made you a bishop. But we have only limited control over such things."

Severus's memories began fluttering at the edge of his consciousness, and he let it. For the first time, he cursed the drug that was making his memories vague and sluggish. Her repeated inquiry interrupted his musings.

"You still didn't tell me what made you sigh so."

"I was thinking about the king."

"Well," she said tartly, "that's enough to make anyone sigh. I hope you don't think you're entirely without fault in the matter."

"Yes, yes," said Severus impatiently. "I've already been informed that I'm the root of all evil in this game and

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that if the white side loses, it will be entirely my fault."

"Where on earth did you get that idea?"

"I thought that universal antipathy was standard for those who destroy beloved leaders."

"Where have you been this game?" asked the castle, throwing her hands in the air in exasperation.

"Getting to the eighth square, you impertinent chit!" Severus snapped. "I notice you haven't even left your space!"

"Why should I have?" asked the castle with infuriating calm. "My job has been here."

The scathing reply came automatically. "With your nose in a book the whole time, no doubt."

The castle smiled. "Yes, with my nose in a book the whole time." She had dimples. She tossed Severus the book she'd been reading.

It was a notebook of sorts, with heavily edited entries, many side notes, and a few scratched out drawings of a chessboard. As he stared at the sequence of scribbled moves, it dawned on him why he had encountered so little resistance from the red pieces in his advance across the board.

"You instructed the other pieces to protect me."

"Well spotted!" she said with another smile. "After I convinced the king's knight, it was easy. He's quite good at this game, you know. So in spite of the white king, you managed to claim another of the seven squares we needed,

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and you've replaced the most powerful piece on our side."

"How did you know I was really on your side?"

"It came to me, just like this did," she said, expansively gesturing around her.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you find things around here to be a bit strange? That's because I'm dreaming it all."

"As much sense as it would make to know that this world came from the mind of a young female, you didn't dream this," Severus retorted. "I'm hallucinating it."

She regarded him curiously. "But you're wearing a funny hat. You always wear funny hats in my dreams. You don't happen to feel an irresistible urge to kiss me, do you?"

Severus wasn't quite sure which of her extraordinary comments to respond to. "Absolutely not! And this is not a funny hat, it's a crown that I nearly died to earn, you ridiculous child."

Rather than look put out, as he had hoped, she looked even more interested. "Do you hallucinate like this often?"

"The frequency of my hallucinations is none of your concern." He avoided her penetrating gaze by flipping through her book. He was surprised to find the nonsense poem, yet again. The difference is that it was written so that he could read it, and it was annotated. This is what he read:

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LODREMORTY Yes.

'Twas lirt (late + dire?) and the bellitaur (Centaur? Taurus?)
Did archemune (?) the forbidrest (Forbidden Forest)
All gresolved (+ resolved) were the lakimers (mer=sea?)
And the orphee (Order) outgrest (?)

"Beware the lodremort, my son! (Yes, yes)
The eyes that burn, the soulesplit (Yes)
Beware lecarrownstrange and shun
Kaginos Pettinet!" (Yes)

He took his gryffish sword (Really?) in hand
And sought the vileunn (vile+villain) fragsole far (Yes.)
And found a space in grimmish place
And rubbed his cursiscar. (Clue or just a cute rhyme?)

And as in idelwhile he rests,
The lodremort with eyes of flame
Surforsted from the forbidrest (An ill-conceived gambit?)
And arked as it came! (Ouch.)

One, two! Three, four! And more and more
The gryffish blade turned bloaddirud; (bloody + red)

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At last it died and by his side
The orphee prodor stood. (Order's what?)

"We have now slain the lodremort.
So take my hand, O Prodor Brave, (?)
We'll not be friends, but when this ends,
You'll be not revilnave." (?)

'Twas timumph, and the orpheements (We win, apparently)
Did partabrate (Partake? Party? Celebrate?) in hoggydron,
All dellerry (?) the wordwize was,
And the prodor livpollon. (?)

What is the prodor? A protector? A predator?
When does the attack come?
What needs to be done to win? Gryffish sword, cursiscar,
the soulesplit.

Severus looked up at the castle, who had observed
him in silence.

"You say you dreamed that I was on your side?"

"Yes. It took me some time to convince the other pieces
that you were, but as you can see, they've all been helping."

"All but the king," said Severus nastily.

Her smile faded a bit. "I think he'll come around," she

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said with more confidence than she probably felt. "When push comes to shove, I think he's accepted the evidence that you were on our side all along. It's just taking his heart a little longer to catch up with his brain."

"It's weakness. It could get us all taken."

"His irrational anger with you is weakness," countered the castle, "but his love for the previous queen is what's keeping him in the game. I suspect it's also what's keeping you in the game."

Severus didn't say anything but returned the notebook to the castle. As she took the book from him, his fingers brushed hers, and he met her eyes.

"Who are you?"

"The king's castle," she said. "And your friend."

"In that order?"

She leaned down and placed her hand on the side of his face. "That all depends on you."

"Prodigal."

"Pardon?"

"Prodigal traitor. That's what the Prodtor is."

"Wonderful," she said. "Now all I need to do is find a prodigal traitor willing to help our side."

"Don't be stupid, girl," said Severus, irritation finally piercing the opium fog in his brain.

A slow smile spread across her face. "I'm so glad

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to hear you say that. By our calculations, we can checkmate the red king in five moves. Two of those moves are yours. Make them count. I'll find you when the game is over. Pay attention to what's happening. It could be important."

He covered her hand with his own and gave it a gentle squeeze. She rubbed her thumb against his.

"Now, if you would be so kind as to get that red pawn out of my way, we can start endgame."

Severus turned to the north and raced off.

The lumpy, lopsided red pawn never knew what hit him. He barely had enough time to wheeze in surprise before Severus struck. Then, before Severus knew what had happened, the pawn disappeared. No pop of Apparation, he simply vanished.

Severus then ran northeast as hard as he could to the northernmost edge of the board. As he caught his breath, he looked at the square around him with interest. He was standing on a hill that overlooked the entire board. Behind him stood a large manor house that must have been quite fine once but had fallen into disrepair. The view from the hill was troubling.

Several squares away, he two kings were facing one

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another, wands out, but neither was able to make a move toward the other. Severus realized that the kings were stuck until one of them was checkmated and suspected the red pieces would be coming to the same conclusion. Upon further scrutiny, Severus noticed that the white king was decked out in a number of odd items. On a heavy chain around his neck, the white king wore a battered black book, shards of the teacup Severus had found, a golden locket whose front was missing, a supremely ugly ring with a cracked stone, and what appeared to be a broken wand.

He could see the red and white knights threatening each other with swords, the bishops gliding, taking pawns and circling one another, and both castles teaming up to drive off the red queen, who had made a daring move deep into white territory.

His perusal was interrupted by a soft hissing noise behind him. He turned to find the largest, deadliest looking snake he had ever seen coiled and ready to strike. He leaped to the right, and the snake's head whizzed past him, fangs bared. Severus retreated out of striking range and cast a Stupefying Curse at the snake. The snake dodged and glided rapidly toward the house.

Severus pursued the snake, firing off more curses as he ran. The snake dodged them easily and disappeared

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through a broken window into the house. The haze surrounding Severus's memories was still thick, but every instinct screamed at him that the snake needed to be eliminated.

Rather than squelch the feeling as he would have earlier in the game, he ran to the front door of the great house and slipped inside.

The entrance hall of the house was dark, in spite of the large windows on either side of the door. A round table in the center of the room was covered with a dustcloth, as were the other articles of furniture. Decades of spider webs hung from the chandelier, and a thick layer of dust coated every surface of the room.

To his relief, there were dozens of s-shaped tracks in the dust over the rotting carpet. It would be difficult to track the snake, but not impossible. Severus lit his wand silently, and followed the darkest and freshest-looking of the snake's tracks to the left.

The next room was nearly pitch black on account of the heavy velvet draperies covering the windows. As dilapidated as it was, Severus could tell that it had been a fine room, with its pale crimson walls and an ornate mirror over the marble mantelpiece. As he examined the room in the small circle of wandlight, his gaze fell upon a loveseat and two overstuffed chairs, all of which faced

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the fireplace. Curiously, they were devoid of dust covers.

He was startled to discover the faded chalk outlines of three bodies that had apparently been found sitting there. The figures appeared as negative shadows, in the light, almost as the outlines of ghosts. As he gazed at them, willing his mind to impart to him the significance of this find, he became aware of a soft sound coming from the floor to his right. His reflexes did not desert him, and he cast a stunning hex in the direction of the sound.

He was gratified to hear an angry hiss, and in the light of his wand, he saw the tail of the great snake disappear up the flue of the fireplace. He cast a quick hex, but it struck the back of the fireplace. Cursing the snake's unnatural intelligence and speed, he ran out of the drawing room up the stairs

He raced past several bedrooms, finally finding the one that shared a chimney with the downstairs drawing room. He stopped short in the doorway, listening for his quarry as he tried to quiet his fast breathing.

There. He swore that he could hear the foul serpent's belly scales whispering across fabric. He quickly lit his wand, and stepped cautiously into the room in search of the snake.

He crossed to the bed and flung off the bedding, which released a cloud of dust but revealed no sign of

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his prey. He coughed and unsuccessfully attempted to fan the dust away from him. A slight movement on the other side of the bed caught his attention.

The bell-pull! The cunning snake had coiled itself around the rope bell-pull and had lain in wait, perfectly camouflaged, for Severus to venture close enough for it to strike. He aimed his wand.

"Reducto!"

To his shock, the snake threw itself off the bell-pull a split second before his curse hit.

"Stupefy!"

But it was too late. The snake had slithered back to the fireplace and disappeared into the chimney.

The snake could have retreated to the ground floor, but Severus didn't think so. He threw the bedroom window open and twisted himself so that he could see the side of the house more clearly. The sheer walls that had appeared unscalable from a distance had large blocks of stone on the corners and around the windows, which protruded enough to grip. The snake would be expecting him to approach by the stairs, which presumably went up to the attic.

Severus placed his wand between his teeth and swung himself out the window. He wedged his toes into the space between two stones and began climbing. It was

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hard work. Sweat dripped into his eyes and his muscles protested as he lifted himself, arm over arm, up the side of the house. As he ascended, he felt a droplet of water strike his face. A storm was brewing.

He put his head down and kept climbing. It was odd, the house hadn't appeared this high from the outside. And what had been carefully worked sandstone cornerstones soon gave way to rough blocks of granite. The climbing was easier, but, judging from an upward glance, he had much further to go than he had initially supposed.

He gritted his teeth and kept climbing. The rain was falling harder. Fortunately, the rough-hewn stone had enough indentations for him to keep his grip. At last, he came to the crenellated edge of the chimney, but really, it appeared to be more of a great tower. As he pulled himself onto the tower, lightning flashed overhead, and he allowed himself to catch his breath.

There was no sign of the snake. Undoubtedly it had gone below to avoid the rain, which would make it more difficult for the snake to move. Severus welcomed the cooling rain, and when he felt sufficiently recovered from his climb, he tentatively approached the wooden door that led below. It was slightly ajar, just wide enough for a snake to get through. He peered through the crack in the door and froze.

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The snake was curled up inside the door, lying peacefully atop a wooden trap door. Clever creature. Had he approached from below, the snake would have felt his attempts to open the trap door and could have bitten him. He considered, weighing whether he could take the snake by surprise. He finally decided that he ought to force a confrontation. After discarding a few strategies, he focused on the door beneath the snake.

"Colloportus."

The vibration immediately roused the snake, which seemed startled to have its exit taken away. It recovered quickly and darted behind the door where Severus couldn't hex it.

Severus threw the door open, hoping to crush the snake behind it, but it had gone all the way to the doorjamb, and struck out from between the hinges, forcing him to jump backwards. He slipped on the wet stone and fell.

Seizing the opportunity, the snake flopped to the ground and struck at his outstretched foot. The snake buried its fangs harmlessly in the thick rubber heel of his boot, and Severus sent a Stunning Spell toward the snake and struck it squarely in the midsection.

The snake was thrown backwards, and Severus scrambled to his feet. The snake seemed to sense that it

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had lost its advantage attempted to escape through the door to dryer environs, but Severus sealed the door with a jab of his wand. Sensing failure, the snake launched itself over the edge of the tower.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The green beam hit the serpent midair, and the snake, which had been writhing frantically in search of a surface on which to cling, went completely limp. As if in slow motion, Severus watched the snake fall to the base of the tower. For an instant, even the raindrops seemed to hang in the air.

And as suddenly as the rain had started, it stopped.

A blinding beam of sunlight pierced the cloud, and Severus looked out from the tower, which had been entirely shrouded in mist, and saw the entire game board stretched before him. He could clearly see the pieces on the board. His heart leapt to see his castle gliding deliberately to the sixth square, where the red king was watching her with a look of contempt.

He glanced at the castle, the knight, and the white king's pawn. All wore similar looks of triumph.

Checkmate.

However, the white king seemed to realize that something was amiss. The red king, with whom he stood face to face, did not disappear. He didn't even tip

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over. He just stood there, glaring at the pieces that had trapped him, refusing to concede.

From his vantage point on top of the tower, it appeared to Severus as though the two kings were speaking. Suddenly the red king drew his wand and dropped into dueling stance.

Severus frowned. This wasn't how the game was played.

Then the white king did something strange. He looked up at the tower and caught Severus's eyes. Somehow sensing the question, Severus nodded.

The red king cast a spell and the white king dodged. But instead of pulling out his wand, the white king drew a large sword with a red gem in the pommel. With one swift cut, the white king cleanly severed the red king's head from his shoulders.

As the red king fell to the ground, the world around Severus began to melt. The colors of the squares ran together and he found himself suspended in a silvery fog. This time, he was not alone.

The white king hovered in front of him. He did not appear pleased.

"Look," he said at last, "I know we've had our differences in the past, but we couldn't have won the game without you."

Severus felt a scornful look twist his features.

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"Obviously," he said, infusing each syllable with as much derision as possible.

A rueful smile lifted the king's lips. "I guess this is my way of saying I don't like you, but I owe you my life." He extended his hand to Severus. "And my gratitude."

For one brief moment, Severus contemplated refusing to shake the king's hand. However, the king had ultimately trusted him and believed him.

He took the king's hand and shook it firmly.

Odd, the king's hand felt smaller than it looked, and it was much softer. He squinted. The king's face was fading in the mist, yet the gentle pressure on his hand remained.

Severus scrubbed his eyelids with his other hand and opened his eyes. It was daylight, and his blinds had been opened. He examined the room, marveling that it was clean, all the bottles were gone, and finally, at the brown head that lay next to his hip on the bed.

He winced, expecting the sun to do serious damage to his retinas, but no sting was forthcoming. Far from it — he felt quite hale, and surprisingly sober. Several empty potion vials sat on the nightstand, along with an empty soup bowl and a half-full glass of water.

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He regarded the woman, who occupied the chair by his bed and whose head rested at his side, and whose hands enveloped his right. She must have nursed him back to health. A glance at the bedroom foe-glass on the door clearly indicated that she was not an enemy, but who was she? What was her purpose?

He gently moved his hand, and she uttered a soft mewling sound before sitting bolt upright in her chair, eyes wide.

"Oh! You're awake! Are you all right?"

He was too shocked to respond. The woman, no, girl, who had probably saved his life was Hermione Granger, one third of the bane of his existence.

"You!" he managed to hiss. "What the hell do you think you're doing here? You — what day is this?"

"October ninth. You've been out for nearly a week."

It was true, her face and clothing showed signs of a lengthy vigil. He glared at her. "Why aren't you at school, Miss Granger?"

She blinked at him in surprise, and to his surprise, began laughing, a high crystalline sound. "I'm so happy to hear you say that!" she exclaimed, brown eyes warm. "I was afraid you'd suffered permanent damage."

"Miss Granger," he said, disentangling his hand from her grip, "You will kindly tell me what you are doing

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in the house of an accused murderer instead of safe in class at Hogwarts."

"I had more important things to do than school."

"Such as nurse a killer back to health. What would precious Potter say?"

"He'd call you a greasy git, shake his head, and get back to work. He knows the truth."

Severus's jaw worked. "What in Morgan's name do you mean 'the truth'?" he demanded.

She looked seriously at him. "That you were following Professor Dumbledore's orders when you cast the Killing Curse. He had you do it to save Malfoy and to save yourself from the Unbreakable Vow you took. We also know he would have died that night, even without your intervention."

He felt the blood drain from his face. "Impossible. Nobody knew."

"Professor," she said tentatively, "I don't mean to pry, but do you remember any of your dreams while you were, you know —"

"Orbiting the moons of Jupiter."

"— orbiting the moons of Jupiter," she finished.

He thought for a moment. "Yes, I do. Parts of it, anyway."

"Then," she continued awkwardly, "you should write

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it all down. Even the slightest detail could be really important. I'd like to hear about it as soon as possible."

"Since when do you place such stock in dreams, Miss Granger?"

"Since I saved your life," she said with a slight smile. "Now, since you're awake, you really ought to take a shower. I'll be downstairs making dinner. We'll talk more then."

She left him alone, and as he mechanically followed her instructions, his mind was whirling. When he had dressed himself in a robe that she had obviously repaired, he followed the lovely smell of food down the stairs.

His sitting room had been returned to relative order, and he found himself drawn to his father's chess set, which had been placed in the corner. His hand sought the white king's rook, and he put the piece into his pocket.

"Professor?" came Hermione's voice from the kitchen. "Are you ready for supper?"

As he crossed his tiny sitting room to the kitchen, Severus felt as if he were in another alternate version of reality. Perhaps he'd gone beyond the foe-glass world into another stranger place. But when he saw the perfect shepherd's pie Hermione had prepared and the expectant look on her face, he wondered if he didn't vastly prefer this place to the previous realities he had experienced.

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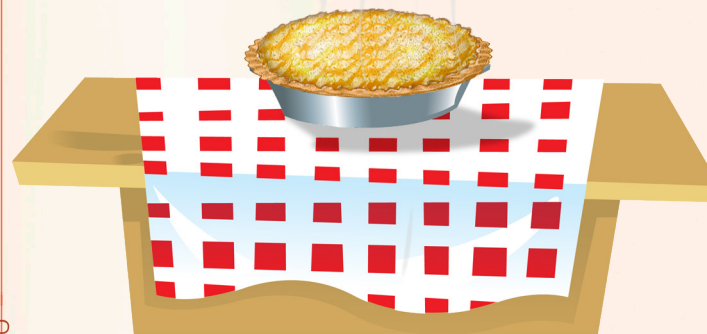
And really, he thought, patting the castle in his pocket, as long as Hermione was there, he suddenly found that he didn't really care about which was his dream and which was hers.

Which do you think it was?

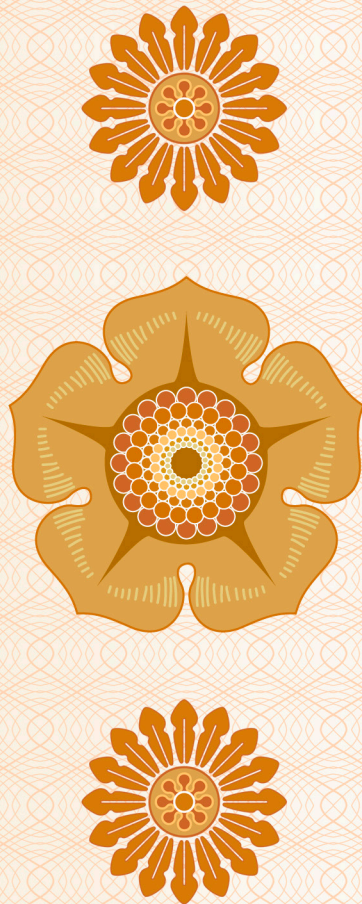
*Ever drifting down the stream —
Lingering in the golden gleam —
Life, what is it but a dream?*

— Rev. Charles L. Dodgson

The End



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Author's Notes



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Other direct quotations/acknowledgements:

"Honey? I beg your pardon, I hardly know you!" is Bob Hope's response to Fozzie's request for honey ice cream in "The Muppet Movie." "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is a poem by Robert Herrick, also known by its first line, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." "The Young Lady's Pleasures and How She Gained Them" is based on "You are old, Father William," from Alice's

Adventures in Wonderland, which, in turn, is a spoof of Robert Southey's poem, "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them." The original is a boring and didactic poem that was supposed to teach Victorian children the importance of temperance and piety. "Sea of holes" is from the Beatles animated film "Yellow Submarine." The "Aged Aged Man" poem, is based on the Looking-Glass White Knight's Song, which in turn is based on Carroll's earlier poem, "Upon the Lonely Moor," which was published anonymously in 1856.

The reference to "forty-two" in the White Knight's song is from Douglas Adam's "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" series. "Boy, why are you sighing?" imprecisely echoes Wendy's first words to Peter in J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan. Having one person's dream intersect with another's drug trip came from Tony Kushner's "Angels in America," as did the phrase "orbiting the moons of Jupiter." I shamelessly stole the serpent on the bell pull from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Speckled Band." The stanzas at the beginning and end were written by Lewis Carroll (aka Charles Dodgson) as frames for Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There.



Colophon



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