Let the Games Begin!

by LunaStorm

Summary

In which Terence 'Terry' Boot is an ordinary bloke and therefore cannot understand why he finds himself in such a mess. Or what these Shadow Court members want with them. Or how Potter, Malfoy, Granger and Longbottom can be so calm about it all!

Notes

This is WILDLY AU. Especially when it comes to the Yugioh universe: I have taken canon, twisted, turned, molded, changed it and reworked it entirely for my own purposes. Plus, I've taken some ideas from other fics, though they are all reworked as well.

By and large, however, you can assume events from Yugioh canon happened mostly the same way, even if the reasons and explanations for them, and the mechanics of Shadow Magic, are slightly (or greatly) different. This fic takes place several years after the Dawn Duel arc, anyway, and as I already mentioned, it is AU.

For the Harry Potter gang, everything is canon up until the fic begins, sometime in the spring of Harry's fifth year.
Chapter 1

Terence ‘Terry’ Boot was an ordinary bloke.

He was 15 years old, attended a boarding school, liked to hang out with his mates, fought with his brother a lot and didn’t have many worries.

His appearance was rather unremarkable: neither fat nor fit, neither tall nor short, neither too pale nor too tanned. He had boring brown hair, which he always kept short, and dark brown eyes, that his former girlfriend had declared ‘very expressive’.

Like so many other blokes his age, he had a fascination for fast motorbikes, hung pictures of top-models over his bed but had a secret crush on shy-but-cute Sally-Anne from his class, was rather proud of his good grades but still preferred comics to history and could eat much more than he should reasonably be able to stomach, especially in terms of sweets.

Like not so many other teenagers, he happened to be a wizard and was currently enrolled in his fifth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; a fact which had come as a bit of a shock to his so far non-magical family, but that in the end didn’t mean much. Sure his boarding school was less dull (and more hazardous) than most others and doing real magic could be rather thrilling; but Transfiguration essays were just as bothersome as Biology ones and magical homework was neither easier than the standard version nor less stressing when it was due the following day.

Besides, he was as obsessed with his favourite team (the Ballycastle Bats, third in the League) as his muggle cousin was with his (Manchester United, second in the run for the Cup), despite the fact that his heroes played on flying brooms with four balls, rather than on foot with only one.

His main concerns were very normal ones: girls, sports, and the teachers’ unreasonable demands on sacred spare time.

All in all, he was a standard bloke, with a standard life.

So why – why!? – did he find himself in this mess?

Of all the absurd, uncomfortable, upsetting things…

Why him? He never did anything to deserve this, he was sure of it. The Fates were cruel indeed!

He glanced around.

On his left, pale slick elegance only marred by the arrogance and maliciousness conveyed by the ever present smirk: Draco Malfoy, Slytherin Silver Prince, arbiter elegantiae of the school, by general feminine consensus the most gorgeous - and thus hated by general masculine consensus - underage wizard in Britain and all around nasty jerk, as usual glaring balefully at his rival.

On his right, impossibly messy black hair and impossibly sparkling green eyes, shining even through the frumpy glasses: the Gryffindor Golden Boy, Harry Potter, hero, seeker extraordinaire, clueless mystifying bloke and Knight in Shining Armour of every teenage witch’s dreams, predictably glaring back.

Now, this stand-off in itself was nothing unusual or surprising.
Those two had been at each other’s throat from day one and their confrontations were fairly common, not to mention, rather enjoyable; loud and unpredictable, the two made for a highly appreciated live show, with no need for tickets (not that the Weasley Twins hadn’t tried selling some). In fact, it was a common practice among the Hogwarts students to arrange their paths between classes in such a way that they crossed all of the expected ‘meeting points’, in the hope of catching the fireworks once the two got their ever-fresh fighting going.

Terry’s favourite this year was the sun-lit third-floor corridor where inescapably, once a week, the Gryffindor Defence class ran into the Slytherin Arithmancy one, very conveniently just outside the room where Terry himself and his fellow Ravenclaws were gathering for Charms.

Too bad said corridor seemed to have inexplicably disappeared: there was no longer any sunlight around them – and it wasn’t a case of sudden blindness, no. That would have been somewhat expected. Oftentimes the unpredictability of these ‘shows’ resulted in the spectators being granted a rather more lively experience than they wished, courtesy of stray curses, exploded debris flying around and the like.

Truth be told, it wasn’t at all odd for a student or three to find themselves chatting away in the hospital wing, under the label ‘collateral victims’. A fair few nice friendships had started that way, Terry could attest to that. There were eve some fools, like those Creevey brothers from Gryffindor, who claimed such happenings as a sort of honour; Terry of course was far from this kind of fanatical nonsense, but he too had had his turn of being hit by a teeth-lengthening hex meant for Potter, and a ricocheting knee-reversal jinx…

Terry knew all too well that Malfoy didn’t care in the least about ‘side-effects’; he had always thought that Potter didn’t care either. After all, why would the two most popular blokes of their generation bother to pay attention to ‘lowly’ common students?

Joining Potter’s Defence Association the previous October, however, had opened his eyes to the fact that the Gryffindor Hero most certainly would have cared, probably a great deal too, if he had but noticed. Which he simply didn’t.

He was genuinely nice, and genuinely oblivious.

Terry, with his studious, inquisitive, observant nature, had often wondered as of late whether Malfoy’s callousness was more or less irritating than Potter’s blindness.

It was like the green-eyed Gryffindor could not register anything in his surroundings beyond a) direct threats, preferably of the lethal kind (against which he was admittedly brilliant), and b) his friends. Friends who never stayed far from him and in fact… yes, Terry could spot Granger, standing proud and vibrant, and a tall shadow, flanking him as usual, despite their unusual situation: surely that was Potter’s faithful side-kick.

But, wait, no… there was no red hair to be seen; not Weasley then. Who…? Ah, yes. The tall, strong frame could only be Longbottom. Bit of a mystery that one, Terry mused. Universally believed to be an idiot with barely enough magic to qualify for Hogwarts (according to rumour, he’d got in merely on his pureblood heritage, like some Slytherins in their year) and yet, not only was he a respected member of the D.A., much admired especially by the younger members, but one of the best among them, recently the only one besides Ginny Weasley who could keep up with Potter and Granger. Terry had watched him master a complex shield in almost no time with his own eyes. It puzzled the entire Ravenclaw House.

Well, at least he would be more interesting to observe than the ginger-haired winner of the ‘Most Predictable Gryffindor of the Year’ award, thought Terry uncharitably…
Then his mind came to a screeching halt. Wait. What was he thinking! There was nothing interesting in this mess! No silver linings! It was not an opportunity for observation! He shouldn’t be thinking about that! He should stick to cursing Fate, Luck, Life’s weird sense of humour and possibly a colourful assortment of Gods!

Because – really. It was one thing to miss a class or two while your skin regained its proper hue under the exasperated fussing of the school’s Mediwitch, and quite another to be dragged along for the ride on one of Potter’s mad adventures!

Oh, yes, he knew what the other bloke got up to in his spare time. Who didn’t? Rumours were wild things after all and they tended to run rampant. Plus, he’d got the whole story about that Basilisk (a Basilisk in a school, wasn’t that mind-boggling) from a portrait the year before and Potter had sort-of confirmed it, in that confusingly modest way of his. Terry was positive it was just one episode of many, after all he could recall absurd tales about Potter beating a troll as early as Halloween in their first year!

They made for wonderful tales to be sure, but he much preferred the role of listener! Let Potter’s usual side-kicks do their job as Proppeian Helpers. He, normal, unassuming, fairly boring Terry Boots, did not want to be involved in any way!

But even as he mentally raged he couldn’t help the sinking feeling that he was already in way too deep.

For the cavernous, barely-lit cave he could guess more than see spreading around them and up high above, welcoming them only with a chilling draft that made the flames flicker dramatically atop the two torches held by conveniently placed – too conveniently, his logical mind pointed out – ornamental supports…

…well, it most certainly wasn’t Hogwarts anymore.
What the hell was going on?

“Potter, this is entirely your fault!” spat Draco Malfoy from his left.

Terry groaned. It seemed the Slytherin, rather than sitting up and taking notice of their weird surroundings, as well as the glaringly obvious fact that they weren’t in Hogwarts anymore, let alone drawing the fairly logical conclusion that they were in huge troubles, had instead decided to simply include this new and startling development into his ongoing argument!

Bloody berk.

Now, perhaps Terry was too normal to enjoy adventures: he had no qualms admitting this. Maybe his being relatively new to magic had something to do with his… prudence… too.

But honestly!

To completely ignore a radical and unexplainable change of scenery, with all the worrisome speculations this invited and the potential threats that anyone with common sense would have realized lurked in a big, dark cave with far too strategically placed light points! That was beyond blasé!

And naturally, Potter was never going to let Malfoy’s provocation go unanswered, no matter that Terry would have readily bet neither of the two had any more clues on what was going on than he himself had…

But maybe all those years of – ahem – extracurricular activities had done Potter some good after all: instead of shooting a catty remark the Slytherin’s way, as expected, Potter ran a hand through his ever-messy hair and half-smiled sheepishly: “Probably, yeah… stuff like this seems to happen an awful lot around me…” he muttered.

Then he shook his head sharply, as if to clear it: “No matter. Tossing the blame back and forth will do us no good. Let’s see if we can figure out where we are!”

Oh, great Merlin! Common sense! From an unlikely source, no less! Quick, someone grab it before it disappears again!

Terry hurriedly said: “I agree!”; Longbottom was nodding quickly too and Granger started saying: “Right, then!…”

Unfortunately, Malfoy, as usual, dismissed anyone around him as completely inconsequential: “What the bloody hell did you do, Potter!”?

Was the idiot never going to realize the seriousness of their situation? Should they perhaps try pointing out the obvious with nice, clear pictures?

“Fix it, Potter! Now!”

“What?! I didn’t do anything!”

“This is a kidnapping! When my father hears about this…”

“I don’t give a damn about your precious father!”
And there went the rare blossom of common sense Potter had produced earlier…

“Watch your mouth, Potter! You’re going to be expelled for this!”

“Wha... that’s ridiculous! I didn’t do anything!”

“You kidnapped me!”

“I did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did not!”

Bloody hell, they’d be here all day…

“I can’t believe you would stoop so low, Potter!”

“You bloody moron, I. didn’t. do. Anything!”

“You said it was your fault!”

“Well it wasn’t! Maybe it was yours!”

“What?! Preposterous!”

“You’re the one who brought up the kidnapping idea! In case you’ve forgotten, it’s your Death Eaters pals that spend their free time trying to kidnap me, not the other way round!”

Terry felt a cold shiver down his back. How could Potter say something like that so cavalierly? Could it really be Death Eaters who brought them here? This was no light matter! Were they going to be tortured? Were they going to... die? How could those two morons just keep fighting each other in front of such a perspective?

“How dare you accuse me of a mess you made!”

“Malfoy, for the last time! It wasn’t me!”

“I demand you fix this!”

“Yeah? Well, if you tell me how…”

“How the fuck should I know, Potter?”

“Well, how do you expect me to know?”

“It’s your fault…”

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

Merlin, Terry was this close to hexing the two idiots… He couldn’t believe those careless morons; it was like any looming threat simply paled for them in comparison to a useless spat with their loathed rival. The way things looked, they wouldn’t stop anytime soon either…

A sharp whistle suddenly pierced the air (and their eardrums).
Terry looked around, disoriented, and caught sight of Granger glaring Potter into submission. Ah, of course. She’d been around the boy hero for quite a long time after all… clearly, she’d developed ways to deal with his ‘Malfoy obsession’. Effective ways, apparently.

“Stop it! Both of you! You should be ashamed! We need to find out where we are and what happened and how we’ll go back and we need to do it NOW!”

Merlin, but her voice was shrill! Even Malfoy winced over his sneer, at the last shouted word.

Mercifully, it seemed to have stopped the quarrelling morons, at least for now. Potter actually looked sheepish and finally lowered his wand, which he’d kept trained on the blond all along. Then he uttered a quick lumos and bright white light burst forth from the tip of the wand, which he raised again in a wide arc, illuminating the area.

Terry spared a fleeting, envious thought for the unfairness of Potter being able to get such an effect when his own lumos more closely resembled a small, portable muggle torch whose batteries were fading; but it was soon drowned in awed wonder at the spectacle being disclosed.

The whitish glow easily overcame the flickering flames, slowly piercing the veil of darkness around them: a huge, cavernous hall was revealed, tearing a faint gasp from them. It was irregularly carved in the stone, but with a majestic symmetry that spoke of intent and great skill. No, it wasn’t, couldn’t be, natural: pillars and vaults were easily discernible, some of them adorned with sculpted scenes too indistinct to make out, yet intriguing all the same. And in the middle of the cave…

“What’s that?” whispered Longbottom loudly, and they all jumped at the sudden, oddly resounding voice, ricocheting off the stone walls as if the pillars were playing catch with its echo.

They let it die down before braving the silence once more.

“A chessboard,” Potter answered his friend at last, but he sounded doubtful.

Indeed, it looked like a chessboard, albeit a huge one; the stone floor was inlaid with big, squared flags of shiny black and faintly glowing white marble, arranged in the usual pattern: they were gleaming in the light of Potter’s lumos. On it stood enormous human-like chess pieces, each a work of art in its own right, so finely they were carved in the polished marble, every detail etched with immense care and skill.

Closer to the five wizards were the Blacks: the usual row of pawns – warriors with pikes and ancient looking plated mails – stood in front of the arrayed Rooks, Knights, Bishops, Queen and King.

The Whites they were facing, on the other hand, were surprising: there were no figures among them, only three rows of pawns.

A faint recollection stirred in Terry’s mind, of seeing a similar arrangement on a much smaller muggle chessboard once, but almost immediately it was chased away by Malfoy’s snort.

His cutting tones slit the silence unpleasantly: “Don’t be more of an idiot than usual, Potter, that’s not the correct set up for a Wizarding Chess match!”

Terry braced himself for another frustrating quarrel but Potter surprised him again: he remained completely focused on the life-sized pieces, a frown of concentration on his face. Malfoy was less than pleased to be ignored and scowled furiously, but Potter paid him no mind.

It was Granger who replied: “Actually, a not very common variation of the game of Chess exists,
that uses precisely this set-up. I believe it is called the Dunsany Variation…”

For the umpteenth time, Terry wondered why that brilliant, brilliant witch was not in Ravenclaw. Now that she mentioned it, he too remembered: Lord Dunsany, muggle writer and poet, had invented in the early Forties an asymmetric set-up to make Chess matches ‘more interestingly modern’; the Whites played, as usual, to capture the King, while the Blacks’ goal was to capture every White pawn, ‘down to the last man’.

It was really unfair that his House had been cheated out of that wonderful memory.

Potter stated quietly, glancing at Granger: “This reminds me of first year.”

Terry perked up in curiosity: they had to be talking of ‘the best Chess match that Hogwarts had seen in years’ that earned Weasley fifty points at the Leaving Feast… Judging by Malfoy’s thunderous face, his thoughts were on that night too.

Granger answered just as quietly: “You think it’ll be the same, then? We have to play to go on?”

“Go on? Go on where?!?” asked Malfoy snidely, at the exact same time when a new voice said calmly from behind them: “I’m glad you understood so quickly. It certainly makes my job easier if I don’t have to explain every little thing.”
Chapter 3

Before the speaker had even said this much, they'd all pivoted to face the unexpected apparition and five wands were trained unflinchingly on the surprising figure.

Terry mentally congratulated himself on his smooth draw. Practice with the D.A. was really paying off.

The newcomer was a beautiful woman, slender in build and with the golden tan that is the result of a dark complexion kissed by the desert sun. She wore an exotic ankle length dress which partially bared her shoulders: it had gold patterns around the neck and the rims of the sleeves and it made Terry think instantly of an Ancient Egyptian Queen. What caught the eye the most, however, was a golden piece of headwear that circled her head, featuring an emerald where it met at the front: it held back her straight black hair, that trailed just below her shoulders, with two locks wrapped in gold beads coming from behind her ears and continuing in front, stopping at her neck.

She was gorgeous. Terry promptly blushed to the roots of his hair when he met her knowing, amused gaze.

“You have been inducted into a Tournament of Shadow Games,” she declared, in a deep, serene voice that made Terry blush even more. “As you have guessed, only by winning this first Game you can hope to go on.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then all of them tried to talk at once: “Go on? Go on?! I want to go back!”


“What’s a Tournament of Shadow Games? How can we be inducted against our will!?”

“I demand you release me at once!”

“Who the hell are you?”

“What happens if w-we don’t g-go on?”

"What happens if we do go on?”

“I’ve never heard of Shadow Games! What are they? Who invented them? Are they Egyptian? You look Egyptian. Is this a form of Egyptian magic? How were we chosen? Did you pick us? How did you bring us here? What…”

“But why us!?”

“ENOUGH!”

Terry’s head swivelled in unison with all others to look at the source of the mighty bellow, namely, one Harry Potter.

The green-eyed wizard had an interesting look that seemed composed in equal parts of fury, denial, acceptance, defiance and resignation.

He closed his eyes for a long moment, then snapped them open and took two determined steps forward, spine straight and chin held high. Then, very deliberately, making every word count, he
asked: “What are the rules?”

Terry gaped. Why hadn’t he thought of that? It was possibly the most sensible question they could come up with in the circumstances!

Not everybody shared his opinion, however, if the way Malfoy spat his protests was anything to go by: “Who in Morgana’s name cares for rules, Potter. I don’t want to play their crazy games! I don’t intend to! You should be taking us back to Hogwarts, you useless idiot, not indulging these lunatics!”

Terry winced: insulting their kidnappers did not strike him as a smart move. He snorted. Malfoy, smart? Yeah, right.

Potter rounded on them all and both Terry and Neville took an instinctive step back in front of his fury: “Shut the hell up, Malfoy! Are you really so stupidly blind as to not realize our situation?”

The blond snapped an indignant “Why, you!” but Potter overrode him impatiently: “For goodness’ sake, Malfoy, wake up and think, if you can manage! Do you really think whoever set this up will just let us go? This was clearly planned and executed with care! We’re well and truly trapped! And demanding things without knowing what we’re dealing with might well be the stupidest thing ever! It’s too great a risk. For all we know, it’ll give us a penalty or something! There’s no telling with this kind of things. We need to know the rules, because like it or not, we’re trapped in a fucking magical contract and yes, Boot,” the green orbs shifted to him abruptly and Terry cringed under their burning focus, “it is possible to be entered into a magical contest against your will. Triwizard Tournament, anyone?” he finished sarcastically.

Terry bit his lip, because he’d been among those who firmly believed Potter had entered his name for the Tournament and was ashamed and embarrassed now that the truth was out; there wasn’t much he could say.

Malfoy of course had no such qualms, but Potter paid him no heed, turning to Granger, so the blond could only huff at being ignored and then shut up.

Potter was a little gentler with his friend: “And for the love of Merlin, Hermione, I know you’ve probably worked out an endless list of questions and I agree it would be interesting to know the history of these Shadow Games, whatever they are, and the magic they work with and everything, but it is not essential.”

Granger looked rather sheepish and nodded a little to show she accepted the rebuke.

Potter stopped to take a deep breath and turned again to face the mysterious woman.

To Terry’s surprise, she had acquired a faraway look and was seemingly staring at them unseeing, her dark eyes swirling with a milky quality that he found unnerving. “Interesting… yes, yes, perhaps…” her voice was dream-like and Terry had to fight the urge to fidget. She was rather creepy at the moment. “Perhaps… it would indeed be beneficial if you knew a part of our history… yes…”

She shook herself out of whatever had befallen her and focused on them once more.

Potter was frowning but before he could say anything she nodded decisively and adjusted the balance of her body. She made a contained circular motion with her arms, bringing her hands before her chest then joining them daintily. It had the taste of a ritualistic motion but what its meaning might be, Terry could not fathom.
Then she started narrating.
“This is a story of oh, so long ago…” the strange woman started. "Over three thousand years ago, Egypt was ruled by Pharaoh Akhenamkhanen. In those days, magic was known to all and magicians were held in high regard…”

Terry disdainfully ignored the pleased noises Malfoy made a point to interrupt the story with; so did the enchanting narrator: “…especially those few who could access the devastating power of Shadow Magic. The greatest magician in the country was the Pharaoh’s own brother, High Priest Akhenaden, a Master of the Shadows; to him was the ancient Millennium Spellbook entrusted.”

This time it was Terry who couldn’t help a gasp of interest, swiftly echoed by Granger.

She ignored them as well: “It was in that book, where the most powerful and most dangerous aspects of Shadow Magic were recorded, that Akhenaden found the enticing, damning ritual that would allow the creation of seven magical artefacts, powerful beyond imagining: the Millennium Items.”

“Millennium Items?” whispered Potter in fascination.

Everybody was spellbound, eyes riveted on the mysterious woman as they listened avidly to the tale she was spinning.

“Maybe, had the land remained peaceful, nothing would have come of his discovery,” she continued. “Maybe, had the situation not appeared so dire, they would not have resorted to that ritual. But when Egypt fell under the threat of invading armies, when the defending soldiers’ skill and courage seemed to fail them, the Pharaoh sought to protect his land through mystical means, despairing of anything else being sufficient. Thus he laid down the command for the seven Millennium Item to be forged, as the Millennium Spellbook dictated. But alas…” she sighed.

“Akhenaden, who was charged with creating the magical items, in his folly refrained from informing his brother and King of the price the spell would require. For Shadow Magic is powerful, yes, but terrible: in order to magically charge the Items and give them enough power to protect Egypt, 99 human sacrifices had to be offered to the Shadows,” she said sombrely.

Gasps and stifled cries tore from their throats, a collective shudder wracking their frames with horror. Even Malfoy looked ill.

“The village of Kul Elna became the victims of the Pharaoh’s unwitting decree,” the tale went on, and the woman’s voice became deep and grim. “Akhenaden had them slaughtered, their blood, bone and flesh melted in with the gold that was cast in the mystic rite that formed the Items.”

There was a pause of several heartbeats.

Then the woman sighed deeply: “I will not go into details about how the Millennium Items did save Egypt, only to bring it to the brink of destruction through internal struggles. I will not recount how they were entrusted to the Pharaoh’s closest advisors, my ancestor among them.”

Her voice was briefly tinged with pride and Terry heard Malfoy’s soft, awed whistle.

“Nor will I speak of the horrors that came from using the cursed Items, or tell how the Pharaoh’s son had to sacrifice himself to seal the unleashed, wild Shadow Magic away,” she said.
Potter made a sympathetic sound at that.

“It is not my story to tell, after all,” continued the woman. Suddenly she focused on each of them, meeting their wide eyes sternly: “I will tell you, however, that it was not long ago, in the grand scheme of things, that the Shadow Magic was once again unleashed, when the most powerful of the seven Items, the Millennium Puzzle, was solved by a young man, to whom it had been gifted.”

“Solved?” breathed Granger in fascination.

The woman didn’t appear to have heard her. She sighed fondly, a small smile gracing her beautiful features: “I will say this much about Yugi… he did not shrink from the tasks Fate heaped on his shoulders. If you have the occasion, do ask him or his friends about the series of adventures that eventually led him to reunite the Items and become the King of Shadow Games. They make for a captivating tale.”

She suddenly dropped her arms down her side. Terry wondered if it meant that story-time was over.

Longbottom released a sigh: “Wow.” Terry silently agreed.

Then he noticed that Malfoy was frowning. “Wait a minute…” he started slowly. “King of the Shadow Games… does that mean… is this Yugi bloke the reason we are here?!” he finished almost shouting, clearly incensed.

Potter asked quietly: “Do you really expect us to meet him?”

The mysterious woman smiled secretly: “That will depend on whether you can overcome the challenges you face, will it not?”

Malfoy exploded: “Why, you insufferable bint, what right do you and this King of yours think you have to drag me-”

He was cut off abruptly when Potter casually waved his wand at him with a lazy “Silencio”. Malfoy’s face went pink with rage and effort and he gesticulated wildly in his fury.

Granger gushed: “Oh, Harry, you’ve finally mastered the Silencing Charm!”

Potter shot her a quick, cheeky grin: “With the right incentive…”

Then he turned serious and gazed intently at the woman in front of them: “You haven’t answered my question, you know,” he pointed out. “What are the rules here?”

She gave an enigmatic smile: “The mechanics of a Shadow Game is simple: a challenge is set, with clear terms; if you fail, you are subjected to a Penalty inflicted through Shadow Magic; if you win, you are rewarded with a prize proportional to the risk you took in playing. Also, if you cheat in any way, you are automatically subjected to a Penalty – and those are always harsh.”

There was a moment of contemplative silence while they reflected on this piece of information.

“Are penalties and prizes agreed upon beforehand?” ventured Granger.

“No.” A simple word, but loaded with weight.

Terry asked incredulously: “So what you’re saying is, we are to go in blind? That we must play without even knowing for what? And we could, I don’t know, lose a limb as penalty, for instance, and we wouldn’t even know that we’re running the risk?”
“And we have no choice but to play, or be stuck here until we starve,” concluded Longbottom softly.

No answer came forth. Great. Just bloody great.

“I still wish to know the rules for this particular Tournament,” said Potter in a mulish tone. “You’ve talked only in generic terms so far!”

The woman’s smile widened imperceptibly: “Well spotted”, she praised.

Then she seemed to focus inward for a moment, gathering her hands above her chest with a more economic version of her earlier, elegant, motion. Terry had a sudden intuition that it indicated truthfulness, the willingness not to deceive. He debated gathering up enough courage to ask.

“To win the Tournament and be returned to your school, you must reach the Council Room,” the woman said briskly. “That means you have to overcome the obstacles in your path and win the Games you are challenged with. The Rule specific to this Tournament is only one: all of you must reach the Council Room. You are, in a way, competing as a team. If even one of you is lost on the way there, the Room will not let you in and you will be trapped here forever.”

“What!?!?”

Unperturbed by the shocked outbursts and by the muttered denials of ‘on a team with Malfoy, perfect, just perfect!’, she went on smiling. Then she inclined her head towards the chessboard: “The first Game is a Dunsany Chess Match. I do find this variation intriguing… Take the place of whichever black piece you wish and capture the Whites. I will play against you. If all of you are still standing when the last White pawn is captured, you win and will have earned a prize; if I take out all five of you, you lose.”

She pivoted smartly and moved to take position on the White side of the giant chessboard, the flickering light glinting off her ornaments and casting eerie shadows on her gorgeous features, now that Potter’s lumos had finally faded.
They stared at the chessboard in dismay.

Terry nervously thought that the pieces seemed bigger and fiercer than before. Those White pawns looked positively evil. But that was just his imagination, right? Right?

“Merlin, I wish Ron was here,” moaned Potter.

Granger and Longbottom chorused: “Me, too!”

Malfoy snorted from behind them and Terry fleetingly thought it was a pity that the Silencing Charm had already worn off.

“What would the Weasel contribute to the situation, pray tell?” the Slytherin asked disdainfully.

“Ron is a genius at chess,” answered Potter simply.

“Oh, please!” scoffed Malfoy.

“Actually, he is,” said Longbottom a tad frostily.

Interesting. But irrelevant right now. “Whether or not Weasley’s brilliant at chess, he’s not here, so the point is moot. What do we do about…?” Terry trailed off, motioning haphazardly to the waiting pieces.

Potter shrugged: “I’m kind of average at chess; wouldn’t gamble our lives on my skill. Are you any good?” he asked Terry bluntly.

Taken aback, Terry just shook his head. He’d read about famous chess matches, sure, and moves and openings and such, but he’d never taken an interest in playing. An oversight he mentally vowed to rectify soon, even if the resolution wasn’t much help at the moment.

Potter shrugged: “And Neville never liked it much, and Hermione can’t play chess to save her life…” he said with a teasing smile for the girl.

Granger just snorted: “Case in point!…”

They chuckled together and Terry couldn’t help wondering if Gryffindors had special classes to learn how to enjoy flippant humour in the face of danger.

“Malfoy?” came Longbottom’s voice, in a carefully even tone: “Can you play chess?”

Arrogance oozed from the blond’s every pore: “Of course,” he drawled. “We all play.”

The other exchanged perplexed glances. “All who?” asked Longbottom, puzzled.

Malfoy looked at him as if he was a cockroach. “All Slytherins, obviously.”

They stared at him in disbelief.

Malfoy rolled his eyes: “Chess is an excellent training for the development of tactical thinking and teaches foresight within a controlled set of moves as an effective tool for the understanding of the far more greatly varied and variable matches of real life,” he said haughtily, sounding like he was
quoting Snape verbatim.

Terry frowned, his propensity for debates coming to the forefront with a ready objection – along the lines that chess has no variables at all, every piece has exact and specific moves and standard boundaries for their space to manoeuvre, so how can it be useful to prepare for real world conditions?

But before he could voice it, Potter’s impatient voice cut in: “Whatever, Malfoy. Can you do this?”

Malfoy flushed, eyes narrowing angrily: “I just told you-”

“I’m not asking if you can play, I’m asking if you can do this,” interrupted Potter with a jerky nod to the silently watching woman and her chessboard.

Malfoy stood straighter, clearly offended: “I’m the best player in Slytherin, Potter!”

Figures.

“If you’re insinuating that I can’t win…”

“I’m not insinuating anything,” replied Potter with a sneer, “I’m stating that this isn’t just about winning the match!”

Everybody frowned, even Granger. “Harry, what do you mean?” she asked tentatively.

“She,” he answered coldly, thumb pointed carelessly to the mysterious woman, “said that all of us must reach this Council Room of theirs. That means we must all survive an ‘go on’. Now, if you recall, surviving Wizarding Chess might not be as easy as it sounds… So the question is, Malfoy, can you win the game and keep us hale and healthy while you’re at it?”

Silence.

“One thing I know about Chess,” went on Potter, “is that it’s all about balance between sacrifices and gains. But winning won’t do you much good, will it, if you’re then stuck here? So it’s not just about winning, even if we cannot afford to lose.”

Well, that was one way to recap a fucked up situation.

Malfoy seemed rather thrown by Potter’s matter-of-fact comments and for a moment, Terry saw him hesitate and gulp. Then the blond shut his eyes firmly and jutted his chin out, snapping harshly: “Longbottom, take the place of the Queen’s Rook. Boot, the King’s Bishop. Granger…” he grimaced. “You’ll be the Queen. Potter, you and I are the Knights.”

Terry’s eyes widened in surprise when the three Gryffindors instantly moved to comply. He’d expected more arguing, protests, demands, perhaps offence at Malfoy’s commanding tone. Not this… this… mature attitude!

By the looks of it, Malfoy was just as flabbergasted.

Terry shook his head in wonder and hurried to take his assigned place.

As he passed by Potter, he saw the tall, shiny Black Knight dismount his war horse with slow, heavy movements and offer the stone bridles to the nervous-looking teen. “Right…” Terry heard the black-haired Gryffindor mutter, “can’t be harder than a hippogriff… come on, now…”

Trying not to speculate on how Potter could have ridden a hippogriff but not a horse before, Terry
watched Granger struggle with the hefty crown the Black Queen had majestically handed her and ignored her grumblings about ‘useless symbols of outdated, archaic institutions promoting inequality among the population’. She was probably just cranky because the crown was so heavy anyway.

He made his way to the forbidding Bishop on the King’s side, eyeing it warily.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Malfoy shoot a mocking grin at Potter, with an off-handed insult about his ‘plebeian upbringing’, while he vaulted on his horse with taut elegance Terry had a hard time not envying.

Suddenly he was startled by a black crosier being brusquely handed to him. He took it gingerly, having some troubles balancing the thing since it was almost twice his height and quite heavy, and stepped up to take the Bishop’s place on the chessboard.

All the while, the same refrain kept running through his mind: why, oh, why did he find himself in this mess?
“Begin!” resonated the clear voice of their opponent from the other side of the chessboard.

One of the White pawns confidently stepped forth, apparently not needing a voiced command. The uncertain light of the torches revealed in flickering succession details of its exquisite design: the plated mail, the long shaft, the sharp spearhead.

Terry dared a sideway glance at Malfoy. The blond had a frown of concentration and his eyes were darting here and there on the chessboard, clearly imagining patterns and tactics.

Finally he appeared to have reached a decision and with a firm nod urged his ride forward. The horse leaped powerfully over a Black pawn and clattered to a halt right in front of Terry, blocking most of his view.

He fidgeted, almost dropping the too big crosier, while another White pawn joined the first; then Malfoy gestured to the Black one in front of Granger. Terry looked over at the girl, who was chewing her lower lip in nervousness.

Malfoy’s voice caught him off guard: “Boot, move to b4.”

He started and nearly dropped the unmanageable crosier again, then he hurried to comply, dragging the blasted thing noisily on the marble.

He stopped beside a row of three White pawns that seemed to have staked a claim to the centre of the chessboard. Yes, he recalled reading something about it being a common tactic to create a stronghold of pawns in the centre: clearly that was the woman’s aim.

As Malfoy moved another pawn to free the second Bishop and then had it move into position on the same column as Terry, the Ravenclaw started to understand Malfoy’s strategy as well: he had to be trying to inflict doubled pawns on their opponent. Despite never having seriously played, Terry could easily see the advantage in that: the doubled pawns would impede each other’s movements and constitute a weakness, all the more since the woman had nothing but pawns to use…

Soon Malfoy started sending Granger up and down the chessboard, while Terry wasn’t called upon to do much of anything, except watch the show from his vantage point in the middle, where he apparently acted as an effective threat just by staying there.

He amused himself observing the other Hogwarts students.

Potter looked bored, of all things, and seemed to be spending most of his time cooing at and petting his stone horse; against all logic, the majestic war horse appeared to be enjoying the attention immensely.

Longbottom was a patient rock, as strong and as apparently immovable as the Rook he stood for, especially after Malfoy castled and made it clear he wasn’t to move for anything.

Granger was a bundle of nerves, bouncing on her place, biting her lips, running jerkily where Malfoy sent her and scowling ferociously at the blond for his distracted disparaging comments. She was constantly muttering under her breath, too, but Terry had no way to make out the words.

Suddenly a heartfelt curse from Malfoy called his attention back to the game, right on time for him...
to see a viciously grinning White pawn advance on him, pike ready for battle.

“Boot, watch out!”

The cry jolted Terry out of his paralyzing panic, but there was no time for conscious thought: it was instinct alone that had him raise the crosier awkwardly before him, in the vain hope of staving off the attack. By sheer dumb luck, the shaft of the heavy thing did indeed intercept the incoming blow, effectively saving Terry’s life. He was thrown violently on the marble floor, hard enough to have his breath stolen from him, and his arms went numb, quivering with dull pain.

Dazed, he widened his eyes in disbelief when the demonic pawn raised its pike again, this time holding it with its point downward, aiming straight at Terry’s heart.

“Get off the chessboard, now!” came Potter’s bellow and Terry rolled away with a cry of terror, the pike stabbing the marble floor with a resounding clang mere inches from his back and skittering on it even as he scrambled frantically to get away, fleeing the chessboard altogether.

Terrified, panting, he turned to stare in shock at the ongoing match, where at least the blasted pawn had given up on pursuing him.

What the hell! He was very careful to keep some space between himself and the cursed chessboard that had nearly claimed his life. Bloody, fucking, hell!

Malfoy tossed him a hurried ‘Sorry, Boot’ and immediately focused back on the match, a worried expression on his face.

Terry gaped. Sorry!? He didn’t know what shocked him more, that Malfoy the Berk had apologized to him at all, or that he could think such a distracted acknowledgment could be enough!

As he came down somewhat from the adrenaline rush, he became annoyed. Why the hell hadn’t the blockhead warned him?

But soon he started to realize that it hadn’t been intentional or planned on Malfoy’s part and worry took the place of resentment. The blond had clearly made a blunder and Terry had been caught in it; Malfoy looked more and more harried as he scrambled to make up for the mistake; Terry got the impression that he’d been reduced to defensive play, desperately protecting the four of them rather than going on the offensive against the swarming White pawns. Already the Blacks had lost the other Rook and both Bishops, as well as all but one pawn. Things didn’t look good.

Curiously, though, the mysterious woman was frowning too, as if things weren’t going her way after all.

Malfoy called out a quick warning, explaining to Potter what he needed, and the Gryffindor nodded decisively, moving to capture a pawn and straight into the trap Malfoy needed him to spring.

Terry clamped down on his envy when he saw the green-eyed teen jump from his mount with astounding agility, grab the attacker’s pike in mid-air and vault over it gracefully. He was running towards the edge of the chessboard almost before his feet even touched the floor. Somehow, he didn’t think Quidditch gave Potter that kind of reflexes though… and the sudden thought that the other’s agility was likely spurred by being hunted by homicidal maniacs cooled his wish for emulation rather effectively.

Potter came to a stop next to him, panting but grinning, and they turned to watch the others together.
And then, unexpectedly, in five mere moves Malfoy had pinched the centre stronghold and gobbled up all but the first three White pawns.

There was a long, long silence, barely disturbed by the crackling of flames and their steady, tense breathing. Then the woman inclined her head regally and said clearly: “I concede the match.”

Breath rushed out of Terry in a whoop and loud cheers exploded from all three Gryffindors.

Only Malfoy didn’t seem to relax. “I’m not sure I deserve it,” he muttered gloomily, freezing the celebrating mood. “I made such a ridiculous blunder… a simpleton could have done better… and I had to sacrifice too much to get out of the muddle into which I’d dragged us…”

Terry gaped. Was the git serious? They’d won! Who cared about a blunder half-way through?

“Curiously enough,” told him the woman with a gentle shake of her head, “it was your blunder that saved you… I had been easily able to recognize and counter your tactics up to that point, but after that, your efforts to adapt to the changed circumstances made you unpredictable… I do not deal well with lack of predictability… the blunder you bemoan is what denied me the easy win I had expected…”

Oh, the irony.

Malfoy, however, remained upset: “Even if I could accept that lack of proper planning and a bit of luck could earn me a victory, which I don’t by the way…”

“The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley,” quoted Granger snippily.

“And luck is nothing to scoff at, Malfoy!” shouted Potter.

Malfoy flushed. “Just because you’re used to count on it since you have no other resources!”

“There is nothing wrong with being able to discard and adapt one’s strategy at a moment’s notice,” rebuked Longbottom. “It is quite remarkable, I think!”

“It is”, agreed the woman solemnly, cutting off Malfoy’s probably moronic retort, “and you can be proud of your victory.”

“Can I?” asked the blond bitterly, making Terry itch with the urge to bop him on the head. They’d won, what more did he want! “I haven’t managed to keep us all safe, after all.”

Terry froze at the quietly spoken words, trying to recall the terms of the game. Damn it all, Malfoy was right, it hadn’t been about winning the match… slight panic spread through his veins. What did this outcome mean, then?

Potter snorted. “Actually, you did. She didn’t demand that you keep us in the game, you know.”

Everybody pivoted to stare at him.

He returned their questioning gazes with a smug grin: “She said we would win if we were all standing when the last White pawn was captured. So stand up straight, lady and gents, and you, capture the last pawns so we can get the prize and go home!”

A heartbeat.

Then the woman’s sudden, crystalline laugh shattered the stunned silence. “So I did! Oh, well spotted, well spotted indeed! I can see you truly are worthy opponents… by all means, finish the
game and claim your prize.”

Malfoy looked rather dazed but he obediently finished the match. When the last White pike clattered noisily to the floor, a deep rumble made them all look up at the furthest stone wall, where a mighty set of doors was slowly opening. A dark corridor could be guessed more than seen beyond.

“Here,” called the woman and they turned to her once more.

She held out a delicate-looking silver necklace, a torque, if Terry was not mistaken, with the symbol of an Ancient Egyptian eye on the clasp. Terry rummaged in his memory, trying to come up with its meaning, but all he could remember was the name ‘Eye of Wadjet’ and something about warding off evil, or perhaps foreseeing threats. Irritated with himself, he vowed to look up Ancient Egyptian symbols as soon as he got to a proper library.

“This is a replica of the Millennium Necklace,” the woman told them, making them all gasp in shocked wonder. “The original, the Item that was passed down my line for thousands of years, is now beyond reach, and that is for the best. But we who are part of the Shadow Court, we who have been touched deeply by the magic of the Shadows, we retain some of the powers the Gods granted us… and with those powers were these replicas of the Seven Items made. They lack the potential of the real Items of course… but they carry an echo of that might nonetheless.”

She held it out to Malfoy and the blond, mouth agape, reached a trembling hand to the necklace, shooting a nervous glance to the woman, as if expecting her to snatch it away and claim it was all a joke.

“The Millennium Necklace allows its user to see through time, the past, the future,” the woman went on, her voice acquiring a dream-like quality. “Though of course, the future it predicts is not infallible and can be changed. This lesser Necklace will offer no knowledge of the past… but it will allow you to glimpse the near future. How often this will happen and how easy to interpret your visions will be, I have no way of knowing. Take it, wear it, use it well. May it remind you of how foresight and schemes, while admirable tools, might benefit, at times, from quick thinking and daring!”

She smiled her enigmatic smile and turned to leave. Then she stopped and glanced over her shoulder: “By the way, my name is Ishizu… Ishizu Ishtar.”

And she was gone, unassumingly vanished under their very eyes.

Malfoy remained there, stunned, gently cradling the precious gift in his hands.
They all moved to what seemed to be the path forward.

The majestic doors opened, as expected, on a darkened corridor that ran transversally, plunging into darkness on both their right and their left.

“Which way?” asked Potter with forced cheerfulness.

Terry was a little comforted by the realization that he wasn’t the only one rattled by the experience they’d just gone through.

“I’m not sure it matters,” answered Granger thoughtfully. “These corridors seem to be at the right angle to form a pentagonal layout of these caves.”

Terry watched the stone walls critically, trying to determine if she was correct, and more importantly, how in the name of Merlin could she have gathered as much so easily.

“If my guess is right,” she went on, “then it’s likely that the Council Room we need to reach is at the centre of the pentagon, but we will have to walk the entire perimeter before we can access it.”

Potter was frowning in what Terry was starting to recognize as his ‘thinking pose’. “With Games in rooms like the one we were in at each point of the pentagon, is that what you mean?” he asked.

“It does seem logical”, admitted Terry, completely amazed that the girl had deducted so much from looking at a stone corridor.

Granger shrugged: “If I am right, then it doesn’t matter whether we go clockwise or counter clockwise.”

Malfoy scoffed, saying in a harsh, almost offended tone: “Of course it matters, Granger! It always matters with magic. You would know, if you were a proper witch!”

Reactions were instantaneous. Terry whirled on the plonker, utterly furious, letting loose a stinging hex that the insufferable blond unfortunately dodged. Granger and Potter were both yelling at him, just as enraged, and Terry found a little satisfaction in noticing that while Granger’s hex, whatever it was, missed, Potter’s Twitchy Ears Hex hit true. Serves the worthless pillock right!

Malfoy’s wand was out and ready to retaliate, Potter and Granger both with another spell on the tip of their lips, when Longbottom fearlessly stepped between the combatants.

Terry shook his head in amazement. Gryffindors. He wouldn’t have interfered for anything. What if he got caught in the crossfire? But Longbottom didn’t even look worried.

“Peace!” he called with his arms outstretched.

“Neville! That, that… you heard… how can you…” spluttered Granger, incoherent with rage.

“Malfoy is a prat,” said the tall boy matter-of-factly, supremely dismissive of the indignant blond at his back, “and deserves worse than a few tame hexes, to be sure, but Hermione, he does have a point.”

“Ha!” shouted the blond triumphantly.
Terry’s jaw dropped. He watched the tall Gryffindor as if he’d never seen him before. He knew Longbottom was pureblood, but he would never have pegged him for a supremacist!

“Neville! How can you say that!” cried Potter outraged.

But the brown-haired boy was shaking his head, hands up in a placating gesture: “Not about Hermione not being a great witch, that is just the product of his rotten brain…”

“Watch your mouth, Longbottom!” shrieked Malfoy, incensed. Terry felt his lips twitch in amusement and knew Potter and Granger were stifling their chuckles as well.

“…but it does make a difference going clockwise or counterclockwise, in rituals and magical mazes and such…”

Granger calmed down and frowned: “Oh? I’ve never read anything on this…”

“Me neither,” grumbled Terry, still rather annoyed.

Malfoy snorted in contempt.

Longbottom explained apologetically: “You wouldn’t, I don’t think… it’s one of those things you learn as a little child, from bed-time stories and such. I don’t think it’s touched upon in Hogwarts until N.E.W.T.-level Astronomy or Potions, where you get to study the whys and wherefores. And before you ask,” he added hurriedly, “I don’t know that. Just that clockwise is supposedly nature’s inner direction and therefore if you’re in a maze created by magic, which alters nature, and you want to walk it safely, you should go counterclockwise.” He paused. “Unless you’re a curse-breaker intent on tearing down the maze, that is,” he finished.

Fascinating…

Terry ignored with some effort Malfoy’s disgusted grumblings, pretending he hadn’t heard the careless thrown ‘ignorant mudbloods’ comment for the sake of peaceful progress: “I wonder if the idea originally sprang from the innumerable clockwise spirals to be found in nature, you know, seashells, horns, pine-cones…” he speculated.

“You’re probably right!” Granger’s eyes lit up in interest. “Spirals can be seen in every aspect in nature, after all, from magnetic fields and the movements of winds in the atmosphere to the way galaxies swirl in space, and of course it can be explained through mathematics and the complex sequences of equations that result in the pattern, but it’s not like wizards ever paid much attention to maths, all in all, and anyway it’s hard to pin on mathematics alone the lure of the spiral to the human mind, so it’s logical to imagine a magical component to it…”

How was this girl not a Ravenclaw? She so belonged in the Nest!

“Yes, well,” interrupted Potter impatiently. It was clear Gryffindor couldn’t properly appreciate her! “Are we going left then?” he summed up.

Longbottom nodded: “I believe it would be best.”

“Alright!”

They started down the dark corridor, Potter once more calling up his impressive lumos.

Nervousness crept into Terry. He wished they could afford to stop, rest, regroup a little. He’d had a taste of adventure, fine, now he was past ready to go back home; but if that wasn’t possible, even
just a little pause to recover and calm down would be welcome. The tense silence was getting to
him.

To break it (and, ok, because he was genuinely curious) he tentatively asked: “So… about what
you said before the mysterious woman… Ishizu… showed up…”

They all turned to look at him, but he addressed Potter: “You said it reminded you of first year.
What was that all about?”

Malfoy scowled furiously: “Forgotten, have you? That they stole the cup without good reason…”

“Excuse me!” shrieked Granger, “We had a perfectly good reason!” she paused and added more
quietly. “Or at least, Harry did.”

Potter shook his head: “You know I wouldn’t ever have managed without you and Ron. Anyway,
Boot, it’s all a bit complicated but the gist of it is, there was… something.” he exchanged a
meaningful glance with Granger, “hidden in the school, behind a set of traps the Professors
designed to discourage curious and thieves. McGonagall’s protection was a giant chessboard, not
unlike what Malfoy just played on.”

“Nice of you to notice none of you did anything to help!” intervened Malfoy snidely.

“Not true,” countered Longbottom mildly. “After all, we followed your instructions to the letter.
We might have opposed you at every step, you know.”

Malfoy frowned, as if the idea hadn’t even occurred to him.

Potter ignored the exchange. “Ron, as we told you, is a genius at chess and managed to win the
match and allow us to go on to the next trap. End of story.”

Terry snorted. “Yeah, right. I bet there’s loads more about this ‘story’ of yours. Why were you
even there? What was the thing hidden? What were the other traps? Don’t give me crap about it
being ‘all’. I know a little of what you get up to, you know.”

Potter blushed and mumbled a bit, trying to shrug it all off.

Longbottom chuckled fondly. “They do have all sorts of mad adventures,” he confirmed
confidentially. “Just in first year, there was that troll, the three headed dog, that whole horrible
mess in the Forest, then saving that Philosophal – sorry, Hermione – Philosopher’s Stone from
You-Know-Who himself…”

“Not to mention Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback!” quipped Hermione merrily.

Longbottom stopped in his tracks: “There really was a dragon?” he asked in wonder.

“You mean we didn’t tell you?” asked Potter shocked. “I’m sorry, Neville! Merlin, I can’t believe
you came on that thrice-cursed detention and didn’t even know it was worth it!”

“Worth it!” grumbled Malfoy in disgust. "As if!"

Harry shot him an unfriendly look then turned to Neville and launched on the whole tale of
Hagrid’s baby dragon.

Terry listened in fascination. “How did he get his hands on a dragon egg? They’re class A non-
tradable items!”
Granger and Potter exchanged a look.

“WEEEELLLL…”

“Never mind that,” cut off Granger.

Malfoy scoffed loudly.

She rounded on him, peeved: “Anything you want to say?” she asked tartly.

Malfoy fell quiet. Then, blatantly ignoring her, he addressed Potter, asking uncertainly: “Did you really meet… Him?”

Potter snorted: “Voldemort, you mean?”

Terry gasped and both Malfoy and Longbottom flinched visibly. Potter shot them a scathing look. What did he expect? That they would be able to talk about the stuff of nightmares as flippantly as he did?

“You saw him too, Malfoy.”

What?

“What?!”

“In the Forest. Remember? The blood sucking shadow that sent you running and screaming like a little girl?”

“Bloodsucking…?” said Terry faintly.

Malfoy was too horrified to even respond to the barb. “That…?”

“Was Voldemort,” confirmed Potter, once again ignoring the shivers and flinches around him.

“But, but…” Malfoy seemed at a loss, and strangely, he looked suddenly very young.

“But, what? But, he was a monster? Inhuman? Repellent? Not at all the supposed height of pureblooded grace and power you were told he was?” Terry couldn’t decide if Potter’s mocking voice was more amused or bitter. “You better shed most of your idiotic ideas of grandeur where Voldemort is concerned, Malfoy. He’s nothing great… a mere shadow, with a construct body that is revolting, chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake… his greatest power lies in charming fools into letting him into their hearts and minds… come to think of it, he’s not even a pureblood…”

“YOU’RE LYING!” Malfoy was quivering with rage and fear. Terry wondered what it could be like, hearing an admired myth torn to shreds so callously. He couldn’t muster too much empathy for the pureblood snot, however.

Potter had fallen quiet at the other’s outburst, and merely regarded him coldly. At length, he said in cool, precise tones: “Tom Marvolo Riddle, aka Voldemort, was born to a witch of little talent and a muggle she eloped with, who refused to marry her and abandoned her and the baby when he found out that she did have some magical powers. You don’t need to believe me… check it all out yourself, when we go back. It is a matter of record.”

Then he turned brusquely and walked on, leaving a stunned and upset blond behind.
Terry followed slowly, mulling over things.
Chapter 8

The awkward, tense atmosphere hung heavily among them as they walked on.

Longbottom broke the silence: “Look over there! What do you think that is?”

Three huge statues stood in a row in the middle of the corridor, barring the way. They were humanoid in body and had the heads of animals: a Cow, a Lion, an Ibis.

Granger instantly muttered, motioning at the one on the right: “Thoth, the Ancient Egyptian God of justice, both as in ‘judgment’ and as in the ‘arbitration of disputes’, as well as the protector of magicians, writers and mathematicians, often represented as an ibis-headed man.”

Not to be undone, since after all, there was House pride to uphold here, Terry quickly added, indicating the middle one: “Sekhmet, Goddess of war and healing, the fierce lioness whose breath created the desert.”

And they shared a grin, finishing together: “And Hathor, Goddess of music, dance, and fertility, as well as the Patron Goddess of miners, commonly depicted as a cow-headed woman with horns in which is set a sun disk!”

“Right…” said Potter shaking his head. “You two are scary.”

Longbottom laughed good-naturedly.

“Whatever,” was Malfoy’s disgusted comment.

“Look, there’s writing on their pedestals!” called Granger excitedly.

Indeed, etched in the stone were simple words, unexpectedly in English.

“See? I was right. This was carefully planned and at this point, it is likely that we were carefully chosen too,” commented Potter.

The wording was elegant in his simplicity:

\[
\begin{align*}
&One \text{ is always truthful, } \\
&one \text{ knows not how to be, } \\
&and \text{ one knows the wisdom } \\
&of \text{ lying only if needs be. }
\end{align*}
\]

Granger let out a great sigh, smiling fondly: “A logic puzzle…” she said happily. “Brilliant!”

Potter snickered, then said in a virtuous voice: “Of course… after all, a lot of the greatest wizards haven’t got an ounce of logic, they’d be stuck in here forever.”

All of a sudden, both he and Granger collapsed into helpless laughter. What the hell?! Gasping for breath, the two seemed to realize that their companions were looking at them strangely and tried to compose themselves.

“You’ve gone round the bend, haven’t you?” asked Malfoy flatly, with a kind of distantly professional tone that managed to convey all in one that he’d expected something like this for years, and that they were worthless for succumbing to whatever madness gripped them.
“S-sorry…” panted Granger. “Inside joke.”

“Okay,” said Longbottom a little uncertainly.

Potter shook his head: “Remember when I said the teachers made traps to protect… what was hidden in Hogwarts first year? Snape’s one wasn’t magic, it was logic and, well…” he trailed off into more chuckles, but Terry had got the point.

“McGonagall told me privately that he was pretty upset I’d solved it so easily,” confessed Granger, still giggling.

“Wow!” Terry couldn’t help the exclamation slipping out: Snape was universally considered the hardest task-master ever and one of the few truly rational wizards Terry had met… solving a puzzle he created, and easily, was nothing short of impressive!

Apparently Malfoy thought so too, because he made no comment on the matter whatsoever, a rare occurrence indeed.

“Well, at least this isn’t very hard to solve,” declared Granger briskly and marched up to the statue on the left. She addressed the horned stone woman smartly: "Who is sitting next to you?"

"Truth," the statue answered in a deep, gravely voice, at odds with her feminine appearance.

Granger nodded and asked the one in the middle: "Who are you?"

"Wisdom."

Lastly, she asked the ibis-headed one on the right: "Who is your neighbour?"

"Lie," it replied.

Granger beamed brightly: “Well, then it’s clear who is who!”

Terry bit the inside of his cheek, trying to sort out the answers in a hurry. How did Granger do it so quickly? He was no slouch in the logic department, but she was too fast to be real!

The Gryffindor girl turned to the ibis-headed statue and asked: “How can we go on?”

The statue solemnly held out a bronze key: “By going through the door this key opens.”

Potter was quick to snatch it.

“You sure, Granger?” asked Malfoy in a tone that suggested more doubt and contempt than could possibly be warranted.

She turned to him, peeved: “Yes! He’s the one who always says the truth, so his direction must be the right ones!”

“And how can you know he’s the truthful one?”

But by now, Terry had worked it out too, and had come to the same conclusion: “The first answer hinted that Hathor isn’t Truth, the second answer wasn’t said by Truth either, so obviously, the ibis-headed Thoth must be the always truthful one. Which, incidentally, means that the lioness is lying and the statue on the right is Wisdom,” he added, just to be thorough.

Potter was already trying the few doors behind the statues and called out when he found the right
one: “This way!”

It was not long before they came upon two other statues.

“The Two Ladies, Nekhbet and Wadjet, the protecting deities for all of Egypt,” said Terry quickly, wanting to show Granger off for once. This wasn’t the standard Egyptian Pantheon after all, they were less known… but of course, Granger wasn’t fazed.

“Nekhbet, the White Vulture, patron of Upper Egypt, representing purification, with her wings spread to represent infinity, all, or everything,” she said proudly.

“And Wadjet, the Snake Lady, protector of Lower Egypt,” came unexpectedly Malfoy’s voice. “Who later on became the uraeus symbol used on the royal crowns to symbolize power and the strength to rule and protect.”

They turned to stare at him in shock.

“What? I don’t need to be a Ravenbore to be cultured!” he sneered. “My upbringing and education was both comprehensive and refined, I’ll have you know!”

Terry bristled, offended, but it was Potter who put the blond in his place: “That, and you Slytherins are obsessed with snakes and power, which this Wadjet apparently combines,” he scoffed.

Malfoy gave him an ugly sneer.

“Anyway,” said Longbottom loudly, derailing the looming fight. “I think this is another logic puzzle. Look, there’s an English inscription here as well!”

They drew closer to examine the bronze disc held suspended between the two imposing statues.

One door leads to death,
one door leads to choice,
one sister tells the truth,
one makes no honest noise,
what question can you ask
to know which door to pick,
if your life and your heart
you wish to safely keep?

“A classic!” said Terry in satisfaction.

“Classic?” repeated Potter in incredulity.

“Yes, there must be a thousand and one variations on it, like, you know: ‘You are travelling down a country lane to a distant village, you reach a fork in the road and find a pair of identical twin sisters standing there, one of the sisters always tells the truth and the other always lies: if you are allowed to ask only one question to one of the sisters to find the correct road to the village, what is your question?’… or: ‘You’re a prisoner and the King gives you the chance to avoid the gallows if you can pick the right door to escape with just one question to the two guards, one of whom is always lying and one of whom is always truthful’… The gist of the problem is always the same: you have to find a question that will force either character to give you two pieces of information instead of one, for example, a question that will force the liar to lie two times and thus speak the truth.”

“Yes,” interjected Granger, “so it must be something along the lines of ‘what would you say, if I
asked you ...?” A tricky question, so to say.”

“Actually, there is a simpler way to go about it,” retorted Terry, savouring the moment. “An indirect question.”

“Oh!” said Granger. “Of course! Well thought out, Terry!” she beamed at him and he was startled by the use of his given name. Even in the D.A. they’d usually called him Boot. Did she think this mad adventure qualified for making them friends? Did she expect him to use her given name too?

Well, she wasn’t expecting an answer at least; she turned promptly to the nearest statue and asked primly; “What would your sister say, if I asked her where this door leads?”

“To freedom,” was the answer.

Potter tried to reason it out. “So, if this is the truthful sister, she’s saying that her lying sister would lie about this door leading to freedom, so this door really leads to death, and if this is the lying sister, she’s lying about what her truthful sister would say, so her truthful sister would say this door leads to death, so this door truly leads to death?”

Terry tried hard not to burst out laughing, especially since the dark-haired boy looked mightily pleased with himself.

“Exactly,” beamed Granger, already moving towards the other door.

“How did you manage to say all that without twisting your tongue?” asked Neville in wonder.

“He’s got a twisted brain, that’s how,” snarked Malfoy.
When, after a little while, they came upon three sitting statues, each holding a box in front of them, it didn’t exactly come as a surprise.

A scarab-headed man holding aloft a bronze box, a crocodile-headed one holding a silver chest and a scorpion-headed intimidating one with a golden coffer.

“What, no history lesson this time?” joked Potter, as Granger and Terry were both silent in their contemplation.

Granger smiled: “They are representations of Khepri, the dung beetle that ceaselessly pushes the sun, Sobek, the feared crocodile God of the Nile, and Seth, the wicked brother of Osiris.”

“Khepri’s mythology derives from the ancient idea that scarab beetles were created from dead matter, because of the fact that they lay eggs in the bodies of various dead animals, including other scarabs, and in dung, from which they emerge having been born, so it became a symbol of rebirth, renewal, and resurrection,” added Terry, chuckling at the disgusted grimaces he got.

“It is also the first God ever to be associated with the Magical Art of Transfiguration,” added Malfoy, shooting a superior smirk to them, which Terry easily interpreted as a barb against their non-magical upbringing, “because of its being the God of transformations.”

Granger looked at him sideways, and it wasn’t friendly, but she disdained to comment. “Sobek the Crocodile was the embodiment of a great fear in the nation of the Nile and he was both a powerful and frightening deity,” she said instead. “Some temples of Sobek kept pools where sacred crocodiles were raised: these crocodiles were fed the best cuts of meat and became quite tame.”

“And Seth was one of the greatest and most fearsome gods of the Egyptian pantheon,” continued Terry. “He was the God of the desert, storms, foreigners and chaos.”

“And patron of the Dark Arts,” added Malfoy gleefully. “Priests of Seth are credited with the creation of some of the most breathtaking and terrible curses in the History of Magic.”

That, Terry wasn’t sure he’d wanted to know.

“It says here ‘the key is hidden by silver’,” called out Potter, who’d been examining the Scorpion’s golden box.

“ ‘The key is not inside me’ is what’s written here,” said Longbottom from the centre, coming up from his examination of the silver box.

“ ‘Gold does not hide the key’,” concluded Granger from the right. Then she frowned: “We need at least one more clue, though.”

Terry quickly knelt to look for clues on the pedestals. After all, the first one had had the instructions on it… and in fact, there it was:

*There is but one Truth.*

Simple and clear. Alright.

He read that aloud and before he could even start sorting out his thoughts Granger had worked out
that the key had to be in the bronze box. He scowled and spent a little while thinking on the answer himself, while Potter opened the heavy lid and retrieved the needed key, eventually agreeing rather grudgingly that, yes, the key had to be where Granger had said, otherwise there would be more than one true inscription. Still, she could have given him a chance to find the answer instead of being so damn smart! With a sigh, he followed the others on.

Before long they came upon a tall statue of Anubis, the jackal-headed God associated with mummification and the afterlife.

Granger murmured fascinated: “The God of the Dead…”

 “…and Guardian of the Scales,” murmured Terry, a little intimidated.

“Wait, wait, I know this one!” said Potter. “He weighs the hearts with his set of scales to determine if the deceased is worth anything!”

Granger giggled: “You make him sound like a butcher!”

They laughed, and Terry shivered. He didn’t feel right, disrespecting Anubis, never mind that this was probably a fake statue made by some insane weirdo, considering its inscription was in English and everything…

Anyway, instead of holding up his usual set of scales, this Jackal was merely standing by a table with them on it. Getting closer, Terry could spot eight black marbles too, that looked identical.

“The only heavier marble contains the key you need,” came a whisper that seemed to emanate from everywhere at once. “You are allowed only two weighings.”

Granger didn’t even hesitate before placing three marbles on each pan. The left one promptly lowered.

“Oh, great, that’s useful,” groused Malfoy nastily. “Well, we have determined that those two aren’t the ones we need, nor are these three…” said Potter in a reasonable tone, although with an undercurrent of puzzlement.

“And we have another weighing, which is all we need,” continue Terry, shaking his head in utter amazement at the brilliant witch. Now that only three possible marbles remained he too, of course, saw how to go about it, but how had Granger figured out instantly which number of marbles to use in the first weighing?

With a small smile, Granger removed all marbles except the three on the heavier pan, then took one in hand and distributed the remaining two on the scales. They balanced perfectly.

“Here we go,” she said with satisfaction, handing the marble in her hand to Potter, who shrugged and ran a nail on a thin etching to open it, finding a small, glinting key inside.

“I get that if the first weighing had balanced we could have weighed the remaining two and found the heavier one that way,” said Longbottom, his voice halfway between awed and bewildered, “but what made you put three and three on the plates the first time?”

“Well, if I’d used only two, we would have needed three weighing to find out the key, unless we were lucky, and we only had two,” started Granger matter-of-factly.

“And if you’d used four, you would have eliminated half the marble in the first go, but you wouldn’t have been able to determine the one you needed in just one other weighing,” reasoned
Terry aloud, a bit miffed that he hadn’t got there quickly enough.

Granger smiled at him.

“I’m really getting tired of all this damn logic…” muttered Potter mulishly as he made for the door.

Beyond it, the corridor went on only briefly and stopped in front of another set of majestic doors, identical to those that had opened after the conclusion of the Dunsany Chess match. Before them, a tall, beautiful stone woman dressed in the style of ancient Egyptian Queens stood, a stone lotus raising regally at her back.

Malfoy whispered reverently: “Isis, the Great Lady of Magic…”

“Wow,” murmured Potter.

They stepped forth and the door they had just cleared snapped shut behind them. They treaded uneasy glances. Alright, they were supposed to go on, not back, but all the same, it felt ominous.

Isis held a tray with three keys, a gold one, a silver one and a copper one. Terry was starting to find the pattern a tad annoying.

As they got close, the statue spoke, a placid, thunderous rumble: “If you make a truthful statement, you will get one key. If you make a false statement, you will get nothing. To go on, you need the golden key. To go back, you need the copper one. You have one chance.”

Then it fell silent.

“Okay,” murmured Potter quietly. “What sentence can guarantee that we’ll get the gold key?”

Terry hesitated. Nothing came to mind readily.

Granger, too, seemed stumped. Then she looked at him: “I might have an idea, but… can I run it by you?”

Terry blinked. He honestly hadn’t expected Granger to recognize him any sort of role or value in their group. She was so much smarter, and braver, and cooler in front of this unexpected mess… he’d thought she was just indulging him when she let him say his piece earlier… and now she was asking for his input?

Unconsciously, he straightened his stance, nodding determinedly: “Fire away.”

“I think the sentence ‘You will give me neither copper nor silver key’ would work,” said she, nervously biting her lower lip.

Terry concentrated: “Because if it’s true, she must give us one key, but she can’t give us the copper or silver one without making it a lie…”

She nodded earnestly: “And if it’s false, then its negation must be true, which would be ‘you will give me either copper or silver key’, which would break the given conditions that you get no key when lying.”

“So the first sentence must be true,” nodded Terry with a wide grin. “You’re right, it’ll work!”

And work it did: soon they were watching the enormous doors open slowly…

Then they stepped through and their jaws dropped in shock: under a vaulted stone ceiling, as vast
as in the cavern where they’d met Ishizu Ishtar, a tropical forest grew, luxuriant and thriving!
The air was heavy with humidity, warm and wet and all the more oppressive after the dry chilliness of the corridors they’d just walked.

Gigantic trees, supported by strong, strut-like buttresses at the base of the trunk, grew in the shallow forest soils. Huge creepers looped and twisted through every empty space, twining themselves around the massive trunks of the trees. And the astounding sight was rendered even more shocking by the fact that it was held inside a dark cave, whose stone walls and ceiling seemed to be under assault by the luxuriant vegetation.

“I think ‘unexpected’ covers this quite well,” commented Potter at last.

“Startling,” nodded Granger.

“Astonishing, too,” added Longbottom in a helpful tone.

Terry grinned: “Out of the blue, shocking, unforeseen, sudden, staggering…”

“Annoying,” griped Malfoy. “You can’t tell me they actually expect us to walk through that! I can see from here it’s complete mud and I’m not treading in that and the bloody air is getting wetter and wetter by the minute and I’m already this close to suffocate and it’ll only be worse under that bloody canopy of weird leaves and I bet there’s all sorts of disgusting beasts in there that proper wizards should only interact with when they’re already appropriately harvested for Potions ingredients!”

A heartbeat.

Then the four of them burst out into laughter. “Oh, Merlin, Malfoy, you’re really something else!”

As he took deep breaths to get his mirth under control, Terry spotted a slim volume neatly arranged on a thick moss-covered branch, where it bended horizontally at the level of their eyes. Determinedly, he strode forwards and snatched it up.

Granger was there in an instant, standing on tiptoes to peek over his shoulder: “What’s that?”


“I’m guessing it explains how this Game works?” inquired Potter.

“Amazing… truly phenomenal…” came the muttering voice of Longbottom, completely out of turn.

Looking up, Terry saw the tall boy kneeling on the wet soil, his hands stained with dark, humid earth while he examined the plant-life of the ground layer closely, peering at the roots of the herbaceous shrubs and digging lightly around the trees.

“Neville’s found his personal heaven, I suspect,” chuckled Potter.

Granger had a fond smile: “Well, you’re right about the Game being explained in this booklet, so I think he can play with the plants as much as he likes while we figure out the rules and such.”
Potter grimaced: “Well, have fun. No way am I trying to read at your pace. You can give me a recap later; I’ll just be over here with Neville! You don’t mind, do you, Neville?” he added the last part addressing the kneeling boy directly.

“Huh? Oh, of course, yes, you’re right...” Longbottom was clearly off into his own private world. He raised excited eyes on Potter, holding out a ghastly-looking, knobby root: “Isn’t this fantastic?” he enthused.

“It’s dirty,” answered Malfoy acidly.

Terry glanced back and noticed with amusement that the blond hadn’t budged from the entryway. Granger snorted inelegantly, muttering something highly unflattering about ‘prissy pureblooded little princes’; Potter told him in an annoyed tone: “Oh, give it a rest, Malfoy!”

“Well excuse me for being refined enough to find it distasteful to play in the mud!” retorted the blond, aggravated. “I’m not going in there,” he reiterated stubbornly, crossing his arm petulantly. He would have looked adorable, if he’d been five rather than fifteen.

Potter said, incredulous: “Merlin’s pants, Malfoy, are you a wizard or not? Scourgify works wonders on mud stains, you know!”

Malfoy stared at him with such a horrified expression that if he hadn’t heard Potter himself, Terry would have thought the Gryffindor had just told him to sacrifice his firstborn to the Prissy God of Cleanliness to get his Spotless Protection against the terrifying attacks of Dirt.

“Are you suggesting I use a household charm?” he breathed, as if the mere mention of the possibility was offensive.

“Huh… yes?” said Potter, clearly not seeing what the big deal was.

“But that’s Elf work!” shrieked Malfoy, affronted.

“Oh, really?” spoke up Granger unexpectedly, with such a venomous tone Terry was almost frightened. “Slave labour, I take it you mean!”

Potter and Longbottom moaned and groaned in unison. Granger ignored them and stalked up to Malfoy, looking remarkably like a sabre-toothed tiger: “Because I don’t expect you pay the Elves you force to work for you, do you?”

Malfoy looked torn between being bewildered and mocking: “Paying the House-Elves, Granger? Are you serious?!”

Granger stood to her full height, vibrating with righteous anger, and Terry watched in stunned fascination as she launched into a passionate diatribe on House Elves Rights, with a generous side helping of insults against Highly Biased or Inanely Apathetic Wizards Condoning and Colluding in the Oppression of Slaves.

Terry glanced at the other two Gryffindors, who had the long-suffering expression of people who’d heard the speech more times than they cared to remember.

Of course Malfoy, being Malfoy, made a point to retort, none too gently, in order to put the ‘uncultured idiot who wouldn’t understand their world if someone explained it to her with pictures’ in her place; big mistake, seeing as Granger was more than capable to hold her own against the jerk, be it physically, magically, or rhetorically. It wasn’t long before the two had descended into a screaming match.
"Open your ears, you insignificant bint: Elf enslavement goes back centuries! It’s part of our traditions! Not that I would expect you to understand the value of our history…"

“The value of history! Well, of course, if you mean a selective history, which glosses over the nastier aspects of our culture…”

“Our culture? Oh, that’s a laugh! As if you knew anything about wizarding traditions…”

Potter flopped on his back on the ground, groaning in exasperation; Longbottom shook his head and sagely told Terry that it was ‘best to let her get it all out of her system’.

Still rather shell-shocked, Terry nevertheless shrugged and sat gingerly on a nearby log covered in wet moss, starting to read and memorize the Player’s Handbook. Now and then, he could make out part of their vicious argument.

“…and that’s why the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, S.P.E.W., is working to stop the outrageous abuse of our fellow magical creatures and campaigning for a change in their legal status and—"

“Spew?!” Malfoy was choking on his laughter.

"S-P-E-W!" cried Hermione hotly.

Terry concentrated on understanding the different goals and requirements of the game. He was rather confused by the constant reference to ‘dice throwing’, but figured they would understand better as they went.

“…secure house-elves fair wages, health assistance and good working conditions…”

“…trying to think of when I’ve heard something more ridiculous than this…”

It seemed they would be competing as a team against a single opponent once more, playing a squad of Explorers while their adversary would act as Guardian for the Temple…

“…changing the law about non-wand use…”

“You’ve got to be kidding! Why don’t we give out wands to goblins next?”

“Well, why not!”

Terry considered getting up to assist Malfoy, who seemed to be choking on his own spluttered indignation, but Potter lazily commented that ‘the pillock had it coming anyway’ and that Terry should think twice before making himself a target for Hermione’s crossness. Yes, it was safer to memorize the rules for moving on the Wheels of Trials instead – whatever those were.

“…get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, because they’re shockingly underrepresented…”

“They don’t need representation! They’re slaves, Granger! They wouldn’t be able to go against their masters’ wishes anyway and you can’t expect us to let them go gallivanting off when there’s work to do in our manors…”

“Your attitude is completely unacceptable!”

“But. They. Like. It. They like being enslaved!…”
“So that makes it alright?!”

Terry wondered how long it would be before they grew tired of arguing and moved on to hexes.

He sighed and let his gaze wander over Longbottom, who was carefully inspecting some dark green, leathery leaves which tapered sharply, letting a rivulet of water drain quickly from their surface. Potter was comfortably lying on the soft, wet ground, absently twirling a brightly coloured stem that Terry was reasonably sure was a bromeliad, an epiphyte of the pineapple family that usually grew directly on trunks and larger branches, as his memory supplied.

The first part of the Game would take them through the rainforest, at least until they managed to locate the Temple; he wasn’t sure what to think of this.

Sure it would be interesting, but he couldn’t help worrying about what kind of creatures they might find. Animals had never really been an interest of his. He thought a tropical rainforest would likely be home to all kinds of colourful birds and probably monkeys. Predators, possibly, leopards and jaguars and definitely snakes. Lots of insects, too, almost certainly. Good thing he knew three different bug-repelling charms.

What troubled him the most was the possibility of some magical creature he’d never heard of springing on them all of a sudden. They tended to be rather spectacular, and not in the good sense of the term. He tried to remember what he might have read on the topic. Manticores lived in this kind of habitat, he thought, or, no, wait, they were the hybrids that preferred temperate deserts, but he was sure something really dangerous lived in tropical climates, what could it be? And this looked like a possible territory for man-eating trees, great. He sort of recalled pictures of a sloth-like beast called a Mapinguari, perhaps, and giant crossbreeds between bats and apes he could not remember the name of. Ahools, maybe? At least, if they were bats, sunlight should work against them…

His musings were suddenly interrupted by the brusque transformation of the background noise of the argument into a loud explosion of shouted hexes.

He turned just in time to see a barnacle-covered Malfoy with antlers instead of hair fall to the ground unconscious, stunned by a orange-haired and severely scratched but otherwise unaffected Granger.

Potter was already checking her over, unfazed by how she was still panting incoherent insults. “Yes, yes, of course you’re right…”

Longbottom still had eyes only for the delicate-looking orchid he was cradling gently and – was he crooning to the thing? Whatever.

Terry realized with a sigh that it would be up to him to help the blond. Stifling a grimace, he enervated the Slytherin and briskly reversed the hexes he’d been hit with, completely disregarding his humiliated protests.

Then he straightened and called out: “I think we should start moving.”

Chapter End Notes

‘Il Tesoro del Tempio’ (lit. ‘The Treasure of the Temple’, English vers. ‘The Curse of
the Idol') is a Ravensburger board game that I absolutely adored as a child. My best friend and I played countless times when we were around eight, with just about everybody we could rope into it.
I have reworked the rules slightly to suit my purposes better, but since we came up with many 'variations' – such as playing in teams, or adding side-quests… - back in the days, I've decided the changes are justifiable.

The game belongs to the category of 'roll-and-move' games and as such, it is a fairly standard kids games, probably rather tiresome to adults because it depends a lot on 'his majesty the d6', and though it still requires more strategy than a boring Game of the Goose or Snakes and Ladders, a lot of it is ultimately luck-based; its greatest appeal is in the beautiful simulation of the 3D temple, the moving cog-wheels, the extremely detailed board game and the well-arranged exotic atmosphere, as well as in the level of care that went into this 'make-believe' (even the instruction manual was written in the style of an adventurer's journal). That, and it tied well into our living role-playing games of 'Indiana Jones adventures', that we were so fond of back then!
Chapter 11

The dark, damp atmosphere under the canopy of trees wasn’t very inviting but they started off nonetheless, marvelling at the incredible variety of trees that was already visible from the very edges of the forest.

They hadn’t taken five steps when a pained cry from their back made them instantly whirl, wands at the ready.

Malfoy had fallen to his knees and was clutching the silver necklace Ishizu had given him rather desperately. Terry was hit by the chilling realization that his grey eyes had acquired the same unnerving milky quality that he had found so unsettling in Ishizu.

A moment later, the Gryffindors sprang into action.

“Vision!” called out Potter, already by the blond’s side, holding him upright with gentleness.

Granger was casting some sort of protection spell Terry couldn’t recognize around them, standing straight and clearly on guard.

Longbottom was kneeling in front of the blond, clutching his arms tightly and speaking softly: “Malfoy, Malfoy, can you hear me? That’s it, Malfoy, breathe… that’s good… a deep breath… it’s alright, it’s going to be alright…”

Terry felt rather useless.

Malfoy was coming out of whatever seizure had taken him, gasping and gulping deep mouthfuls of air: “T-top r-right,” he stammered. “G-gold… big, b-big… top right hole…”

“Oh, okay,” crooned Longbottom soothingly. “Anything else?”

Malfoy shook his head and immediately grimaced, as if moving was painful.

“T-too conf-fused…”

“Alright,” said Potter just as softly. “Don’t worry, I think it’s over now…”

“Oh, and you would know, h-how, exactly?” snarked Malfoy, though he was too breathless to make it truly nasty.

Longbottom and Potter shared a glance that spoke volumes; too bad it was in a language Terry wasn’t familiar with.

Something stood out clear as day to him, however: “You’re used to this,” he stated flatly.

They all turned to look at him, questioningly.

“You… this…” he made a generic motion to indicate the whole situation. “You’ve done this before, calmed someone down after a… a vision.”

Longbottom chuckled weakly: “Let’s say Harry has given all of us some practice.”

“Potter?” blinked Terry, honestly surprised. He was under the impression that the green-eyed boy loathed Divination.
“Figures Perfect Potter would be a Seer…” said Malfoy bitterly.

Terry was struck by the sudden insight that the blond was jealous – terribly so. It was probably spoiling Ishizu’s gift for him, the idea that his rival had such an ability naturally.

But Potter denied it immediately: “No. Not a Seer… definitely not. And I don’t get visions like yours, glimpses of the future.” He shook his head ruefully. “No, I… I sometimes get to see what Voldemort’s doing at the moment.”

Terry and Malfoy turned to him with identical expressions of utter shock.

Potter shrugged, uneasy: “It’s… well, it kind of happens when he’s feeling a particularly strong emotion… like when he’s torturing someone, for instance…”

“You… can see when the Dark Lord tortures someone,” said Malfoy very slowly, in a tone of complete disbelief.

“Not always,” denied Potter defensively, “but yeah… it happens.”

“It happens an awful lot,” muttered Longbottom despondently.

“Yes, well.” Potter shrugged, as if to say it wasn’t a big deal. “It’s not as bad as it sounds.”

He ignored the snorts from Longbottom and Granger.

“Though if Avery doesn’t shape up… I swear, that idiot is under Cruciatus more often than…” he trailed off, shrugging again.

Malfoy mouthed the name ‘Avery’ in a daze, staring at Potter as if he’d never seen him before.

“Anyway, these… nightmares… visions… whatever… tend to wake the entire dorm up, unfortunately, so my friends kind of have experience with, huh, helping me with the after-effects and such…” Potter was babbling, noted Terry, and looking awfully guilty: just what was going through that mind of his? Did the moron expect them to blame him for something like this?

If Terry was to be completely honest, the only thought that rang in his mind at the moment was ‘thank God it’s not me’!

Longbottom, who’d stepped aside for a moment, came back with a colourful flower, the size and rough shape of a cup. He was trying rather unsuccessfully to cast the *aguamenti* spell: “Ah, damn… I usually manage it when I need to water my plants… *aguamenti! Aguamenti!*”

Terry moved to help him, but a jet of water had finally exploded from Longbottom’s wand, dousing an area of soil, but also effectively filling the cup-like flower.

“Here!” said the tall boy triumphantly, holding it out to Malfoy.

The blond sneered and started to reject it, but Potter squeezed his shoulder sharply: “It’ll make you feel a whole lot better, trust me on this.”

Reluctantly, the Slytherin drank it down, trying unsuccessfully to hide how thirsty he really was. Terry noticed that what little colour he usually had was returning to his pale cheeks.

“So,” said Granger briskly. “Either something gold and big with holes, or something gold inside the holes of something big, did I get that right?”
Malfoy stared blankly at her. Then he reluctantly nodded: “It was something very big and gold, and I desperately wanted something that was in the top-right hole of the thing. Don’t know what, though. And I couldn’t see clearly, it was too dim.”

“Well, we’ll keep an eye out for it,” said Longbottom firmly. “Just tell us when you’re ready to go, alright, Malfoy?”

Potter squeezed the other boy’s shoulder one last time and got up, moving a little way to the side to scrutinize the surrounding vegetation, and the strong and vibrant canopy layer that the crowns of the taller trees formed above their heads.

It was only a few moments before the blond was able to stand on somewhat firm legs and they started moving again, Terry taking the lead and walking swiftly on the rich unstable compost that was the forest’s ferns-covered ground.

He rounded an enormous trunk, covered in moss and climbing rattans, that he was almost sure was a mahogany tree, only to stop abruptly in his tracks. Beyond it, the natural environment was cleft by two paths, splitting towards their left and right, that could be nothing but magically built.

Aside for going in different directions, they were identical, and made of a series of gigantic lemon yellow squares, not unlike those of a common board game in shape and arrangement, but huge – the five of them could have easily fit on each of them without having to stand too close to each other. Terry didn’t even try and guess what material they were made of: it wasn’t stone, didn’t look like wood, was too rough for glass and felt too natural to be plastic…

On the first square, the only one the two diverging paths had in common, lay innocently a pair of dice, one black with white dots, the other white with black dots, both more or less the size of a quaffle.

“Well,” commented Terry, dazed. “That explains all the rules about dice rolls.”
Chapter 12

With a sigh, Terry moved to gather the dice and promptly threw them, before he thought better of it.

They rolled until the black one stopped on a five and the white one on a three; instantly three squares on each path lit up, emitting an eerie glow that seemed confined to two inches above them.

“Alright,” said Potter with forced lightness. “At least it’s easy to understand. We can move three squares either way. Uncomplicated, I like that. Do we stick with going left?”

“Wait. What about the black dice? We should be able to move eight squares, shouldn’t we?” frowned Granger.

Terry shook his head: “No, the Player’s Handbook mentioned that the white die governs the Explorers Squad, that would be us by the way, while the black one is for the Temple’s Dark Guardian. I assumed we would only use the white one, but apparently we’re the ones determining our opponent’s chances at movement as well…”


Terry nodded. “According to the rules, one player interprets the Dark Guardian and has the task to prevent the others, the Explorers, from finding the treasure that is our ultimate goal. I think that most likely, whoever set this up is playing that role, the same way Ishizu Ishtar was playing White in the last match.”

“What treasure?” asked Granger. “How are we to find it?”

“And what does it mean, ‘prevent us’ from finding the treasure, exactly?” asked Malfoy suspiciously.

Terry hesitated, not really knowing how to summarize the booklet efficiently. “From what I gather,” he said slowly, “we must first find the Temple, fetch a Sword that should be in there somewhere, than go to the Idol in a room inside the Temple, and finally get the treasure… a blood ruby, apparently… that we’re supposed to retrieve. If we manage to get it out of the Idol’s range, we win.”

“Why do I have the feeling you’re leaving something important out?” asked Malfoy acidly.

“And you haven’t mentioned this Dark Guardian in your rundown,” added Potter with a frown.

Terry sighed. “Here, I’ll read you the Introduction to the Player’s Handbook,” he said, whipping the booklet out of his robe pocket.

He read aloud: “Buried deep in the web of the impenetrable jungle lies a forgotten temple. Within its walls lurks an awesome idol, harbouring a priceless gem known as the Bloodstone. The Idol will only surrender his precious treasure to the one who draws the Golden Sword - the key that will unleash the hidden treasure from deep within the Idol’s stony heart. Those who seek the precious Bloodstone must overcome many dangers. Before the doors of the Inner Temple are the perilous Wheels of Death, set to throw intruders into a dark abyss. A Guardian prowls within the temple walls, jealously guarding the path that leads to the treasure, ready to send thieves to the gaping Pit of Bones. Only the most valiant adventurers will vanquish every challenge and seize the fabled treasure…” He stopped.
“Right. Right. Get to the Temple, get the Sword, get to the Idol, get the Bloodstone; avoid falling into traps, being caught in mysterious deadly wheels – whatever they might be – and getting stabbed in the back by our opponent or something. Like I said, straightforward…” said Potter feebly.

“Idol… big, gold thing! It must be what Malfoy’s vision was about!” exclaimed Granger.

“Not to play Augurey here, but wasn’t the title of this Game ‘The Curse of the Idol’?” pointed out Malfoy.

Terry smiled grimly: “The Curse is what we get if we fail.”

There was silence. The rainforest quiet noises seemed louder than a moment before. The yellow squares continued to glow eerily.

Finally, Potter sighed: “No sense in borrowing troubles. Left? Right? As long as we go, I don’t really mind…”

“Left,” said Longbottom firmly.

“Alright,” said Terry, and scooped up the dice before walking smartly along the left path, stopping on the third square.

The others followed and the yellow glow disappeared suddenly as soon as the last of them stepped on the square. Of course, Potter, being Potter, decided to check out the workings of the Game, just in case, and bumped harshly on an invisible barrier that prevented him from leaving the square again: a few moments’ worth of tries confirmed that it had sprung around the whole square, effectively trapping them, presumably until they rolled the dice again.

When Terry did so, getting a four on the white dice, the squares alit both before them and at their backs, allowing them to retrace their steps if they so wished.

Nobody saw the point in it, however, and so they went on, doing their best to ignore the fluttering variety of colourful birds and other small creatures that animated the rainforest all around them.

Once, Terry thought he’d spotted a pair of orange glowing eyes amidst the green, but whatever they belonged to was watching a square they didn’t stop on and didn’t seem interested in them. Good.

It was on the third dice roll that suddenly, a peculiar but not unpleasant stroll through the luxuriant vegetation turned into a deadly trap.

Malfoy, who was bringing up the rear, had barely set foot on the square that was their current destination when the weird stone disappeared from under their feet, plunging them into a pitfall trap. There were collective yelps and groans, but by some miracle, no one was seriously injured.

“At least there are no spikes to be impaled on,” joked Granger weakly.

Terry glared at her just as weakly.

“Oh, yes, that is such a lucky break!” grumbled Malfoy, dusting himself off with a disgusted air. “Never mind that we’re trapped here and will slowly but surely starve to death, let’s think positive…” His sarcasm was thick enough to touch.

“This is a Bauhinia guainensis,” interrupted Longbottom, who was tugging and prodding a sickly
brown liana with a flattened profile and slight indentations that looked a little like steps.

“Oh, fantastic, we know the name of the hideous thing, now that will be useful…”

Longbottom raised his voice and talked right over the Slytherin: “It’s called ‘monkey ladder’, because it’s unbelievably sturdy and often provides arboreal animals with paths across the forest. It’s very resistant and won’t break even under heavy weight…”

“We don’t need a Herbology lesson, Longbottom, the situation is dire enough without being bored to death!” was Malfoy’s snide comment; but Terry, unlike the blond, had caught on: “You think we can safely use it to climb back up to the path?” he asked excitedly.

“Positive,” confirmed Longbottom.

That shut Malfoy up rather nicely.

“Well, if we’ve got a plan, hurry up, I don’t like this one bit,” came Potter’s voice.

Turning to him, Terry saw the dark-haired boy had whipped out his wand and was eyeing balefully a long, horizontal crack in the humid earth, about ten inches wide, that ran all along one wall of the trap, near the ground. It looked like a grinning mouth, ready to spit out something.

Malfoy’s wand was out in an instant as well and the blond looked pale and worried.

“Let’s not waste time, then,” said Terry decisively, moving to collect the dice that had fallen along with them. He did not want to be trapped by as silly a mistake as losing the dice!

Granger was already halfway up the liana, scrambling with some difficulties to heave herself up, while Longbottom tried to help her from below. Then it was Terry’s turn, while the smart girl cleverly levitated the dice up to leave his hands free. It was a pity that Levitation Charms did not work reliably for living beings and were therefore not a good solution in an emergency.

It was also a pity that he was so out of shape, he had troubles drawing breath, damn it all, and right when he desperately needed it, he would have to see about some sort of training regime when he got out of this mess!

Terry paused a moment before the last effort to get out, gripping the liana tightly, panting harshly, trying to find the strength to haul himself up.

And all hell broke lose.
“Watch out!”
“What? Where?”
“Over there!”
“What the hell!”
“What is it?!”
“It’s getting out!”

The cacophony of cries was confusing, but a half-glance behind his shoulder told Terry everything he needed to know: they were in big troubles.

What looked like a black cloak, roughly half an inch thick and as black as the dead of night, was slowly coming out of the crack and gliding along the ground, appearing to spread itself to cover every spot on its path in a lethal search for prey.

“Lethifold!” bellowed Potter, as usual the most reactive in front of a threat from Dark Creatures, instantly jumping back a few steps and raising his wand.

Malfoy screamed, and Terry felt his own very real terror echo terribly in his shriek.

“Keep moving! It prefers to attack victims that are asleep or unconscious! Don’t stay still! Move! Move!” screeched Granger from above him.

Terry jolted and grabbed the liana more tightly, his earlier tiredness completely forgotten thanks to the adrenalin that fear was pumping in his veins.

“Get out of here! Get up, get out!” shouted Potter.

“Stupefy!” That was Malfoy, and judging by his cry of frustration and terror, his spell had been ineffectual.

Terry scrambled desperately to climb the last bit of slope, feeling Longbottom below, panting and puffing and whimpering in fear and distress as he tried to mount and barely managed.

Weak attempts at shields sounded from the two still in the pitfall, along with Potter’s anxious: “Get the fuck OUT!”

Terry grasped at the very dirt, his fingers skittering uselessly on the cold, humid earth, desperation alone giving him the strength to climb out of the deadly trap. He turned, gasping for breath, and barely registered that Granger was trying to haul Longbottom out as well before he propelled himself forward to help in her effort, hands grasping blindly at the robes of the heavy boy; right on time, as the tall boy had lost his grip on the liana and was about to fall.

“Malfoy! Get out!” Potter’s voice was harried.

“Don’t be an idiot, Potter! We must find a way to stop that thing!”

“Go! I’ll hold it off!”
“Harry!” Granger’s cry was full of distress.

“Potter, you suicidal jerk! Much as I’d like to dump you here and forget your existence, we need your scrawny ass to get out of this freaking Tournament!” shouted Malfoy.

“For fuck’s sake Malfoy! I know what I’m doing! Just GO!”

Just what was that idiot planning on doing?

Malfoy launched himself at the liana and climbed up with the speed of a monkey, while Potter took a step towards the creature and planted himself firmly on his parted legs, wand held high, utterly still; facing the advancing veil of death with no apparent fear.

Terry had a brief, lengthy instant in which to notice, with a sort of distant daze, that all those stories were wrong: you don’t see your life flash before your eyes when you’re about to die. Instead, he got a much worse accelerated movie of Potter’s messy death and their subsequent slow agony, and watched in horror as the fast-forwarded scenes showed the four of them painfully surviving on the forest nuts and fruits and arboreal frogs, until a dreadful combination of fur and teeth and claws finally ended their miserable existences.

Then Potter’s voice yelled confidently: “EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

A blinding flash of white erupted from his raised wand, and it was only a moment before Terry could recognize a gorgeous stag, that charged the Lethifold without hesitation, planting its silvery-white antlers straight into the horrid thing, blasting it away.

Terry’s eyes were riveted on the beautiful apparition and he was startled when Potter’s head suddenly appeared near his feet, a hand held up in a wordless request for help. He flushed when Granger bumped him out of the way and grabbed her best friend’s hand, ashamed to realize he’d been too dazed to help.

A quick glance down the trap proved that the Lethifod had retired; a moment later, Malfoy launched himself at Potter, slapping him with trasport. “You damned idiot!”

“Oy! What the hell, Malfoy!”

“How dare you risk yourself like that! I don’t want to be trapped here by your stupidity, Potter, so curb that death wish of yours!”

“Fuck you, Malfoy! I don’t have a death wish! I had it sorted!”

“Sorted!” screeched Malfoy. “Sure, of course, obviously!”

“The only spell that works to repel Lethifolds is the Patronus Charm! I...”

“Which is one of the most difficult spells invented! Most adult wizards can’t even cast it!”

“Well, I can!”

“You couldn’t have been sure! You moron! You gambled everything on a spell that might not have worked... If the thing hadn’t been corporeal it would not have been enough...”

“I’ve been casting a corporeal Patronus since I was in third year!”

Malfoy scoffed: “And you expect me to believe that?!”
“Damn you, Malfoy, I-”

BANG!

Terry jumped a foot high at the loud, sudden noise. Wands were out and pointed almost instantly, but rather than an enemy, there stood Longbottom, an horrendous bulb with protruding blue-black appendages that he had quite clearly just squeezed in his hands.

“Thunder Spud,” he explained serenely, showing it off. “It maxes a loud, explosion noise if squeezed. I thought nothing less might catch your attention...”

“Terry?” Granger’s gentle voice startled him almost as badly as the loud bang. “Are you alright?”

“What?” he squeaked, then cleared his voice embarrassed. “Yes, yes, of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be? It’s not like I have nearly died after all!” he said a little hysterically. “For the second time in just a few hours, I might add!”

“I know,” said Potter easily. “So?”

Terry was completely taken aback. “Well, this is a new experience for me!” he snapped childishly. Potter shrugged: “Happens to me all the time,” he deadpanned.

Terry could only gawk.

“Shouldn’t we go on?” reiterated Longbottom. “I think I see some stone walls.”

“Where?” asked everybody, curiously or anxiously.

“Over there... just beyond those huge snakes,” answered Longbottom with a calm that Terry suddenly recognize as a sign of looming hysteria.
They stepped out of the warm humidity of the forest and into the dry cold of the stone corridors and stood in the single beam of light coming from outside, waiting.

Potter was still out behind them, outside the green-covered walls of the Temple Longbottom had, indeed, found, chatting away with the snakes he had easily persuaded to let them pass.

Terry hadn’t been as scared as his pureblood friends when Potter had suddenly started hissing at the Duelling Club in their Second Year.

First, because he was still rather new at the whole magic thing and chalked the ability up to some spell of enchantment, like everything else unexpected around him. Then, because he’d looked up the ability in a series of books and had discovered that while in England, thanks to the Slytherin line, Parseltongue had a reputation for being a Dark Art, elsewhere it wasn’t so, in Greece for instance, Parselmouths were considered great Healers, because of Hyppocrates being one, and other cultures had other associations for the skill, and for snakes in general.

So he hadn’t bought in the hysteria and mass panic that year and had felt smugly superior thanks to his better-informed acceptance. He had to admit, though, that hearing those unnatural sounds coming from Potter’s throat up close... it was creepy. And rather frightening too. He shivered, trying to shake those creepy hisses from his memory, then hastily cast a warming charm, to make it look like it was the cold that was bothering him.

By the scathing look Malfoy shot him, he wasn’t fooled; but the blond kept silent. Terry could tell that he was troubled; why, though, was anyone’s guess. Maybe he was shaken by their brush with death; maybe he was still shocked that Potter could cast a corporeal Patronus, maybe the reminder that Potter was a Parselmouth had stunned him.

Or maybe he was just tired of this whole damn Shadow Tournament – Terry could sure sympathize with that.

He watched disgustedly as a chirpy Potter caught up with them, gushing about the snakes he’d met. Just what was that Gryffindor made of, that he could bounce back from the scare they had without a qualm and immediately throw himself head on in the next potentially lethal situation?

What did he have that Terry didn’t? Or maybe it was that he lacked something – common sense, or self-preservation instincts or...

“Terry?” once again, Granger gently calling him startled him. “Do you want me to handle the dice this time?” she asked.

Terry blushed. “N-no. No! I’m alright, I promise!” he said hurriedly.

He scowled at Malfoy’s snort and threw the dice viciously. They bounced off the stone walls and the noise echoed loudly down the corridor.

Six and one.

The squares lit up as usual, though now the yellow glow seemed much brighter because of the surrounding darkness.

“It seems the path splits again,” he said a little inanely, because everybody could see the fork, just...
four squares far. “Do we turn right or go on straight?”

“You choose,” said Potter almost cheerfully.

“Yeah, Boot; lead the way!” smiled Longbottom.

“What?!” burst out Malfoy. “Why in the name of Morgana’s pet boggart would we follow him of all people?” He blithely ignored Potter’s incredulous, choked laughter of ‘Morgana’s pet boggart?!?’ and rounded on Terry with outrage: “Who died and put you in charge, I’d like to know?”

Terry felt the vein on his temple throb in irritation. He’d asked what they wanted to do, it’s not like he’d made a unilateral decision and expected them to comply!

He opened his mouth to give the arrogant berk a piece of his mind, but Potter beat him to it: “Why did we put you in charge of the Dunsany Chess match?” he asked in a dangerously mild tone.

Malfoy sneered bitterly: “Because no one else would do it!”

Potter was by the blond in a flash, his hands fisted in the front of the Slytherin’s robes, utterly ignoring his cry of protest.

“Wrong!” he hissed furiously. “It was because you were the best at that!”

He released the spluttering blond, making him stumble a little.

Terry felt himself blush and pale at the same time, as impossible as that was. Did Potter mean…?

“Oh, and Boot is the best at this, I take it?” mocked Malfoy, snide incredulity dripping from his every word. “Please. He could barely keep himself together through the first few obstacles…”

Terry lowered his head in shame. It was true. He was useless…

“Nonsense!” rebuked Potter, making him jump before he realized the other boy was replying to Malfoy rather than to Terry’s thoughts. “He reacted like any sane person would…”

“Confirming you’re not sane then,” snarked Malfoy, automatically, as if insulting Potter was such an ingrained reaction by now it came out without thought.

Potter scowled furiously but didn’t reply.

Granger interjected reasonably: “Terry is the one who knows all the rules, it makes sense to trust him with this!”

Terry felt bolstered. Memorizing rules and knowing things by heart in general was right up his alley. If he could ignore the rest of it (all the absurd, or overly-dangerous, or requiring split-second decision stuff, which he would gladly do without, thank you) he could convince himself he was, indeed, the best at this.

He took a deep breath and stated: “Then I think we should stick to the same direction at every fork, that way we keep confusion to a minimum.” He was pleased that his voice didn’t tremble. Much.

He wanted to show Potter and the others that they were right in trusting him, that he did in fact know what he was doing. That he could do this. Even if he wasn’t sure it was true.
“Left, then?” asked Longbottom encouragingly.

“Well, it would be ‘straight on’ this time, but that’s the general idea, yeah. Let’s call it ‘not right’,” Terry joked feebly.

Malfoy sniffed in contempt, but offered no further opposition, so they moved on.

Torches flared up at regular intervals as they walked, illuminating a corridor that seemed to go on forever. When they passed the one departing to the right, they saw that it, too, went on into the darkness with no apparent end. Terry briefly wondered about the relative size of the cavern they were in and the temple. Then snorted. Magic, right, right… whatever.

It did raise a concern however. How were they to find the Sword they needed?
Lost in thought, pondering their next move, Terry barely noticed that the last lit square before them had an intricate carving etched on its surface, creating a bas-relief of what looked like four connected wheels of different sizes.

No sooner had they all reached the square, however, that a flash of reddish light ran instantaneously along the lines of the bas-relief, like liquid fire, almost immediately put out, but followed at once by a distant, ominous rumbling.

They glanced at each other nervously.

“What was that?” asked Longbottom fearfully.

“No clue,” answered Terry worriedly.

They remained in tense silence for a few long instants, straining to hear more, but the temple was once again silent.

Terry looked interrogatively at the others. The Gryffindors shook their heads, various degrees of perplexity and worry on their faces. Malfoy just sneered, which Terry took to mean he didn’t know what was going on either.

He bit his lips. He had a vague idea of what it might be, especially in connection to the carving under their feet, but didn’t feel confident enough to share his guess.

“Nothing for it, then,” he said simply and taking a deep breath, he rolled the dice again.

Somewhere in the temple, the Dark Guardian would move four squares. Before and behind them, three squares lit up. Terry led the way and almost immediately spotted that they would end on another, identically etched, square.

A moment later he realized that the stone wall on their right was unexpectedly breached by a series of tall, narrow holes, that reminded Terry of cathedral windows, albeit without glass.

The corridor they were in was absolutely chilly, but warmer air drifted in from the holes and it carried a hint of smoke smell with it, as if from distant fires.

Terry broke into a run, hurrying to the first, tall stone sill to try and look out of a ‘window’, the others right on his heels.

As they all reached the carved square, the rumble happened again, and this time it was much louder, clearly happening on the other side of the window-like holes; and indeed, a simple glance through them allowed them to see its cause.

The vast hall that lay under their eyes was instinctively dismissed as unimportant, while their eyes fastened on its centre, where a huge pool of smoking lava stood out brightly in the surrounding darkness, the vivid red of the flames making the black stones around it seem even sharper. Above it, apparently suspended on the very lava flow, four enormous wheels lay, interlocked. Terry could barely make out squares on them in paths, identical to those they’d followed so far. Clearly, they were expected to walk on those wheels at one point.

“The Wheels of Death!” breathed Terry in terrified awe.
Nothing he’d read in the *Handbook* had prepared him for this spectacle!

The smallest wheel, the furthest one from where the entrance to the temple was, appeared to be inserted in a wall and supporting a revolving door. Terry would bet a lot that that was the way in to the Idol’s room: their final goal.

As they watched, the slowly turning wheels stopped their interconnected movement and settled in a pattern that united or interrupted the paths of squares at random. The rumble died down and unexpectedly, flames flared up through the very wheels, not damaging them but making it clearly impossible to step on them, except for the squares.

“Merlin’s pants!” gasped Longbottom right next to Terry.

“Look!” exclaimed Potter suddenly, arm stretched to point down to the Wheels. “Over there, at the edge of the largest Wheel!”

Terry squinted, trying to see what the other boy was pointing out amidst the fumes and flickering shadows. Granger’s squeal and Malfoy’s muttered curse only made him more determined to spot whatever it was. At last, he identified the huge black stone where something long and thin sparkled at odd moments, apparently chained to the rock.

He gasped: “The Sword!”

“Oh, how do we reach it?” fretted Granger. “We’re on the wrong floor and I don’t see stairs…”

With sudden decisiveness, Terry jumped and climbed onto the tall ‘windowsill’ stone, feeling bolstered and exhilarated by the idea of his companions depending on him, on his decision-making skills. He leaned out recklessly, craning his neck to see better.

Nervousness or excitement made him miscalculate his momentum however and he felt himself lose balance. All of a sudden, the dark chasm under the window-like hole seemed kilometres long and Terry felt his heart beating wildly in his throat as he tried frantically to catch himself on the stone.

Thankfully, Longbottom’s arms circled his waist swiftly, holding him strongly in place and preventing him falling to his death. Gulping, he braced himself better and glanced back sheepishly at his saviour. “Thanks, huh, I—sorry!...”

Longbottom smiled: “It’s ok. I’ve got you. Just be careful, alright?”

Terry pretended not to hear Malfoy’s derogatory comment on his brain power and leaned out of the hole again, carefully this time, unspeakably grateful for the tall Gryffindor’s arms securely holding him back. He definitely wasn’t cut out for this kind of stunts.

Still, he had *some* skills. Knowing his eye for details was one of his strength, he concentrated on seeing and memorizing as many elements of the visible scene as possible, committing everything on sight to heart.

“Right,” he said at last. “I can spot only one entry point to the Hall of the Wheels. We must go back…”

“And why am I not surprised that you were leading us the wrong way?” asked Malfoy snidely.

“Shut up, Malfoy, nobody’s interested in your opinion,” shot back Potter tiredly.

Terry ignored them both: “…and try to find the stairs that must be there.”
He went on ignoring the ensuing squabble (“Oh, they must be there, must they? Well, we’re sorted then…” – “Malfoy, give it a rest!”); instead, he silently climbed down the sill and promptly threw the dice.

They got a two and stifled sighs and groans as they moved back so little. However before Terry could scoop up the dice again the sound of light running footsteps came from just beyond the corner they had passed earlier.

They froze, their eyes sliding to the black die of their own volition. It showed six white dots, gleaming in the light of the torches.

An instant later, a black clad figure rounded the corner, a mane of flowing white hair bouncing erratically behind him. Grinning maniacally, the white-haired stranger charged them, grabbed Potter around the waist and disappeared in a flash of blue-white light, leaving the four of them completely stunned.
Chapter 16

A ringing silence filled the corridor for long instants after the surprising development. Stunned, the four remaining teenagers could only look at each other uncertainly.

Eventually Granger, as pale as a ghost and tormenting her lower lip viciously, moved hesitantly towards the spot where the white-haired apparition had vanished.

Her feeble *lumos* was directed to the point on the wall that the stranger had grazed with apparent casualness, barely highlighting what looked like scratches on the stone: “It’s… it’s what h-he touched,” she said almost apologetically.

Terry was startled at how unsure and unsettled she sounded: he’d never seen her like this, she was always confident, determined and annoyingly bossy. Now instead… her entire demeanour, from her pallor to her frantic wringing of her sleeve, spoke of concern and upset. Vaguely, he realized that she had to be truly worried for Potter. She was probably used to his disappearances meaning he was in mortal danger… come to think of it… could he be? He felt too dumb with shock to remember properly what the Dark Guardian could and couldn’t do… but surely Potter could survive anything, right? Not even the Dark Lord had ever managed to off him… surely they didn’t need to worry so…

“It looks like a hieroglyph…” she said with a visible effort to pull herself together.

“Transportation Sign,” came Malfoy’s voice, in an oddly flat monotone. “You run a finger along the lines in the correct sequence and it sends you to a pre-determined arrival spot,” he explained. “I’ve seen it done with Runes.” He was completely expressionless and was offering his comments with such a detached air it was like he wasn’t even there with them.

Granger nodded uncertainly. “Could we… could we use it to track down Harry, do you think?”

Longbottom said nervously: “B-but… I mean it… it could be d-dangerous…”

Granger bit her lip: “You’re right… it could be a trap… we cannot risk it… and we’re not sure of what would happen if we use it wrong…” she said, upset, “but we have to find Harry!”

That seemed to shake Malfoy out of his detachment: “Why?” he cried, suddenly looking furious. “Why, for all that’s magical?! Why should we risk ourselves to go and rescue the bloody idiot, just because he went looking for troubles *again*!”

"Harry doesn't go looking for trouble," said Granger, nettled. "Trouble usually finds him."

She stopped abruptly, as if realizing what she’d just said, then she chuckled and a bit of colour returned to her with her smile. She shook her head a little. “Trouble usually finds him…” she repeated in mid-voice, as if telling an inside joke to herself.

Terry couldn’t fathom why – and judging by the way Malfoy was gaping he couldn’t either – but for whatever reason, the line had returned to Granger all her assurance and resolve: “Right, well,” she declared in a very definitive tone, “whether you like it or not, Malfoy, we’re going to find Harry, so you better get over your tantrum and quickly.”

The Slytherin spluttered with indignation, but she ignored him with supreme aplomb.

“Anyone has any idea how to go about it?” she asked instead. “Terry?”
Terry blinked at the note of hope in her voice. He suddenly felt like a deer caught in headlights, but... they trusted him. They’d said so clearly, hadn’t they? They trusted him to know the rules and lead them safely to victory in this absurd game... and he could do it. He could! It was just... he needed... time, or an idea, or...

For a moment, he was tempted to just shook his head pathetically, like Longbottom was doing, and tell them that he couldn’t, didn’t know how to, that he didn’t want the responsibility, that someone else should shoulder it... But something in him rebelled. He could do this! He was as good as any of them, experienced adventurers and haughty purebloods and genius know-it-alls... and he would prove it!

And just like that, his brain kicked into gear: "Granger... Hermione. Can you do that geometry thingy again?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" said Gr... Hermione confused.

"You know, like when you took one look at the stone walls outside the first room and somehow figured out the place was a pentagon!" said Terry unfalteringly.

"Oh... well, I..." she looked flustered and uncertain.

But Terry was on a roll: "I'll tell you everything I've memorized about the temple, you figure out its layout. We need to guess where Potter is – I think he was taken to the Pit of Bones so if we have an idea of how the temple is organized..."

"...we can get to Harry," finished Gr-Hermione with the relief of someone who's finally understood the situation. "Right, let's get to it!"

In less then ten minutes, they had a tentative layout sketched out in the dust accumulated near the walls, the product of Terry rattling off everything he could wrack his memory for and Granger... Hermione... drawing the most logical conclusion as to relative size and position of the various rooms and corridors.

Terry studied it critically.

The vast hall with the Wheels at the centre, the Inner Temple beyond them, most likely, the corridor they were in and, they guessed, a twin one on the other side of the building running around the perimeter, since there had been another path through the forest... stairs out of sight and therefore probably along the outer walls, down the corridor they had left to their right when they entered and, possibly, at the end of this one... and the Pit of Bones, then, in the ‘white space’ of their improvised map...

The validity of their conjectures was confirmed by Malfoy’s rather grudging: “Seems logical.”

“So... we... hum... we have a plan?” asked Longbottom weakly, still looking rather pale and uncertain.

Terry stood straight, fists clutched at his side, grim resolve filling him. “Yes: we go there, spring him out, get back,” he said succinctly.

Gran...Hermione, smiled thinly: “Nice and simple. I like it.”

Terry smiled tersely back. With renewed determination, he threw the dice.
Chapter 17

Luck was with them.

It took only two rolls to get in sight of what had to be their goal: a rather gory arch-like construction made of various whitish skulls, beyond which the corridor ended plunging straight into a dark pit.

Two hands were grasping at the flagstones under the arch as they approached, desperately trying to find a grip; soon, a head of messy black hair appeared over the edge, quickly followed by angry green eyes beyond glasses with a cracked frame; then a grim snarl in a dirty face; and finally, Potter hauled himself out of the pit, his robe rather torn and very dusty, and stood under the macabre arch, cursing with transport.

Well, that simplified things… nice of him to break out on his own.

Gr-Hermione barely managed to wait for the next die roll before she launched herself at the boy, squeezing him in a hug that threatened to send them both tumbling into the pit. Fortunately, Potter seemed ready for it and promptly balanced his weight better to compensate for the girl’s momentum and then hugged her back, letting her babble incoherently into his shoulder with just a slight smile.

“You lot alright?” he asked looking past her to the other three boys.

Terry stared incredulously: “You’re the one who got kidnapped, Potter!”

The Gryffindor shrugged: “I’m fine.”

Hermione released him and took a step back, snorting. “Fine!” she repeated huffily.

Potter smiled, half ruefully half amusedly. “I am fine, Hermione! It was dirty and bleak, and irritating as hell, but not really dangerous or anything.”

She sniffed. “Dirty, I can see that!” she exclaimed, detaching herself from him and wrinkling her nose. Quick as lightning, she fired a *scourgify* at Potter and then a *tergeo* at herself, sticking out her tongue at him in response to his mock-scowl.

“If you’re quite done…” interjected Malfoy acidly.

Hermione ignored the Slytherin and stared hard at her friend: “Are you really ok, Harry?” she asked with the utmost seriousness.

Potter looked uncomfortable but shrugged nonetheless: “It was just... just spiders, Hermione. Honest. Rather annoying but... nothing much. I wasn’t bitten or anything and climbing out was easier than I’d feared at first. Though if Ron had been here...”

They shared a chuckle: Weasley’s fear of spider was an open secret.

Hermione looked appeased, but it was Longbottom’s time to nervously question Potter. “Is... is he here?” the boy asked, glancing around apprehensively.

Potter shook his head. “He disappeared after dumping me there,” he said with a jerky nod to the pit behind him.

Won by curiosity, Terry dared a look into the plunging darkness. On the bottom of the pit, he could
barely make out what looked like a carpet of human bones. He shivered and grimaced.

Potter came up to his left and murmured: “Macabre, huh?”

Before Terry could reply, a sudden movement in the shadows caught his attention. Something big and dark and alive was down there... Potter stiffened beside him and Terry had a sudden suspicion.

“When you said ‘spiders’...” he started, but he didn’t finish the question. He didn’t need to.

Eight bright eyes, glowing with malicious intelligence, had appeared and were glaring at them from below, accompanied by an angry clicking sound and what sounded suspiciously like hissed insults, coming from a *something* covered in thick black hair.

Horrified, Terry noticed the light of the torches glinting off a set of giant fangs that were bound to be venomous, he just knew it! And it was huge. Terry judged the leg span had to be almost fifteen feet! The thing hissed and clicked a moment longer, then retreated slowly into the farther darkness of the pit.

Terry turned to Potter, horrified, and found that he didn’t even have the words to question the other boy.

Potter shrugged uneasily and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Did you know that Hagrid has created a colony of Acromantulas in the Forbidden Forest?” he whispered offhandedly, but without meeting Terry’s eyes.

It was the Ravenclaw’s turn to stiffen: “What!?!?” That… that was… Potter couldn’t be serious… oh, dear God…

“Ron and I had an interesting lesson in negotiating with their kind, couple years ago or so...” the other went on with forced nonchalance.

“You... you... you are saying... you can’t be serious... you... you talked your way out of being eaten by a freaking Acromantula after being dumped into an ossuary with it?!”

He was desperately hoping to hear an ‘only joking!’ as an answer.

But Potter only nodded reflexively: “Diplomacy and the Spider Repelling Spell. A wonderful combo!”

Spider Repelling...? Terry was rather dazed.

“What are you looking for?” asked Hermione, suddenly appearing behind them.

Terry almost jumped and realized that he’d quite forgotten the presence of the others for a moment.

The girl’s eyes narrowed and she looked both curious and suspicious.

But Potter, rather surprisingly, managed to lie smoothly: “I kind of dropped my last sugar quill in there...”

Or maybe he wasn’t lying. Just omitting a few hairy details...

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Harry! You aren’t thinking of going down to look for it, I hope!”

“Harry, that’d be crazy!” exclaimed Longbottom, looking worried.
“Nah!” Potter laughed uncomfortably. “I’ll buy a few others next Hogsmeade weekend!” And he moved away from the pit.

“If we’ll ever see another Hogsmeade weekend!” intervened Malfoy’s funereal voice.

Terry glanced at the blond and noticed that his eyes were riveted on the pit. He had to have seen the Acromantula as well.

Judging it was high time to shake themselves from dreary thoughts, Terry shouted brightly: “Right! Well! We found Potter safe and sound, which is awesome, and now I think we all have enough of this damn temple, so how about we find the godforsaken sword at long last?”

Cheers came from the Gryffindors, along with Malfoy’s acidic: “And do you have a plan for this too?”

Terry’s only answer was to throw the dice.

Five. Excellent! They quickly set off, retracing their previous steps. The sooner they went back and found the stairs they needed...

Terry’s thoughts died away abruptly in the reverberated blaze of a blue-white lightning. Glancing behind, the five wizards froze.

The Dark Guardian had rematerialized in the square they’d just left, white hair in erratic locks around him and mad grin in place, his general look perfectly suited to the gory skulls-arch that was now framing him.

Terry groaned.
Chapter 18

“Oh, dear. It seems I’m late… I was hoping you hadn’t escaped yet! Pity…”

The sardonic grin of the new-comer was as irksome as it was chilling. Terry glowered at their mysterious opponent, torn between annoyance and wariness.

The other’s voice lingered for a moment in the cold corridor, then died away into silence.

Nobody spoke another word. The five wizards were taking the chance to finally observe their adversary properly and stood quiet, sizing him up.

He was a tall, handsome man in his late thirties. His most striking feature was beyond doubt the white hair, almost glowing in the dim light; now that he could see it clearly, Terry realized it wasn’t dyed but a natural hue, though surprisingly, his eyes were brown, rather then red or purple like Terry’d read was the case with albinos.

Everything about the stranger, from his long black leather trench coat, that seemed to be an integral part of his image, to the odd-looking silver medallion that peeked out from under it, evidently on a lace around his neck, summed up to the classical description of a refined adventurer.

Where Ishizu’s beauty had appeared ageless and timeless, likening her to the statue of an Egyptian Queen of ancient times come to life, gorgeous and unapproachable, this man looked alluring and dangerous in a very immediate way: the look in his eyes, the hard smile, held a little bit of come-hither and a little bit of threat, as if to say, *When you take a bite I might bite back.*

Terry found it disquieting and glanced sideways to see the others’ reactions. Potter’s and Malfoy’s countenance was blank and alert, and perfectly identical, to Terry’s vague amusement. Longbottom was pale and guarded. And Hermione… Terry sneered. Granger’s look was nothing short than admiring! Bloody girls.

He turned back to the Dark Guardian, who was scrutinizing them with just as much interest and intensity.

After a while, the white-haired man was the one to break the silence: “Yes, a pity… but on the other hand, this makes everything more… interesting!” His shark-like grin was not at all reassuring.

None of them uttered a word and his smile widened unnervingly: “Nothing to say? Oh well… you’re right after all. No words are needed among players… Let Chance speak!”

He motioned grandly to the dice that had rolled near Terry’s feet, making the slim notch lapels and uncuffed sleeves of his trench coat flap impressively.

Terry hesitated. Obeying their adversary didn’t exactly strike him as a good move. Then again, it’s not like they had many choices. If they didn’t play, they would be stuck there… forever.

He tensed and without taking his eyes off the Dark Guardian, he murmured in as low a voice as he dared: “I’m going to throw the dice… be ready to run as far as the roll will let us. We must try and escape him before he separates us again…”

He felt more than saw their nods and let the dice fly.
A heartfelt curse slipped out of his mouth. One! A damn bloody one! And their opponent got a freaking five! Just perfect.

Wands were out almost instantly and the dismayed groans of his team-mates mingled with the Guardian’s triumphant laugh, even as they moved as far away from him as they managed – which wasn’t much, unfortunately. Terry clasped his firmly, but even as he turned to face the threat, he had an awful suspicion that it might not do him much good after all.

The white-haired menace started towards them, grin threateningly in place, and it was immediately clear he was targeting him: Terry froze with sudden, overwhelming terror. Potter might be able to face an Acromantula and live to make light of the tale… but he didn’t fancy his odds!

A scream tore itself from his throat as everything around him seemed to fade, leaving only the foe charging him and his own too-loud heart beat. Why couldn’t he do anything? He knew hundreds of spells, but now that he needed them, his mind came up blank! What use was knowledge if it fell out of reach in a crisis? Fear was numbing his reactions… he could feel his cold fingers hurting where he clasped his useless wand…

Four voices shouted in Latin around him and four slightly differently coloured shields sprang up around him, meshing and strengthening each other.

Dazed, Terry realized that all his team-mates had reacted to protect him – even Malfoy! – and that shook him out of his stupor effectively. In an instant, lists of spells with loads of details poured into his mind in sudden stark clarity, as if a dam had broken and his knowledge had eagerly burst forth in a ready flow. Relief almost made him dizzy, but the wave of excitement in so abruptly remembering how to fight focused him at the same time and he fixed his attention again on his opponent, this time with resolve instead of fear.

For a moment, it seemed as if the Guardian wouldn’t be deterred – but Terry was ready now. Trusting his – friends? – well, allies at any rate, to defend him, he clenched his teeth and went on the offensive.

Swiftly and smoothly, he fired off three hexes in an elegant chain of movements – sneezing hex, stinging hex, knee-reversal hex: one of the many combos they’d come up with and practiced in the DA, finally in use for real, and with excellent results, his rapid fire not once interrupted by a hesitant or awkward movement…

Too bad none of the spells hit the target.

At the very last instant, the Dark Guardian had swerved to the side and thrown himself beyond Terry, leaping between him and Hermione and tackling Longbottom instead, catching everybody off guard.

The two fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs amidst confused cries; the man’s hands closed around the Gryffindor’s throat and for a horrible moment, Terry thought Longbottom was being strangled. He screamed in fear and fury, wand pointed futilely because he wouldn’t dare cast, not when Longbottom might get harmed… To his right, Potter didn’t let himself be intimidated by the risk and his bellowed relashio! hit the two squarely, where they were struggling on the dusty stone floor, forcing the aggressor to release its hold.

Terry wanted to kick himself. His memory very unhelpfully reminded him that the Revulsion Jinx wouldn’t have hurt Longbottom in any case and that he did know it. Why hadn’t he thought of that?
The white-haired attacker was propelled away from the breathless Gryffindor, whose hands flew to his neck instantly, grasping frantically. Then Longbottom leapt up from the floor and let out a bloodcurdling roar of rage.
Chapter 19

“THIEF!”

To Terry’s shock, the normally calm boy lunged after the Dark Guardian with absolute fury. He bounced against the game’s barrier painfully but he seemingly didn’t notice, and threw himself at it again and again, hitting it furiously, eyes trained on the white-haired man who was dancing out of reach with a mocking laughter.

Longbottom’s face was scarlet and he was incoherent with rage, so much so that odd words spluttered from his mouth: "Not… funny… don’t… hand back… show him…"

Flabbergasted, Terry watched the steady, patient Gryffindor lose it completely, and hit the barrier with such rage that it rattled – despite the fact that it was insubstantial!

“Give it BACK!” Longbottom screamed.

Their opponent just laughed and moved further away, nearing the stone wall.

Hermione was suddenly next to Terry, whispering with hurried worry: “Terry, you’d better throw the dice again before Neville tries to tear the game apart…”

He nodded quickly and obeyed. The dice bounced on the floor for what seemed like forever, but at last they stopped and the barrier was no longer there.

Almost before it had vanished, Longbottom was darting forward.

To no avail! With a last cackle, the white-haired man brushed the wall – no, realized Terry, it was the odd symbol on the wall, what had Malfoy called it? Transportation Sign? – and vanished.

Longbottom screamed in frustration and sank to his knees, looking defeated.

They moved up to him; Terry bit his lips uncertainly, not knowing what to do. What had their foe done? Could he really have stolen something? And what might it be, that had Longbottom so upset?

Potter approached the kneeling boy, who was heaving gasping breaths, and put a hand gently on his bent shoulder. “Neville?” he asked carefully. “What did he take?”

Longbottom raised distraught eyes to him: “My parents’ locket,” he answered with a dead voice.

Potter and Hermione gasped, looking stricken.

Terry frowned: the way he’d said that… was Longbottom an orphan? He realized he had no clue… it’s not like they talked about their families much in the DA… did he dare ask? It didn’t seem like a good time.

A quiet, derisive snort came from behind him.

He saw Longbottom’s shoulder tense and Potter turn to glare past him with furious contempt.

Terry glanced at Malfoy. He had a strong suspicion that the blond was about to be his usual nasty jerk. He also didn’t think this was a good time for it. He fingered his wand, mentally preparing for the shield he was sure he would need soon, what with the hexes that would fly in a moment or
two…

“You can cut the dramatics now, Longbottom. Last thing we need is an angst-filled Griffindork wallowing in self pity for some pathetic Hufflepuffish reason!” said the Slytherin contemptuously.

Longbottom shot him a dirty look and Potter made a disgusted noise. Terry grimaced. Yep, a damn git…

Hermione’s tone was full of righteous anger as she addressed the blond: “How can you be so callous? I know you probably have no idea of what that locket means to Neville, but can’t you at least show a little sympathy…”

“Please!” exclaimed Malfoy dismissively. “It’s not like it was worth much, from what I saw.”

“It was worth more… more than you… can comprehend, you shallow… narrow-minded…” cried Longbottom, livid.

Malfoy looked down on him condescendingly: “I’ll buy you a new one when we get out, Longbottom, alright? Just as long as you quit whining.”

Longbottom paled, eyes flashing angrily.

Terry mentally face-palmed. Of all the insensitive, tactless things to say…

Potter sniffed scornfully: “There are things you cannot ‘buy’, Malfoy. Things that are beyond price, invaluable and irreplaceable, made so by the sentimental value they carry, not that your pea-sized brain could comprehend this… You probably have no concept of love or family, but…”

“I know what a family means much better than you, Potter! The Malfoys are an ancient line of pure-blood wizards. Our family name is everything to us! My heritage is so rich and various you would never truly comprehend it, for generations we have--”

“But clearly, all those generations of stuffy aristocrats have completely missed the point! Otherwise you wouldn’t be so uncaring…”

“Bite your tongue, you moron, you’re too plebeian to even wrap your mind around what it means to be a Malfoy!”

“At least I understand the important things! Like how much it hurts to lose something precious to you!”

“Precious! Ha! That thing was worth next to nothing, obviously you’re unable to recognize true value! I, on the other hand…”

“.are too narrow-minded to see what is clear as day to us, and don’t even have enough manners to respect someone else’s sorrow,” spit out Hermione.

“What would you know of manners, you worthless mud-”

“Say that word, Malfoy, and I will curse you,” said Potter dangerously.

The blond sneered: “I don’t even know why I waste my time with the likes of you.”

“Funny, I was thinking the same about you!” hissed Longbottom, clutching his fist and glaring at him. “It’s useless to try and make you understand that people have feelings… that s-sometimes, it d-doesn’t matter if something costs a lot or… or if it is very magical… some… sometimes… even
a… a gum wrapper can be… valuable…” he panted, obviously overwhelmed.

Malo...
“My father says that their being carted off to St. Mungo’s was a blessing in disguise to the family…”

Longbottom let out an anguished roar.

A split second later Terry realized that the other boy had just charged past him, heading straight for Malfoy. Potter leapt forward and seized the back of the taller boy’s robes; Longbottom struggled frantically, his fists flailing, trying desperately to get at Malfoy. Terry managed to react with promptness, for once, and seized Longbottom’s arms while Potter managed to get an arm around his neck and together they dragged him backwards, even as Longbottom kept shouting at Malfoy.

The pressure Harry was exerting on his throat rendered him quite incomprehensible, but that didn’t make it any less clear that his opinion of the blond was quite insulting. And totally deserved, in Terry’s opinion.

The Slytherin looked, for a moment, extremely shocked.

Idiot. What else did he expect after what he said? If it had been his parents the blond insulted… well, Terry wasn’t sure he wouldn’t choose to remain trapped here just to have the chance to murder the disgusting jackass!

He had a feeling the others agreed with him. Despite everything, however, they needed to stop Longbottom.

“Let. Me. Go!” the tall Gryffindor was yelling, glaring murderously at Potter.

Terry’s eyes bulged out of his head. Longbottom, murderous? Glaring at Potter? It was unheard of! Though completely understandable under the circumstances…

“‘I’m sorry, Neville,’” gasped Harry dejectedly. “‘I know you’re right. I know he deserves it.’” He ignored Malfoy’s indignant screech. “‘But I had to stop you,’” he picked himself up a little unsteadily, "'I really can’t let you tear him apart before we’re out of this mess."

“So you would let that insane creep murder me if we were out?” shouted Malfoy, and even Terry, who considered himself rather pacific, felt the urge to hit him. Hard.

Potter turned to glare at him: “How the hell did you get into Slytherin, Malfoy?” The blond choked on his indignation. “Because your preservation instincts are even worse than mine, and that’s saying a lot!”

“How am I supposed to know Longbottom will go off into a murderous rage just because I say the truth out loud?”

“Truth!...” shrieked Hermione in outraged disbelief. “There’s nothing even resembling truth in your contorted view of the world!” bellowed Potter.

“It’s his reaction that’s contorted!... Sheer insanity… probably inherited or something…”

Neville roared and flung himself at Malfoy again and this time, managed to punch the idiot straight in the guts. “Don’t talk of what you don’t understand,” he hissed rancorously as the Slytherin doubled in pain.

He said nothing else, merely stalked off into the corridor, as far as the die roll allowed him. Terry saw him punch the barrier again in fierce frustration and then pace back and forth with all the helpless fury of a caged tiger.
Malfoy remained crumpled where he was, panting slowly, while Potter and Hermione kept a baleful eye on him.

It was some time before Terry felt on safer enough ground to ask slowly: “What in the name of Merlin was that all about?”

Potter and Hermione looked away.

Longbottom turned sharply and gave him a flat look, then said in clipped tones: “Never mind.”

Terry remained perplexed, and with the uncomfortable feeling that he should really not pry.
Chapter 20

The sound of the dice bouncing on the stone floor seemed harsher than before, the glow of the lit squares colder.

Terry, feeling a little cowed by the overemotional scene, simply waited quietly until Potter asked tightly: “Well, are we moving on, then?”

“Yes. I want to find that bastard.” The cold resolve in Longbottom’s tone was as hard as steel.

Terry shrugged and retrieved the dice, following the others as they retraced their earlier steps.

A dice roll.

Another.

They were moving back, though slowly, along the by now familiar corridor. The silence was heavy.

At one point, Hermione said tentatively: “You know… There’s a chance he’ll simply give it back at the end.” She hesitated, looking away. “If we win, like.”

Longbottom didn’t react.

Potter tried encouragingly: “Yeah, probably.”

Silence again, like a heavy curtain over the group.

Another roll. Steps resounding oddly in the stillness.

Terry glanced at Malfoy. Sullen, he was fiddling with the necklace and glowering angrily at the floor. Terry firmed his lips, unspeakably angry at the blond’s insulting behaviour even if he hadn’t been the primary target. He always felt out of the loop when the purebloods went off on one of their ‘your great-grandfather insulted my great-uncle once’ kind of feuds; but this had felt different – harsher – and even without knowing the whole truth Terry felt that the blond had been completely out of line.

Yet another dice roll, and finally they were back to the corridor turning to their left, to where they hoped to find the stairs.

Potter and Hermione were darting worried glances to their friend. Terry let his mind wander.

What the hell had happened to Longbottom’s parents? It couldn’t be just that he was an orphan… Potter was one and he didn’t react like that to mentions of them. Was it because it had happened long before? Had Longbottom’s parents just died? If the wound was fresh, Terry could understand… Well, not really. He couldn’t even imagine what it would be like to lose his parents. Didn’t want to imagine it.

And what was that about… about torture? Could it be…? He felt cold dread at the mere thought. He knew there was a war going on… the entire point of the DA was to get ready to defend themselves… but at the same time… it never seemed quite real, not inside the familiar, safe walls of Hogwarts… they talked of being killed… sure… but in an abstract way, so to speak… Terry didn’t really put much stock in it… And torture… that wasn’t something he could bring himself to
talk about… even think about… yet now it lurked at the edges of his mind… if it had happened to Longbottom’s parents… they were Aurors, Malfoy had said… were they on a mission, were they tracking down criminals? Or… had they been… had they been caught – tortured – he swallowed convulsively – by Death Eaters?... Could it happen… could it happen to him? His family? Could it…? He wanted… no, he needed… to know… to ask Longbottom the truth…

He sighed. It was really none of his business, no matter what. His sudden panic didn’t give him the right to pry, especially after already having been warned off the topic…

He hugged himself and tried to put it all from his mind. Unfortunately, the only other thing to focus on was the uncomfortable silence weighing on them.

At least he could finally spot a set of stairs descending into darkness, right where they’d guessed they should be. Under the circumstances, though, he couldn’t really muster any enthusiasm about it.

Wearily, he led the way to the top of the stairs and threw the dice again. Two.

Nobody moved for a long instant. Then Potter sighed and called up his *lumos* once more, pouring its white light farther than Terry would have thought possible, probing the darkness of the vast hall beneath them until the edges of his spell mingled with the reverberation of the flames enclosing the Wheels of Death.

The three Gryffindors moved down a few steps while Terry stood a moment longer, transfixed by the spectacle.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Malfoy opening his mouth, a sneer on his face. Whatever the blond was about to say, Terry was quite sure that none of them wanted to hear it. They’d had about enough of the Slytherin for the time being. So he rounded on him and whispered furiously: “Shut up!”

Malfoy’s face was the picture of disbelieving outrage.

After a moment he frowned and was clearly preparing to deliver a scathing retort, but Terry didn’t give him the time. Pointing a menacing finger straight to the other’s chest, he spoke in an undertone: “Malfoy, if you want *one* hope of getting out of this place in one piece, I strongly recommend you keep your mouth shut from now on! Do your best to make us forget you even exist, that’s my advice!”

Malfoy gazed angrily at him and opened his mouth once more, but Terry cut him off with an impatient hand motion: “No, I mean it! You’ve pushed too far this time. If I was Longbottom, I know I’d be seriously considering as viable the option of being stuck here with your rotting carcass!”

He turned smartly away and stalked off, secretly rather proud of himself. That had been nicely graphic. He quickly caught up with the others and paced himself to their speed.

The stairs were large but very steep: they had to be careful while making their way down.

Terry took the time to observe and commit to memory the layout of the hall they were about to cross, mentally already selecting the best paths to negotiate the tricky area.

And it *was* tricky.

From up here, they could see the various corridors twisting and crossing each other, as if they were
watching a three-dimensional map, because the actual ceiling was several meters up from where the stone partitions ended; but he was sure that once they found themselves on the lower floor, they would feel trapped by the labyrinthine walls, with nothing but choking darkness above them.

He noticed that the corridors seemed more regular and more rationally disposed at the outer edges of the hall and grew more and more twisted and rough towards the centre – and what was likely their ultimate goal: the Idol’s chamber.

Their outlook changed too, from smooth, precisely cut stone slabs to ever more uneven black rocks. Closest to the frightful Wheels of Death and their constantly erupting flames, not only the walls but the floor, too, was made of rough rock, irregularly patterned: some dark formations loomed forbiddingly over the paths cut by the yellow squares, others rose starkly in the middle of the paths themselves, splitting the squares or forcing them up and down small crevices.

It was as if the closer the builders got to the pool of lava, the less they’d wanted to alter the natural landscape; or more likely, the temple had started off around the natural eruption site, as a way to worship the force of nature, since it was quite common for sacred places to be centered on natural phenomena – such as hot springs, for instance – and then as the civilization that created it grew and became more refined, the building was added to and modified to suit the new, more complex taste… a rather common pattern of growth for temples in the ancient times…

Terry rolled his eyes at himself. Except, of course, this particular site wasn’t a temple at all and had probably been created from scratch by their opponent… so his reasoning had little sense…

Still, the care for details was impressive.

He was right that from the ground floor, the hall was a disorienting maze. His excellent memory paid off, though, and he led his companions quickly and efficiently through the labyrinth.

He kept an eye out for whatever… surprises… might be in store for them; but fortunately enough, they didn’t see hide or hair of their opponent for a good while.

A few times he thought he spotted a threatening glint on the rock walls further ahead on their path. He wasn’t sure he hadn’t just imagined it and wasn’t sure what it was either, but he wasn’t keen on finding out. After all, if it was him designing a dungeon, he’d made sure to include all sorts of traps! Weapons sunken into the walls, for instance, ready to be unleashed on any incautious adventurer; or lethal sash blades falling from the ceiling; or even spears sticking out of the floor! Case in point… he eyed suspiciously a smattering of small round outlines on the floor. They didn’t notch the smooth surface of the square they were on, but Terry knew better than to think they were decorations. His lively imagination provided him with colourful short movies of their hapless bodies pierced by lethal spikes sprung from the very floor… it was sheer luck that they’d stopped one square before, he was sure… dear God, let next throw not be a one!...

Twice they ended on the squares with the intricately etched symbol of the Wheels of Death, but nobody commented on the ominous rumbling that followed, marking, as they had discovered, a turn of the contraptions.

It was probably too much to hope for, however, that they would not run into the white-haired menace at all. Halfway through the hall, according to Terry’s estimation, they suddenly heard the dreaded sound of footsteps approaching their position.

Although Terry’s instinct was to hightail it immediately, the vicious look Longbottom sent his way stopped his attempt before he could even formulate the idea. It was obvious that the other boy
would not accept any course that led them anywhere but straight at the Dark Guardian.

Unfortunately – or fortunately, for Terry’s nerves – they were still subjects to the Game’s rules and even when they caught sight of their smirking opponent, they could not simply charge at him. Under Longbottom’s glare, Terry was very quick with the dice, but it didn’t change the results, much to the Gryffindor’s frustration… and Terry’s relief.

He’d never been so happy to get a row of threes and ones, even if it made them spring a trap at last.

Fortunately, it was nothing more serious than a rope net, falling suddenly over them and pinning them to the floor with small, heavy weights.

Caught by surprise, Terry let the dice fall noisily to the ground and apparently it counted as a throw, for their foe swiftly ran away, his mocking laugh echoing hauntingly around them. Curiously though, no square lit up around them.

“I think this stupid net is forcing us to skip a turn,” grumbled Hermione from where she was, rather ineffectively, trying to cut the ropes with a conjured knife. “Damn annoying…”

Longbottom growled a curse.

Terry shrugged. In his opinion, there were worse things than being slightly delayed by an essentially harmless net. He transfigured a blade for himself from his tie, setting to work on the ropes on his side, but didn’t hurry.

There were much worse things than being delayed…

…although even he was starting to wonder. When were they going to reach that godforsaken Sword?
“There it is!” cried Hermione at long last, pointing to a huge volcanic rock in a vaguely pyramidal shape, further down the uneven corridor they’d just turned into.

Something long and thin was glinting on it, sparkling randomly when the reddish flicker of flames struck it. The Sword!

“About bloody time!” grumbled Potter.

Terry threw the dice again, relieved when they got the needed five. The air had gotten warmer and warmer as they neared the Wheels of Death and now that they were practically at their feet, it was almost unbearably hot. The huge contraptions loomed over them menacingly.

Up close, they were terrifying. Much, much bigger than they’d looked from afar and in a surprisingly elevated position. Terry wasn’t sure how they’d manage to climb on them: the gear teeth were the size of heavy lorries and perfectly smooth, offering no grips even where they touched the surrounding rocky area instead of being separated by a fiery lake. Flames erupted randomly from the lava pool, making Terry jump in fright every time. Occasionally, lapilli would be thrown from the flames and rain down on them, stinging a little. Smoke spirals raised here and there, lingering in a hot miasma.

The sooner they managed to leave the area, the better!

They hurried to gather around the majestic-looking rock that held their prize. Focused as they were on reaching the Sword, however, they failed to notice that the engraving on this square was different from the usual bas-relief of four connected wheels. When they stepped on it, a gong sound reverberated through the temple, seemingly making the very air around them vibrate.

They exchanged panicked looks.

“What was that?” whispered Hermione, as if unwilling to disturb the following resounding silence.

They shook their head helplessly.

Terry’s eyes fell to the floor. “The symbol… it’s different!” he exclaimed.

“Looks like a key of sorts,” remarked Potter.

Unfortunately that didn’t give them any more clue about the situation.

Potter sighed: “Well, whatever it was, I’m sure we’ll find out…”

“And probably not like it…” added Hermione under her breath.

Potter shrugged. “In the meanwhile…” He gestured to the nearby rock.

The Sword was chained to it by hilt and blade both, sort of dangling diagonally against the porous surface. A quick flick of Hermione’s wand had the locks magically open and the lean weapon fell into Longbottom’s waiting hands.

They huddled closer to inspect it.

It was long and shiny, with so many jewels on the hilt it made them blink because of all the little
sparks of light it reflected incessantly. Though Terry had to wonder if they were real at all.

Potter held out a hand and Longbottom readily relinquished. They watched as the green-eyed boy turned it over a couple times and balanced it critically. He made a noise of disappointment. “Well, it certainly isn’t much,” was his short comment.

“It looks just fine to me,” protested Hermione. “It’s beautiful! Like a Sword out of a fairy tale. The kind of ancient Sword the real king in exile would pass down in incognito to his roaming descendants, until the Kingdom was threatened and he had to save the day in a glorious epic Battle and reclaim his lost throne, proving his right with his forefather’s Sword!” she exclaimed enthusiastically.

Then she blushed at their stares. “Well, you know what I mean! It’s how it always goes in novels and the like.” She crossed her arms petulantly. “I’ve always thought that was really romantic…” she sighed.

Potter nearly choked: “R-romantic?” He stepped closer to his friend, scrutinizing her intently: “Hermione, are you feeling well?”

She pouted.

“Look,” said Potter in a very reasonable tone. “A sword isn’t something romantic. It’s… well, basically, it is a long piece of metal with very sharp edges. That, you know, you use to cut things. Monsters. People, occasionally,” he explained in a helpful tone.

They transferred their stares to him.

“Well, it is!” he huffed, crossing his arms defensively. “And there’s no need to look at me like that! After all, I’m the only one here who’s actually wielded a sword in battle, so I should know what I’m talking about!”

“That’s right!” exclaimed Terry in amazement. “I’d forgotten… you used the Sword of Gryffindor to face the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets!”

There was a choked, incredulous sound from Malfoy, that went completely ignored.

“I heard all about it from the portrait of Headmaster Aragon…” he stopped suddenly when he realized he was sounding like a babbling fangirl.

Potter just shrugged.

“You know…” said Hermione. “I’m pretty sure the Sword of Gryffindor was a magical gleaming sword. I seem to recall you saying that its handle had rubies the size of eggs. And Ginny said it was glittering.”

“Yes, but at least it was well-balanced! And sharp! This one is so light that I doubt we could pierce something with it even putting our whole weight behind the hit and practically dull. Look!” he complained, running a finger along its edge. It didn’t even draw blood.

Would he be like that after this Tournament was over, Terry wondered? Talking casually of happenings that to most people were the stuff of legend? Reminiscing past adventures? Of course, there was the tiny little detail of having to survive the adventure first…

He shook his head and said aloud: “Well, I bow to your superior expertise, but since I don’t particularly want to pierce, cut, hit or otherwise maim or kill anything with it, I’m pretty okay with
it being mostly for show. Enhances the chances that we won’t have to do anything more strenuous than wave it, which is perfectly alright with me!”

Potter and Granger chuckled and even Longbottom cracked a small smile. They went on blithely ignoring Malfoy’s indistinct mutterings. It seemed to be a working solutions to deal with the blond.

“Come on, let’s go!” called Longbottom, gesturing to where they’d come from. “I think there was a ladder to reach the Wheels down that way…”

“Ok,” nodded Potter, handing the Sword to Terry, who took it in surprise. Nobody else seemed to expect anything else, though.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t take long, I’m boiling!” exclaimed Hermione. She was the only one who hadn’t taken off the outer robe of the uniform yet: all the boys had already reached the conclusion that their shirt was more than enough in the heat.

They retraced their steps with two throws, making the Wheels turn noisily once more, and found that Longbottom was right: there was a metal ladder anchored to a tall rock that would allow them to climb onto the second largest Wheel if it was in the right position.

Looking up at the top, they could make out the shape of a huge gear tooth, ready to be stepped onto.

“Well,” said Potter taking a deep breath, “here goes nothing!”
Chapter 22

The Wheels didn’t look any better from upon them than they had from below.

They were all interconnected, disposed horizontally to form what Terry imagined was a typical clock gear. The squares of the Game’s path were secured on a double set of rails, not dissimilar from train tracks, that crossed each Wheel in perfect arcs.

He was relieved to see that the path from their position to the outline of a door in the stone wall on the other side of the gear was unbroken, albeit long, since it passed on each of the four Wheels.

He was much less relieved to find that the impression of flimsiness he’d gained when he’d looked at the squares from afar was anything but wrong. They looked about as secure a passage as a rope bridge over a chasm, or a slowly crumbling mountain spur!

Terry felt a stomach-twisting dread as he stood rooted on the very top of the ladder, eyes fastened to the lava flowing viscously a measly couple of feet below them. The white die sported four shiny black dots, meaning they had three more squares to go on the big Wheel. He did not want to step on it.

Rivulets of sweat ran down his back: it really was unbearably hot. Next to him, Longbottom took a fortifying breath and stepped forth, looking straight before him, as if he didn’t want to be reminded of the sea of fire awaiting their falls. Terry gulped, realizing the others were impatiently waiting for him.

Slowly, carefully, he took an hesitant step on the precarious looking yellow square, flinching as the lava frothed and gurgled below him. He wondered whether suffering from vertigo could be considered normal under the circumstances. A small part of him laughed mockingly at the thought. There was nothing normal about this thrice-damned situation!

He took another step, and another. In an effort to ignore the twisting knot in his stomach, he tried to examine the path he was about to cover. And froze. Oh, no, no, no, no…

He swallowed convulsively and managed to choke out: “Brace yourselves!”

The others blinked, puzzled, and he gestured to where they were standing… atop the engraved symbol of interconnected wheels!

Realization hit them and they moaned. “Just great!”

Terry stepped on the square.

The thundering rumbling was much, much worse this time, coming from all around them. The slowly rotating mechanism shot unsettling vibrations up their very bones. All the squares trembled and rattled dangerously, only slowly settling again. Shouts were torn from their throats as they fought to retain their balance.

Hermione shrieked as she staggered and faltered, perilously close to the edge of the square. A quill fell from a pocket of her robe and plunged straight into the lava pool, being swallowed by the magma with a soft, horrible blop. An outburst of flames flared up, missing the girl by inches.

“Hermione!” yelled Potter, lunging to grab her.
They dithered together for an instant that just about gave Terry a heart attack, but then Potter pulled the girl sharply towards the rest of the group and they fell one atop the other, safely in the middle of the square.

They lay there panting for a long moment.

Fire rose up all around them in almost-continuous bursts, raising the temperature to nearly intolerable levels.

“Good thing we’re used to Hogwarts moving staircases!” joked Potter weakly.

Hermione laughed, but there was an edge of hysteria to it.

Terry shook his head, feeling dizzy: “We need to get out of here. The sooner the better!”

He went to throw the dice, but Malfoy stopped him with a sharp cry: “Wait!”

“What now?!” growled Longbottom aggressively.

Malfoy scowled, but answered nonetheless: “What happens if the dice roll off the square? It’s happened before, they’ve bounced off walls and stuff!”

Terry paled at the thought of losing them to the fire and being trapped in that inferno. “Oh, God,” he moaned.

“Good thinking!...” Potter picked himself up: “Shields?” he suggested.

Hermione approved: “If we stand in a circle, we should be able to contain the dice on all sides and prevent them falling off!”

They did so and cheered at the six they got. That is, until they realized that the recent turn of the Wheels had rearranged the path so that they were completely cut off from the rest of the gears as well as the temple!

They groaned in unison, muttering heartfelt curses, that morphed into alarmed shrieks when unexpectedly, the Wheels moved again! They grabbed each others’ arms to brace themselves and managed to steady one another.

When the trembling was finally over, a path had formed that crossed two of the four Wheels.

“Well, better than nothing, right?” said Potter with barely any hint of sarcasm.

“But what happened? Why did they move again?!” asked Hermione in a shrill voice.

Terry regarded her with sympathy. She didn’t look entirely recovered from her brush with death yet and he really couldn’t blame her.

“Obviously, the Dark Guardian must have stepped on an etched square, thus activating the mechanism!” sneered Malfoy.

Hermione moaned: “Just what we needed... now we can’t even prepare...”

“We’ll just wait a little after we throw the dice, give him the time to move before us,” said Potter soothingly. “That way he won’t catch us mid-step!”

Terry and Longbottom both nodded fervently, before they all moved on.
They made it all the way to the other end of the second Wheel without the gear turning again, at which point they sighed despondently: unless they wanted to go back to the temple ground, they had no choice but to retrace their footsteps.

Of course, their opponent activated the whole frustrating thing when they were but two squares away from the symbol they had access to... one really had to wonder, was the white-haired menace timing it? Because if he was, and if his goal was to annoy them, he was getting full marks!

They hurried to pass on the third Wheel, wanting to take advantage of the suddenly opened path: who knew how long it would last?

Then they had to waste two turns because of stepping on another symbol and consequently trapping themselves on a four-squares broken path.

By this time they were all tired, frustrated, hot and audibly grumbling. So when the reverberating gong sound thundered all around them once more, it was welcomed with hissed curses and baleful glares. The only positive point was that they were close enough to the door that they were almost sure would lead them to the Idol to see an elaborately carved stone panel acting as a revolving door when the gong was heard.

“So it was a key,” muttered Hermione. “And that’s what it does: it opens the way to the Inner Temple.”

“At least it’s nothing worse!” exclaimed Terry.

His relief was short lived though. When they reached the door – thankfully without anything else moving around them – nothing happened. The panel didn’t budge. There wasn’t any crack, handle, passage, doorknob, lever... nothing! They had no way to get in!

“I can’t believe this,” grumbled Potter. “I - can’t - believe - this!”

“But we saw it move,” reasoned Hermione. “Logically there has to be a way to open it!”

“There is,” said Terry in a desolate tone. “We stepped on it when we took the Sword.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me!” spat out Malfoy.

“Did you see any other key-like symbols lying around?” asked Terry despondently.

“But you can’t mean... it’s on the other side of the Wheels!... surely not…” Hermione was almost pleading.

Terry sighed, dejected: “I can think of nothing else!”

“But that’s completely ridiculous! We’d never be able to!... Even if we go back, there is no way to make it to here quickly enough…”

Potter was frowning: “I hate to say it, but Malfoy is right... there are too many squares between here and there to allow us to cover the distance in one throw, no matter how lucky... no, there has to be another way!”

But Terry shook his head.

He’d finally understood what they needed to do...
“We must split up!” he said firmly.

“What?!”

“What do you mean?”

“No way!”

“No, listen…” he tried again.

“We can’t!”

“The rules say we must stay together!”

“Listen!” he shouted over their protests. “It’s the only way! We need someone to activate the- the ‘gong-key’ thingy… while someone else gets in! Otherwise we’ll just be stuck going back and forth uselessly!”

“But the rules…”

“No, think on it! We were separated when Potter was taken to the Pit of Bones, weren’t we? So clearly it is allowed!”

There was silence, broken only by the gurgling sounds of the lava below them, as the others pondered his proposal.

“I think that as long as we conclude the Game together, we’re good,” he insisted, a tad desperately.

Finally Hermione nodded: “Sounds logical.”

“I agree,” confirmed Potter.

“So how do we split up?” asked Longbottom.

“I think you and Potter should go back to activate the key, while the three of us go on,” said Terry, as authoritatively as he could manage.

“And why…” started Malfoy acidly, only to be interrupted by an irritated and derisive Hermione: “Isn’t it obvious? It’ll be a cold day in hell before Neville will pass on the opportunity of confronting the Dark Guardian!”

“Damn right!” muttered Longbottom ferociously.

“Plus, if they end up in the Pit of Bones again, Potter is the one with the best chance of getting out in one piece,” added Terry, glancing apologetically at the dark-haired teen.

It was probably cold, but if someone had to face an Acromantula… well, better Potter than him, that was for sure.

Potter shrugged, muttering something along the lines of ‘Dream of my life…’ but didn’t object.

Malfoy scowled but kept silent.
They re-cast the shields and Terry threw the dice, getting a four.

And the Wheels turned again, eliciting a chorus of groans, curses and protests. This was really getting old! And now they were five steps from the sealed door once more.

Terry took a deep breath in an effort to keep calm, accidentally inhaled some smoke and started coughing. “R-right!” he managed to gasp. “Nothing for it. We will try and stay as close to the door as possible the whole time, while you two go back, so that we’re ready when you activate the ‘gong-key’.”

“And what if they activate the blasted thing while we aren’t close enough? How will they know if it is a good moment or not?” asked Malfoy, snidely, but very sensibly.

Terry bit his lip, uncertain, but Potter had a ready solution: “Sparks,” he said shortly. “Like in the Forbidden Forest.”

Everybody nodded, except Terry, who was rather miffed to see that even Malfoy had got the reference, while he remained in the dark. Seeing his confusion, Hermione quickly explained the system, and Terry nodded sagely: “Ah, yes. Like in the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament, right?”

To his surprise, Potter stiffened instantly, his face going completely blank. An awkward silence ensued, baffling Terry. What had he said wrong?

Hermione coughed lightly and said nervously, in a transparent attempt at moving past the uncomfortable topic: “We’d better make the sparks green or blue instead of red, ehm. They… they should show up better in here that way.”

“Yeah, ok,” said Longbottom just as tensely.

“Shall we move?” said Potter in clipped tones, not looking at any of them.

Bewildered, Terry nevertheless let the matter drop and followed Hermione and Malfoy, while the other two started off on their own.

They walked quickly… and collided painfully with the Game’s barrier after only two squares.


Looking back, they saw that Potter and Longbottom had made it just as far: two squares in the opposite direction.

“Oh, of course!” exclaimed Hermione in exasperation. “We can split up, but the steps the die allows us…”

“…must be distributed equally between the two teams!” finished Terry, who’d worked it out as well. “Wonderful.”

Malfoy made a doubtful noise: “Equally? Then what about even numbers?”

Terry frowned but Hermione shrugged: “Probably just divided then. Like, if they had moved the whole four squares, we’d have been stuck, and so on.”

“Makes sense,” sighed Terry. Would this bloody Game never end?

After a short discussion, they decided to only move one square per turn, thus letting the other two
progress faster; a bit of shouting back and forth later, they had also agreed that blue sparks would be the signal for the three of them being in a good position for the door to be opened, while green sparks would indicate that Potter and Longbottom wanted to stop – to avoid setting the Wheels off for instance – and the other three should complete the remaining steps of that throw.

When the two Gryffindors were out of earshot, Terry took a chance and asked quietly to Hermione: “What did I say wrong? Earlier, when I mentioned the Triwizard…?”

She shook her head sadly: “Don’t worry. The Tournament is just a sore spot with Harry, is all. Especially the Third Task.”

Puzzled, Terry frowned, not wanting to insist but also not understanding.

Malfoy scoffed: “He isn’t still pining over Diggory, is he?”

Terry gasped, suddenly figuring it out.

“For the love of Merlin, it’s ridiculous…” started the blond.

“Malfoy, shut up,” hissed Hermione, eyes flashing angrily. “If you know what’s good for you… shut – up.”

And she ostentatiously turned her back to him.
Chapter 24

Waiting for someone else to ‘do their job’ turned out to be harder than Terry could have imagined. Potter and Longbottom were quick to climb down from the Wheels at the first occasion, to avoid being trapped by their unpredictable turns, and thus disappeared from the remaining three’s visual.

As for them, they moved back towards the door at a snail’s pace, keeping an eye out for green sparks, but they didn’t seem to have anything to do or even talk about to pass the time. Especially since Hermione was clearly annoyed at Malfoy (not that there was anything new there…)

In between throws, they stood around awkwardly, waiting for the Game’s barrier to spring up around them. They all gazed fixedly at one unremarkable spot or moved their eyes fretfully from the unstable floor, to deep into the fire, to up to the darkness of the distant, vaulted ceiling.

Never did they look at each other.

From time to time they sighed, or fidgeted. Malfoy took up tapping a hand on his leg in an maddening incessant rhythm. Terry kept switching his weight from one leg to another. He also found himself fiddling non-stop with the collar of his shirt, loosening it because of the heat, then straightening it nervously, then loosening it again…

It was like being trapped in an elevator with perfect strangers. It had happened to him once – the lift in his block of flats had stopped working unexpectedly one evening when he was seven – but that time his brother and his mother had been with him and she’d narrated children’s tales to keep them distracted the whole time, so it had been fun more than anything. If only they had something like that to pass the time now!

Minutes stretched impossibly until they seemed hours. Terry almost considered provoking Malfoy into a spat, just for something to do.

“No news is good news, right?” burst out Hermione at one point. “I mean, if something had happened to them, we would know… right?”

Terry shrugged. They should have agreed on a ‘danger’ signal, too… On the other hand, it’s not like they could have helped in any way… and imagining all sorts of horrors was stupid…

Twice they found themselves transported far from the door again by a turn of the Wheels, but they were almost beyond caring. Then their luck changed and a third rumbling movement brought them with jerks and jolts right in front of the stone panel. They perked up, sending blue sparks immediately towards the dark ceiling, and waited.

And waited some more.

Then the Game’s barrier sprang up around them as usual. They slumped. The others must not be in position…

They threw the die – grumbling when they got a one – and sent up more blue sparks, staying where they were and praying that the Wheels would not undo all their efforts once again…

And finally – finally! – the stone slab moved, like a very slow revolving door, and they shot through it before something else could delay them.
They were in!

The chamber was small and entirely made of stone. It was also dimly lit and cold. After the brightness and heat they’d been swamped with, it made them shiver unpleasantly. Whispering, Hermione cast warming charms on everybody, even as they struggled to slip their robes back on.

Their eyes however never strayed from the Idol majestically towering over them, huge and exotic and shiny even in the half-light.

Malfoy’s vision had been spot on. The idol was big. And gold. And rather ugly.

In fact, it reminded Terry a lot of a very fat mandrake. If a mandrake ever grew to 15 feet and was gold instead of muddy greenish. And bald.

“Top right!” hissed Malfoy right in his ear, making Terry jump.

“Oh!... oh, right!...” he murmured back, unconsciously clutching the Sword he was carrying.

He let his eyes roam up to the very top of the fat, bald head and gulped. Then he forced himself to observe the ugly thing better and realized that there were twelve slit-like holes in his enormous chest, spread more or less like the numbers on a watch. How had he missed them? They looked the perfect width for the Sword to be inserted in and then slid along them.

“Do you think a Levitation Charm will do the trick?” whispered Hermione practically.

Terry was struck by how odd it was that they were all whispering. As if the huge monstrosity could hear them if they talked too loud! It felt right, though. He certainly didn’t feel like yelling at the moment.

Anyway, there was no point in dawdling. He straightened his shoulders and whipped out his wand.

“Wingardium leviosa!” he enunciated in a clear whisper, swishing and flicking.

The sword rose slowly, masterfully directed by his wand – he’d always been rather good at Charms – and slid effortlessly in the top right hole.

There was a noise that, to Terry’s shock, remarkably resembled that of a coin dropping in a coffee vending machine and then-

With the speed and force of a projectile shot with a sling, something red was expelled by the mandrake-Idol with a loud burp and tore through the air in a straight line, hitting Malfoy directly in the stomach.

The poor boy groaned loudly, instinctively clutching the thing and doubling over in pain. Slowly, as the Slytherin regained his wind, the stream of unintelligible mutterings coming from his balled figure morphed into an impressive collection of expletives, piling abuse on their adversary.

“Ah… Malfoy?” asked Hermione hesitantly. She looked torn between being highly amused and completely offended by the whole ordeal.

Terry decided that struggling to keep his face straight really wasn’t worth it and collapsed to the floor laughing himself silly.

Malfoy’s grumbled insults expanded to include both of them (though they also lost some steam) and eventually the blond stood up and showed off the long-awaited prize: a red lump, roughly the
size of an ostrich-egg, looking more like coloured glass than anything precious.

The fabled Bloodstone.

“Let’s go find the other idiots,” groused Malfoy and stalked off towards… the closed door.
Chapter 25

Fortunately for everybody’s nerves, it swivelled open without any input on their part.

They stepped out and were instantly hit by a wall of heat that felt almost physical.

Blinking in the reddish light, they spotted Potter and Longbottom casually strolling up to them. It seemed they were finally free of the need for accursed dice rolls. Thank Goodness!

As the other two Gryffindors came closer, Terry observed them carefully, blinking away some sweat. They looked dishevelled – Potter had a smudge of dirt on his cheek – Longbottom’s clothes and hair were in complete disarray – their robes, carelessly slung over their shoulders, were slightly torn in more than one place – and they both sported quite a few bruises and a couple angry red cuts.

“What happened to you two?” asked Hermione with fond exasperation.

“Ah…” said Potter sheepishly. “Nothing much!”

“Harry!” she huffed, arms crossing impatiently.

“Sprang a couple traps,” explained Longbottom hurriedly, caving before the girl’s frown, “but honestly, it was nothing serious!”

“Oh?” asked Terry faintly. He already knew that his definition of ‘serious’ and Potter’s were a world apart, but Longbottom had seemed more sensible so far!

“It was just a few darts shooting out of a wall, Hermione,” entreated Potter. “No big deal!”

“Harry’s pretty fast, you know. Dodged almost all of them!” added Longbottom reassuringly.

Hermione worried her lower lip: “And you?”

Longbottom shrugged modestly: “Threw myself to the ground, and they passed over me.” He smiled: “It’s what I always do when Peeves is in one of his ‘let’s-play-target-with-the-students’ moods. Works every time!”

Hermione smiled too, but her worried frown didn’t disappear: “And the bruises?” she asked demandingly.

“Ah…” grimaced Longbottom.

Potter sighed: “A lump of rock crumbled over our heads,” he admitted. “But honestly, we’re fine! It wasn’t even a big one…”

Hermione looked like she was gearing up to a rant, but she was derailed by a rope ladder suddenly plunging amidst them.

They blinked at it, then as one looked up to where it was supposedly coming from.

A round skylight had opened in the distant ceiling, letting a hesitant sliver of daylight descend tentatively in the fiery darkness they were in. The ladder was evidently fastened to something on the roof above it.

Terry met Potter’s eyes through the rope rungs.
“Want me to go first?” asked the other teen with a crooked smile.

Terry sighed and his eyes fell to the dice he still held in his hands. With a mischievous grin, he let the black one drop but held out the other one like a footballer would the ball, and when he let it go, he timely kicked it with all his strength. The dice shot away with forceful speed and hit the wall of the Inner Temple with a very satisfying thump, ricocheting off and plunging into the lava pool with an even more satisfying plop.

“Ha!” exclaimed Terry with feeling.

He turned just in time to catch Hermione and Malfoy look at him as if he was out of his mind and the other two fighting laughter. He shrugged, and reached out to grab a rung.
Chapter 26

They emerged atop what Terry immediately dubbed an Aztec Temple top, though it wasn’t entirely accurate. Still, it was pretty close to what he’d always imagined those infamous sites for human sacrifices would be like.

Looking about while he waited for the others to climb out, he could see that the completely flat top was made of stone slabs with elaborately but roughly carved mask-like figures, vaguely squared and squat and with too many limbs. The building they were on towered over the rainforest they’d crossed, rising tall and imposing like an ugly pyramid from a sea of green. There was a very long set of monumental stairs up the side opposite where they’d entered the structure at ground level.

When they were all out, a polite cough made them twirl around sharply. Their opponent was there, exuding danger and casual elegance, welcoming them with a small smirk. The handsome man looked perfectly at ease and as part of the ambience here as he had under the gory skulls-arc down below.

That was as much as Terry saw before a blur shot past him and straight at the man: Longbottom, who didn't waste any time in punching his target with all his strength.

“Ouch!” yelled the white-haired bloke, rocking back with the force of the blow. He held a hand protectively over his right eye. “What the hell!”

Gritting his teeth, Longbottom lunged at him again, grabbing him by his leather notch lapels. Terry was struck by the fact that Longbottom was a full head taller than his opponent: the white-haired man’s presence made him look more imposing than he actually was.

“Give it back, you bloody good-for-nothing maggot!” shouted Longbottom, who looked ready to strangle the thief. He shook the man furiously: “GIVE-IT-BACK!”

“Alright! Alright!” cried out the other. “Chill out, now, there’s a good lad…”

Probably noticing the murderous glint in Longbottom’s eyes, he was quick to produce the trinket – for all appearances from nowhere – and swiftly handed it over.

Longbottom snatched it and dumped the man on the floor, then took a few hurried steps back, all the while glaring at the bloke, who was touching carefully the tender skin around his eye. He was going to have quite the shiner.

The adventured blew out a huffed breath, lying back for a moment and seemingly looking at nothing, then rolled onto his side and leaned up on an elbow, regarding Longbottom with amused bafflement: “What’s so special about it, anyway? It’s not particularly valuable, or magical, or I don’t know what. In fact, it looked pretty ordinary to me.”

“There’s nothing ordinary about it!” spat Longbottom, incensed.

“Fine, fine,” the other said placatingly. “I apologise if I have offended you.” He smiled and Terry was surprised to see that it was frank and likeable. “I meant no harm, you know. I really had no idea it was so important to you.”

“There are times when you hurt people all the more because you just don’t think you might be doing it,” told him Longbottom stiffly. “And I can’t believe you stole something if you didn’t even want it!”
The other shrugged, then stretched out lazily like a big wild cat. “Like I said, I meant no harm.”

“Well, you hurt Nev anyway,” pointed out Potter, quite calmly given the circumstances.

The adventurer shrugged again: “And for that I’m sorry, though I’m still in the dark as to why such a useless little trinket would be valuable…”

“Even a useless trinket can carry memories and feelings, making its loss an actual ache,” groused Longbottom, clearly not appeased even if the locket was safely around his neck again, being reverently stroked with a finger in an unconscious gesture. “And I don’t care how little you think of my grief or if you want to mock me for it, I’m used to it. But trust me, if you’d really taken away the one thing I have left of my parents that they actually gave me…”

There was a threat in the low, grumbling tone of the Gryffindor teen, but it wasn’t that what made their strange opponent grow serious.

His eyes became gentler with every word of Longbottom’s. Finally he replied quietly: “I know what it means to lose someone you hold dear. I would never make light of such a sorrow.”

“Now why don’t I believe you?” growled Longbottom, more snidely than Terry had ever heard the other boy being.

The white-haired man shook his head gently. “My sister, my beautiful, sweet, beloved sister, died in a car accident when she was just eight. Her name was Amane…” he trailed off, looking sadly into the distance.

Then he turned to Longbottom again, sitting up calmly. “For a long time, it hurt so much to have lost her that I couldn’t bring myself to even admit she was really gone. I wrote to her regularly… letters to Heaven.” He smiled sorrowfully. “I would tell her what was going on in my life, about my friends and the games I played… and every letter I wrote hurt a little, like small piercing stabs straight in my heart…”

He paused again, then continued in a subdued tone: “My mother died when Amane was born and my father… well, he was a very busy man… an archaeologist, you know, forever on one expedition or another, and when he was home, he worked for his museum most of the time… so when I lost my beloved sister… it was like being left alone in the world…” He shook his head sadly. “Oh, yes. I know what it means to lose a loved one. And perhaps I deserved this after all,” he concluded touching lightly his rapidly blackening eye.

For a long moment, nothing moved.

Then the white-haired man shook himself and jumped to his feet: “But of course, this was all a long time ago, before I met Yugi and the others, way before I joined the Court…”

“Court?” asked Malfoy, his interest peaked. “Yugi – as in Yugi the King of Shadow Games? So you’re part of this Shadow Court business! Can you send us home?”

Terry rolled his eyes. That was so naïve. The adventurer didn’t show to have even heard the blond and just went on: “…hell, it was even before I received… It!”

He reached under his leather trench coat to drag out and dangle before their eyes a cord on which was fastened a weird silver ring with five hanging prongs, encasing an Egyptian pyramid with the Eye of Wadjet engraved.

“Let me guess,” said Malfoy, “another Millennium Item.”
“The Millennium Ring, yes.” The man chuckled: “Well, a replica actually, the original Items are beyond reach now – thank the Gods for that – but good guess nonetheless. I imagine Ishizu already explained how we used what little of the power of the Shadows we retain to make these replicas? Good.” He smiled at their nods. “The leftover power, so to speak, will allow you to use this Ring to play hot-warm-cold.”

“How did a British come to have an Ancient Egyptian artefact?” asked Potter, surprisingly.

“The original Ring, you see, could be used like a sort of very sophisticated compass, that would lead you to whatever you set it to point to. This one, too, can be set to find something, but it won’t point to it except in very general terms, giving you a direction so to speak; but it will also glow brighter the closer you get. All clear?”

They nodded.

“Excellent!” the white-haired adventurer exclaimed cheerfully. “Then here you go, it’s yours!”

And he took it off his neck to pass it to Terry.

Even if he had half hoped for this, Terry found he was too surprised and overwhelmed to say much at the gift. He reverently took it and turned it over and over in his hands, letting his finger run all over it as if he was blind and trying to see it through touch. It was gaudy and tacky and big and exotic and absolutely fantastic.

“Very well, now, what else should I tell you…?” wondered the stranger aloud.

“Your accent!” exclaimed Hermione out of the blue, looking like someone who has found the answer to a complicated geometry problem.

Terry raised his head from his new acquisition at her outburst.

“I beg your pardon?” asked the man politely.

The girl blushed and stammered: “Uh, ah, I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to be rude… it’s just… there was something that struck me as odd when you were talking, and I couldn’t figure out what it was, and then I realized, it’s your accent, I mean, the other lady, Ishizu, sounded so foreign, while you… you sound very British!”

The man laughed charmingly and she blushed even more. “I am British, my dear!”

“Oh!” exclaimed Hermione, flustered. “Oh, I see!”

He laughed some more, gently: “My name is Ryou Bakura, and I was born and raised in Birmingham. Moved to Japan in my teens – in fact, that’s when and where I met Yugi and his friends for the first time.”

“Oh, ehm, well, p-please to m-meet you, Mr. B-bakura?”

Terry, busy gaping at the normally self-assured girl stammering, almost missed Potter’s moan of ‘Not another Lockhart, please!’

The man seemed unfazed though and laughed kindly: “Oh, just call me Ryou, please. I prefer it, to be honest.”

“How did a British come to have an Ancient Egyptian artefact?” asked Potter, surprisingly
sounding slightly hostile.

“He said his father was an archaeologist,” blurted out Terry in a defensive tone, before he realized he should probably let the man answer (and why was he defending him anyway?)

“Another good guess!” praised Ryou. “My dad purchased it from a street peddler while on a trip in Egypt.”

“A street peddler?” repeated Malfoy in complete disbelief. Once again he was ignored.

Ryou clapped his hands together with a sudden burst of energy: “Now, let’s see… the buffet over there is at your disposal.” He gestured grandly, leading them to the side, to a table full of trays of various foods and pitchers of colourful fruit-juice that Terry could have sworn wasn’t there earlier. “There are even some cream puffs, look! I love cream puffs.”

He snatched one off a tray and popped it into his mouth happily.

“I’m afraid I must go, but there’s no need for you to hurry. No one’s going to bother you up here… take some rest! Hum, what else…?” He made a show of thinking it over. “Nope, nothing! Whenever you feel like going on, I’m sure you’ll find the way without problem!”

He moved past them, patting Longbottom on the shoulder companionably: “Sorry again about the whole ‘stealing your locket’ thing.” He smiled dreamily, eyes apparently watching something no-one else could see, lost in the sands of time. “I couldn’t resist, I’m afraid. In honor of a very old acquaintance…”

His fond tone prompted Hermione to ask kindly: “Someone you loved?”

Ryou blinked, bewildered, then his smile became shark-like. “No. Someone I hated with all my guts. And whose soul I really, really hope is rotting in hell… slowly and painfully.”

They stared, completely flabbergasted.

He just laughed and before they could react, he jumped on the stone sill and then off it.

They ran to the sill with shouts – Hermione was the fastest – to watch him freefall towards the forest below them, his trench coat spreading around him like black wings, and just in the nick of time grab a liana and swing himself on a branch, from where he disappeared into his forest.

Potter sighed on Terry’s left and turning, he saw a look of longing on the Gryffindor’s face. Bloody daft, all of them.
They took their time, enjoying the unexpected feast and chatting idly around mouthfuls. With Ryou’s promise that nothing would ‘bother’ them, they felt free to relax for the first time since the whole ordeal began and they took advantage of the chance shamelessly. After all, who knew what was in store for them in the rest of the Tournament?

Potter was going on about wanting to try Ryou’s grand exit, merely – Terry suspected – to rile Hermione up.

“But it would be so much fun!” he’d say with a teasing grin. “Imagine, the total freedom of flying without a broom…!”

“And crash to your death!” she’d retort a little shrilly. “Really, Harry, of all the irresponsible…”

Terry listened with half an ear, amused, until their banter got a little more heated and Hermione let it slip that ‘a freefall is the height of foolishness, no matter how cool and sexy is the idiot who’s doing it!’ At which point he met Malfoy’s horrified eyes across the table and burst out laughing.

Potter, naturally, had switched to teasing his furiously blushing best friend; and for some reason Lockhart came up again, though Hermione swatted him for it.

Terry left them to it and located himself a glass.

A little while later he was accosted by Longbottom, who joined him in examining some strange morsels that seemed to include crabs, chilli and mint leaves.

“Any guesses on what they are?” asked the Gryffindor lightly.

Terry glanced sideways at him. He seemed much more at ease and back to his usual calm demeanour. “Not really, but I’m pretty sure there’s chilli in them, so perhaps I should just let them be.”

Longbottom nodded seriously, pretending to ponder the topic. “I’ll stick to these mango-chicken rolls, then.”

Terry grimaced: “Urgh, mango.”

The other boy laughed.

Terry bit his lip and then took a chance: “Say, Longbottom…”

“Oh, just call me Neville, will you?”

Terry smiled: “Alright, Neville.” Then he hesitated, not sure how to approach the topic he wanted to mention but knew he probably shouldn’t.

“What were you saying, Terry?” asked Long- Neville lightly, pouring himself a glass of pinkish juice.

Terry took a deep breath: “You don’t have to answer or anything, I know it’s none of my business, and if you don’t want to talk about it I understand, no problem, so don’t worry or anything, I-”

“You want to know about my parents,” Neville interrupted his rambling with a subdued tone.
Terry stopped his babbling abruptly and looked uncertainly at the Gryffindor, unsure whether he should just apologize and let the matter drop or…

“They aren’t dead,” said Neville with effort, “but they’re as good as.” He closed his eyes, hand grasping his glass so tightly Terry expected it to explode any minute. “I don’t…” Neville heaved a deep, pained breath. Then shook his head. “I don’t think I can talk about it.”

Terry nodded quickly, regretting having asked, but Neville forced out a small, reassuring smile: “Don’t worry. It’s natural that you want to know… just… just ask Harry, alright?” he was speaking with difficulty. “Tell him I said he can tell. He knows… he knows; he’ll explain.”

Terry made a mental note to do so whenever an occasion might rise.

There was a silence, embarrassed on Terry’s part, sad on Neville’s, and the sounds of a petty argument between Potter and Malfoy over the sophistication - or lack thereof - of cucumber and salmon canapes drifted to them.

Then Neville seemed to shake himself out of his funk. “So…” he asked, with forced lightness. “Ever tried these? They’re samosa, right? Parvati offered some on her birthday last year, they’re amazingly good!”

Terry seized the chance of a lighter topic with gratitude: “No, I’ve never had any… they told me Padma offered some as well but I was in the hospital wing at the time… I’ve had sushi before though, have you?”

And with that they were back to the much safer, though far less meaningful, food chat, at least until Hermione’s wonderings about the iconography of the bas-reliefs around them drew Terry into a more satisfying discussion of pre-Columbian art, of which, to his surprise, Hermione knew little.

Finally, Potter decided it was time to drag them all on, though not before he insisted to pack at least some of the leftover food.

“You never know when you’ll have to go without, and trust me on this, starving isn’t fun,” he said seriously – which made Terry seriously wonder about the boy-hero. He looked as if he was talking from experience. But when had he possibly suffered starvation? In this day and age?

Terry wracked his brain to sort through all the gossip about Potter’s adventures, but he thought none of them could have offered this particular challenge. Unless it was something that hadn’t made it to the Hogwarts gossip chain? It was possible, when it came to the Golden Trio, though Terry wouldn’t have believed it before finding out about the whole baby dragon business.

Or else… well the only other option was that he’d faced lack of food outside the school… his train of thoughts led him to really reconsider Potter’s skinniness… was it possible that… but no, surely not?

His musings were derailed when Potter called out: “Everybody ready?”

There was a chorus of ‘yes’ and Terry took out his newly acquired silver Ring. True, the way forward seemed pretty obvious – the imposing staircase led to a clear-cut path in the jungle beneath them – but just for the heck of it, he tried out his magical trinket, fiddling with its prongs and having fun with getting it to glow or dim by walking randomly around the flat top.

Al last Malfoy lost his patience and told him in no equivocal terms just what he thought of idiot children playing with magical toys whose complexity was manifestly beyond their understanding, which rather destroyed Terry’s excited mood.
Offended, he nevertheless pretended to just shrug the insult off and joined the others in descending the lengthy staircase. The last thing he wanted was for the Slytherin to know he’d affected him.

He managed to count 359 uncomfortably tall steps, interrupted by two landings, which made him agree wholeheartedly with Potter’s grumblings of it being too damn long a stair, even if Hermione primly informed them that, compared to the 11,674 steps of the Swiss staircase that figured in the Guinness Book of Records, it was nothing.

Which brought up Malfoy’s question about just what this Guinness Book was – and they had the rare and unexpected treat to see Malfoy favourably surprised by something Muggle (though he went right back to sneers and contempt, redoubling his efforts to make them forget his momentary lapse, especially in the face of their unmerciful teasing).

The lively banter made the track through the final part of the rainforest go by quickly and at last they found themselves in front of a thick drape of lianas, disposed not unlike a beaded curtain. Terry’s Ring was glowing brightly.

They parted the vegetation… and were shocked to see an absolutely modern-looking, highly technological corridor – all white surfaces, glass and steel. They moved faltering in, trying to readjust to the sudden change (Terry actually double checked that his eyes weren’t deceiving him, for he’d spotted what he was almost sure was a circuit camera), but soon their eyes were drawn to five neatly disposed and brightly coloured… guns.
“Cool!” exclaimed Potter loudly. He bounded over to examine them more closely.

“What?” exclaimed Hermione scandalized. “They’re guns!”

“Exactly!” replied Potter cheerfully.

Terry walked over and picked one up as well. Like the other four, it was shaped like a sci-fi phaser, with a futuristic, aerodynamic design, but it was extremely light and in bright colours such as purple, yellow and red. A toy gun, in a word.

He pointed at an imaginary target in the air to get a feel for the grip, childishly excited. Potter was right. It was cool!

Hermione, however, didn’t seem of the same mind. “How can you say that guns are cool?” she asked, outraged.

“Well, they are!” said Potter, looking surprised.

Terry nodded vigorously.

“They’re instruments of death!” exclaimed Hermione in horror.

Terry’s nodding stopped in mid-gesture. He and Potter shared a look, half of uncertainty, half of exasperation.

“Well, yes, technically,” answered Potter at last. “But then, so are wands,” he tried in a reasonable tone.

“Wands aren’t designed for the sole purpose of killing!” Hermione was crossing her arms with righteous indignation.

That gave them pause.

“They’re still cool,” said Terry stubbornly.

“But what reason do you have to say so?”

Terry pouted. What kind of question was that?

“I don’t think ‘reason’ has anything to do with it, Hermione,” said Potter. “They’re cool because they are. Like… like motorbikes!”

Terry perked up: Potter had got the point perfectly. “Yeah! Exactly! Like motorbikes!” he exclaimed enthusiastically.

Hermione gave them both a flat look.

Terry frowned in renewed exasperation. Why didn’t she get it!? That made perfect sense to him!

“Aren’t guns usually made of metal though?” Asked Lon-Neville, examining one closely. “This looks more like plastic.”
“How do you know?” wondered Terry, impressed. “You’re pureblood, right? I didn’t think you took Muggle Studies!”

“I don’t.” Neville shook his head sadly. “It is considered an ‘easy course’: my Gran would never accept it. She does, however, think it important for a wizard to be familiar with the Muggle world, so she’s been sending me to a Muggle Summer Camp three weeks every July since I started Hogwarts.”

“Cool,” commented Potter and Terry was surprise to see envy on his face.

“Not really,” shrugged Neville. “I always feel terribly out of place there. And I would much rather have more time at home with my plants… the greenhouses are suffering from my absence, Gran is too old to look after them properly…” He sighed mournfully. “It is undeniably useful, though. You wouldn’t believe how much I learn every time in just three weeks!”

Malfy snorted, his whole demeanour screaming disdainful incredulity.

Neville fiddled with the gun in his hands, a small smile on his face: “Last year she found one where the theme was electronic stuff – you know, computers, loudspeakers, microphones, printers… they brought us some to try out and even some prototypes. Not that I had ever seen any before, even the standard stuff, which meant most of the guys there thought I was stupid, but it was amazing.”

“I highly doubt that,” sniffed Malfoy in mid-voice.

“The boy I roomed with was very keen, turns out his father sold the stuff and he actually brought a laptop computer, called it Zenith, and all these weird little squared things called floppy disks… he was a bit mean about it, but he also liked to show off, so I got to watch and learn how to use it… and I talked him into showing me everything, even if he mostly seemed interested in that videogame of his… I found that a bit stupid, frankly. Blowing up little green things with small beams of light… whatever. I loved the MatLab software, though. With a tool like that, even I could take Arithmancy…”

“I miss technology a lot, too,” said Hermione. “Not guns, though,” she added as an afterthought.

Malfy scoffed: “That’s ridiculous! Magic is a thousand times better…”

“You will be allowed to express an opinion, Malfoy, when you’ve had enough direct experience to formulate a sensible one!” snapped Longbottom. “None of us is interested in your father’s trite propaganda!”

Terry winced. Longbottom might have forgiven Ryou Bakura, but it seemed the Slytherin wasn’t as lucky yet.

“I wish I could go to a Summer Camp,” said Potter yearningly. “I’ve never even touched a computer…”

Terry observed his barely concealed envy and longing and his mind put it in a whole new perspective, Potter’s comments on the lack of food earlier… his awful clothes – rags, more like, except for the school uniform… his staying at school as much as possible… Terry felt uneasy. He knew that there were unprivileged families in England. His mother donated clothes and old items regularly to the charities that took care of the poor in his neighbourhood. But could Potter come from such a background?… It seemed almost absurd… and yet… the signs were there - lack of food, rags for clothes, not being able to afford Summer Camp…
“Well, plastic or metal, I don’t care, they’re still guns and I refuse to use them!” declared Hermione firmly.

“What?!” yelped Terry rounding on her. “What are you on about?”

She stared fiercely back at him: “I won’t use a gun!” she reiterated.

“But it’s obvious that the next part of this Tournament requires us to use them!” exclaimed Terry.

In the direction they were to take (unless they wanted to go back to the Chessboard room) the corridor was interrupted not very further on by a set of steel double-doors, above which three-dimensional, illuminated channel, red letters read ‘Bubble Shooting’.

“I – don’t – care,” she said clearly.

“They’re just toys, Hermione,” tried Potter half-heartedly.

“It’s the principle of things! Guns are wrong!”

Neville frowned: “Why, though? There are a lot of things you can use to kill or hurt people. Besides, Harry’s right, wands can be employed as instruments of death too, yet we all carry one all the time.”

“In the end, it’s the people who avails themselves of guns who are the problem… guns are just tools,” reiterated Terry. “And these ones in particular are toys, they’re not made to be dangerous!”

“They are tools that make killing too easy. Anything that makes taking a life as simple as pulling a trigger is wrong! And it’s doubly wrong that they make toys out of those things! It’s like encouraging children to become violent!”

“Don’t you think you’re exaggerating, Hermione?” asked Potter wearily.

“No, I’m not! I know that the problem is the people and their choices but guns make the wrong choice too easy. They’re a mistake and I won’t lower myself to use them!” she exclaimed, impassioned.

Terry gestured pointedly to the steel double-door that interrupted the corridor a little. In lieu of a doorknob or handle, it had a digital display that read 0000/1000 in squared, neon-red figures. It didn’t take a genius to guess they needed to score that amount of points for the door to open.

“So you’d rather be trapped here forever?” he mocked.

“YES!” answered Hermione vehemently, even as Potter muttered resignedly: “Of course she would.”

Terry gaped and Potter patted his shoulder sympathetically: “She’s not one to back down on what she truly believes in,” he explained.

“I won’t touch them,” she reiterated, crossing her arms stubbornly.

“For once, Granger, you’re talking as if you were a real witch,” commented Malfoy arrogantly. “I, too, will not touch those muggle contraptions!”

Potter scowled: “She is a real witch, you jerk!” and Hermione rolled her eyes: “I’m not objecting to them because they’re muggle!”
But the blond haughtily ignored them and whipped out his wand, pointing it to the variously
coloured and sized bubble-shaped targets hanging on the walls.

Before anyone could react, he started firing off well-aimed *reductos*.

“Malfoy, NO!”
Three other bubble-targets blew up in quick succession, as the blond ignored their shouts.

“Malfoy, STOP!”

“What are you doing!”

“Stop! You can’t! Malfoy…!”

“EXPELLIARMUS!” bellowed Potter, taking matters into his own hands.

Malfoy shrieked: “Potter! How dare you!”


“I’m clearing this ridiculous, low-class task before we’re forced to sully ourselves with…”

“Do you want us to be trapped here forever? Is that what you want?”

“Don’t be an idiot Potter! Of course I don’t!”

“I know you have a brain in that little head of yours, contrary to all appearances, so why on earth don’t you use it from time to time?…”

“Watch your mouth Potter! I’m not in the mood to bear your petty insults!”

“Look! You bloody jerk, look!” Potter grabbed the blond by and arm and yanked him around over his loudly screeched protests. “LOOK!” he repeated, pointing to the steel doors.

“What?” spat Malfoy, barely sparing them a glance. “And let me go, you oaf, haw dare you touch me…”

“Are you blind?” growled Potter getting in Malfoy’s face.

The other took a step back, alarmed, and was jerked back by the grip Potter hadn’t relinquished on his arm.

“What does the display say?” asked Potter through clenched teeth.

Judging by Malfoy’s expression, he might as well have spoken Aramaic; Terry and the others however swivelled to look at the digital display and understood immediately.

It still read 0000/1000.

“Damn!” exclaimed Neville. “Blowing the targets up doesn’t give any points!”

“Oh, great going, Malfoy!” spat Terry annoyed.

“What are you talking about?” sneered the blond, looking offended.

Potter hissed: “He is talking about the fact that you were trying to destroy our chances of going on!”
“I was not!” cried the other, aggravated. “It’s clear we must hit those bubbles – I’m merely doing it the proper, wizarding way instead of submitting to use these… these muggle…” He waved, an expression of distaste on his face: it seemed words were failing him in his disgust.

Potter snarled wordlessly, abruptly releasing him and throwing his arms in the air in exasperation.

“You prejudiced idiot!” groused Terry. “And now we have less possibilities to make points! Way to go, really!”

“You’re not making any sense!” cried Malfoy, incensed.

“Am too…” started to retort Terry, thoroughly vexed.

“It’s just not worth it, Boot,” said Potter disgustedly. “Come on, let’s make the most of what we’ve left.”

Fortunately they’d stopped the Slytherin with still plenty of colourful bubbles around them.

Terry, Neville and Potter all gripped one toy gun firmly and looked at each other, taking deep breaths to calm down and focus.

“How do you think this works, exactly?” asked Neville.

Potter shrugged and pointed his cheery yellow gun to a random, blue bubble. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

He squeezed the trigger and a lemon yellow beam shot towards it, hitting it squarely. A yellow bubble popped into existence and quivered, glued to the blue one.

Potter lowered his gun, bewildered. “Ah… perhaps not, then?”

“Oh!” exclaimed Terry, looking at his own, red toy gun. “I think I’ve got it!” he exclaimed and aimed at a red bubble.

The aim was a little off, but when his red beam grazed it, the bubble exploded with a soft pop and a trill was heard from the doors. The display was blinking to 0010/1000.

Potter and he looked at each other and grinned.

“Alright!” exclaimed Potter cheerfully. “Let’s shoot some bubbles!”

And they did just that.

Soon coloured beams were streaking through the room and crossing each other and the three of them were laughing and yelling in triumph or dismay, caught up in the game.

Whenever they missed and hit the wrong colour, newly created bubbles were left sticking to the pre-existing ones, making everything more complicated. Worse still, when Terry cleverly decided to pop the original bubble, hoping it would take out all the ones glued to it too, they instead fell to the floor, where they bounced and leapt and rebounded every which way, adding to the general confusion – but also, they had to admit, to the fun.

Terry was chagrined to realize he was responsible for the most misses – so much so that Neville mock-yelled at him: “The green ones are mine, Boot! Stick to your own reds!”

Potter on the other hand had an excellent aim (probably all that practice with hexes and curses) and
the number of yellow bubbles quickly dwindled to zero, at which point he switched to the purple gun, so that he could continue.

When the score touched 0500/1000, all the bubbles still on the walls started suddenly moving, back and forth along the wall and up and down as well, catching them off guards and exponentially increasing the chances of them hitting each other instead of the targets… fortunately, nothing untoward happened if they did, except that yet another bubble would start bouncing crazily around.

Every 100 points after that the moving bubbles doubled in speed, until the last ones were zooming all around them like rainbow-coloured streaks. As a consequence, they were forced to jump around and run all over trying to chase them down and they made it an impromptu contest of just who could come up with the most creative insult for the devilish devices that were continuously eluding them.

They shouted and laughed and cheered Neville on when he doggedly pursued a smaller green bubble that kept eluding him and boasted about their hits or bemoaned their misses and generally endeavoured to make as much confusion as the bubbles themselves, despite being only three.

When at last a triumphantly grinning Potter, who’d switched gun again, made the last blue bubble pop with a victorious yell, the three of them were panting and laughing like loons and not even Hermione’s severely pursed lips could dampen their fun.

The double doors slid open with barely a sound and they saw the corridor continuing forth, identical, until another set of double-doors. This time the lettering was green instead of red and it said ‘Scarab Hoarding’.

With a sigh, Terry put his gun down. That had been fun!
Chapter 30

Terry and Potter, side by side, were the first to cross the double-doors, now wide open.

Before they took two steps, something small and golden flickered in mid-air before them, flying in rapid, random patterns with a soft buzz. Terry barely had time to blink and already Potter had snatched it out of the air with startling swiftness.

“Is that a Snitch?” asked Malfoy, surprised.

Potter held up the thing he’d been examining closely so that everybody could see it.

“If Snitches can be made from Golden Beetles rather than Golden Snidgets… then yes,” he said, amused.

It was, indeed, a golden, somewhat round thing the size of a Snitch, but with markings that evoked the head, mandibles, antennae and wing cases of a beetle.

“That’s a Scarab!” exclaimed Hermione, who seemed to be getting over her indignation about toy guns, but was still scowling a bit. “They’re a kind of amulet – they were very popular in Ancient Egypt.”

“They’re still popular, they help with focusing for very detailed Transfigurations,” clarified Malfoy.

“Think I can have that for my Transfiguration O.W.L.?!” joked Neville.

Another soft buzz flittered around them, the stark, neon lights of the corridor glinting off its golden hue.

Both Malfoy and Potter reacted almost automatically, Seeker instincts coming to the fore, and their hands shot out towards the ‘Scarab-Snitch’.

Malfoy was closer though and his fingers closed around the metallic insect, while Potter wrapped his around the Slytherin’s.

Malfoy shot his rival a look of gleeful smugness.

Potter’s eyes narrowed in response.

Terry fought the urge to step away from between the two.

And then another buzzing glint caught their eyes from the left side of the room, and two more near the opposite wall, and Neville, who’d gone to examine the new set of doors, called out: “I think they need to go in here!”

He showed them a circular rim holding what looked like a cross between a basket or a butterfly net and a cloth tube, flexibly connected to the score display.

“Throw those Scarab thingies here, I bet they’ll give us the points to go on!” said Neville.

Potter and Malfoy let their golden prizes fall in simultaneously and the display tingled to 0010/1000.
“Wonderful,” sighed Hermione. “We have to catch 198 more of the things!”

“It shouldn’t be a problem, Hermione, Harry’s the best Seeker in Hogwarts!” exclaimed Neville happily, then added as an afterthought: “And Malfoy’s a Seeker too, come to think of it. You’ll see, it won’t take long.”

Terry glanced to the blond out of the corner of his eyes and was not at all surprised to see him look as if he’d just swallowed a sour lemon, peel and all.

Potter taunted him farther: “Think you’re up to it, Malfoy?” he asked in mid-voice. “Or do you prefer to leave the job to a real Seeker?”

Ouch. Terry took a nervous step back. The look the Slytherin was shooting Potter was scorching enough to set ice on fire.

He couldn’t understand why Potter just grinned, a delighted spark in his eyes.

He couldn’t understand how Madam Hooch ever managed not to run away screaming whenever those two faced off on the pitch, either, come to think of it.

But Malfoy’s face was stretching into a lazy, studied smile. For an instant, Terry expected a scathing comeback, but instead, the blond turned a fraction and his hand shot out again, closing around another Scarab.

Ostentatiously, he brought it to the rim and let it drop with smug nonchalance: “Two to one, Potter. What were you saying, about leaving the task to a real Seeker?” he asked sweetly. “Well… if you insist…”

The green eyes narrowed again. The challenge was on!

While they were distracted, a lot more golden Scarabs had appeared, zig-zagging here and there, and more still kept coming, seemingly out of the very walls, as Potter and Malfoy strove to grasp them.

Hermione had quickly transfigured something into a bag where Potter could stuff his catches, only dropping them into the waiting tube once in a while instead of running back and forth with every single one.

Feeling that it was vaguely unfair, Terry had done the same for Malfoy, using his trusted school tie (and wondering into how many more things it would be turned before the end of the Tournament, and whether they would be innocuous like this satchel or more like the earlier blade).

The Slytherin looked at him with such stunned amazement he felt himself go red, but then snatched the bag and ran into the game.

Neville was keeping count, quickly doing the math to sort out who was bringing how many Scarabs to the doors and shouting it out, while Hermione and Terry cheered them on. The two rivals seemed rather evenly matched, with Potter always only slightly in the lead.

To Terry’s surprise, despite the obvious effort they were having to make – especially when the golden things started flying higher above their head, forcing the two to jump unseemly and wave their arms wildly to grab them – they didn’t stop sniping at each other even for one second.

He was even more surprised to realize that he could only follow about half of the taunts and gibes they were trading and that there was a lot more hinted at and implied than outright stated.
Could you have ‘inside insults’, the way you had ‘inside jokes’?

Suddenly, the Scarabs doubled in speed and number of sharp, random turns. Sparing a glance to the display, Terry saw that yes, they’d broken the 500 points barrier and the game was turning harder.

The two Seekers were utterly focused on the quick, jerky movements of their targets, blocking out everything else, eyes wide to catch any change of direction that might favor them.

As the speed of the Scarabs increased even more, their running and jumping became more hectic until Terry felt dizzy and tired on their behalf. He was sure that if it had been him, his arms would have dropped off from fatigue already!

Then the 1000 points needed were reached: a bell sounded, the Scarabs alit on the walls and all movement stopped.

Malfoy and Potter stood wheezing and panting, the Gryffindor with a huge grin, the Slytherin fighting off a similar one.

“And the final count is…” hollered Neville: “Malfoy: 96; Harry: 101!”

“Ha!” crowed Potter jumping and launching in a victory dance.

Malfoy scowled, but still there was a light in his eyes that said he’d been having great fun. And he was practically polite when he reversed the transfiguration and gave Terry his tie back!
Chapter 31

Hermione, who’d moved ahead to spy what was awaiting them, moaned. “I hate this Corridor!” she muttered vehemently.

Terry peered through, over her bushy head of brown hair.

The trait of passageway before the next set of doors was considerably longer this time. And considerably… fuller, too: in fact, there was so much cramped in there that Terry felt positively amazed.

A whole lot of tracks and obstacles had apparently been knocked together in a jumble of confusing pathways. Some were suspended in mid-air, flying bridges or perilously dangling catwalks or even simple ropes hanging from tall poles at different heights, here and there interrupted by platforms of various sizes scattered randomly over the area, with trapdoors, parapets and connecting ladders. Others were on the ground, so to speak, but cluttered by so many boulders and steep climbs, stacked stones and toppled over trunks that the terrain looked impassable. Yet more paths were going over ponds filled with various algae and water flowers or what looked like patches of marshes. All of the paths crisscrossed each other in an inextricable tangle.

“An obstacle course!” cried Potter cheerfully.

“Oh, joy,” deadpanned Neville. Then he sighed: “At least there aren’t any hinkypunks this time. I hope,” he added with a bit of dread.

Terry grimaced, reminded of their third year’s Defence exam. That had been the first – and last! – time he’d scored barely acceptably on an end-of-term exam. Damn grindylows!

“And how are we supposed to pass this… course, do you think?” asked Malfoy.

They looked at each other and shrugged.

“The usual way, I suppose,” muttered Neville. “You know… walking? And crawling… and jumping… and creeping on our bellies and leaping over stuff and trying not to plunge to our deaths and so on?”

“No bleeding way!” blurted out Malfoy. “I’ve had enough of mud and sweat and generally looking as if I’d endured an Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures period together!”

Terry and Neville tried in vain to stifle their chuckles.

“Then you could go the aerial way. You know, climb,” said Hermione, though she didn’t look happy at the prospect.

Malfoy scowled: “If we were meant to climb like monkeys, Grangers, we’d have prehensile tails,” he said cattily.

Potter promptly interjected: “Well, if that’s what you want, Malfoy…”

Quick as lightning, he pointed his wand at the blond. There was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, and the next second, Malfoy was sporting a long, light colored tail.

Everybody burst out laughing while the Slytherin screeched furiously: “Potter! I’m going to
The idiot Gryffindor dove to take cover behind a nearby boulder, but he was laughing so much that it didn’t take long before Malfoy managed to drive him out; Potter was fast and agile, though, and apparently used to evade pursuers: he bolted from one hiding place to the next, guffawing all the time, the blond Slytherin giving chase and screaming insults.

Until Potter lost his footing on a slippery stone by the nearest pond and plunged into the water with a dismayed cry and a splash of impressive magnitude. Terry and Neville had to hold themselves up, they were laughing so hard.

Malfoy looked appeased and with a haughty sniff, turned his attention to reversing the trasfiguration he was victim of.

Potter came out choking and spitting water. He looked like a half-drowned cat, but he was triumphantly holding up… a bunch of algae.

“Look what I got!” he shouted with glee.

Terry and the others stared at him incredulously, their chuckles still tapering off even as they tried to stifle a new burst.

The green-eyed boy blinked, realized what was dangling from his fist and scowled: “Oops…” He hurriedly stuffed the algae out of sight, setting their laughter off again, then sniffed at their mirth and dove underwater once more.

A moment later, he was coming up, this time with a blue coin roughly twice the size of a Galleon clasped in his hand. A glittering ‘30’ was painted on it in silver.

“Fine, go ahead and laugh!” he mock-pouted. “And here I’ve figured this game out, at great cost to my personal safety… or at least my ‘dryness’… ungrateful, the lot of you!…”

They laughed even more. But Potter was right: now that they knew what to look for, it wasn’t too hard to spot several twirling coins like the one he’d fished out of the water along the various paths, most often in hard to reach positions.

“I think that’s what we need to collect to open the door!” exclaimed Potter excitedly.

“They’re in absolutely absurd places!” screeched Hermione, dismayed. “How are we supposed to collect them?”

Neville answered mock-pompously: “By relying on our agility and daring to brave the extreme challenges set out before us! Onwards, my friends!” Then he bowed to Potter: “After you, if you don’t mind!”

They laughed companionably again, and set forth.
Once again, Terry found himself cursing the bad shape his body was in and solemnly promising to himself that he would exercise more!

He was trudging through the most intricate and convoluted obstacle course he’d ever seen outside of cartoons and he was not enjoying it. At all.

The closer Terry had ever been to something like this were fitness trails and that really didn’t compare. For one, there wasn’t even half this many obstructions and barriers and impediments of various nature, in those trails. Hindrances and blockages were mostly for show, not impossible to pass like here!

He idly wondered who was it that had designed it. Possibly a sadistic drill sergeant looking for a way to torture his poor vict- err… trainees. He wondered if magic could help him find a way to make Georges Hébert regret inventing the classic obstacle course method for military training…

He’d first tried ‘going the aerial way’ – to put it in Hermione’s words – because, well, Malfoy was right, the ground was either muddy or watery and he didn’t particularly fancy ending up filthy and sopping wet; and then because… to be honest… it looked positively awesome!

In his mind’s eye he envisioned himself powerfully leaping from the top of a brick wall only to grab a pole and swing himself around it, gracefully transforming his momentum to fly over a boulder and grasp a handhold on the rock wall he would then swiftly climb…

Sadly, it turned out to not be as easy as Jackie Chan made it look in movies. He estimated that he’d waded with effort and difficulty through about one third of the trail, nearly plummeting to his death twice, he might add, and scraping his forearms badly, not to mention bruising his legs and ribs all over, before he found himself in an untenable position – namely, dangling like a sack of potatoes from the edge of a wooden platform he was simply unable to haul himself up on – and had to give up.

Moving carefully he clambered on a thankfully near trunk until he managed to reach a coarse climbing rope fastened to a pile of rocks and grasping it tightly, he started sliding down it, wincing at the rope burns he was giving himself.

Did the stupid cord have to be so rough? Okay, intellectually he understood it was a matter of abrasion resistance and the rope’s durability and safety depended precisely on that, but right now, he wasn’t feeling reasonable enough to concede the point.

He let himself drop to the ground, twisting his ankle painfully – luckily he’d learned a spell to ease sprained ankles and it worked beautifully, though it took a few minutes for the pain to fade and his swollen ankle to return to normal.

In the meanwhile, he watched the others fight their way through the various obstacles.

Malfoy somehow contrived to look as elegant and as poised as ever, despite being obviously in difficulty. It was probably the way he moved skilfully from rope to beam, his balance as perfect as a cat’s. Terry noticed, however, that he was progressing very slowly, mainly because he seemed to be evaluating every single step six times before daring to make it. Clearly, he lacked the skill for acrobatic gymnastics and wasn’t about to risk his neck. Or his clothes, judging by how fastidiously he was avoiding anything that might stain or tear them.
Hermione had the look of someone who’s been given a horrible but unavoidable task and is determined to see it through as quickly as possible and well enough that nobody might get the idea of asking her to start over. She had even managed to collect two blue coins and Terry nearly smacked himself, because he’d quite forgotten they were supposed to.

Neville was patiently trudging through the cloying mud of a swamp-like area and didn’t seem particularly worried about getting dirty. He was also methodically picking up all coins that weren’t too far or too difficult to reach, while carefully avoiding anything that might be even remotely dangerous. Terry had to admit it was a smart way to go about things, all in all, especially combined with Neville’s stubborn patience.

But it was Potter who caught Terry’s eyes – and held them.

The Gryffindor moved around obstacles with a speed and efficiency that was beautiful to watch – the way power of any kind is. He was vaulting, rolling, running, climbing and jumping, looking for all the world as if he wasn’t even straining himself. Terry could see however the way he exerted his muscles to the point they were noticeably defined and the sweat running down his exposed skin. He was going after the hardest coins and tearing through the peculiar environment as if he was born in this confusing jungle of tracks.

Terry’s mind brought up the memory of a DA session in which Potter had talked about what Lovegood had jokingly – or maybe not so jokingly, you never really knew with that girl – declared ‘The Fine Art of Running Away’…
…It had been just two weeks before Christmas and the Weasley Menaces had decided to ‘liven things up a bit’, by way of casting underhanded Stinging Hexes on unsuspecting fellow students.

They should have known better than to target Katie Bell of Gryffindor, who apparently had learned how to deal with the two unstoppable red-heads and rounded on them looking remarkably like a fire-breathing dragon. Her screeched threats of dire retaliation had promptly pushed the two to take off at a run in the face of her wrath, but since they were limited by the Room of Requirement’s current size and layout, what had ensued had been a comical hunt-and-flight sort of game.

When one of the Twins had stumbled upon one of the desks they used to practice the Reducto curse and hurtled down on the floor, giving the Gryffindor Chaser a chance to pounce on him and make him collapse helplessly with a strong Perpetual Tickling charm, Potter had stepped in and taken it as his cue to lecture them on how to escape pursuers.

There had been some protests – people muttering that to run away was cowardly – Terry himself had thought something along those lines – sure he was all for running away if in danger, but it felt vaguely offensive that Harry Potter, Golden Hero of the House of Braves, would suggest it!

Potter had quelled them with a look that made them feel stupid: “If you’re planning to duel a fully trained Dark Wizard out to kill you, you’re either suicidal or simply stupid. What we’re learning here is to be used in full-out battle only as a last resort – because it would probably be the last thing we’d do!”

“You did…!” protested someone.

“I had no choice!” Potter had shouted and then he’d repeated in a broken whisper: “I had no choice…”

He’d swept the room with his glare: “When you’re faced with stronger, faster, more powerful, more skilled, better opponents, running away is not cowardly – it’s sensible!”

There had been a lot of shuffling and indistinct muttering. What Potter was saying sounded so utterly logical, and yet – well, it felt – Terry didn’t know – disloyal somehow.

“We’re all here in the D.A.,” had said Neville quietly. “Isn’t it all supposed to be about fighting You-Know-Who and his followers? You can’t tell us that the first chance we’ll have to do something real we’ll have to hightail it - or is this all just a game or something?”

Terry had felt relieved that someone seemed able to put his misgivings into words.

Potter had regarded them all coldly and answered with more calm and precision than Terry had expected from him: “You’re misunderstanding me. What I’m saying isn’t that we shouldn’t fight if the chance arises, or if the reason is important enough. I’m saying that we must never forget our priorities.”

His jaw had firmed at their perplexed stares. “One, we’re to stay alive. Two, we’re to keep our friends and families alive!” Potter had looked almost angry as he barked this out. “If Cedric and I had fled…” His voice had broken again.

Then he’d visibly steeled himself and elaborated: “We’re no use to anyone dead. That means that if the odds are against us – and right now they are, no matter how much you feel you’ve learned –
fleeing to fight the next battle is the best option unless the gain is so great it justifies our probable death. And I mean the ‘stopping Voldemort’ - he’d ignored the numerous flinches – “from getting his hands on the means for immortality’ kind of great gain. If you throw away your life in a minor skirmish for the only reason that you don’t want to look like cowards, who will be there to fight when it truly counts? When the time will come when every single wand will make the difference? Who will protect what’s truly important? Help when the need is greater?’"

He’d turned to look straight at Neville: “Some of us have a lot of reason to want to hurt Voldemort” – again he’d ignored the cringes - “and his Death Eaters. Most of us will probably get their chance, and sooner rather than later. But as for what the D.A. is all about… revenge, yes, defiance against the Ministry of Morons, sure… don’t think I don’t feel the same…” He’d taken a steadying breath. “…but mainly the D.A. is supposed to get us ready to protect ourselves and our families. That’s the most important thing of all. Death – yours, mine – is okay only if it ensures the ones you love are safe. No matter how heroically you think you’re acting, if you die and abandon them to pain and death, that’s not brave: it’s meaningless.”

He’d bowed his head and missed the faint reddening of more than one pair of cheeks at his rebuke.

Terry had never felt more uncomfortable – as if suddenly all the – well, the fun – they were having in the D.A. had been cast into a grey and bleak scenario where it was taking on a different form entirely – a much scarier and more sombre shape…

A feeble protest had come from Thomas and Brown of Gryffindor: “But you do all those cool things…!”

“It’s only cool when someone’s telling the tale afterwards,” had retorted Potter acidly. Then he’d straightened and gone on in a matter-of-fact tone: “There is a reason why the instinctual response to an opponent is called ‘fight or flight’. And after what I saw today, I really think we should start training for the flight response, as well as the fight!”

“What do you mean?” had asked Padma frowning. “If you run away, you run away, and that’s that!”

“Oh, is it?” had asked Potter. “And here I thought the point was to actually get away.”

They’d stared at him uncomprehendingly.

“Learning to run away means learning not to run into or stumble over obstacles and the like. To find quickly the most direct path through an area, and find hiding spots, and be able to change direction at a moment’s notice if something – or someone – pops up… basically, it’s about training to identify and utilize paths – regular first, then alternate, more efficient ones. And sharpen your reflexes, let’s not forget that.”

Many had been nodding by this point, including the Weasley Twins, who’d offered several examples from their own experience escaping Filch.

Hermione had started off on one of her sagely-worded rants about developing the necessary level of spatial awareness and understanding how an obstacle is like a challenge and the ability to overcome the challenge depends on multiple factors, for example, on body type, speed, angle of approach, the physical make-up of the obstacle.

Potter had interrupted her fairly soon: “The point is that everything around you – walls, trash cans, stuff lying around or hanging – they’re hindrances that can slow you down and get in the way, but if you know how to take them on, they’re advantages.”
“How?” had asked Padma’s twin – Terry thought her name was Parvati - rather dubiously.

Potter had thought a moment, searching for the right words: “What makes an obstacle useful rather than a nuisance is that if you can pass it, and your pursuers cannot, you have a huge advantage. Which is likely to be the case, since Death Eaters are hindered by their bulky robes and unlike us, they probably won’t be so smart as to shed them if needed.”

“And if we don’t want to lose our clothes?” had asked Marietta Edgecombe, making Terry roll his eyes at her idiocy. He’d never liked the older Raven.

“You have to recognize the difference between what is useful and what is not in emergency situations! If you value your clothes more than your life and freedom…” Potter hadn’t needed to complete the sentence. The silly girl had blushed and mumbled some sort of apology.

And so their training in The Fine Art of Running Away had started…
…They’d cleared an area and scattered it with transfigured steps of various height and then they’d set to leap over them all as quickly as possible.

Again and again and again, one after the other in a path around the room.

There had been a lot of muttered grumbling – Terry had been on the verge of becoming quite vocal – because it had been rather boring, not to mention tiring.

The Weasley Twins had tried to liven things up by hopping over the steps with some weird acrobatic jumps with twists that ended up looking like an uncoordinated attempt at a shamble.

Potter had scolded them, annoyed: “Stop trying to show off, you’re only going to twist an ankle like that. It’s not about moving in a flashy way, it’s about gaining the most ground – the way you must do when you are running away for real, or chasing something too – but in such a way as to stay safe at all times!”

“It’s a matter of efficiency. Economy of movements, right? Otherwise you’ll be out of breath too soon,” had interjected Hermione.

“Not only that,” had replied Potter shaking his head. “Trust me, if the alternative is certain death, you’ll find your breath. Maybe collapse for a week afterwards, but in the meanwhile you’ll keep running, adrenaline or panic or whatever will keep you going. The problem is that if you’re trying to escape, you can’t afford to get injured. Because if you get hurt, your running is at an end and the bad guy catches you. And that is Very Bad.”

They’d all laughed nervously, but Potter hadn’t looked like he found it funny at all.

“So you see, it isn’t a matter of ‘cool moves’ and acrobatics,” he’d repeated again and again. “The key point of Defence is not to be the coolest bloke around, because if you die, no matter how cool you looked doing it, you’re still dead.”

It had been a rather depressing way to keep them focused, thought Terry. And the repetition of unfamiliar movements had been hell on his muscles. He really preferred the standard spell practice!

He wasn’t the only one, either. When Potter had tried to switch them to practising falling down and had attempted to explain how you can limit the damage you take after a drop if you roll properly and even use the momentum of the fall to give you a push onward, many of the girls had started screeching about ‘the idiocy of falling down and getting covered in bruises intentionally’. And Terry had to admit that he’d been thinking along the same line. Deliberately dropping on the hard floor to bruise some new body part, only to get up and do it again, did not sound like fun.

There had been enough mutinous rumblings that Potter had given up and gone back to Shields the next meeting.

Now Terry wished he hadn’t.

He watched the Gryffindor walk along the crest of an obstacle like on a balance beam, then swing through a gap between two obstacles and finally land, bending the knees when his toes made contact with the ground.
Compared to his own lumbering motions, it made such a stark contrast that he truly regretted scoffing at that sort of ‘training’.

He shook his head. Potter was often an oblivious moron, despite his leadership skills and charisma, but there were times when he made everybody else feel like clumsy little fools.

Terry still wondered where he’d learned all that, even if he’d overheard some sort of answer from Ron Weasley’s joking comment: “Don’t look so glum, mate, it was a good idea to teach us this stuff. It’s… what was it Hermione said?… ‘critical thinking skills that allow one to overcome everyday physical and mental obstacles’. Cool stuff, even if it doesn’t look like it. Learned from experience, was it?”

“Yeah…” had answered Potter faintly. “I suppose I should almost be grateful to for the Harry Hunting game… lot of practice and all that…”

“Suuure,” had smirked Weasley, “I recommend a thank you gift for the bastards. A box of the Twins’ sweets, ya think?”

Terry had been rather confused. He could easily guess they were talking of Death Eaters pursuing Potter, given the boy’s story it was a straightforward deduction, but was Weasley really suggesting pranking insane dark wizards?

It didn’t really matter, but Terry’s mind found it hard to cope with incongruity. Maybe he’d ask Potter if he got the chance.

He observed some more as the dark-haired boy used an almost instinctual fast redistribution of his body weight to perform body manoeuvres Terry would have judged difficult if not outright impossible and used his momentum to keep going at great speed with little apparent effort.

Ravenclaw to the core, he’d devoured his muggle cousins’ books on physics during the holidays, just because, and now he could easily recognize the principle of absorption and redistribution of energy as the factor that allowed Potter to jump from greater heights than should be considered sensible and reduce impact forces on the legs and spine when landing in a roll.

Too bad understanding the principle would never translate in automatically being able to perform the same feats!

The Gryffindor was watching with narrowed, contemplative eyes a sparkling blue coin atop a tall structure. He carefully estimated the distances involved before starting off at a run, until he was close enough to step off the wall, transforming forward momentum into upward momentum, then using the arms to climb onto and over the object.

When he’d secured the coin, he ran his gaze around, evaluating the best next move, and finally leaped off, landing on the side of a nearby platform in a sort of hanging position, the hands gripping the top edge, holding the body ready until he managed to muscle-up into a position where his upper body was above the obstacle, supported by the arms.

Terry shook his head in admiration and envy and returned his attention to his own path.
Chapter 35

Tired, bruised and on the verge of being seriously annoyed, Terry eventually balanced carefully over the last overturned beam, laid like a bridge of sorts over a small pond, and let out a relieved breath when he stepped off it and onto the firm floor before the set of double doors.

Thank Merlin he was out of the damn area!

Hermione was already resting nearby and she offered him a weak grin which he made an effort to return.

He let the meagre three coins he’d managed to collect – forty points in all, shameful – drop into the waiting box and couldn’t bring himself to smile at the points tingling to 0070/1000.

He let himself drop on the floor next to the Gryffindor girl and sprawled, unspeakably grateful to Potter for insisting they bring hip flasks with them. He couldn’t remember ever being so thirsty before in his life!

It was some long moments before he’d recovered enough breath to sit up. Hermione had closed her eyes next to him, quietly resting.

He watched Potter vault over the last boulder and easily balance on the last overturned trunk, jumping down right before them. He was grinning hugely: “Well, that was fun!”

Yeah, right.

Potter dumped his coins in the door’s collector and a seemingly everlasting tinning jingle resounded, to mark the unbelievable amount of points cascading into the lock. Terry’s eyes nearly bulged out when he saw a 200-points coin. He almost didn’t want to know how hard it must have been to get it. In the end, they only needed 60 more points!

Potter gulped down his water and then flopped down on the floor, smiling at Hermione who was picking herself up.

Glancing back to the tracks, Terry spotted Malfoy blocked at a crossroads of sorts. He was peering cautiously at his options, reminding Terry of a skittish cat faced with the necessity of treading water. That was going to take a while.

He turned to Potter, frowning thoughtfully. Maybe this was the chance to ask about Death Eaters hunting him and the weird idea of pranking them with sweets.

He didn’t manage to say more than “Hey, Potter…” however, because Neville chose exactly that moment to trudge up to them, dripping mud all over the place. He looked like the proverbial Swamp Monster.

“…Hermione?” he asked with a cute little whine. “You wouldn’t know a cleaning spell, by chance?”

He tried his hardest to look as pathetic as a lost puppy and she rolled her eyes, fighting a smile even as she jumped to her feet to help him.

By the time the commotion was over Malfoy had managed to get over his indecision and had almost caught up with them. He looked as pristine as when he’d set off, though a lot more irritated.
He shot them a dark look, however, when they asked him about his coins: apparently he hadn’t bothered collecting any. Selfish git…

Luckily Neville had picked up quite a number of 5- and 10-points coins and his contribution quickly got the lock counter up to 0995/1000. Then Potter turned over his pockets and frisked and rummaged until he finally produced one more 10-points coin.

The lock trilled to 1000/1000 and froze; with barely a sound, the double doors slid open. Peering in a little wearily, unsure what more to expect from this tiring Corridor, they stopped short in front of a perplexing view.

The portion of Corridor before the next set of doors was square and not very big and the floor only consisted in a footbridge running around along the walls. The centre was occupied by a big… pool?

A pool full of variously coloured balls! Amber yellow, bright cerulean, bottle green, electric indigo, magenta – and that was about as far as Terry could go with his memory of his Aunt Frances’ watercolour box.

“What are we supposed to do?” asked Neville a bit perplexed. “There doesn’t seem to be a logical way to collect points here.”

“No…” replied Hermione a little absently. “I don’t think… Harry, can you see the lock clearly? It doesn’t have a score display, does it?”

Terry kept his eyes peeled on the double-doors opposite them, like Potter was doing, and had to agree. The lock was a simple, empty tray with a round impression, just the size of the balls in the pool, Terry guessed. He almost groaned at the growing suspicion his mind was providing him with.

Then Potter put into words: “Looks like we must find the right ball to put there,” he sighed.

“We might as well be looking for a needle in a haystack!” griped Malfoy.

“Well, at least we know how to go about this,” exclaimed Hermione determinedly and ran lightly along the footbridge until she reached the door, bending to examine the tray closely. She called back: “It’s all made of brass!”

Potter kneeled on the edge of the pool and stuck his hand down into the balls, rummaging aimlessly: “These feel like plastic!” he yelled at her.

Terry heard a perplexed muttering from his right side: apparently Malfoy didn’t know what ‘plastic’ could possibly be. Stifling a smile at the pureblood’s ignorance, he watched Granger run lightly back: “So we’re looking for a brass one? All agreed?”

“I think so,” nodded Potter.

Terry shrugged, it was as good a guess as any, and Neville and Malfoy didn’t object.

She sighed and said petulantly: “Good. But this task is still a pain!” She wrinkled her nose at the pond. “Should we try and levitate the balls out?” she asked.

“Oh!” said Potter so innocently that Terry took a wary step back. “Actually I thought of a funnier way…”

Hermione frowned, turning at him: “Funnier…? Harry, what are you up to now?”
Instead of answering, the Gryffindor pounced on her with a mischievous grin and in a moment had lifted her in his arms and thrown her right into the thick of coloured balls. She shrieked through the air and plunged, scattering small balls every which way; she re-emerged sputtering and glaring at her laughing friend.

To Terry’s surprise, instead of exploding in a furious rant, she just bellowed dramatically: “You’ll pay for that, Potter!” and in the blink of an eye, pelted the grinning boy with a barrage of well-aimed ball-projectiles. Well, mostly well-aimed. Quite a few bounced off Neville and Terry too, eliciting indignant yelps.

Potter was laughing too hard to retaliate properly, but Terry was prompt to bend and scoop up some balls to throw back. They were extremely light and, indeed, made of the plastic usually chosen for toys.

His aim wasn’t as good as Hermione’s, but it was enough for her to laughingly call for help from Neville and before he knew it, Terry found himself pushed straight into the pool of balls by the taller Gryffindor.

Shrugging balls off his shoulders, he mock-glared at the smirking boy towering from the footbridge. “This means war!” he bellowed, doing his best not to laugh and let go another handful of balls towards Neville, only to have to dodge Hermione’s fire – which wasn’t easy at all, since he was standing on ever-moving balls and kept stumbling and plunging in the ever-shifting filling of the pool.

It didn’t matter though: the others weren’t faring any better and when Potter and Neville fell into the pool as well, the all-out battle became a confusion of laughter and shrieks and stumbles and falls and throws.

Until Potter choked in the middle of an inspired ‘Evil Lord of the Plastic Balls’ rant and stared in shock at the round metallic object in his hand: “Ooops… I think I’ve found it!” he cried waving it so they would see it.

“Aww…” they chorused grinning, not particularly happy that the fun was over.

Their chuckles almost covered Malfoy’s disgusted: “Thank Morgana!”

Terry sniffed at the spoilsport and fired off a last ball at Neville’s head, making the other boy chuckle as he dodged and stumbled yet again. Grinning hugely, they hauled themselves up in front of the door.
The five of them stood rooted on the doorstep, awed by the suggestive sight offered by the vast room the Corridor had led them to.

The floor was a smooth expanse of water, spread like a glass pane in all directions, which mirrored the surroundings with the barest of flickers.

On it, a vast granite slab, long and rectangular, floated as if by magic, its foundations hidden so perfectly by the water that it looked for all appearances suspended on the lake like a still raft.

There was a graceful pier that connected the even quay where they stood to the closest edge of the apparently floating platform, seamlessly morphing into a long processional way once on the slab. It lead to a stone-built enclosure wall, on the way passing through three tall, insulated gateways, well-spaced – Terry estimated that there might be twenty paces between the first and second gateway – and beautiful in the perfect symmetry of their stone pylons and the delicacy of their projecting cornices.

All was peaceful, not even the slightest breeze stirring the calm harmony of the site.

Terry felt like sitting cross-legged by the water and just let time roll by: the gracefulness of the aesthetical building reflected in the water invited contemplation and meditation and made him feel as if the place was suspended out of time. It was the most evocative location he had ever seen.

They stepped on the pier quietly and instinctively walked in a line, almost feeling as if they should mimic the processions they had no doubt the place had been imagined for.

They approached the gateways slowly, awed by the high, precise architecture; one after the other, they passed under the tall granite gateways, almost reverentially, taking in the perfectly cut stones and glancing at the beautifully unsettling effect of the reflection on the water surface, as smooth as oil and as clear as a mirror.

The walls seemed to be quite bare: there was none of the bas-reliefs, frescos or hieroglyphics Terry would have expected. There were also no sculptures of any kind. Everything was well-defined, minimalist, essential: the few colours, the suffuse lightning that reduced shadows to a minimum, the vast space with barely any items, be they decorations or furniture, all seemed designed to achieve efficiency and simplicity.

In front of the enclosure wall that Terry guessed hid the temple proper, there were four isolated columns, just as neat and smooth as the rest of the architecture around them.

Among the columns was set up a working desk: a good-sized glass top articulated in an L shape, a comfortable-looking swivelling chair, a polished metal filing cabinet and a chest of drawers for storage that appeared to fit under the desk top as if they were made for just that purpose.

Everything on it was flawlessly organized and even at a glance, Terry could see it was all state-of-the-art, top-line equipment, down to the pencils in a minimalist pen holder.

Above the desk Terry recognized a huge monitor and an assortment of perfectly arranged electronic devices he could not truly identify, but were apparently plugged in the amazing-looking laptop holding pride of place over the entire station, including what looked like a round movie-projector steadily blinking a red laser light in a slow spinning pattern.
On the whole it looked extremely efficient, extremely modern and most of all, extremely out of place in the frame of huge granite architecture; though perhaps not as much as the man sitting behind it, expertly typing on the keyboard…
Chapter 37

The incongruous apparition was a handsome man with an unfriendly air. He had brown smooth hair that fell over his forehead and eyes, obscuring his expression.

He was impeccably dressed in what Terry could have bet were designer clothes; his perfectly tailored slacks and silk shirt could have looked like an ordinary, though expensive, business suit if it wasn’t for the unusual length of the white leather jacket.

He looked fully absorbed in his work and didn’t deign them of a glance; they remained awkwardly standing in front of his desk, fidgeting but silent.

Something told them this was a man used to be feared and respected.

Finally the stranger raised his face, pinning them with two icy sapphire eyes: the expression in them was so deep and inscrutable, so cold and cutting, that Terry shivered, his mind filling with images of ice pinnacles and cutting winds.

He scrutinized them intensely from top to bottom, giving Terry the upsetting feeling that he was dissecting them with his gaze and carefully evaluating every piece for functionality.

Somehow, he had the horrible sensation that they were coming up short.

The man’s sneer became more and more pronounced as the piercing blue eyes infallibly spotted and lingered on their dishevelled hair, torn clothes, the spots of mud streaking their outfits and the general sweaty and unkempt appearance.

Terry fought the heat he could feel growing in his cheeks and lowered his head, mortified by the judging sneer of the stranger. He felt Potter fidget uncomfortably at his side and caught him nervously trying to flatten his unmanageable hair.

“You’re late,” snapped suddenly the man, every syllable dropping with exacting precision. It made unpunctuality seem like a terrible crime. Terry gulped.

Unlike him, both Potter and Malfoy reacted with mulish scowls, their being intimidated vanishing in front of the contemptuous attitude faster than snow in the midday sun.

The Gryffindor spat, irritated: “Late for what, pray tell? I wasn’t aware we were on a tight schedule!”

Malfoy’s grumbled comment was a lot more insulting and made Terry discreetly roll his eyes at hearing the man declared ‘a disgrace to the name of wizard’.

The man’s attention snapped to the blond and the Slytherin stilled and paled when he met the livid gaze holding him under scrutiny.

“I beg your pardon?” asked the man dangerously.

Malfoy gulped, but then straightened defiantly and recklessly shrugged, openly throwing his own contempt right back at the man: “I said you’re a disgrace to wizardkind! It’s obvious you lack proper pride, you uncouth plebeian. No true wizard would lower themselves to use such ridiculous things as these Muggle *combutens* – the mere idea is quite beyond me!” he sniffed disdainfully.
The four of them sighed or grumbled in exasperation. The man simply pinned him with a freezing stare: “What, pray tell, do you mean by ‘wizard’?” he asked acidly.

Terry’s eyebrows rose in shock and he shared disbelief glances with Potter and Neville.

Malfoy stared at the man as if he’d come from Mars on a fluorescent pink broomstick occasionally braying and said very slowly, as if he was talking to someone retarded: “A magic user.”

The other returned his attention to his laptop with a brusque nod, utterly dismissing them with a curt: “Magic doesn’t exist.”

They all stared at him.

He went on working on something or other, fingers flying over the keyboard, producing a pleasant ticking sound, or scrolling the screen and scanning it unbelievably fast.

They stared some more.

He ignored them.

Eventually Potter found some words: “Right. Right. No such thing as magic. Ok.” He ignored his companions’ choked incredulity and took a deep breath. “So all this…?” he asked leadingly.

The man raised his eyes from the screen long enough to bestow an infuriatingly condescending look upon him. “I realize that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, to the uninformed mind,” he said patronizingly, “but I really expected more from potential successors. Surely you do not need to resort to pointless superstition to justify to yourself the as-yet-unknowns the world presents you with?”

There were varied reactions to this little speech – Hermione bristled openly at being declared uninformed and superstitious, Malfoy raged at magic being considered pointless, Terry gaped – but as usual it was Potter who cut through the insults slash meaningless minutiae to get straight to the heart of the problem.

“Potential successors? What the hell are you talking about?”

Terry blinked, then winced. Good point – he should have grasped that tiny detail himself!

Unfortunately, the man ignored the green-eyed boy masterfully and went on to say: “As a matter of fact, this illusion is the result of a complex and innovative application of the scientific principle at the base of my company's prize product.”

“Your company?” blurted out Hermione.

Unhindered, the man continued: “In short, during a filming of the Templo de Diablos in Spain, the light scattered from the stone architectures was recorded and now it is being reconstructed in a holographic interface so that an eye or camera placed in the area where the reconstructed beams cross and blend will see an image of the object even though the object is no longer present, appearing three-dimensional and, to a superficial glance, real, thanks to the almost-constant changes to the position and orientation of the viewing system.”

“Huh?” was Potter’s and Neville’s brilliant contribution.

Terry worked through the explanation while trying to stop gaping. “How… how are you reproducing it? Holograms are practically sci-fi…”
“My company specializes precisely in the production of holographic interfaces,” sneered the man. “There are hologram generators all around us displaying what you see. Perfectly rational explanation – the system is patented if you must know. No hocus-pocus nonsense!” He shot them a smug look.

“Your company?” asked Hermione again, rather faintly. She looked like she expected the answer but wouldn’t believe it until she heard it.

“KaibaCorp,” the man said shortly, his attention already back to the laptop he was working on.

Hermione’s breath rushed out in a squeak: “No bloody way!”
Chapter 38

The man raised his head again to regard her coldly.

She blushed and babbled: “I- I mean… the Kaiba Corporation…” she trailed off.

Terry could understand. The KaibaCorp…! It was unbelievable!

“Huh… Hermione?” asked Neville tentatively. “What, exactly…?”

“…is Kaiba Corporation?” finished the girl a little shrilly. “Oh, nothing… it’s just the most amazingly successful multi-national company specializing in the entertainment and gaming industry in the world! It produces all – and I mean all – the best and most advanced games! Their technology is at the cutting edge for every kind of gaming system!” she cried.

The man’s mouth hinted at a pleased smile, which was gone a heartbeat later.

Terry was nodding along earnestly. He’d grown up with KaibaCorp games. They were the best, hands down. The logo was almost worshipped by children the world over, because it practically guaranteed that the game bearing it would be of amazing quality.

KaibaCorp gaming devices were the kind of things you longed for and moped over and pestered your parents about all year long, secretly hoping to find them under the Christmas tree or among your birthday presents…

He remembered watching with jealousy a classmate who’d received one, courting their favour to be able to play; he remembered also being the one envied and coveted when it was his turn to boast about one and graciously allow his friends to partake in the fun, all the while gloating about it…

And many adults were just as bad! The more complex and refined devices were even used in professionally played games – Terry’s whole family enjoyed watching the live broadcasts of Duel Monster Tournaments and the worldwide known duellers invariably used KaibaCorp’s Duel Disks (and the spectators invariably oohed and aahed in wonder at the amazing holograms which gave the card based game a whole new level of spectacular thrills).

Not to mention the absolutely breath-taking Kaiba Land Amusement Parks that had been built on a few selected locations around the world… Terry had never had a chance to get to one, but of course he’d seen the ads on TV and just like any other boy of his generation, had dreamt of going.

Well, any boy who grew up in a muggle home, he supposed. He didn’t think wizards knew of Kaiba’s entertainment empire… come to think, he’d never heard of amusement parks in the wizarding world at all.

Which goes to show magic isn’t all-awesome. Just mostly so.

And this man sitting before them was so casually claiming rights over all of this… it could only mean…

“You’re Seto Kaiba!” he whispered in wonder, eyes growing wide in amazement.

They were truly meeting him… The Seto Kaiba…

Terry’s eidetic memory slapped together bits and pieces of articles about him – the muggle press
seemed to like to hound him as much as the wizarding version hunted Potter, and his mother was no exception, avidly devouring every gossip printed about the man.

There were so many wild rumours flying around about him… introvert genius, extremely shrewd businessman, mastermind inventor with detached cleverness and steely self-control… fiercely loyal to his brother and a few hand-picked friends… supposedly he’d driven his own adoptive father to suicide, only to take over KaibaCorp and turn it into one of the top ten enterprises worldwide… and kept it there steadfastly for over a decade!...

And he was here, before them, in the flesh!

Taking part into this Shadow Game Tournament!

Terry shook his head in amazement. That was possibly the weirdest discovery yet… the man was just about the last person Terry would have guessed to be part of the admittedly rétro wizarding world!

“And this super corporation is… yours?” asked Potter sounding both impressed and a little sceptical.

The man sneered again: “I am CEO and majority shareholder and I have been since I was a teenager!” he snapped.

Potter raised his hands placatingly: “Ok, ok. Huh… good for you. Hmm…” he fidgeted a little.

The man narrowed his eyes at him: “Spit it out. I don’t have all day.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Terry almost jumped at the blunt question. Of course, Mr. Kaiba was completely unfazed and merely kept his gaze trained on Potter, waiting with the patience of a predator stalking a prey.

The Gryffindor elaborated, floundering a little: “If you’re the top bloke in such a huge corporation I imagine you’re insanely busy…”

His speech was interrupted by Malfoy’s outburst: “I don’t believe it!”

They all turned to him, vaguely perplexed.

“It’s not true!” he reiterated, crossing his arms defiantly. He was glaring at Mr. Kaiba with a mixture of contempt, incredulity and hatred and looked on the verge of exploding with indignation.

Potter hesitated, then sighed: “What, exactly, isn’t true?” he asked, looking resigned to wait out the blond’s latest tantrum.

“He can’t be as successful as she says!” exclaimed Malfoy indignantly, with a jerk of his head towards Hermione. “That’s completely ridiculous!”

“Why not?” asked the girl, irritated.

“He doesn’t even believe in magic!” shouted Malfoy, throwing his arms wide, his tone suggesting that was the most heinous crime he’d ever caught wind of.

“Of course I don’t. My mind is sufficiently refined not to need such platitudes simply because it is hard to find other explanations for the bizarre or fantastical events I have witnessed,” retorted Mr. Kaiba pointedly.
“Platitudes!” hissed Malfoy, inflated like a turkey with offended ire; the man scowling at him looked almost as outraged, though much more collected.

Terry stuffed a fist in his mouth to keep from bursting out laughing.

“Right, well,” Potter sighed wearily. Evidently, he didn’t find the idea of a catfight about the existence of magic as hilarious as Terry did. “My question stays. Aren’t you supposed to be making business deals somewhere or something?”

“Nonsense for unrefined mind, is it?” fumed Malfoy, mostly ignored by everyone, though Terry spared him an amused glance and noticed Neville sidling up to the blond.

“I mean, won’t your, huh, board of directors or, or stockholders or whatever, expect you to be working?” persisted Potter. “Making decisions and organizing stuff and generally making money?”

“I have a strong suspicion that you don’t really know much of anything about managing a word-renown corporation,” commented Mr. Kaiba coldly. “At any rate, my brother is keeping an eye on things.”

“I’ll give you platitudes!” Neville grabbed Malfoy just as the blond lunged for the man behind the desk, dragging his arms back and forcing the blond to abort his ill-advised attack. “Let me go, Longbottom! I’ll show this worthless hmphmm…” Calmly, the tall Gryffindor muffled Malfoy’s raging shrieks with his firm hand.

“And anyway, if you don’t believe in magic, what the hell are you doing in a magical tournament?” went on Potter as if nothing was happening next to him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” spat Mr. Kaiba, turning rigidly to his laptop. Terry caught some mutterings about ‘midgets with unnerving puppy-eyes guilt-tripping rivals in helping out with their mad plans again’.

Malfoy jerked violently and managed to twist free of Neville’s restraining grip: “Let me go I said!” he shouted.

He slammed both his hands violently on the desk: “If magic is just unrefined platitudes, then how do you explain this, you stupid muggle?!” he yelled. He looked beside himself with righteous anger as he whipped out his wand and pointed it dramatically at the sneering man.

Alarmed, Terry and Hermione both cried out to stop him. Potter, rather more practically, quickly raised a Salvio Hexia shield between the two.

Malfoy’s bellowed Hair Loss hex bounced off it and hurtled towards Hermione, who shrieked as all her hair fell off, leaving her completely bald.

“Malfoy, you jerk!” she pounced on the blond and slapped him soundly.

He cried out and promptly dragged an annoyed looking Potter between him and the furious girl, holding him in place as a human shield behind which he cowered: “Give it a rest, you crazy wench! It’s Potter who cast a shield, it’s his damn fault…”

She whipped out her wand as she advanced on him, looking murderous: “Don’t you dare…!”

Mr. Kaiba’s calm, collected voice interjected with smoothness: “Interesting effect. A solution of metallic salts in thioglycolic acid and sodium hydroxide, I assume?”
They all froze and turned to him, wide-eyed and puzzled.

“I wonder what you used as catalyst…” he went on, unfazed. “Crushing the substance into a powder to increase the surface area of the reaction would not be sufficient to reduce the length of the telogen phase of the hair follicles… unless you’re inducing hair loss during the anagen phase of the hair cycle? Preventing the matrix cells producing new hairs from dividing normally while each hair is supposedly actively growing, as occurs with chemotherapy drugs, usually results in hair shedding within a few days… an adjustment of the dosage to increase sensitivity to the drug in combination with a specific catalyst would easily be able to simulate an instantaneous, ‘magical’ effect. Rather ingenious, if a tad childish,” he praised.

Even Malfoy could find nothing to say to that and merely gaped at the genius in as much shock as the rest of them.

“The method of delivery, however,” the man went back to sneering, “is rather pathetic. That weapon of yours looks like it was stolen from a blowpipe wielder in the Amazon – completely outdated design and no compatibility with any available upgrades to boot. I expect it’s ridiculously hard to recharge and offers no variability…”

Their jaws dropped a little further as he shook his head contemptuously.

They’d officially entered the Twilight Zone and Terry rather wondered how he’d missed the signpost.
Chapter 39

Neville sighed loudly: “What I’d like to know is… what are we supposed to do, now? Mr… ehm… could you just tell us our next task, please?”

“Ah!” exclaimed Mr. Kaiba, finally getting all of his attention off whatever work he was engrossed in and leaning back in his chair with the kind of lazy readiness a lounging leopard might have. “A sensible question. At long last.”

Muttered grumblings from Potter and Hermione were quelled by a stern gaze from their fellow Gryffindor, who just stood patiently waiting for Mr. Kaiba’s directions.

Terry’s eyes moved back and forth between Neville’s I-can-be-as-patient-as-a-rock-and-just-as-immobile-too attitude to their latest, nerve-racking opponent, who was watching the tall brown-haired boy with the intent gaze of an eagle who hasn’t yet decided whether to classify him as Prey, Too-Big-To-Be-Prey or Uninteresting-Rock.

Then with the suddenness of a striking snake, Mr. Kaiba pushed a key on his laptop.

Five identical sections of the temple wall behind him vanished altogether, leaving them to peer beyond the desk station into five identical, dimly lit passageways.

Since the man wasn’t moving or talking, just carefully observing them, they traded uncertain looks and then walked around him (Neville dragging a shell-shocked Malfoy) to where they could almost touch the wall. If, indeed, there was a wall there at all. Terry hadn’t forgotten Mr. Kaiba’s quick explanation of his holographic scenery.

Impulsively, he thrust a hand forward into the solid-looking stone. Despite having somewhat expected it, he reeled with shock when it went right through, separating beams of coloured light into rays around its outline. A random thought struck him and he had to stifle a laugh: he was used to transparent people – the ghosts – going through a solid world, but how weird was it to see a translucent world pass through a solid person?

“Are we… supposed to go on alone?” asked Neville sounding nervous.

“What?” Terry jerked his attention back from playing with the holographic light rays and tried to peer further down the passageways. Unfortunately there wasn’t much to see. “But…?”

There was no answer forthcoming, only that calm, scrutinizing gaze that was chilling him to the bones.

“Well?” demanded Potter rather impatiently.

The man snorted disdainfully and turned his back to them, once again focusing on his laptop. Terry peered discreetly over his shoulder and saw a green-on-black chart next to an impressive wall of figures that he knew would never make any sense to him.

Right. They were on their own. Message received.

They sighed and spread until each faced one of the identical entryways.

That was when Malfoy roused suddenly from his shock and glared at the openings with an ugly scowl: “I. Refuse,” he bit out through clenched teeth.
“Malfoy…” started Hermione, already exasperated.

“Hell, no!” cried Malfoy. “I’m not doing it. It’s bad enough to be dragged into this madness by proper wizards. I won’t let an idiotic muggle too blind to see what’s under his very nose force me to deal with his nonsensical *combutens* and whatever! I. Refuse.”

He glowered furiously at all of them, especially Mr. Kaiba.

The man swivelled around in his chair, eyes burning with chilling rage.

Potter didn’t waste time. He simply grabbed Malfoy and shoved the stunned, indignant boy into one of the passages. Hard.

Terry bit his lip to stop from laughing. That Gryffindor sure knew how to handle a crisis.

“A most effective way to deal with such a nuisance. Allow me to compliment you on your practicality,” sneered Mr. Kaiba.

Potter shrugged sheepishly. “I will, on the other hand, refrain from commenting on your evident obliviousness, in light of the necessity of sparing the time you do not seem to realize is essential to the completion of your task.”

“Huh?!”

“There is a time limit!” cried Hermione, who apparently had been able to decipher the convoluted speech.

Mr. Kaiba nodded unconcernedly to a digital clock ticking a count-down.

“What!?” the three remaining boys cried in dismay. How had they missed it?

“I strongly recommend you do not waste any more valuable time. Be it yours or mine.”

Potter narrowed his eyes at Mr. Kaiba, a scowl firmly in place.

“Not now, Harry!” said Hermione a little frantically. “Argue later!”

Potter looked pretty disgruntled, but nodded. He made to enter another of the passages and Terry moved to copy him, choosing the one at the utmost right.

But suddenly Potter stopped and whirled around again: “Wait a sec. Aren’t you going to, I don’t know… keep an eye on us? If you’re supposed to evaluate us and all?” he asked not very friendlily.

Mr. Kaiba swivelled around in his chair, turning to face him just so he could bestow the full force of his contemptuous gaze on the dark-haired teen: “You have been under surveillance the whole time. My security cameras,” he negligently pointed towards the distant ceiling and they all automatically looked up, obviously not spotting anything in the shadows of the rocky vault, “have tagged you the moment you stepped into the room with the toy guns.”

“What?!”

It was really impressive how he managed to look down on them while sitting and letting them stand taller.

Sighing, they exchanged a last glance and resigned themselves to facing whatever the genius had in store for them.
Terry caught Neville mouthing a ‘good luck’ just before he disappeared into his own passage and smiled weakly. Here went nothing!
Chapter 40

As soon as Terry took the two steps needed to cross the threshold, the dark, rundown corridor he could see through from ‘outside’ turned out to not be there.

As the saying goes, all was not how it appeared and between one eye blink and the next, he was standing in clean, well-lit passageway.

It was as unremarkable as a hospital hallway. The tiled flooring was sturdy, each light blue ceramic tile spotless. The walls were painted an anonymous, pale grey. Terry snorted.

Carefully, he put his hand through the right wall. Once more, it went right through a stream of light rays that scattered haloing its outline.

He sighed.

Somehow, he suspected that moving through the walls of the illusion would be counted as cheating, so he had no choice but to go on along the corridor.

He took a deep breath, unable to understand why he felt so out of sorts all of a sudden. Then he realized: this was the first time he was all alone since this madness had started. The silence was getting to him badly. It was hard to bear: it made the atmosphere of this unremarkable corridor almost agonizing.

He berated himself. There didn’t seem to be anything dangerous here and it was ridiculous to be scared just because he was suddenly alone. He wasn’t a baby for pity’s sake!

Forcing himself to ignore his unease, he moved further down the corridor, to where he could see a staircase with pale grey banisters. Curious, he drew closer and tentatively tested the first step with a cautious foot.

To his enormous surprise, it was solid and sturdy enough to support his weight. Either Mr. Kaiba had found a way to make his illusions real to more than sight and hearing… or this was authentic after all.

He tried out the walls again.

Light beams exploded around his hand, scattering every which way in a whirlwind of colours around the dark silhouette of his hand. The same happened when he drove his hand down right through the banister.

So the walls were holograms, while the floors were real… it was likely, then, that the walls were devised to create a maze of sorts, to disorient and confuse them. It made sense, if the goal of the game was to finish the track within a certain time.

Terry perked up as he realized that this was a perfect occasion to use his Millennium trinket.

He fished it out of his shirt, drawing it out by tugging on its chain. The weird silver ring with the engraved Eye of Wadjet was still mysteriously gaudy. Terry fiddled a little with its five hanging prongs, until he realized that he needed to choose a destination in order to activate it.

He groaned, all of a sudden remembering that they were on a tight schedule. And here he was wasting time! He wished he had a watch…
Then he smacked his forehead: what did he need a watch for, he knew how to perform a Tempus spell! This place was really wrecking havoc on his nerves.

Irritated with himself, he closed his eyes, focusing on the idea of ‘exit’. The ring in his hands warmed a little and he opened his eyes once more to see the left prong no longer hanging from the ring, but pointed like an arrow towards the left.

Alright. Left it was, then… he could see an opening further up that would allow him to turn in the wanted direction, so he started climbing quickly.

Out of the blue, a big cubic boulder sprang out of the wall right before him. Caught off guard, he cried out and jumped back, forgetting that it was probably a hologram. Taking a breath to calm his racing heart, he spat a few choice words at the damn thing. Then he realized that a short sentence was floating inside it, in black, regular lettering.

*If a rectangular box that leans on a frictionless wall with one corner and rests on a frictionless floor with another corner starts sliding down, does the moment when will it become detached from the wall depend on the angle of incline of the box?*

Oh bloody hell.

Right, right… so… the centre of mass can be related to the angle of incline of the box, so the speed with which its position changes can be related to the rate of change of the angle… so…

“Yes,” he said firmly.

The boulder sank into the wall again.

Grumbling in annoyance, Terry hurried further.

Just as he turned into the opening on the left, starting down the short set of stairs there, another cube sprang up a step down from him. He jumped back with a yelled curse, stumbling on the step behind him and falling painfully on his butt.

“Damn it all!” he shouted, exasperated.

On top of it, the question was beyond reasonability: *Which of the following acid is more acidic, Cl-CH2COOH or CH3-COOH?*

He didn’t even know how to read that stuff, how was he supposed to know an answer?

But wait… these were all holograms, right?

Cautiously, he touched the boulder with his hand and… yes! The peculiar buzzing feeling happened again, pins and needles all over his hand. He rolled his eyes. The entire thing was probably just a plot to make them waste time. And he’d fallen for it! Wasting time to find the damn answer to the physics question! Well, no more. He wouldn’t fall for it anymore!

Determined, he stepped forth right through the boulder.

And cried out in sudden pain.

An electric jolt had gone through his body, making him jerk back up the stairs and stumble again. His legs were going to be all a livid, damn it! He breathed deeply. His sight was still blinded, but the other senses, which had blacked out for a moment, were returning. He could again hear the
silence, broken only by his own cursing, feel the smooth cold tiles under his body.

Apparently, the questions weren’t such a useless ruse after all.

And he was wasting time again!

Angrily, he stood up, his vision still a little blurry but good enough to move. He stalked back up the stairs and back into the first corridor, but when he tried to go on in his original direction, his ring warmed up pulsingly and all its prongs pointed down the left branch.

Not knowing what else to do, he crossed his fingers that a wrong answer wouldn’t have any horrific results and simply guessed.

“The first one!”

He nearly collapsed in relief when the stupid boulder sank into the floor.

He went on. Soon, the prongs on the ring changed, this time indicating right with finality.

Terry wondered if the others were okay, or if one of them was in trouble. As soon as the thought had formed, the ring switched again, this time pointing straight forward.

Terry stopped short.

He thought of the exit. The prongs snapped towards the right.

He thought of the others in trouble. The prongs returned to pointing ahead.


With a sigh, Terry moved forward, to whomever was in need of assistance.
Chapter 41

It wasn’t long before he saw a dark shape crouched in a corner, just a hint of pale blond hair peeking out of his cloak.

“Malfoy?”

Terry ran down the impromptu ramp and fell to his knees next to the huddled form.

The blond was pale and shivering violently, but scowled at him anyway, asking rudely: “What do you want?”

“Malfoy? What happened to you?”

“None of your business!” the Slytherin snapped.

Terry rolled his eyes in annoyance as he backed off. Why had he even bothered?

Still, when the blond had troubles standing and had to lean on the wall to steady his wobbling legs, Terry’s worry overcame his irritation. He’d seen the blond look this upset before… but when?

Then in a rush, the memory made sense: in Ryou’s forest, when he’d had that first ‘vision’!

Remembering what Potter had said about drinking being of help, he quickly transfigured his tie (which was going to go down in his personal history as Most Versatile Item In His Wardrobe once all was said and done) into a chalice and filled it with water. He took it as a sign that the vision had been a bad one when Malfoy drained it without even a token protest.

“What did you see?” he asked curiously.

The blond sneered at him and snapped haughtily: “You’re starting to make less sense than Longbottom, Boot, and that’s saying a lot. You might want to keep your mouth shut before people start realizing what an idiot you are.”

“Watch your mouth, Malfoy!” retorted Terry, annoyed. Merlin, whatever he’d seen had to have really affected him, he was more infuriating than usual!

The blond took a deep breath and shoved Terry away, stalking off.

Gritting his teeth to prevent himself from hexing the aggravating Slytherin, Terry bit off: “That’s the wrong way.”

Malfoy swirled in place and glowered at him: “One,” he said chillingly, “I’m not going anywhere, except away from your nosy stupidity, so there can be no ‘wrong’ way.”

“Oh, stuff it!” exploded Terry, crossing his arms mulishly.

“Two,” went on the maddening blond, supremely ignoring him, “what would an uncultured idiot like you know about it, anyway?”

Terry glared. He should have just gone on to the exit and left the boorish Slytherin to fend for himself!

“Hello-o?” he sing-songed dangling his trinket from its chain in front of the other’s sneer. “Magical
sort-of-compass here!"

Malfoy scoffed haughtily: “You probably aren’t even able to use it properly, Boot.”

“Why, you!” yelled Terry, at the end of his rope. “Just who do you think you are?”

The Slytherin’s eyes flashed: “Who do I… I, Boot, am the Heir to the Malfoy Family! The carrier of one of the wizarding world’s wealthiest and most influential names! We are the nobility among magic users - and I’ll be damned if I just bow to the whims of a blockhead too blind to even admit to the existence of magic!”

Terry blinked: was that the problem? It didn’t make any sense! So what if Mr. Kaiba didn’t believe in magic? Plenty of people didn’t!

“But what would someone like you know of what it means to bear the responsibility of inheriting a Lordship,” Malfoy went on contemptuously, “or to try and maintain some dignity among uncouth plebeians…”

Stung, Terry snorted back: “Dignity, ha! And responsibility, what a laugh! As if you knew the meaning of the word, you rotten spoilt prince. You and your precious father can only resort to squandering money to get your way – that’s not nobility! You have no concept of – of chivalry and duty to the others, if anyone was ever so unlucky as to depend upon you, I pity them!”

“How dare you!”

“And I may be a ‘peasant’, but at least I have manners – which is more than can be said for you, Mr. Malfoy Heir! For all your claims of supposed superiority, you’re as rude as a longshoreman!”

Malfoy stopped in mid-step, rooted to the spot. He looked shocked.

“I don’t care who the hell your father is, or his father for that matter, because guess what? It’s you I’m stuck with – it’s you that matter! Not how many titled ancestors you can sew into a damn family tree, but whether or not you’re worth anything. Which I really doubt, by the way.”

Malfoy glared murderously at him, but Terry just shrugged. The time when he felt too intimidated by Malfoy’s arrogance to stand up to him had passed at some point or other during this absurd Tournament. Besides, it felt good to throw the conceited Slytherin’s insults right back. Maybe this was why Potter was always so quick to quarrel with him?

Seeing that the Ravenclaw, for once, wasn’t cowed, Malfoy’s expression became sour and he glanced away sullenly.

Terry shot him a self-satisfied look and turned away, marching down the path to try and find the point he’d reached before deviating to assist the blond.

His annoyance mounted again when he realized the stupid snake was still mulishly refusing to budge, but he dealt with the two questions the holographic maze sprung on him in quick succession, trying to forget the blond snob and his ridiculous sulks.

Before passing through the opening and into another bland-looking corridor, he shot a glance back.

Malfoy was scowling, with his arms crossed and looking pretty disgruntled. He looked cute that way, like a kitten that was all puffed up trying to look tough. Terry fought to avoid grinning, because he just knew he’d end up hexed if he did…

But he was irritated enough that he felt no compunctions throwing a rather nasty parting shot back
at the Slytherin: “You know, if you’re serious about living up to the role of aristocratic leader, not that it isn’t an unbelievably outdated concept, but anyway, maybe you should get a clue about what the duty of a true lord is... like, to take care of and protect his people – something you don’t even seem to understand the need for. And try and consider the possibility – shocking I know – that you might be called to sacrifice your comfort for the good of the many from time to time. ‘Cause that’s what being a true lord means, if you ask me – nothing to do with money or silly titles. I recommend you look to Potter for advice... he’s a much better leader than you!”

And he marched on without a second glance, the blond’s hissed outrage following him like a thunderous echo.

He’d just triggered yet another question-cube, this time from the not-really-visible ceiling, when angry steps caught up with him.

A livid-looking Malfoy, his body tense and his lips firmly thinned, shot a disgusted glare at the floating words, How many body parts does a lobster have?, and snapped out: “Seven.”

Terry approached cautiously, not entirely sure about this apparent change of heart. “How do you even know?” he mused, not really talking to the jerk, but unable to keep the question from slipping out.

Amazingly enough, Malfoy deigned to answer acidly: “How are you supposed to transfigure one if you don’t know?”

Terry lifted his hands in surrender. He hadn’t ever felt the need to transfigure a lobster, nor could he ever imagine a situation where he would, but... he supposed the blond had a point. Of sorts.

Malfoy transferred his glare to him: “Well, Boots? What now?”

Terry shook his head in amazement. Was the lack of outspoken insults to be taken as progress? Whatever.

“We need to find the others, I think,” he said.

“No we don’t,” was the immediate retort.

“They might be in trouble,” pointed out Terry reasonably.

“See if I care,” was the sourly muttered response.

Terry rolled his eyes. Progress? Wishful thinking...

“Just find the damn exit, Boot. You can manage such a simple task, I hope?”

Terry glowered at him, then gave a disgusted sigh. It just wasn’t worth it. Holding his ring steadily in his hands, he ostensibly asked for the exit way, while focusing his thoughts on Hermione instead. Malfoy could hardly blame him if they happened to run into the others ‘by chance’, right?

It took two turns to the left and Terry fielding a question on whether or not division by zero was allowed in mathematics before they heard Potter’s voice asking incredulously: “Is dandruff living or non-living? No, seriously? Is this for real?”

“Non-living,” answered Hermione matter-of-factly. “It is, essentially, dead skin, so...”

“That’s not the point! What kind of lame question is it?...”
“Hey there!” called out Terry, turning another corner, this time to the right, and coming up behind them, a sulky blond in tow.

“Terry!” the two Gryffindor exclaimed. “And Malfoy. Good, now we only need to find Neville…”
Chapter 42

They worked their way through the maze. Terry was in the lead because of his ring and tried hard to ignore Malfoy’s sulking, Hermione’s fretting over the time limit and Potter’s childish complaint about the stupidity and/or impossibility of the questions.

In an effort to distract his companions, he asked what had happened to the two Gryffindors before he and Malfoy had caught up.

Not much, as it turned out: “Oh, we ran into each other pretty soon, right after I figured out I couldn’t just bypass these stupid questions. Seriously,” Potter told him with a shrug, adding in a mid-voice grumble: “What is baking soda, really, who the hell bothers with some brainiac definition when all you need it for is leavening? Anyway,” he’d returned to addressing Terry, “Hermione rescued me, and how she knew sodium bicarbonate is the answer I’ll never guess, mind you, I doubt dough and batter give a damn what it’s called, or bakers for that matter… but whatever; then we ran into some questions that even she didn’t know how to answer and…”

“Honestly, Harry!” interrupted Hermione rather shrilly. “Give it a rest - we don’t have time to go over every detail. We only have thirteen minutes left!”

“Thirteen minutes?” yelped Terry dismayed. How had they wasted so much time? Damn Malfoy and his stupid sulks!

“Chill, guys, I’m sure we’re close,” said Potter trying to reassure them, only to back off a step when Terry and Hermione both glared at him.

Bringing his attention back to the maze, Terry led them around the umpteenth corner and stopped, facing a fork.

Both paths were blocked by cube-boulders, each with its floating question: Do objects float in liquids denser than themselves? swayed on their left, while a tougher one, Do aquatic plants have thinner leaves than terrestrial plants to facilitate the gaseous exchange? taunted them from the right.

Before they could attempt to answer, Potter called out: “Hey, look! Over there!”

He was pointing down the left path and Hermione impatiently yelled to the boulder-question: “Yes! Of course they do! Archimedes Principle! Now disappear already!”

The holographic boulder obliged and they caught sight, down the corridor where they were headed, of the missing member of their group. The tall Gryffindor was sitting cross-legged at a fork, a piece of parchment spread on his legs.

“Neville!” exclaimed Potter, relieved. They all hastened towards him, Hermione grumbling about his ‘lazing about’: “Come on, let’s get a move on!” she cried impatiently.

Neville was diligently making a notation on his piece of parchment, but raised his gaze when he heard them approach: “There you all are!” he exclaimed, apparently oblivious to Hermione’s irritation. “That’s good. Now we’ll be able to get out!”

“Huh?” they all said intelligently.

“Well, I examined the exit ways and they’re all connected. Either we open them all at the same
time, or we’re stuck here,” he said matter-of-factly.

“How did you have the time to do that?” asked Hermione, shocked.

Neville blinked: “Well, it’s pretty easy to navigate these corridors…”

They gave him a deadpan look.

He hesitated, but then forged on: “Well, you see, the questions that pop up are thematic, right? So all you have to do is follow your chosen topic and you get straight to the matching exit! I just tried a couple different routes until I found the Herbology path and… voilà!”

There was a long silence, then Terry commented: “I feel stupid now.”

Neville gave him an uncertain look.

Hermione’s rather frosty tone reminded them: “Nine minutes!”

They jumped and Neville hurriedly waved the parchment he’d been working on: “Look! I mapped this place and the thematic paths.” He gave them a sheepish smile: “You know I’ve got a memory like a sieve, and magical means only help so far – remember my Rememberall, Harry?”

Potter reacted chuckling and shooting Malfoy a smug glance, while the blond scowled and huffed, looking put out. Terry made a mental note to ask about that. When they had the time.

“The point is, I’ve taken the habit of making notations and maps, otherwise I’d still get lost in Hogwarts! I’m rather proficient, all in all.” Neville gestured them closer to the map: “Here! I copied down the questions, too, and noted who’s more likely to know the answer… that way we won’t lose much more time!”

Indeed, picking a random corridor drawn a tad wobbly on the impromptu map, Terry could read, in Neville’s small, neat handwriting, notes like: [Arithmancy] What is the value in the middle of a set ordered from least to greatest called? [Hermione] and [Zoological Transfiguration] What glands do humans and dolphins have in common? [Malfoy]

Terry was impressed.

He quickly sought his own name and found it on the path leading to the central exit, next to the heading ‘Muggle Sciences’. The first question listed read: What is the acronym for the device that emits electromagnetic radiation through stimulated emission of photons?

He actually knew the answer was ‘laser’, but he wondered how Neville had guessed he could handle it. He didn’t think the other boy had ever been around when he’d discussed his extra reading with Tony and Mike. Had he?

“These here are the ones I know,” said the tall boy proudly, showing the corridor on the right, where the first question noted was [Herbology] What is a botanical garden containing living collections of willows called? [Me]. Terry’s eyes slipped to the last one and his eyebrows raised of their own accord: [Herbology] What is the taxon of plants which can survive in dry environment called? [Me].

Did Neville actually know the answer? If he did, that was remarkable.

“Why do I have the lamest ones?” complained Potter. “Is it possible to make a battery from fruit, what kind of nutcase even thinks…?”
“Ehm… they’re the ones left out…” said Neville apologetically and Potter scowled at him.

“Later!” cried Hermione, who looked positively frazzled. “Seven minutes!”

“Alright!”

They hurried where Neville pointed them to go and made quick work of the boulders blocking their path.

Once the last one was cleared, Terry could see what Neville meant by ‘connected’. Lines of neon blue light were embedded in the final wall in an intricate web and like the Gryffindor had mentioned, they linked all five exits, centring on five round ‘handles’ of sorts, one on each outlined door.

If Terry had the time, he might have liked to admire the elaborate pattern. They had other priorities, though.

Hermione’s shrill “Two minutes!” rang out in the silent corridors, quickly followed by Neville’s “Everybody in position?”

Various ‘yes’ chorused while Terry focused on the last question, floating before his eyes above the outline of the door: *In what fashion does a bob attached by a string to a pivot point move?* An easy one, luckily, once he’d figured out it meant a pendulum.

Then Potter started counting down: “Three, two, one…”

“Periodic!” exclaimed Terry, the others’ answers lost in the noise of their shouts.

When the answer rang true, a purple neon light shot out of the round handle, running along a path on the blue neon web to meet the other four purple ones, until it was just one line, continuous. Then with a brief white glare the doors vanished, showing five dark passages identical to those they’d entered from.

They’d barely taken a couple steps down the passages when a loud, annoying siren started wailing and the doors reappeared with a loud locking sound. Had they still been inside, they’d be trapped!

Terry hurried out of the passage and met the others, all looking rather shaken by the close call.

“Just in the nick of time, eh?” asked Potter, looking immensely relieved to be out. “Good job, Nev.”

Hermione looked thoroughly bad-tempered and was muttering angrily to herself: “Can’t believe I didn’t do better, it was no different from a test…!”

Terry just shrugged. He liked his good grades sure enough, but as this particular performance wasn’t likely to end up in a report paper, he didn’t see the point in fretting so.

Rather, he looked curiously around.

The real-looking image of the back of the Temple was about the most interesting thing in sight. The rest of the place was empty, except for a single, metallic locker about as tall as Hermione. Terry could conceive no possible reason for it to be there, but aside for that, it wasn’t exactly attention-grabbing.

Much more worrisome was the fact that the mighty set of doors in the furthest stone wall was
inexorably closed.

They looked at each other helplessly.

“Now what?”
Chapter 43

With no clear idea of what to do, they settled to wait.

Hermione snatched up Neville’s map and sank to the ground to pour over it, muttering to herself about how she should have known this answer or that one. As if it could make any difference.

Potter went to check the locked doors, rattle them, poke at the lock, as if he knew how to pick locks. Well, maybe he did at that. It probably wouldn’t do any good anyway.

Neville sat calmly with his back leaning on the incongruous locker, apparently unconcerned, while Malfoy sulked a little while away, not that anyone really minded receiving the silent treatment from him.

Terry wished he had a book.

Even if it seemed like ages, however, in the end only a handful of minutes went by before the doors unexpectedly opened and someone strolled leisurely in.

Potter had instantly jumped back and his wand was instinctively out before he could think things through; the others fished theirs out in turn, just an automatic reaction, and scrambled to their feet.

They needn’t have worried though. The newcomer didn’t even bat an eye and just took a few more steps in, before stopping and blinking at them in surprise. He looked like a second edition of Mr. Kaiba, from the brown bangs falling casually over his eyes down to the formal, designer clothes and lengthy jacket, blue rather than white but otherwise identical. They could have mistaken him for their opponent, if it wasn’t for the big, friendly grin the bloke sported: an expression that, even with only a short meeting, they’d already realized was simply inconceivable on Mr. Kaiba.

“Hello, there!” the newcomer exclaimed affably. “I guess you’re the newest candidates? I didn’t expect you so soon!”

“Uh… hello?” tried Potter tentatively, lowering his wand. “Err… are you… I mean… who…?”

The other man smiled genially: “I am the vice-president of KaibaCorp! You may call me Mokuba – otherwise it’ll become very confusing with my brother and me both being called Kaiba…”

“Brother?” asked Terry interested. He hadn’t known the amazingly successful CEO had a twin!

“You have met my big brother, haven’t you?” asked Mokuba lightly.

Ah, okay, not a twin then. Close, though.

“I know he often gets lost in his work, but surely he’s met you before the Game?”

“Yes, we…” started Hermione, but at that moment a scowling Malfoy marched up to the newly arrived man, rudely invading his personal space, and bit out dangerously: “Do you believe in magic?”

Mr. Mokuba blinked and stilled, focusing on the grim and hostile blond. After a stretched silence, he said with forced calm: “Please tell me that you didn’t ask my brother this!”

The four of them burst out chuckling. They really couldn’t help it!
“Shut up!” cried Malfoy shooting them a furious glare, then rounded on Mokuba again: “I – want – answers!” he bit out through clenched teeth.

The man looked inordinately amused: “Do you now? And to what questions, if I may be so bold?”

Malfoy hissed angrily at the mocking tone. “I want to know why we’ve been kidnapped!”

Mokuba’s smile was suddenly reminiscing: “Ah, to be young and naïve… I remember when I was in my teens… still thinking that demanding to know why I’d been kidnapped was any use…” he sighed, mock-moved. “Come to think of it, I don’t think I ever found out what most of those kidnapping were about…” he concluded pensively.

Malfoy’s irritation reached a new level and his eye twitched ominously.

“You make it sound like being kidnapped was the norm for you,” remarked Terry dryly.

“Well, you know how it is. Let’s see… there was that time our old friend Pegasus locked me in that tower to force my brother to duel him… the time I was dragged to the other side of the world by a rival of my brother… the time I was locked in a warehouse with Yugi’s silly cheerleader, the time Pegasus’ thug imprisoned me, the time the Big Five tried to blackmail my brother by abducting me, that one time I was taken by error instead of Princess Adina, the time my bodyguard turned out to be paid by an enemy… that time those Rare Hunters kidnapped me and dangled me from a helicopter, now that was fun… there was the time I was held hostage in the Virtual World, not that I blame Noah, he was just confused you know, turned out pretty alright in the end, then the time that bastard Wheeler messed up and…”

“Wow,” interjected Potter deadpan, “I feel so outclassed now. Perhaps I should let old Tommy boy know he’s soooo behind in the kidnapping department…”

Hermione choked on her laughter, while everybody else looked at him in disbelief, or in Mokuba’s case, bland incomprehension.

“Anyway, on with the show!” cried Mokuba cheerfully. “You’ve completed the Game, so now it’s time for…”

He was interrupted by a phone trill. Terry watched in envy as he fished a black hand-held phone out of a pocket: mobile phones were very expensive and this one didn’t look like the bulky "brick" phones his father was given by the company he worked for. Its design was sophisticatedly elegant.

Mokuba excused himself with a faint smile and turned around to talk rapidly in what sounded like Japanese. He listened for a while, then said something else curtly and cut the conversation with a frown.

“Problems?” asked Potter flippantly.

Mokuba blinked: “Ah… yes, that is, no – nothing serious, some difficulties arising with one of our projects… I should perhaps go check it out… unless…” he suddenly grinned and flipped the phone open again, quickly pressing in a number: “Seto?” they heard him ask, immediately followed by another stream of rapid-fire Japanese.

A pause. Then his grin widened and he quickly agreed to something, at least if his enthusiastic nodding was anything to go by. Another, slightly longer pause, followed by a chirpy sentence that sounded like a goodbye, and he turned to them again: “Excellent! My big brother’s going to handle the matter… which means, I get to give out the prizes! So, want to know who’s the lucky winner of this round? My brother gave me all the scores!”
“Err…”

“Wonderful! Let’s see!” he exclaimed with much more enthusiasm than any of them was feeling.
Chapter 44

Mokuba was bouncing about excitedly like a small kid that has just been promised sweets. Terry spared a thought to marvel at how he could possibly be related to Mr. Kaiba.

The man skipped lightly to the metallic locker, Neville hurriedly moving out of his way, until he stood tall before the metallic grey piece of furniture and turned to face their rather perplexed expressions.

“So!...” he exclaimed cheerfully looking at each of them in turn, where they’d instinctively fanned out in a semicircle around him. “Scores were attributed based on Conduct, Judgment, Spirit, Attitude, and Bonus!”

They traded glances, a tad amused a tad unnerved at his jubilant tone.

“You all started off with 10 points. Conduct measured how promptly you recognized and followed instructions: one point was deducted for every minute you delayed entering the maze.”

“Oops,” commented Potter quietly.

Mokuba didn’t show that he’d noticed: “Judgment measured how well you could estimate the time needed to complete the Game: one point was added for every minute of the time you had remaining on the clock when you crossed the exit.”

“Just great,” muttered Hermione bitterly.

“Attitude measured how sensibly you handled the task: one point was deducted every ten steps you were forced to take…”

“What?” yelped Terry, surprised.

…and one point added for every question you answered correctly on the first try,” went on Mokuba unperturbed.

“Spirit measured your determination and integrity as Gamers! One point was added every time you didn’t immediately change path when confronted with a question you couldn’t answer and one point was deducted every time you tried to cheat by going through the holograms.”

Sheepish grins met his mock-glare.

“Bonus would have given you points for discovering and answering the five extra questions hidden in the maze – which none of you did,” Mokuba pouted a little.

“That means… you,” he suddenly pointed an accusing finger to Potter, “are in the negatives!” he shook his head disappointedly, but there was amusement lurking in the eyes peeking out of his dark bangs.

Potter mock-pouted back.

“You three didn’t do too bad,” Mokuba told Terry, Hermione and Malfoy, “but you still lost some of the starting points and you,” he smiled at Neville, “were the only one to gain some, so with the grand total of 12 points, you’re the winner!”

Neville, to Terry and Potter’s great amusement, looked shocked.
“And now…” Mokuba spun back to the locker and opened it theatrically: “Prizes!”

He took out three glass cups filled with chocolate ice-cream topped with whipped cream, a single ruby red cherry perched on top, and balanced them precariously in his arms.

“You don’t get anything,” Mokuba told Harry almost petulantly. “Serves you right for trying to tinker with the holograms!” But he winked to take the sting off the reprimand.

Harry grumbled good-naturedly: “Wasn’t trying to mess around! Just looking for a better way to do things, you know?” and the man chuckled before going on to distribute the desserts: “Behold!” he cried dramatically, exaggerating the grand gesture of offering. “The most wonderful and most widely craved sweet in the world! Chocolate parfait!”

Terry burst out laughing.

He noticed that Hermione looked upset as she turned the cup over and over in her hands and Malfoy had done nothing but stare at it as if it was filled to the brim with poison or acid, forcing Potter to take it in his place, but he refused to worry and simply transfigured his tie into a spoon, then eagerly dug in.

Mmm… it was sinfully good!

“I’m getting one too… best dish in the whole world! But first…” muttered Mokuba turning to rummage in the locker again, while Potter transfigured a couple spoons and generously shared Malfoy’s parfait with Neville.

The blond just glared disgustedly at them.

“And here we go!” Mokuba re-emerged from the locker, one hand securely clasped around another glass cup of chocolate parfait, while the other held out a thin sceptre-like monstrosity, made of a silver stick topped by an ugly ball bearing an Eye of Wadjet in bas-relief, from which two oddly shaped handles protruded, that could have represented wings or ears – Terry really couldn’t tell which.

He gave it to Neville with a big grin.

The boy wiped his hands down on his robe nervously and cautiously took it: “Is… is this…?”

“It’s the replica of the Millennium Rod!” said Mokuba cheerfully. “Yugi asked us to produce one, so I took care of it. It came out pretty cool, wouldn’t you think?”

Terry privately thought it was a matter of opinion. His ring was gaudy, but at least it had a remarkable, exotic design. This rod was just ugly.

Neville however was staring at it reverently, as if he couldn’t believe that the sceptre-like stick truly rested in his hands.

“I made sure to stay as close to the original as possible, in its design. Luckily I’d seen the real deal often enough, before the Items were disposed of, because my brother was its keeper. I don’t know how he got to have it, though…” concluded Mokuba pensively.

“Marik Ishtar gave it to me,” said an irritated voice behind them.

They all turned and gaped at the illusionary temple fizzling and trembling, light coalescing strangely around the tall, slim figure of Seto Kaiba emerging from it at a brisk pace.
Of course, he was completely disregarding the supposed presence of stone pillars. He moved as if he expected the world to rearrange itself for his convenience.

“Before he died,” he clarified at their puzzled looks, then rolled his eyes: “…because he was convinced that I am the ‘reincarnation’ of Hight Priest Seth, cousin of the Nameless Pharaoh, who supposedly owned the thing originally.”

Malfoy’s breath caught: “You are?” he asked in disbelief.

“Of course not!” Kaiba scoffed. “Utterly ridiculous notion. Then again, that Egyptian fool was certifiable…”

They raised their eyebrows, wondering if they could dare ask for more.

They all seemed to decide that they would not. Mr. Kaiba was beyond intimidating and he already looked irritated. Instead, they turned to Mokuba.

It was really strange to think the two men were related. Where Seto Kaiba was cold, aloof and completely self-sufficient, his brother was spunky, sociable and bubbly.

Catching their interest, Mokuba obliged lively: “Marik Isthar was the heir to a clan of Tomb Keepers that had guarded the last resting place of the Nameless Pharaoh for generations. Err… you might want to ask Yugi about the details, nobody knows more than him about the whole thing, after all. The important point is that the Millennium Rod stayed in the family, generation after generation, until Marik… passed it to you?” finished, turning to his brother, who simply gazed coolly back.

Mokuba shrugged: “I’ve always thought there was some big, dark secret behind it all, but all Ishizu will say is that the Rod’s main use in Egyptian times was to seal the Ka hiding inside of people into stone tablets.”

“Preposterous,” commented Mr. Kaiba.

“She says her brother told her…” tried Mokuba, only to be cut off: “It matters not. He was insane.”

“Insane because he believed in the truth of magic?” asked Malfoy acidly.

“Ah… no… he was really crazy,” said Mokuba delicately. “Split-personality Disorder. Developed from the conflict between his overwhelming hatred and desire for revenge against the Nameless Pharaoh, and the burden of his duties as Guardian of the Tomb. I didn’t know you’d kept in touch with him after he returned to Egypt,” he said to his brother, frowning a little.

“I did not,” retorted Seto. “He’s the one who showed up and dumped the Rod on my desk before vanishing. Mutou informed me of his death not long after. End of the story.”

Mokuba nodded thoughtfully.

“Hmm… what… what does it do?” asked Neville almost timidly. He waved the rod feebly when everybody turned to look at him, his cheeks reddening.

“Do?!” scoffed Kaiba incredulously. “Absolutely nothing. It’s a piece of silver, boy, what do you expect it to do? Even as a conductor it’s pretty useless.”

“It’s decorative,” pointed out Mokuba mildly. Terry could have sworn he was fighting not to laugh.
Mr. Kaiba glared at him: “Its aesthetical value is a matter of opinion, but if you want to call it a function, suit yourself.”

Then he glowered at Neville: “The point is that it represents your victory. It is a symbol of your having achieved the goal of being number one. You should be proud of holding it for that alone. Forget all that hocus pocus nonsense you’ve been fed, it has no place in Gaming” he spat disdainfully. “Too many morons are enamoured of that idiocy as it is!”

Neville and Potter automatically grabbed one of Malfoy’s arms each, preventing the blond from going for his wand.

Bereft of the option of placing a few well-aimed burning hexes where they’d count, the Slytherin just hissed and sputtered at them and the world in general.

“I still don’t understand why you’re even there if you think this is all idiotic!” interjected Potter, annoyed – though whether at Mr. Kaiba’s maddening mind-set or Malfoy’s bothersome attitude was debatable.

Mr. Kaiba sniffed: “I only agreed to help out because Mutou insisted and unfortunately, I owed him. And it’s none of your business anyway. Go play with your hocus-pocus if you like it so much, I have business to attend to!”

He whirled sharply, his lengthy white coat swirling as dramatically as Snape’s cloak, and stalked away.

He stopped after just a few steps, turned his head a little and called over his shoulder: “We’re done here, Mokuba. Let’s go before Roland manages to make an even bigger mess of things!…”

His tone was as sharp and cold as when he was talking to them, but Terry noticed a slight softening of his sharp features, betraying the fact that his little brother at least had bypassed the icy barrier he’d erected between himself and the world.

Mokuba smiled fondly at his brother stalking off and turned quickly to the five wizards: “Listen, I don’t know much, but according to Yugi, the Millennium Rod granted the holder the power of bending the wills of others through mind control, and also let its user telepathically communicate with their brainwashed ‘servants’. That last one I can attest to, by the way. I don’t know what this lesser version might do, though. Maybe nothing, since Seto doesn’t believe in it… magic can be tricky like that. I guess… you’ll have to find out yourself!”

He smiled apologetically and set off after his brother with a hurried “Ja ne!”

“Does that mean ‘bye’, do you think?” asked Potter randomly after a while.

They shrugged.
There was a long silence after the two Kaibas disappeared.

Each of them was lost in his or her own thoughts. No-one was in any hurry to go on.

Terry peered at the door they were most likely supposed to go through. He sighed.

All of a sudden he was feeling immensely tired, as if a weighty coat had been dumped on his shoulders, heavy and stifling. This crazy adventure had been a never-stopping rollercoaster of adrenaline-filled moments, made only worse by their continually tense interactions. He just wasn't up to face anything more right now.

Wearily, he closed his eyes and blew out another sigh, letting his head fall back and then to the side, slowly, to stretch his stiff neck a little.

“Are we moving on or what?” Malfoy's acrimonious voice cut through the atmosphere like a razor.

Terry sighed again, opening his eyes with bleary resignation. Here they went again... However, the Gryffindors looked as reluctant to 'go on' as he felt.

“How about we just hang around in here a little bit more?” asked Potter finally, trying and failing to sound cheerful.

Terry raised his eyebrows, glancing around sceptically. As good as taking a break sounded, the place was making him nervous. And it was practically empty, besides.

“Are you insane?” Malfoy's tone was a perfect blending of incredulity and contempt. “I know you've never had much brains to begin with, Potter, but what little you had must have been seriously addled as of late if you're seriously suggesting...”

“We've been at this for hours!” cut him off Potter, his voice already raised in irritation. “I for one would like to take a break.”

Malfoy's voice rose to match Potter's instantly: “We're trapped Salazar knows where, at the mercy of insane idiots who can't even screen their own employees enough to realize they're muggles, and stupid ones at that; we don't know what absurd stuff is likely to happen to us and if we'll ever make it out of this ridiculous dungeon; we have no idea how we got here and more importantly, how we'll ever be able to go back; basically our only hope is to survive enough to get to the bottom of this crazy mess as soon as possible... and you want to take a break?”

For once, his tone was too incredulous to sound properly scathing.

“I'm with him,” interjected Hermione with a disdainful sniff.

“Of course you are, you...”

“I wouldn't mind a pause either,” said Terry over whatever insult Malfoy was clearly gearing up to spit, “but, really, here doesn't exactly strike me as the best of places, there isn't even anywhere to sit or...”

Malfoy shot him a look of pure contempt: “For goodness' sake, Boot! Are you a wizard or not? Transfigure yourself a chair if you want to sit!”
Annoyed at the blond for his tone and at himself for not thinking of it, Terry snapped back: “So now you want to stay?”

“Ehi, come have a look!” came Neville’s voice out of the blue. “This locker is full of stuff!”

Derailed from the heating argument, they turned to gape at the tall boy, who was crouched in front of the incongruous locker and rummaging in the lower shelves.

After a long moment, Potter said weakly: “Anything to eat, by chance?”

“As a matter of fact, there is,” replied Neville coming up with a handful of brightly coloured boxed. “At least, I think so,” he added as an afterthought. “I mean... these are food, right?” he held them up for them to see.

There was quite a collection of very colourful boxes covered in huge, cartoon-like Japanese writings and cute little manga-style characters all over.

A closer examination offered minuscule listing of the ingredients in several languages, from which they gathered the stuff inside the boxes had names like botamochi (which apparently was made from rice, red beans and a lot of sugar), kappa ebisen (which turned out to be basically french fries, even though the box claimed them to be made of shrimps) and Saku Saku Panda (cookies filled with sweet chocolate).

“Don’t they have any sugar-free snacks?” exclaimed Hermione in dismay. “And no, that fried stuff doesn't count. Merlin knows what it would do to my liver!”

Potter rolled his eyes: “Food is food, Hermione.”

“Not when it's junk food it's not!” she sniffed.

Terry shared a look with Potter, then they both shrugged and ripped in a different box – Terry's was bright red with fat little pandas jumping among huge green and pink ideograms and produced little packages of crunchy, panda-shaped biscuits the size of a fingernail, filled with delicious chocolate. And possibly some addictive secret ingredient, because it was quite impossible to stop once you'd started eating some!

Hermione huffed. “What else is in there?” she asked Neville, who was sitting cross-legged now, with his ugly Rod slated across his lap and munching on the contents of a yellow cardboard box with purple stripes, that seemed to be filled with soft, chew candy.

“Wait, are you... eating the paper too?” asked Potter, barely holding a laugh in.

“It's tasty!” protested Neville.

“It's plastic!” retorted Hermione, rather horrified.

“Nuh-uh. It says here it's rice paper,” assured Neville, waving the box haphazardly. “It just looks like plastic, but when you put it in your mouth it dissolves like flour. Lemon-orange flavored flour, to be precise.”

Terry made a face. “If you say so.”

Potter braced himself on Neville's broad shoulders to peer into the locker over his bent head.

“You know, Harry, you could have asked me to move,” pointed out the brown-haired boy.
amusedly.

“Where's the fun in that?” grinned Potter, tottering in his effort not to stamp on his friend. “Oh, hey, there are games in here too!”

“Great, wow, just what we need, more absurd games!” exclaimed Hermione throwing her arms in the air.

Potter fished a box out, narrowly missing Neville's head, and said cheerfully: “They don't seem to be absurd, Hermione. In fact, they look like perfectly normal, perfectly sensible board games!”

He showed off what he'd picked: “Monopoly?” asked Terry incredulously. “You've got to be kidding me!”

“Oh, come on!” cajoled Harry. “I've never played at this.”

“Ah!” nodded Terry, understandingly, “that explains a lot.”

“And just what do you mean by that?” pouted Harry.

“Only that if you had played, you'd know that it is just about the most boring game ever invented!”

“Oh, I don't know,” muttered Hermione. “It's not that bad, really, when compared with Senet, or Snakes and Ladder!”

“Well, point,” admitted Terry reluctantly.

“Here's a set for Senet, whatever that is,” chimed in Neville cheerfully. He'd scooted back a little and turned so as to fish the boxes out more easily and was cheerfully sorting through them. “And Reversi, Stratego, Mehen, Liubo, Oware... wow, there isn't a single one I've heard of before!”

He looked genuinely impressed.

“Here's one: chinese checkers,” said Potter.

“You know how to play?” asked Neville sceptically.

“Well, no, but how different can it be from standard checkers?”

“Judging from the picture on the box, a lot,” said Terry dryly, because the six-points star covered with little holes and the coloured marbles on it looked nothing like a checkers board and pieces.

Hermione bypassed Potter to look for herself: “Hey, what about this?”

She held out a dark red box with the name of the game in italic script and Potter and Terry reacted instantly: “No.”

Hermione pouted and Neville looked confused: “Huhm, why not?”

“You want to play Scrabble against Hermione?” asked Harry incredulously. “Wait, you don't know what Scrabble is, do you?”

Neville shook his head mutely.

“It's a word game where you points by forming words from individual lettered tiles, sort of like in a crossword,” explained Terry succinctly.
Neville got the point instantly: “Right. Not with Hermione around. Got it.”

“You're mean!” she mock-sniffed.

“It's just self-preservation, my friend. Who would play a word game with a walking dictionary?” Potter winked at her, his grin taking the sting off his teasing.

Hermione rolled her eyes and let it drop.

“What about a card game? I see a Rummy deck.”

“What's that?” asked Potter and Neville simultaneously.

“Right,” Terry sighed. “I highly doubt we'll find a card game we all know how to play, except for Go Fish, and really, that's just sad.”

“Wait,” said Potter suddenly, “wait. We're really doing this? I mean, are we seriously wanting to take a break here and play a board game?”

They looked at each other.

“Yup,” nodded Neville.

“Sounds fun to me,” shrugged Terry. It sounded half-crazy and half-ridiculous too, but he wasn't going to voice this. He needed a break, damn it!

“I think we all agree,” smiled Hermione. “Well, except for Malfoy.”

They shot a glance at the blond, who'd gone off in a huff a while ago and was now glaring holes in all of them and the floor alternatively.

They looked at each other again. And shrugged. If he wanted to be a spoilsport, he could be one off in a corner by himself!

“Alright,” said Potter smiling. “Then I have the perfect game.”
Chapter 46

Harry was holding up a small, peach coloured box starring a short, squat cartoon 'hero' with a horned colander-helmet, big teeth, an even bigger sword, an absolutely huge hammer and a power saw. And pink trainers.


Grinning, Potter flipped the box over, so that Terry could read the back too: “Go down into the dungeon. Kill everything you meet. Backstab your friends and steal their stuff. Grab the treasure and run. Admit it. You love it.”

“Harry,” interrupted Hermione in a carefully controlled tone. “Harry.”

The green-eyed teen's grin just grew wider.

“Hundreds of thousands of copies sold!” went on Terry. “Millions and millions of monsters slain! Munchkin captures the essence of the dungeon experience with none of that stupid roleplaying stuff.” He stopped. “No- seriously? Potter, I never thought I'd say this, but maybe Malfoy has a point about your sanity, if nothing else...”

The Gryffindor ignored him and turned the box over again, reading aloud himself: “You and your friends compete to kill monsters and grab magic items. And what magic items! Don the Horny Helmet and the Boots of Butt-Kicking. Wield the Staff of Napalm or maybe the Chainsaw of Bloody Dismemberment!”

“Oh, for the love of...!” huffed Hermione.

Potter looked up at them, mischief in his every feature: “Try and tell me you don't want a Chainsaw of Bloody Dismemberment. Go on, I dare you!” he laughed.

Terry opened his mouth to say just so, but he had to stop as he realized that a part of his mind – a small, insignificant part, of course – was liking the sound of 'Boot's Boots of Butt-Kicking'. He could even imagine the wicked-looking spikes they were bound to have on their points. And really. You couldn't go around with stuff like that and not wield something adequately matching. Like that Walking Sword of Doom in the little picture to the side.

Hermione rubbed her forehead: “Harry. I hate to tell you, really, but this looks like the kind of flimsy humour that-”

“Look at the pictures! They're amazing. Look!” he opened the box and flipped a random card: it was titled 'Flaming Poison Potion' and it depicted a very convincing short, bald wizard, complete with pointy, star-covered hat, running through it so fast he was leaving his beard behind in an effort to get rid of a grenade-like black vial. With flames coming out of it. And a skull-and-crossed-bones 'danger-of-death' symbol.

“Poor bloke must have messed up his potion. Oh, how I feel for him!” muttered Neville jokingly.

“Oh, if it could but happen to Snape...” murmured Potter dreamily.

“Harry! That's horrible,” sniffed Hermione. “Besides, great art doesn't change the fact that it sounds like a completely pointless game and-”
“Oh, come on! It sounds brilliant!” enthused Potter. “It's bound to be funny, it says so right here!” he pointed to the lower end of the publisher's description: “Fast and silly, Munchkin can reduce any roleplaying group to hysteria.”

“Harry, that's a promo, they would say anything...” tried Hermione. “Besides we're not a roleplaying group!”

“That's kind of debatable,” muttered Terry, who had some summer experience with that kind of games. “We sure have the dungeon part down pat. And the 'crazy Dungeon Master with absurd plot ideas' one too.”

“Maybe, but don't you think we've had enough of dungeons for now?” attempted Neville, though he was fighting chuckles. “I thought the point was taking a break from this stuff...”

Potter paid them no mind: “And, while they're laughing, you can steal their stuff,” he went on reading.

There was a long silence.

Then Terry and Neville looked at each other and burst out guffawing.

“None of us knows how to play!” tried Hermione, with the look of someone who's fighting a losing battle and knows it.

“So we all start out on an even footing!” replied Potter with a bright smile. “Plus the rules are pretty clear. And funny, too,” he entreated. “And it's all about player interaction, so it's bound to be fun!”

“Can't we try Uno instead? It's fast, easy, and has a lot of interacting!...”

Potter pouted.

Hermione glowered. Then sighed.

Terry and Neville exchanged helpless looks.

“Munchkin?” Terry asked, resigned.

“Munchkin,” Neville sighed.

As it turned out, however, Potter's idea was absolutely brilliant. The rules were easy, the pictures and texts hilarious, and it took them no time at all to get their interactions to new and unexplored heights of nonsense. And the rhythm of it all went well with munching sweets, too.

Soon they were lost in the surprisingly funny card game, kicking dungeon doors open (that is, flipping a card with a door on the back from the proper deck) and dealing with the various monsters, traps and the sundry thingies it threw at them. Or laughing themselves silly at the descriptions.

Halfway through the game Terry the Hardened Orc Warrior had the misfortune to be trapped on a doorstep by a Wannabe Vampire and, not knowing any clerical 'booga-booga', he was forced to listen to him talk about his Very Cool Character for three hours – and of course, Potter offered to interpret the wretched creature... Terry had to promise Hermione to build her a monument so that she exerted her authority to turn his sentence into a three-minutes happening... good thing he didn't specify how big the monument had to be, too... his tie was really collecting experience with being
transfigured into all sort of stuff.

Then Elvish Princeling Potter started offering help to all and sundry, scaring monsters away with his Very Impressive Title, until they figured out he was stealing away with a bonus level for himself every time, the jerk... just because Elves supposedly prized generosity... all those Oh-no-it's-a-random-encounter Cards served him right! Especially the Duck of Doom!

Neville the Halfling Thief managed to collect an astounding amount of Treasures while they weren't looking, only to sell them all at double their price and buy himself as many levels as the others had painstakingly earned by throwing improbable bonuses at even more improbable fiends... then again, when you have to use a Footstool to reach the monster you're supposed to defeat... yeah, Terry could see the value in going the trader's way.

It was Hermione the ½ Breed Dwarf Cleric who took the cake, however, when she entered a glaring contest with a Plutonium Dragon, brandishing her Cheese Grater of Peace and a showy collection of veritably odd Enhancements and finally tipping the scales in her favour by fishing out of her Portable Hole... “A what?”

“A Swiss Halberd,” she repeated matter-of-factly. Then went on in an inspired imitation of a promo-girl: “A very versatile two-handed pole weapon consisting of an axe blade topped with a spike mounted on a long shaft and with a hook or thorn on the back side of the axe blade for grappling, as well as various useful tools stowed inside the shaft through a pivot point mechanism, such as screwdrivers, can openers, tweezers, corkscrews, toothpicks, scissors, fish scalers, sawblades...”

By the time she got to 'ballpoint pens' and 'nail files', they were all laughing so hard they had troubles breathing.
The fun was exactly what they'd needed. Terry was still bone tired, not to mention rather sore, and rather inclined to just curl up somewhere for a nap, but he no longer felt weary and depressed.

A lot more relaxed and still occasionally guffawing, the four friends packed up the game and the rather amazing amount of empty boxes and discarded wrappings they'd accumulated “munching during Munchkin” - as Potter quipped, making them all break into laughter again.

They stuffed everything haphazardly into the locker, which Hermione had to use a Colloportus on because it wouldn't close and no-one had any patience for putting things in in some sort of order to get them to fit behind the metal door.

Then by general consensus, they dragged themselves in a corner, which Hermione swapped with a couple well-placed Scourgify spells, before transfiguring their cloaks into mattresses and covers.

“We should probably arrange some guard turns...” said Potter sleepily.

“Just as long as mine's not the first,” mumbled Terry, collapsing on the bumpy mattress.

There was no answer and he opened one eye blearily, trying to figure out what was going on. Had they all dropped off already? That was fast...!

But no, they were very much awake still; Hermione and Potter seemed to be engaged in an argument made up entirely of glances.

Terry watched them fascinated.

Hermione's expression was slightly pleading. Potter scowled. She gave him a flat look. He shrugged. She didn't relent. He closed his eyes wearily. Opened them again and gave her a very pointed glance. She raised her eyebrows in confusion. Potter darted his gaze to where Malfoy was glowering at them nearby. She followed his eyes briefly, then looked at him, at once blank and expectant. Potter raised an eyebrow, as if to show a point. It was her turn to scowl.

Terry was mesmerized. It was like watching a movie in a foreign language. Without subtitles.

Now they were glaring at each other, not in a mean way, but merely challenging.

What the hell was that all about?

Hermione suddenly raised her chin in a haughty manner, flicking her hair with faked nonchalance. Potter's lips twitched in a grin and his gaze turned halfway between exasperated and rueful. They both turned to glance at Malfoy, who was now muttering to himself and kicking the small chippings on the stone floor in a bored manner. Then they looked at each other again.

Potter closed his eyes again, his whole posture of exaggerated resignation. Hermione was smug and apologetic and amused all at once.

The green-eyed boy sighed exaggeratedly and scooped up a couple pebbles, bouncing them lightly on his palm. He shot a put upon look at his best friend. She smiled warmly and a bit mischievously at him.

Potter rolled his eyes and threw a little pebble at Malfoy, who predictably, glared at him. “What
the hell do you think you're doing, Potter!” the blond growled, marching up to his declared rival.

Hermione busied herself with arranging her transfigured covers, for all appearances ignoring the two boys.

Potter stood braced and confident, arms crossed and smirking. Mockingly, he taunted the annoyed blond: “Going to bed on an empty stomach, Malfoy? Not very Slytherin of you, I dare say. Shouldn't you be taking advantage of the resources available to conserve your strength?”

The sarcasm was so heavy in his voice it almost covered the sensibility of the objection. “More and more I find myself wondering how you wormed your way into the Snake Pit...”

“Why, you!...” yelled Malfoy, offended.

Terry blinked in wonder: had those two been arguing about Malfoy's dinner? Or, lack thereof, as it were?

Be that as it may, the deliberately taunting tone sorted the desired effect. After a quick and heated exchange of insults, the blond stalked off on his own with a last, spat “Leave me alone!” but Terry noticed that he grabbed some snacks and water on the way, all the while glaring burningly at Potter.

“Oh, but how can we go on without your scintillating company?” muttered the green-eyed teen sarcastically, but in a very low voice.

Hermione gave him a small, knowing smile, as she snuggled on her makeshift cot. Potter made a face at her, but there was an undercurrent of smugness in his countenance.

Terry stared at both in disbelief, too tired to wrap his mind around the weird notion of Potter tricking Malfoy out of concern for his well-being.

Oh, well.

He yawned, and curled up under his own impromptu quilt.
It was beyond hard to tell the time at a glance underground, so Terry couldn't have said if it was
day or night when he woke up with a huge yawn.

It seemed cool to say that he woke up at dawn, though, so he let his sleep-addled brain go with
that. He had more important worries anyway, like his stomach clamouring for breakfast.

He blinked his eyes blearily.

They had been forced to sleep with the lights on, because they had no idea how to turn the glaring
off, but judging from his pounding headache, it hadn't been the best idea. Or maybe it was due to
the hard floor. Or the cold. Or the soreness and bruises from the madness they'd gone through the
day before. Or...

Terry groaned and firmly told himself to shut up.

He rubbed his hands over his face and ran them through his short hair a couple times. It probably
wasn't doing any good for his appearance, but it made him feel slightly better. His vague gaze
followed the descent of the hand he dropped to the side until it fell on the rumpled blue tie that had
been a pillow for part of the night. And quite a lot of other things the day before. He felt absurdly
happy to clasp it. Comforting like a teddy-bear.

He needed to wake up before he went completely over the edge of reasonableness.

Abruptly, he realized that he'd been staring unseeingly for a while. And that what he'd been staring
at was, by the looks of it, Potter and Malfoy arguing. Silently.

Wow, those two really had the whole drive-each-other-up-the-wall-in-every-circumstance thing
down to an art form.

With a deep sigh, he got up stiffly from the bungled and rumpled amass that was his robe and made
his way unsteadily over to where Hermione was... cooking something.

He blinked in surprise.

Then his mind caught up with him. Right, right... they were wizards and witches. Nothing
altogether strange with a girl holding a probably transfigured teakettle over a definitely conjured
blue flame. Perfectly sensible to just enjoy the results of her magic. A well-made cup of hot tea can
warm the heart and soul even in the direst circumstances. Though where she'd found the tea bags
was a mystery...

He sank to her side with a slurred “Mornin' ” and just stared bleary-eyed at the mesmerizing dance
of the little blue flame. He didn't even react when Potter plopped down beside him, uncaring what
the first spat of the day had been about.

After he'd eagerly downed the first, wonderful, perfumed sip from the cup he'd extracted from his
trusty tie and was now cradling jealously in his hands, relishing its warmth, a clearer thought made
his way insistently to the front of his mind.

“Ehi, wait a sec. Weren't we supposed to stand guard in turns?” he asked confused. He was pretty
sure he hadn't been called upon for such a duty. Or had he? Surely he hadn't just fallen asleep on
his watch?
“Hermione's brilliant,” shrugged Potter, as if it explained everything, which Terry supposed could be considered reassuring, except that a more thorough explanation wouldn't have gone amiss in his book.

“Yeah?” he asked leadingly.

“I just thought it was the smartest thing to do,” she said, her cheeks reddening a little. “I mean, it's not like it's really that complex, merely complicated, after all, but if one pays sufficient attention to how it's all put together, then it is quite effective.”

“Like I said,” nodded Potter, “she's brilliant.”

Glaring, Terry decided that he was not in the mood to play guess games this early: “I must really ask you to be a little more obscure on the matter,” he said sarcastically. “Why, someone might even understand what you're saying!”

They started, then laughed sheepishly.

“I'm sorry, Terry,” said Hermione apologetically. “We're talking about the perimeter alert I put up before falling asleep.”

“Perimeter alert?” he asked, interested.

He knew the concept from the muggle world, of a device that let people know when someone entered their property by making it so that anyone who crossed a strategically disposed beam would trigger an alarm, siren or strobe light. He supposed it stood to reason that there would be a magical equivalent. But where had Hermione found the right spell? Or had she come up with it on her own?

The interesting field of research did wonders to wake him up and he plied the smart girl with questions. He gaped at her admission that she'd modified an existing charm. An Herbology one at that!

“It's amazing, isn't it?” nodded Neville knowingly. “I must have used that charm a thousand times to protect my flowerbeds in the greenhouses... never in a million years would I have dreamt of using it out of context, though,” he chuckled.

“Oh, well, it wasn't anything much!” the girl told them with faintly reddened cheeks. “I just thought, if it can be used to jolt trespassers in warning around flowerbeds, why not around our cots?”

“But how did you twist it so that it would jolt us awake instead?”

“I didn't,” she explained matter-of-factly. “I just made it so that it would jolt both the trespassers and us-”

“Which is good, because it gives them that moment of surprise that lets us clear off our disorientation,” butted in Potter knowledgeably.

“...by linking our socks to the edge I set as perimeter for the spell through a slightly altered Protean Charm,” finished Hermione easily.

Terry shook his head in mute wonder, goggling at the casual mention of a slightly altered N.E.W.T.-level charm tossed out like it was routine.
“I have to ask, though, why socks?” was Neville's amused contribution.

Hermione just blushed and ducked her head embarrassed.

“I'm so going to use it against the Twins,” was Potter blithesome comment. “No more being caught off guard by nightly pranks!”

A cloud of freezing bad mood materialized over their makeshift campfire, throwing a shadow over the still brightly dancing blue flame, and they glanced up uncomfortably to see a scowling pale Slytherin watch them contemptuously.

He had dark circles under his eyes and the grumpy air of someone who was too tired even to sleep.

“If you don't get moving within the next five minutes, I'm going on alone,” he said acidly and then he was gone, off to sulk by the double doors and glare a hole in the wall.

“Jerk,” muttered Potter disgustedly, but he made an effort to pick himself up.
Chapter 49

Unless you were a trained Marine, however, packing up an overnight camp was no quick task, not even when said camp was basically made of rumpled robes you were supposed to put on and a bit of knick-knacks found in a locker that really had no sensible reason to be where it was.

Although, it was a blessing it was there, if nothing else because that was where Hermione had got the teabags from, Terry discovered.

She also had no qualms taking a small box out of it and slipping it into her outer pocket, where it barely fit. She smirked at Terry's raised eyebrows: “Just a little something for our next break.”

“I thought we'd eaten anything edible in there,” said Terry, who hadn't been too pleased to find out they'd been stupid enough not to plan for breakfast in advance. They'd made the best of a bad bargain and weren't going to mention their rumbling stomachs, but...

“It's not food,” Hermione shook her head apologetically and Terry slumped, disappointed. “It's a card game.”


She rolled her eyes, fighting not to blush: “It's not stealing! I'm going to give it back to the first opponent we find... but they left them here for us and... It's not stealing, per se, just... I'm just borrowing...”

Terry chuckled good-naturedly: “Relax, honestly! I was just teasing you!”

“Teasing her about what?” asked Potter nosily, making Terry jump two feet high with the way he'd sneaked up to them unnoticed.

“Don't do that!” he burst out, a hand to his racing heart. “Jerk!”

“What?” asked Potter with perfect confusion.

Terry looked at him bewildered: “Huh?”

“Jerk what?”

“Wha...?” Terry blinked, feeling rather lost. “Don't you know the meaning of 'jerk', Potter?” he asked, wondering if the Gryffindor was pulling his leg.

“Sure,” said Potter easily. “To pull.”

Terry opened his mouth, caught the mischievous hint in Potter's eyes and closed it again, glowering.

“Come on, let's go!” called Hermione in long-suffering tones.

It turned out that the Slytherin's ultimatum hadn't been a bluff. When they gathered before the mighty set of doors, Malfoy was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, they could spy a wooden panel dangling from the ceiling in the corridor beyond, faintly lit by orange candles. It was a roughly cut signal, the kind Terry was used to seeing in cartoons, and
odd-shaped balloon letters were painted on it in purple. The paint had dripped in a couple corners, staining the wood below the writing.

Walking confidently, Potter moved under it, tilting his head to read it: “Tongue Twisters Turns.”

“Tongue Twisters?” asked Neville, perplexed. “Are we going to get hexed down this corridor?”

They looked at him in puzzlement.

“What do you mean, Neville?” asked Hermione.

The boy didn't seem to understand their confusion. “Well, the tongue-tying charms are all classed as hexes, aren't they? Though I don't know why they would want to tie our tongues, unless we're going to meet someone who we aren't supposed to talk about all this to?”

Terry and Hermione burst out laughing: “Oh, Neville, no! Tongue-twisters are phrases that are designed to be difficult to articulate properly,” said the girl.

“Like, how much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? He would chuck as much wood as a woodchuck would if a woodchuck could chuck wood,” said Terry very fast, proud that he got it all out perfectly. He'd practised quite a lot one summer when he was young, after his brother had made fun of him for getting his tongue, very predictably, twisted.

“If one doctor doctors another doctor, does the doctor who doctors the doctor doctor the doctor the way the doctor he is doctoring doctors? Or does he doctor the doctor the way the doctor who doctors doctors?” fired off Hermione immediately, a competitive glint in her eyes.

“Trust her to make it a logic nightmare as well as absurd to say,” muttered Potter rather fondly.

Terry sniffed. He could do it, too! “Is sounding by sound a sound method of sounding sounds?”

Potter groaned.

“How many boards could the Mongols hoard if the Mongol hordes got bored?” volleyed Hermione back with a grin, and then she went on immediately: “If a sailor went to sea to see what he could see, what could he see besides the sea?”

Terry opened his mouth, but was cut off.

“If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?”

Everybody turned to stare at Potter.

“What?” he huffed, crossing his arms. “Am I the only one not allowed to have some fun?”

“By all means, Harry,” giggled Hermione, motioning him to continue.

“No, no! I know when I'm not wanted!” He turned his nose in the air, affecting being offended, but muttered to Neville as an aside: “This is the only one I can remember. Learned in elementary school, I'll have you know,” he said mock-smugly.

Terry stifled his laughter. Neville didn't bother.

“Anyway, they're used as word games because they can be quite humorous when they are mispronounced,” Hermione finished her explanation.
Neville blinked. “Oh!”

“Wait,” said Potter frowning unhappily. “How do you know that? I mean,” he went on impatiently before anyone could answer, “how do you know that Neville isn't right and that this,” he gestured to the dangling signal, “indicates muggle tongue-twisters?”

Terry and Hermione shared an embarrassed glance. “Huh... I suppose we don't,” they admitted.

“But it makes more sense that we're to face another game and not just a hex,” contributed Neville.

“Oh, huh, good point,” accepted Potter. “Shall we go, then?”

A handful of steps down the corridor, they nearly missed the script on the right wall, spidery and narrow writings in purple ink on the bare rock.

Amidst the mists and coldest frosts,
With stoutest wrists and loudest boasts,
He thrusts his fist against the posts
And still insists he sees the ghosts.

“How lovely,” muttered Potter. “Sense it makes... zero.”

“They don't necessarily have to make sense, Harry,” said Hermione patiently.

A little further, they found another, this time on the left wall.

When a night's light, like tonight's light,
You've no need to light a night-light
For a night-light's light's a slight light,
So it's really not quite right to light it.

And then the corridor ended.
There was no warning, no doors, no outline of openings or mechanisms, no triggers, nothing. The corridor terminated in a cul-de-sac, stone walls closing seamlessly. Like a trap.

“Did we miss a turn?” asked Hermione uncertainly.

They retraced their steps, but they found nothing except the two tongue-twisters written on the walls. The double doors they'd entered from had, not unexpectedly, closed after them and looked quite impenetrable.

“Great, just great. Trapped in an empty corridor... just what I always dreamed!” moaned Potter irritably.

They milled about a little while, running their hands on the walls, poking and prodding randomly, trying to figure out where to go, but soon grew frustrated.

“I can't believe this!” grumbled Terry. “We're trapped!”

“Let's not lose our calm,” recommended Neville, who was cutting a rather imposing figure with his ugly silver Rod held firmly before him. “I'm sure there's a way out. We just need to find it.”

“And what if there isn't one?” asked Terry snidely. An empty stomach wasn't doing any favours to his mood or disposition. “Maybe Malfoy was right, maybe these Shadow Gamers are all wackos and trapping us here to die of boredom and starvation is their idea of fun.”

“Malfoy!” exclaimed Potter with the tone of someone who's had an epiphany.

“Where?” asked Terry, turning quickly around. However the blond was nowhere to be seen.

“Malfoy's not here!” said Potter, looking at them expectantly.

“You're just now noticing?” asked Neville incredulously.

Potter waved impatiently: “No, no- oh! For pity's sake! What I mean is, if he's no longer here, he must have found a passage or something to get out!”

“Or something...” muttered Hermione, eyes unfocused.

“What are you thinking about?” Potter turned to her hopefully.

“This corridor is called 'Tongue Twisters Turns', right?” she reasoned out. “Well, did you see any turn at all?”

They blinked and glanced at the length of passageway before and behind them. It was perfectly straight.

“Clearly, we need to find an opening that turns either left or right. They only things besides rock walls and flooring here are the tongue-twisters...”

Terry caught on: “If we want to turn, we have to vocalize the tongue-twisters? That what you mean?”

She nodded: “Probably.”
“Sounds like a plan,” said Potter, seizing the suggestion. “So which one looks easier to say?”

Neville and Hermione shrugged, but Terry stopped them: “Wait, wait! I have an idea.”

He fished his Ring out of his shirt and let it dangle before him, concentrating on the quickest way to reach the exit of this corridor. Its varying glow and twitching points led them rather quickly to the first tongue-twister they'd encountered.

Slowly and carefully, minding his pronunciation, Potter read it aloud, making Terry shiver uncomfortably with the way his sibilants hissed through the air eerily.

Nothing happened.

“Hum,” tried Terry, fidgeting awkwardly. “The game, with tongue-twisters, is usually to say them as quickly as possible without mistakes…”

Hermione nodded pensively: “It’s probably got a time limit, you have to say it fast enough or it won't count.”

Potter glared at her and she shrugged unrepentantly: “That's how I would set up this game.”

The Gryffindor took a deep breath and prepared to try again. Terry fought the urge to beg him to let someone else do it, just so he wouldn't have to listen to the disconcerting hissing in his words again.

Potter blew out the verse in a mad rush, but stumbled on the thrusts his fist part, cursed, tried again, didn't go further than stoutest, yelled in exasperation and said it again more slowly. This time he managed to say it all, but apparently it wasn't fast enough.

“You have to say it faster,” said Hermione rather bossily.

Potter turned to her with an irritated scowl: “I would if I could, but I can't so I won't!”

Neville chuckled: “Getting into the spirit of things?”

“Huh?” asked Potter, derailed.

Terry realized how his little outburst sounded and chuckled as well.

“Oh, fine!” spat Potter, annoyed. “You do it, then, if you think you're any better!”

Neville shook his head quickly, backing away a step. Terry shrugged: “Alright.”

He read the four lines carefully a couple times, then took a deep breath and spat it all out as hurriedly as he could manage. It took him two tries, but then the stone upon which the tongue-twister was inscribed sank noiselessly into the floor, baring a rough opening behind it.

Further, the corridor did indeed turn, in a slow arc to their left. The left gallery-like stone wall sported small rectangular alcoves, regularly spaced. Each was covered by a fluttering light curtain and on the nearest ones, they could spot neatly printed text.

Hermione approached the closest alcove on the left.

“Can you imagine an imaginary menagerie manager imagining managing an imaginary menagerie?” she read aloud, only hesitating briefly here and there but pulling it off rather well.
“No,” deadpanned Potter.

“Can you deposit a dozen double damask dinner napkins on a desk?” read Terry from where he’d moved to the next one.

“I suppose, if I had the napkins... and the desk...” pondered Potter, mock-seriously.

“What does double damask even mean?” wondered Neville, but he was ignored.

“Oh, this one's easier,” said Hermione. “Can you think of six thin things... a-uff!” she complained. “I got it wrong!”

“Six thin things,” stressed Terry with a little smirk.

She poked her tongue at him.

“Ooh... look! Your poor tongue! It's all twisted!” he mocked, eyes dancing with mirth.

“You're impossible!” she huffed.

“Can you think of six thin things and of six thick things too?” enunciated Potter clearly. He looked rather pleased with himself, too.

“Yes, I can think of six thin things and of six thick things too,” replied Neville without missing a beat.

The alcove sunk into the ground, baring a passage.

They all groaned. “I can't believe this...”

They poked their heads in and groaned again when they saw the passage led back to the initial corridor.

They left it at that and chose to move along the arc instead, fairly ignoring the rest of the alcoves.

“Where has Malfoy gone off to, anyway?” complained Potter as they moved on. “Shouldn't we have caught up with him already?”

“Missing him?” taunted Terry, smirking.

Neville snorted incredulously. Potter gave them both a dirty look: “You'll miss him too if it turns out we have to go back and look for the prick...”

“Oh-huh,” frowned Terry, “hadn't thought of that...”

“There's a fork,” announced Hermione, pointing somewhere before them.
Chapter 51

The left corridor's wooden door bore an oval panel upon which was inscribed:

I thought a thought
But the thought I thought
Was not the thought
I thought I thought.

The right one had a square panel and it read:

Of all the felt I ever felt,
I never felt a piece of felt
Which felt as fine as that felt felt,
When first I felt that felt hat's felt.

“They're equally bad,” complained Potter.

“I think Malfoy went that way,” commented Neville pointing to the left.

“What makes you say that?” frowned Hermione.

“Because the door is ajar.”

“Oh!” said the girl, rosy-cheeked.

Terry, too, felt like blushing. It was pretty obvious, now that it had been pointed out to him.

“Hey, Terry,” said Potter abruptly. “Can't you find that git with your trinket?”

Terry blinked at him, then nodded: “Probably.”

But the Ring couldn't do much more than glow softly near the right door and dull by the other, while the points, rather unhelpfully, indicated the direction between the two. “This is going to take some time,” he sighed.

Since the door was already open, they went on unhindered and walked down a corridor that was the twin of the earlier one with the alcoves, except that it curved in a wide arc to the right.

Terry glanced distractedly at the alcoves, relatively sure that they didn't need to bother with them.

“Odd, though,” commented Potter, who seemed more interested in the little rectangular spaces.

Terry heard some muttered comment from Hermione about curious cats getting themselves killed, but ignored her along with Potter. This corridor had already lost whatever appeal to him.

“What are you doing, Harry?” came Neville's voice from behind them as he and Hermione resolutely marched on.

“Would you look at this thing? It's like there's a protective bubble around this bowl of, well, they look like crisps, really,” replied Potter, moving around one of the alcoves to look at it from every angle.

“So?”
“So, it's intriguing. Why would they protect crisps? What's so special about them?”

“Harry!” moaned Hermione exasperated, turning to glare at him impatiently.

“What? I'm just curious!” he protested.

“Precisely!” grumbled the girl.

“How can you be sure they're crisps?” asked Terry acidly. His empty stomach gave an unpleasant twist and he hurriedly added: “Mind, if they're really edible, then I'm all for getting them...”

“Ah-ha!” exclaimed Potter triumphantly. Then he cleared his throat and enunciated clearly: “Crusty crisps which crackle and crunch!”

The bubble in the alcove popped, allowing him to reach for the unfortunately small bowl. He sniffed one crisp and threw it happily into his mouth. It did crunch under his teeth.

“Honestly, Harry!” sighed Hermione.

He simply held out the bowl to her. She crossed her arms, huffing: “I don't want god-knows-how-old crisps so early in the morning!”

Harry brightened as he shrugged: “Suit yourself!”

“Your loss, our gain,” piled it on Terry, reaching out for a fistful of crisps himself. Hey, he was hungry!

Neville shook his head when they held the bowl out to him: “No, thanks. Between unknown food left lying about in a magical environment by who knows who or with what intention and starvation, I choose to go hungry.”

Potter and Terry stopped munching and stared, then looked at each other uncomfortably.

“Well,” said Potter. “We've started already. Whatever's going to happen is going to happen regardless.”

“Right,” agreed Terry. “No point in letting it happen on an empty stomach.” And he reached for more crisps.

Hermione shook her head disgustedly and wandered to check out the other alcoves.

“Clean clams crammed in a cream can,” she read aloud, popping another protective bubble, but she was careful not to even touch the almost rusty-looking tin.

“This one's empty,” called Neville from the last-but-one. “Maybe Malfoy got it.”

“Ooh, look at these!” Terry's eyes sparkled at what was in the last alcove, enveloped in a green protective bubble: dark brown, almost mahogany, leather wristbands, a good three inches wide, with cool looking metal studs. “I want them,” he declared, entranced, and quickly read the inscription aloud: “Lesser leather never weathered wet-there-red – argh!” He stumbled on his own tongue mid-way through and sulked.

Neville took up the task, reading very slowly: “Lesser leather never weathered wetter weather better.”

The insubstantial shield disappeared and Terry snatched the longed for items before anyone else
could lay claim to them, smugly pleased. So much for his mother's stern refusal to buy him any!

“Boys and their toys,” sighed Hermione long-sufferingly. “Now, can we go on? Please?”

“Here's the doorway,” Potter waved them over.

The thin, narrow writings above the wooden door read: *What noise annoys a noisy oyster?*

Terry sighed. “A noisy noise annoys a noisy oyster,” he recited obediently. “Merlin, this is more bothersome than the Raven on one of his bad days...”

“The Raven?” asked Hermione, curiously.

“Hm? Oh, it's the guardian to Ravenclaw Tower,” he explained. No need to get into details.

They were about to step through, when a soft cry from Neville made them twirl on the spot, wands out and ready.

The ugly Rod was glowing in Neville's hands, casting bluish-white eerie shadows on his glazed over eyes. The tall boy had a dazed look about him.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed in soft wonder.
“I can hear Malfoy!” Neville exclaimed, looking flabbergasted.

The others frowned: “I don't hear a thing...”

“No! In my head!” shouted Neville, eyes wild.

They froze and then Potter said carefully: “O-kaay... now that is disturbing.” Then he blinked, disconcerted, as the Rod's glow dulled and vanished under their eyes.

“Wait, wait. Do you mean that you can hear him, but his voice is so faint that it seems to be only in your head? Or that he's actually talking in your head? Like mind-speech or something?” asked Terry authoritatively, attempting to determine the scope of the phenomenon by a rational way.

“Mind-speech!” yelled Hermione and when everybody started and turned to her abruptly, she went on quickly: “Remember what Mr. Mokuba told us? About the power of the Millennium Rod? He said that it granted the holder the power of bending the wills of others through mind control, and also let its user telepathically communicate with their brainwashed 'servants'.”

“How do you remember that so precisely?” asked Terry in wonder.

He had an excellent memory, but they'd only heard the explanation once and he had a strong suspicion that she had recited it verbatim!

“She remembers everything,” assured him the other two Gryffindors matter-of-factly.

Hermione was going on as if she hadn't heard their comments: “Obviously, this is a lesser version, but like the Necklace and the Ring, it probably maintains some link with the original powers. Therefore it is not unthinkable that it allows the holder the faculty of mind-speech!”

“So, basically, Malfoy's talking to Neville through the power of the Rod?” clarified Potter.

Hermione started to nod but Neville cleared his throat: “I... don't think so. I mean,” he went on hurriedly when they turned to him. “I don't think he's talking to me. About me, rather. Hum. He's insulting me. In his head I think...”

“Excuse me?” blinked Hermione.

Neville went red in the face and lowered his head, mumbling: “He's... was... ranting about how I'm a useless slob and he's sure I'm the one who's holding us up and the reason he's having to wait... called me a brainless squib...” he swallowed.

“That git!” hissed Potter.

“Don't listen to him, Neville!” added Hermione, scowling.

“Then he went on with something about how even that Granger... ehm... muggleborn...” he shot an apologetic glance at Hermione and she rolled her eyes: “I can guess he used a rather ruder epithet. Don't worry, Neville. Go on!”

The tall boy shrugged: “That's it, really. The sound of his voice was already fading when he said your name and after that, it vanished. That's also when the Rod stopped glowing.” he added conscientiously.
“So I was right!” crowed Hermione. “This is connected to the power of the Rod!”

“The voice faded when he said Hermione's name?” asked Terry, an idea forming into his mind. “When did it appear? Do you remember the first thing you heard?”

“I-I'm not sure...” said Neville wide-eyed. Memory was not exactly his forte. “I-I don't... it was something like ‘useless Longbottom, fat slob that he is, I bet that’...”

He trailed off, wilting under Potter's furious gaze: “That... that...” the green-eyed boy seethed.

Terry was nodding thoughtfully to himself, his agile mind working out the mechanics of the strange phenomenon.

“Don't listen to him, Neville,” insisted Hermione. “He's a git!”

“You're worth twelve of Malfoy!” said Potter forcefully. “Any Malfoy. All of them together too, actually!”

Neville was slumping miserably, but he smiled at his friends a little, their indignation cheering him up. It's not like he didn't know Malfoy's opinion of him. There wasn't any need to give it any importance.

“Just ignore him!” advised Hermione dismissively.

“Not exactly easy when he's in my head,” pointed out the tall Gryffindor dryly.

The girl faltered and Potter gave him a long, dark look: “I get you,” he said Potter. “I totally get you.”

Terry was reminded of what Potter had told them in Ryou's jungle: that he sometimes got to see what the Dark Lord was doing at the moment; that he had, in effect, a mind link to a dangerous psychopath.

“Anyway!” he said quickly, eager to change the topic. “I think I've figured it out.”

He enjoyed their curious looks for a moment and then revealed: “Names are the key! It activated when Malfoy thought the name 'Longbottom' and, in a way, directed his thought-speech to Neville here... and it was interrupted when he thought of Hermione instead and started ranting at her!”

They pondered on this for a moment, then nodded. And Potter rounded on Neville, immediately making the logic leap: “Do it on purpose!”

“What?” asked Neville, startled.

“What? Think of Malfoy's name, then send him a mental message.”

Terry and Hermione both snorted, then intercepted each other's gaze and guffawed.

“What, now?” exploded Potter, exasperated.

“Mental... message...” giggled Hermione.

Potter rolled his eyes: “You know what I mean, Hermione!” he complained. Then he smirked and gave a perfect imitation of her typical sniff: “Honestly!”

“All right, I'll try,” said Neville, determined.
He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, curling his hands around the Rod firmly. Then his face scrunched up as if in an attempt at concentration... and then he cried out, surprised and alarmed, and let the Rod drop onto his own foot. He bit back a curse and a moan and quickly fetched it up, his nervousness nearly making him drop it again, then gave them all a very sheepish look: “Ehm... he’s panicking.” He shrugged, embarrassed and apologetic: “It kind of caught me off-guard, the way he started freaking out... loudly!” He winced.

Potter burst out laughing like a lunatic.

“Oh, dear,” commented Hermione, not sounding too worried. “We really should have tried it out with one of us first, so that you could get used to it...”

Neville smiled feebly: “I'm going to try again, ok?” he said almost calmly.

A moment passed, then another, then another. The tall Gryffindor didn't give any sign of being doing anything, inside or outside of his mind.

“Neville?” asked Terry, half-cautious half-perplexed.

“Oh, I'm just waiting until he runs down his usual insults. I imagine when he gets to the part about castrating my toad he'll be ready to listen, what do you think?” he asked Potter.

“Castr-” yelped Terry, half-chocking.

“Yeah, probably,” nodded Potter seriously.

Gaping at the nonchalance, Terry mouthed his horror for a moment, then gave up. He was a mere Ravenclaw. The intricacies of habitual interactions between Lions and Snakes were quite beyond him, and frankly, he was thankful for it.

“All right,” said Neville suddenly. “Here we go again!”
It was a fascinating thing, watching the expressions chasing each other on Neville's face as he went about his mental conversation with the missing member of their group.

Annoyance made a lot of appearances, as did shame and irritation, and to Terry's slight surprise, amusement.

“That's so completely amazing,” commented Hermione conversationally. “This Rod of his essentially makes him a mind reader. It’s... mind-boggling!”

“N-no, it's not... I don't think that's it,” replied Neville, momentarily distracted from his inner dialogue with Malfoy. “I can't 'read thoughts', or even emotions. I mean, I can get that he's angry, for example, but I get it from his choice of words and the 'tone' – it's really just like hearing a voice. And when he's not thinking directly at me, even if I concentrate, it's all just a kind of... I don't know... like wind rubbing on bark and with a lot of whooshes.” He shrugged rather helplessly.

“White noise,” muttered Hermione narrowing her eyes.

“So it's basically a magical handheld transceiver inside your mind?” asked Terry eagerly.

“A... what?”

“A walkie-talkie,” he explained.

“Oh!” nodded Potter, mock-knowlegeably.

“Err... yes, I suppose,” admitted Neville.

Terry nodded thoughtfully: “The Rod probably activates some sort of channel, only on 'mind-waves' rather than radio-waves and you don't need a portable device – well, other than the Rod itself... it's quite amazing that anyone can receive your transmission, though, and that you can hear from anyone.”

“Maybe he can't,” suggested Hermione pensively. “Maybe it will only work with people he knows personally.”

“Since he needs to 'address' the communication through use of a name, that's quite likely. However I wonder if someone he doesn't know but who knows him could send a message. Or if he could contact someone that he only knows by name...”

“I'm curious about the possibility of a half-duplex channel of sorts – you know, only him transmitting, but with any number of listeners...”

“I wonder if the effect could be recreated...” wondered Terry, more and more intrigued. “If we could put together a set of spells that allowed us to simulate this outcome...”

“Oooh... imagine...” said Hermione excitedly. “We could perhaps enchant, I don't know... headphones...”

“...and distribute them to groups that need to keep in contact, just like walkie-talkies, only they wouldn't need to worry about speaking aloud... I bet Aurors and Hit-wizards would love it...”
“That would be amazing!” enthused Hermione. “Maybe if we take apart some...”

“Ah-ehm!” Neville cleared his throat loudly, making the two of them jump. “Not that this isn't fascinating...”

Potter snorted.

“...but shouldn't we, like... go on?” He gestured to the far end of the hallway.

“Come on!” Potter grabbed both Terry and Hermione by an arm and dragged them forward. “You'll have time to plot the revolution of magical means of personal communication later!”

“Malfoy says this is probably the last trait of the Corridor, from what he remembers, and to hurry up,” Neville reported in a dutiful tone when they reached the next door.

“I bet he said more than that,” grumbled Potter.

Neville gazed at him blandly.

“Last part, then?” asked Hermione with forced lightness. “I don't suppose he'd make himself useful to the point of telling us what to expect?”

“Oh, well, you know him,” chuckled Neville. “But, he did say that he's taken care of the stupid fireflies as well as the thrice-damned swans – actually, he went and really cursed them with three different epithets – so even we should be able to get by, in his oh-so-mighty opinion.”

“Typical...” grimaced Potter.

“But what does it mean?” asked Hermione, bewildered.

Potter was already swinging the small door open and peering inside. A cacophony of cries and calls and thumping noises blasted out of the opening.

“What's in there?” asked Terry, unable to stifle his curiosity.

“Frogs,” was the very dry answer. “And snakes and birds and quite a lot of fish...”

“Excuse me?”

Terry bumped the Gryffindor's shoulder to have a peek himself.

The scene in the narrow passage beyond was about as serene and orderly as a three-rings circus and confusedly colourful enough to resemble a kaleidoscope.

A bunch of animals were running around in patterns of any shape, starting and leaving off completely at random, generating enough noise and confusion to give Terry a mild headache. He bemusedly made out some apes that were throwing apples at each other, at least one goose honking and waddling in circles, fluttering bats attacking self-moving bicycles, a few frogs whose calls were so loud they reverberated over the cacophony at random intervals, some plump, soft-plumaged birds he couldn't name, and, indeed, quite a lot of fish that somehow didn't seem to need any water.

A toad suddenly croaked right at his feet, making him jump a foot in the air with a very undignified squawk.

Nothing in the passageway appeared to be still for more than two seconds at a time and absolutely
“Whoever designed this was certifiable,” muttered Terry in vaguely horrified fascination. “Or very fond of mushrooms.”

“Oh, look!” exclaimed Hermione, who seemed to have an uncanny knack for finding anything written within a five miles radius.

She was pointing to a stone slab just inside the door, where ten lines were inscribed, all of them but two glowing pulsatingly.

She rapped smartly the lower of the dulled lines: “I think this is what Malfoy meant.”

Squinting, Terry managed to read: *Six sleek swans silently swimming swiftly.* It was just above *Seven slick slimy snails slowly sliding,* which in turn glowed softly above a line about the *Eight apes that ate eight apples.*

He groaned.

“What on Earth are thrushes?” wondered Potter, bewildered.

“A very common group of passerine birds,” was Hermione's prompt reply.

“Oh,” said Terry. Well, now he had a name for the plumpy birds, as well as the purple flowers with sharp prickles they were whacking around: *Three thriving thrushes thumping thirty thistles* was inscribed right above *Four flimsy fireflies fluttering fearfully over fields.*

“All right,” said Potter decisively. “No point in dwindling about. I'll take this one!”

He tapped the fifth line with his knuckles and then took a deep breath: *“Five fat frogs fleeing frantically from fifty fierce fish,”* he said all in one go.

The mad circus stopped abruptly, stilled in a general, unnatural pose. Frogs and fish all disappeared from the scene with a light 'pop'. While they gaped, Potter launched himself through the suddenly statuary animals and made it to the other end of the passageways with nothing worse happening than a rather spectacular stumble over a frozen goose drawing a very heartfelt curse as he got up rubbing his bruised shoulder.

The moment he cleared the furthest bat, noise exploded again and everything was moving even faster than before.

“So...” sighed Hermione, resigned. “Do you want the apes, the toads or the bats?”

Terry shrugged and went with the *Nine nice night-bats biting bikes.*

Leaving behind a considerably less crowded but still very noisy carnival, they emerged in a small area before a closed set of double doors, in front of which Malfoy was glowering, arms crossed and impatiently rapping a foot.
“About – bloody – time!” the blond hissed. “What in the name of Morgana's tits held you up so long?”

“Morgana's tits have names?” laughed Potter.

Malfoy looked at him strangely, then decided to ignore him.

He ignored Neville too. Actually, Terry noticed that the Slytherin was very carefully avoiding the taller boy's eyes and that he tensed slightly whenever Neville made a move.

He also watched him size him and Hermione up, as if debating whether addressing a Ravenclaw muggleborn was more acceptable than addressing a Gryffindor muggleborn. Apparently, it was, because Malfoy turned to Terry and he even displayed some semblance of civility.

“Couldn't you work through the damn tongue-twisters more quickly, Boots? Surely you at least had enough sense to manage them?”

Terry blinked at the back-handed compliment.

“Well, excuse us if we actually needed time to...” started Potter angrily, then changed course mid-sentence: “Wait a second: you know what tongue-twisters are?”

Malfoy motioned with a disgusted air to the doors behind him: “That's what told me their name,” he said succinctly.

Above the doors, in big, loopy purple letters was painted _A thousand tricky tongue-twisters trip thrillingly off the tongue!_

They contemplated this for a brief moment.

“Whoever wrote that,” commented Potter blandly, “must have been smirking the whole, bloody time.”

Hermione nodded: “That, or else they were beaming so brightly and perkily you just know you should run, and fast...”

Terry snorted a guffaw, while Malfoy made a thoroughly disgusted nose that drew Potter's attention right back to him: “Oh, hey, but if you didn't know what they were before, how did you work through them so quickly?” he asked.

“Because I'm not stupid, maybe? It was apparent that they were activation strings!”

The boys glowered at the slur, but Hermione was not to be deterred from learning by a mere mocking tone and instantly fired questions at the blond: “Activation strings? What are those? How do they work? I've never heard the term. What do they have to do with tongue-twisters?”

“Don't you know anything, Granger?” sneered Malfoy. “I suppose I shouldn't expect much from a mu-muggleborn, but still!”

As usual, he loftily ignored Potter's enraged outrage on behalf of his best friend.

“Magic is often triggered by strings of syllables or sequences of sounds and it is only natural for
the human mind to try and twist them into recognizable words, to help with remembering them,” the Slytherin said arrogantly. “There are some so well established ones that even low-class grannies like the Weasleys will teach their bratty grandchildren...”

Neville calmly grabbed Potter's wand arm and held it tight as the other Gryffindor fumed.

“You know...” Malfoy went on, apparently oblivious if it wasn't for the gloating gleam in his grey eyes. “Like 'Flee from fog to fight flu fast' and 'May-born witches might only marry Muggles'.”

“I've never heard that last one,” commented Neville lightly while the three muggle-raised stared at him incredulously.

“How would avoiding fog cure the flu?” asked Hermione sensibly.

“I suppose every culture has its superstitions,” mused Terry. “And maybe it's just a funnier way to say you should stay warm and out of bad-weather.”

He shrugged at her grimace. Well, it made sense. Somewhat. More than the may-birth nonsense!

“Well, whatever!” said Malfoy impatiently. “I think you've wasted enough of my valuable time for today. Let's get a move on!”

“Wait! Look!” exclaimed Potter, pointing to the ground off to the side.

“What, now?” burst out Malfoy, pivoting on his feet completely exasperated.

“There's something here – like a note!” replied Potter, quickly moving to pick it up.

“Harry, for the love of...! Can't you just stifle your curiosity for once?”

“But it could be important!” retorted Potter reading it over. He blinked, then slumped. “Ah... never mind,” he muttered, his cheeks reddening slightly.

“Well, now you’ve picked my curiosity, Harry,” grinned Neville.

Rolling his eyes embarrassedly, Potter handed the piece of paper over. Terry and Neville bowed their heads together to read it aloud: “If you notice this notice, you will notice that this notice is not worth noticing.”

They burst out laughing.

“Well, maybe that'll teach you something,” said Hermione smiling gently.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Can we go now? Or do you need to indulge some other Gryffindorish ritual?” asked Malfoy nastily.

“Someone got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning!” scowled Potter.

Malfoy rounded on him in a fury: “I didn't get up from any side of the bed this 'morning', because there wasn't any damn bed!”

Then he turned around and stalked up to the double doors, whipping his wand out: “Alohomora!” he shouted and put such force into it, that the doors blew open.

The vast room beyond made them blink at the chaotic glare of many neon-lights. Some buzzing, upbeat background music with a groove filled the air, blending pleasantly with the overabundance
of reds and blacks.

The place was scattered with tables: some were oval-shaped and covered with green baize, with padded and slightly raised edges, a few were very long and rectangular, though with rounded corners, with high edges that barely let Terry see a covering of red felt with an intricate layout of cases drawn upon it. Most however were light-blue tables shaped as half-circles, with five luxurious looking chairs each along the curve.

Flashing neon-lights were shaped as attention-grabbing shocking pink signs blaring 'Poker' above the green tables, 'Craps' above the red ones and 'Blackjack' above the blue ones.

Terry felt his jaw drop.

Around the room there were lots of accessories, such as upscale brass dustbins, kitsch fuzzy dice hanging from the ceiling, garish swag lamps in stained glass with pictures of cards and dice.

What looked like slot-machines lined the walls, their noisy, fake-cheerful tunes clashing and making the room come alive, here and there making room for huge posters representing Ace Cards.

A far corner area was a bar, complete with shining black and polished steel furniture positively gleaming under the triumph of light that was the huge, wide-spread chandelier hung above it and rows of strangely shaped bottles standing at attention behind the tall counter, their numbers multiplied dizzyingly by the mirror they were lined against.

But what caught the eye the most were the mesmerizing, galvanizing wheels patterns of the sharp coloured area rugs, which seemed designed specifically to shake them all wide awake.

They barely had a moment to take the casino room in before a shout made them turn their head sharply: “Finally! You're here! I was almost thinking you'd never make it!”
Chapter 55

Their heads snapped to the right, to see a tall woman jumping to her feet and slamming both her hands on the table before her with violence.

She was definitely beautiful, thought Terry, but about as different from Ms. Ishtar as it was possible without changing species.

She had long blonde hair, falling down her shoulders in a mane of sensuous waves, alluring purple eyes and a lovely face that looked attractive even though it was twisted into an irritated scowl. And her body... Terry gulped involuntarily. Well, he had only ever seen that kind of body on certain magazines that his mother was never, ever supposed to find out about...

It didn't help that she wore a white corset so tight her breasts seemed on the verge of bursting out of it, and which her gutsy purple jacket did a very poor job of concealing.

Terry swallowed drily.

“For Salazar's sake, woman! Cover yourself! Have you no shame?”

Startled by the outburst, Terry swirled to stare at Malfoy, who looked completely incensed and also faintly horrified. The others were gaping at him as well.

“Bah!” Four heads swivelled back to the stunning woman, who'd straightened and was now glaring at them above her impressive breast, that seemed even bigger resting upon her crossed arms. “None of my former husbands ever had any complaints, brat,” she told Malfoy. “Not my fault if you can't appreciate the beauty offered to your innocent kiddie's eyes!”

She threw her blond mane back dramatically, smoothing her hands down her side sensually and thrusting her breasts out.

Terry went red to the root of his hair and beside him, he heard Potter choke on his own sputtering.

“Your attire is utterly improper!” spat Malfoy back. “Clearly your husbands were a bunch of coarse goons!”

“H-husbands?” squeaked Hermione. “Plural?”

The woman sniffed haughtily: “Yes – three, to be precise. Well, four if you want to get technical but it really doesn't count…”

“Four…” repeated Hermione weakly.

“For Salzar's sake, put on some clothes!” Malfoy cried, stalking towards her. “It's positively indecent!”

She paid him no mind and raised a finger to tap her chin delicately, looking at the ceiling in a mock-thinking pose: “Of course, the count is soon to go up once more, but I'm not sure this newest one counts either... it all depends on whether you count the men or the weddings, right?”

“Who cares, woman! Put this on!” snapped Malfoy in a very offended tone, thrusting at her his own cloak.

Terry found himself stifling incredulous laughter. “Let me get this straight,” he said. “You're more
freaked out by her attire than by the fact that she's about to marry her fifth man?"

Malfoy turned to look at him blankly: “What's so strange about her remarrying? Blaise Zabini's mother is on her seventh husband. My grandmother Druella buried two others before wedding my grandfather.”

Terry stared at him, wide-eyed: “And that's ok?” Slowly, he started to walk towards the two blonds and the others moved with him.

“There's no point in widows just moping about for decades!” protested Malfoy with an unconcerned shrug. “Especially if there have been no children from the previous marriages. That would be a waste!”

“A waste!” exploded Hermione, who seemed to have suddenly recovered all her breath. “A waste! Are women nothing more than broodmares to you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You stay there and talk as if the only reason for a woman to marry was to produce a child!”

Malfoy frowned: “Well. It is!”

Hermione swelled with indignation: “Why, you insufferable retrograde misogynist!”

“It's the duty of every pureblood to produce a magical child!” retorted Malfoy with purported dignity. “Witch or wizard, mind.”

“What if the child isn't magical?” asked Terry, just because.

Malfoy looked at him strangely: “Excuse me?”

“Would it be ok to remarry if you'd had a child from your previous marriage, but he or she was non-magical?”

“Squibs don't count, obviously,” Malfoy said dismissively. “They're completely worthless.”

“Figures,” muttered Terry darkly, glowering at the prejudice blond.

“You, you... loathsome... disgusting... aargh!” screeched Hermione, fumbling for her wand, fury in her eyes.

“Oh!” shouted Potter, hands raised in the sign for Quidditch time out. “This is neither the place nor the time for this discussion.”

The following awkward silence was broken abruptly by the loud sound of a fist hitting the table. They turned to their latest adversary, only to find that she had come around the table to their side... and that she had an expression as dark as a summer storm.

“You,” said the prosperous woman lividly, “are the rudest bunch of brats I've ever met. To ignore a lady so!”

She flounced her blond tresses loftily again, sharply turning her back on them.

Terry had a fleeting thought that she must be very used to her charm and appearance winning her favors – or at least attention – from men, before he caught a proper sight of her backside and promptly blushed at the purple mini-skirt, so short that a good portion of her long, long legs was
left uncovered by her boots, despite them being knee-high. All thoughts, fleeting or not, promptly fled him.

“Ha!” spat Malfoy, sounding disgusted. “A lady wouldn't dress like a harlot!”

She pivoted instantly, eyes blazing in fury, and slapped Malfoy's face soundly: “How dare you!”

The Slytherin cried out in pain and shock and stumbled back, half-tripping on Neville, who steadied him only to be seized and jerked harshly between the two blonds. Clearly, Malfoy felt the need for a human shield between himself and the furious woman.

For her part, she stalked off, returning to her place behind the table, and tossed over her shoulder: “Time is money, brats! Come here and play already! Or are you too chicken?” She spun around and smirked at them: “I suppose you're just little kids after all... perhaps this is too much for you?” Suddenly, she laughed, and it was at once seductive and nasty: “If you're scared now, just wait till you lose!”

Terry exchanged helpless looks with his companions.

It seemed they were about to become gamblers.
They reluctantly took position at the blue table, sitting on five of the stools ready for them.

The woman abruptly lost her scowl and her impatience and became all genial smiles: “So!” she shouted brightly. “What will it be? Poker? Blackjack?... Any preference?”

The five exchanged uneasy glances.

“Does anyone even know how to play?” muttered Potter, trying to keep their opponent from overhearing. Judging from her shark-like smile, he wasn't successful.

“I know how to play poker. Sort of,” whispered, quite unexpectedly, Neville. He was blushing and mortified, as if he'd done something shameful. “Seamus taught me.”

“He did?” said Potter sounding outraged. “How come he didn't teach me?”

Neville shrugged, embarrassed: “I doubt what I learned from him would be enough here, anyway. I don't think any of us has any chance of winning at poker against a professional player.”

“Nope,” agreed Terry. “Mind you, I don't think we have any chance at any of the games. The house always wins,” he said, gloomy. Then, as everybody stared at him, he added defensively: “That's what my dad always says!”

“Nonsense!” butted in the bosomy woman. “That's just what blue-noses say to keep you from having fun!”

They looked at her warily and she went on: “You should never listen to that kind of lousy, goody-goody spoilsports. Ha! Teetotalers, I'd bet - the lot of them. They never want people to enjoy themselves!”

She looked righteously upset. It didn't quite fly with them.

“Come on, kiddies,” she cajoled. “Show me some courage! Make. Your. Choice.” She watched them expectantly, then rolled her eyes: “This year would be nice.”

“Blackjack is perhaps the simplest to learn quickly,” said Hermione hesitantly.

“Of course it is!” the woman proclaimed in a sugary tone. “Blackjack is very simple!”

“Yeah, right,” muttered Terry with a sinking feeling. “Blackjack is very simple!”

“Anyone has a better idea? ...Didn't think so. Right, then. I suppose blackjack it is,” said Hermione with a sigh. “Hum. If you can explain the rules to us, that is.”

“Don't you worry, you little lost lambs.” She started shuffling a deck of common cards with a smug grin. “You know, I'm happy you chose this...” she shook her head nonchalantly, still shuffling, her agile hands a blur. “I'm particularly fond of this game, truly. I used to work as a blackjack dealer on a cruise ship. Ah, good memories!”

They froze.
"Ah... perhaps, on second thought..." said Hermione faintly. "Maybe... maybe poker isn't that bad an idea..."

"Do you really think it'll make a difference?" muttered Potter morosely.

Hermione shook her head disconsolately: "At least two of us know the rules already."

"Three," murmured Terry, who did, in fact, know the rules, though the closest he'd ever come to an actual game was watching movies.

"Knowing the rules doesn't really mean you know how to play," pointed out Neville nervously. "Or that you've played at all."

"Be that as it may, Neville, if you at least know something of the game than it's better than nothing, right?"

"Aw, don't be spoilsports!" cooed the woman, with an unnerving smirk. "I was so looking forward to a good blackjack tournament. It's been ages since my last!"

"Why'd you stop?" asked Terry before he could stop himself.

"Switched to Duel Monsters," she answered easily. "Much better for catching rich men. They never can resist getting challenged into dueling me!" She gave a swooning sigh as fake as a Barbie doll.

"Is that how you found your husbands?" asked Hermione, quite obviously still torn between outright disapproval of the woman and disapproval of Malfoy's disapproval.

"A few of them," she answered nonchalantly. "There were always suitors buzzing around me. Especially after I found my first Harpie Lady," she sighed reminiscently.

"Her what?" whispered Potter and Terry could only shrug, equally perplexed. At a guess, he'd say it was a card, but she made it sound as a pet almost, so he really wasn't sure.

"Most of them were pretty boring, sadly," the woman prattled on. "Mind you, they would pay good money to get a chance with me. But what can I say? A woman wants more than just cash – especially if she's made a good deal of it already." She laughed daintily. "Some of them were so insistent! You wouldn't believe what poor, dear Jean-Claude did just to gain my notice!"

Casting a rapid glance at them, she precisied: "Jean-Claude Magnum."

Then, since they didn't look very impressed, she went on petulantly: "Hello? Jean-Claude 'Badass Ninja' Magnum? The famous actor? The King of Kung-fu Movies?"

Awkward silence met her, while each presumably wondered how to tell her it didn't ring any bell with a shred of politeness.

"Humpf!" she sniffed, irritated. "Uncultured brats."

"So you duelled this famous actor?" asked Potter in a painfully obvious effort to be ingratiating.

"Damn right I did, and I defeated him soundly! The he proposed to me, right there on the Duel pitch. Ha! All of his swooning fangirls were green with envy, let me tell you."

"It must have been very romantic," said Hermione in a tone that dripped with her conviction of the contrary. "Was the wedding as idyllic?"
“Don't be silly, girl, I refused him.” The woman sniffed: “Who do you take me for? I told him to come back when he became a good duelist!”

They looked at her, wide eyed. “Did he?” asked Potter.

“As a matter of fact, he did.” Even she sounded a little surprised at that. “And, well. What can I say? I was in a terrible state at the time, really an awful period – all Joey's fault, of course – and Magnus was so infatuated... and he had become a better dueler, on the whole...”

“...So this time, you accepted him?” asked Terry, not entirely sure why he was even interested.

"Certainly not. The idiot was broke!" Abruptly, the woman slapped her hand on the table loudly and scowled at them: “Enough with the questions! What the hell, brats! Do you think we're here for an episode of Oprah's?! Stop your gossipmongering and let's get on with business!”

“Fine, fine!” said Potter, raising his hands placatingly. “So... how does this blackjack game work?”

“It's basically a comparing card game between players and dealer, from what I know,” answered Hermione.

“Precisely!” agreed the woman, sitting down again. “To win, you have to create card totals which will turn out to be higher than the dealer's hand – that's me, in case you're too dim-witted to figure it out. But!” She raised a finger patronizingly: "You must never go over 21: that's busting, kiddies, and it will get you out of the game faster than you can say 'you're lovely'!”

She got a few flat looks for that, but wasn't fazed.

“Card... totals?” asked Malfoy with the slightest trace of disgust in his voice.

“Are you stupid or what?” asked the woman bluntly.

Hermione sighed: “It's about adding up all the values of the cards: the jack, queen, and king count as 10, everything else as their natural value. The sum is what you use.”

“Give the girl a prize!” the woman mocked.

“What about aces?” asked Neville sensibly.

“Either 1 or 11 according to the player's best interest,” replied the woman promptly.

“Oh, well, that's something,” muttered Terry. It came out less sarcastic than he'd intended.

“Now, let us do things properly, hm? This is a real, casino blackjack table, and as you can see, the dealer faces the players – usually five to seven – from behind a semicircular table and – you see those markings?” she pointed at seven rectangular shapes in white print, arranged in correspondence to the seats they'd occupied. “They're called boxes. It's where you place your bets.”

“Bets?” repeated Malfoy in a faint voice. “Wait. This is gambling!”

"Yes," murmured Neville, a bit hunched over.

“You're only just noticing?” asked the woman incredulously.

“Maybe casino look different in the wizarding world?” wondered Terry.

“What, pray tell, is a casino?” asked Malfoy through gritted teeth.
“It's a public room or building for gambling and other entertainment,” explained Hermione.

“You mean it's a club for the low class,” sneered Malfoy. “Bah. It's no wonder that woman goes around like that, if she hangs about such places.”

“I don't think wizards have anything like that,” explained Neville, more conciliatory. “Gambling's not really something you would do openly.”

“It's not something to do at all! Not in polite society!” said Malfoy, scandalized.

“You seriously object to gambling?” wondered Potter. “Not that I blame you, honest, it's just... you argue for Muggle hunting. You can't possibly be opposed to something just because it's illegal!”

“It's not illegal, Harry,” corrected Hermione.

“What?”

“Gambling's not prohibited in the wizarding world,” confirmed Terry, who'd stolen Anthony Goldstein's copy of *You Can Get Arrested for That* by Joe Humdrum just a few months before and incidentally discovered, among many other things, that peeling shrivelfigs in a hotel room was illegal; as was, for some reason, riding a broom around an official building more than 50 times in a single session. Wizarding law could be dumb and weird at the same time.

“It's frowned upon, though,” murmured Neville.

“It's vulgar. So working-class. I can't believe you're forcing us to do something so demeaning!”

“No-one's forcing you, hun.”

“Good! Then we aren't playing!” Malfoy crossed his arms, looking the epitome of haughtiness.

“Well, how do you propose to leave this room, then?” asked the woman. “Because I assure you, kid, you ain't gonna get anything from me you haven't won!”

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Chapter End Notes

The book Terry mentions is based on an existing (and hilarious) one by Rich Smith, which deals with American dumb laws. Nothing to do with shrivelfigs whatsoever; but peeling oranges is, indeed, illegal in hotel rooms (at least in LA). So's driving around the town square more than 100 times in a row... and fishing in your pijamas... and drinking beer from a bucket... and - you know what? Muggle laws can be weird as well.
Chapter 57

Potter sighed dejectedly: "And what is it, exactly, that we need to win from you?" he asked in a martyr's tone.

She grinned evilly and straightened her pose, coincidentally thrusting her chest forward in a very distracting way; she pointed to the far side of the kaleidoscopic room: "See that little key there?"

"Uh... no?" said Hermione uncertainly.

Terry blinked, realizing he'd kept his gaze riveted on the woman quite haplessly, and obediently turned to look where she was pointing.

There was a deep green velvet curtain hiding a section of the wall.

"Right." The woman blinked at it, then gritted her teeth, jumped to her feet, stalked up to the curtain, threw it back with violence, stalked back and morphed her scowl into an alarming smirk. "That key," she reiterated with satisfaction.

A display reminiscent of a shooting game in a luna park was revealed, with all sorts of mostly useless and always tasteless things stacked without rhyme or reason on the overflowing shelves. An elaborately kitsch sign proclaimed them all 'prizes'.

There was, indeed, a key in there, haphazardly thrown among the mess. Gaudy, heart-shaped, as big as Terry's forearm, and looking less incongruous than it should have next to a man-sized, plushy polar bear wearing a knitted hat and a wonky toy cash register. A cheerful white tag indicated its price of 50 coins.

Typical.

They exchanged helpless gazes, then turned to her, resigned.

She smiled winningly.

"Right," sighed Hermione. "I guess we're playing after all."

Malfoy grumbled, but subsided.

"How does this work, anyhow?" asked Neville, sounding crestfallen. "Do we play for the coins or what?"

"Oh, it's really very simple!" the woman simpered. "Soul of simplicity, I am. Truly."

They stared at her, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Just hand over the entry price and we can get started!" She held out a hand invitingly. "One dollar per chip, darlings."

"Excuse me?!"

They gaped at her, completely nonplussed.

"You want us to pay?"
"One dollar per chip," she repeated serenely. "Bets are paid 1:1, and blackjacks 3:2!"

"Oh, that's rich," commented Malfoy in stunned disbelief. "First we're kidnapped, then we're forced to play a number of games for some mysterious bastard's sick pleasure, and now you want us to pay for the privilege of being robbed by a slutty gambler?!

The woman's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Well, tough!" he exclaimed, oblivious. "I'm not some plebeian idiot who'll waste their fortune on this kind of low-class entertainments!"

"I kind of agree with him on this," said Neville thoughtfully.

"Then stop wasting my time and leave!" shouted the woman, incensed.

"Err... we kind of... can't," pointed out Potter.

"Not my problem!" she fumed.

Silence followed, while she turned her nose up and refused to even look at them, and Malfoy and Neville kept their mulish frowns.

In a rather desperate attempt at moving past the stalemate, Potter tried probingly: "You know... you never told us your name."

The woman smirked, slanting a loaded look at him out the corner of her eye: "Flirting, little boy? My, my. How forward of you."

Despite the reddish tinge creeping to his cheeks, Potter insisted: "No, seriously. Why won't you tell us your name?"

"Honestly, Harry. Why do you even care?" sighed Hermione.

"I'm curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat," retorted the witch.

"I think your curiosity is more centered on my breasts than my name," teased the woman with a knowing smirk.

Potter went red up to his scar, but managed, to Terry's admiration, to shrug it off: "Just wondering how you ended up involved in all... this," he said with commendable nonchalance, twirling his finger to encompass the madness they'd been plunged into.

"Oh, well, that's Yugi's fault mostly. Or rather, Pegasus'. Or... well, I suppose it's all down to Pegasus' weird relationship with Yugi and his gang." She nodded, apparently satisfied by her indecisive conclusion. "So, yeah. Pretty much Yugi's fault." She tut-tutted. "Par for the course."

They exchanged dark glances. This 'Yugi' had come up an awful lot since this had all started.

"Do you know him well?" asked Hermione, trying for nonchalant. "Yugi, I mean?"

The woman shrugged. "I met the whole gang years ago, when Pegasus organized the Duelist Kingdom tournament on his private island."

"Oh, I remeber that!" exclaimed Terry, surprised. He'd been a little boy back then, and he'd never
taken an interest in Duel Monsters since, but his father had followed the broadcasts rather enthusiastically. "Wasn't there a bloke who summoned a baby dragon and then used a time card to age it and make it super-powerful?" It had looked both smart and cool from where he stood, and it had kind of stayed with him.

"That was my Joey!" she squealed with a sappy smile.

"Yours?" echoed Hermione sarcastically. "Let me guess, one of your... husbands?"

"Was, at one point." She chuckled. "Might well be again soon. I did kind of accept him again, after all. We're supposed to get married again at the end of the month."

"A-again?"

"As of right now, we're divorced. Have been for over five years," she shrugged.

"Divorced? What does that mean?" asked Malfoy blankly.

The three muggle-raised stared at him.

"A divorce is the dissolution of a marriage by judgment of a court or by accepted custom. It means she's no longer married to him," explained Hermione slowly, unable to believe he really didn't know.

Malfoy, however, seemed genuinely confused: "But she's not his widow?"

"Lord, no! The bastard's alive and kicking. And as sexy as ever!" the woman sighed dreamily again. Terry rather wished she didn't. She certainly had a flair for the soap-opera kind of dramatics.

"Weird," murmured Neville softly.

"How would she do that?" Malfoy asked much louder, sounding genuinely baffled. "What magic has united, nothing can divide."

"Oh, darling," the woman purred with a self-satisfied smirk. "It's just a matter of getting the right lawyers on your side!"

"...Right," muttered Potter, eyeing her weirdly. "And you met this Joey at the tournament you were talking about?"

"Oh, who cares?" grumbled Terry. "I'm rather more interested in this mysterious Yugi."

"Yeah, how did you meet him?" asked Neville.

"I told you! I was invited to the Duellist Kingdom tournament! We were all there."

"Who all?" asked Hermione with a slight frown.

"All of Japan's strongest duelists!" was the proud reply. "We were invited to compete for the title of "King of Games". Except, I would have been a Queen. Obviously." She sighed dreamily: "The most dangerous, cutthroat, relentless competition in the world of Duel Monster!"

"Why'd you go then?" asked Potter - rather naively in Terry's opinion.

"Hello-oo! Three million dollar prize money! You would have joined as well, if you had any skill!"
"Ah..."

"Were you really good enough?" blurted out Neville.

She scowled, offended: "I'll have you know, that I made it to the semi-finals, through a 48-hours long battle royal and a number of Eliminators! And I was defeated by the King of Games himself! That's how good I am." She threw back her hair with a definite air of 'so there'.

"Wow," commented Potter, rather sincerely.

"Wait... Yugi is supposed to be the King of Games, right? So you were competing against him?" said Hermione, narrowing her eyes slightly.

The woman shrugged.

"That doesn't sound like a good way of starting a friendship," commented Terry wonderingly. "The way you make it sound, there wasn't a lot of sportmanship around in that tournament, after all."

Rather grudgingly, the woman admitted: "They rescued my Star Chips from bloody Panik to help me stay in the tournament, alright?" She looked away for a moment. "Very decent of them."

"So that's how you became friends?"

She sniffed. "I suppose you could say so, yes." She gave a put upon sigh: "Then there was the whole unpleasantness with the Big 5 and the virtual world and being swept up in their mad quest to rescue Kaiba, not that he deserved it, the grumpy bastard. Although Joey looked very dashing in that emerald green jacket. And even better out of it."

Terry narrowed his eyes at the mention of yet another familiar name - he had no doubt that this 'Kaiba' was the same they'd met - but before he could open his mouth to ask for more, the woman shook her head sharply, making her hair whip about, and snarled: "But that's all beside the point! Are you going to pay the entrance fees or not?"
Chapter 58

After a long moment, Potter gave a long, resigned sigh and stuck a hand in one of his pockets, rummaging until he came up with three sickles and what Terry suspected was the D.A. coin, since the other boy hurriedly hid the flash of gold away.

"I don't have any dollars, I'm afraid. Err... we're British, you know. Will these do?" Potter asked with a winning smile.

The woman blinked. "Never seen money like that in my life," she said bluntly. Still, she fingered the coins with undisguised interest.

"They're sickles," explained Hermione quickly. "They're quite legal, Gringotts Bank releases them. Ehm."

To their utter shock, she seemed to recognize the name: “Oh! Gringotts!... Yes, of course. You know," she mused, “I’m really not surprised that they've got funny currency of their own. Weird lot, those dwarf-like moneybags.”

Mouth slack, Hermione stammered: “You- you kn-know about…?”

The woman stared down her nose at her: “It is a rather prominent credit institution,” she pointed out. Then she admitted: “Also, Yugi and his lot all keep their savings at Gringotts. Something about it being the safest place for storing precious stuff…”

"They do?" asked Terry, genuinely startled. Were their kidnappers/gamemasters muggle or magical, in the end? It was becoming more and more difficult to figure it out.

"And the rate of change?" inquired the woman.

"Five sickles the pound," Hermione replied automatically.

"Hermione!" hissed Terry, alarmed. He wasn’t overly sure of what the pounds to dollars rate was, but they should try for a more convenient rate than that! "You mean one sickle per pound!" he tried with a nervous smile.

Hermione looked startled, then embarrassed, and the woman smirked: “Nice try, kid.”

Then she looked them over calculatingly. “Five of these... sickles... for a pound, one pound for two dollars,” she said thoughtfully, “I say that makes – at the bare minimum – fifteen sickles for the five of you, wouldn't it?"

"No, it doesn't!" protested Hermione.

"Well, I say it does, and I'm the only bureau de change you'll find around here, so what I say goes!" grumbled Neville.

“I still don’t think you have any right to demand payment from us, considering we’ve been pressed-ganged into playing!” grumbled Neville.

She arched a blonde eyebrow at him: “Really, hun. You don't expect to play blackjack for free, now, do you?”

“Well, seeing as I don’t want to play in the first place…!”
“Look, we can argue from here ‘till morning, but somehow, I don’t think we’d go anywhere,” intervened Potter firmly. He went back to rummaging in his pockets and managed to produce another five sickles. “It’s only money,” he cajoled.

Regarding him with quiet disapproval, Neville calmly handed over three more sickles from his pouch. “That’s all I have.”

Terry grimaced when Potter looked in his direction and shook his head disconsolately. He was going to class, for pity's sake. What could he possibly have needed money for?

Apparently, Hermione agreed with him, because she sheepishly shook her head too.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes until they were slits and crossed his arms firmly. "Absolutely not," he declared through clenched teeth.

Potter groaned, letting his forehead fall onto the velvety table.

"You broke or something, hun?" the woman mocked.

"I'm not paying for something so positively disgraceful," he shouted, incensed. "Especially not for the sick convenience of a tarted up harlot!"

Fast as a cheetah, the woman shut him up with a resounding slap.

Malfoy stared at her in horror, a red imprint marking vividly his pasty-pale face.

“Back to the point,” snarled the woman, who was now giving Terry the disquieting impression of breathing smoke from her nostrils, like a dragon.

"Hum... We still don't know how to play," said Hermione in a small voice.

The woman took a deep breath, straightened, and recovered her smile. “Right! So. Let’s start with a brief tutorial, since you’re complete newbies. Each box is dealt an initial hand of two cards, both visible.”

She followed words with actions and Terry looked down to where her perfectly manicured hands, wrapped in purple fingerless gloves, had turned a queen of hearts and a five of spades for him. She’d also handed over a red, round casino chip with white markings along the border: it looked rather meager against his memories of piles of coloured chips as seen in movies.

Terry looked up again to watch the glaring contest she and Malfoy were suddenly in, her withholding the cards until he paid his entrance fee, him cradling his wounded cheek and equally wounded pride.

Potter sighed: "Malfoy. Please. I'll pay you back once we're out of the woods. Just... just give her the last four sickles. Please.”

Staring at Potter as if he’d suddenly spouted a second head, Malfoy slowly fished out an expensive mokeskin pouch – which Terry very much envied, though he didn’t want to admit it – and handed over the required money.

“There! See? Wasn’t that hard,” said the woman in grating, honeyed tones.

The four of them as one scowled darkly at her (Malfoy was still staring at Potter). Sadly, it didn’t have much of an effect.
“So. First, the players place bets by putting the desired number of chips in the circle in front of their seat. Don’t bother doing that this time, since it’s only for show. Next, you get your hand,” she gestured to the cards on the table.

Terry glanced discreetly over the other's cards - Malfoy's and Neville's hands were too far for him to see clearly, but Hermione had two fours, hearts and spades, and Potter a seven and a five of diamonds.

“You always get them face up. The dealer, on the other hand, receives its first card face up, but the second card is neither drawn nor consulted until the players have all played their hands.”

A ten of hearts appeared before her.

She waved her hand-held deck about.

“Then we start from my left and move clockwise.”

“Start what?”

“Why, giving out cards!” she said. “One at a time, as long as you want it. You can go on hitting until you don’t want any more cards – unless you bust, in which case you’re out and that’s that. If you don’t want another card, say you ‘stand’ and I’ll move on to the next player.”

She mimicked what she was describing and gave Potter a seven of hearts, after which he hurriedly told her he was alright, and Terry another queen - diamonds.

"Oh, dear," she said with mock-concern, halting her motions. "Busted!"

Terry grimaced.

“Since your hand value exceeds 21, all bets on it are immediately forfeit.”

“And once we’ve all made our decisions?” asked Hermione.

“The dealer’s hand must be resolved. That means I go on drawing cards until the hand busts or achieves a value of 17 or higher.”

She drew a 2 of diamonds, then a six of clubs.

“That’s it! I’m done – and Green Eyes here wins!”

“Because his hand is higher than the dealer's?” clarified Hermione.

“Precisely!”

She turned another card – a jack of clubs. “Ah, see? If instead of the six I’d gotten this one, I’d have busted. Like him,” she gestured to Terry. “If the dealer busts, all remaining player hands win. Got all that?”

“I suppose,” sighed Hermione – and they set about playing for real.
Chapter 59

Quickly and deftly, the busty blonde collected all the cards up again and shuffled the deck with obviously practised ease.

“This game sounds boring,” muttered Malfoy sourly. "Boring and plebeian."

"Maybe we should have tried poker. At least that's fun," murmured Neville, a little glumly. "And there's not as much math."

“Too late to change your mind!” their opponent said cheerfully. “Come on, now. I don't have all day, you know!”

“At least it seems straightforward enough,” sighed Hermione.

Terry reflected that it didn’t sound very consoling.

"Ready, darlings?” the woman asked sweetly.

With a sigh, they straightened and focused on her, ready for receiving their hand.

“Now. Don’t forget,” said the woman, shaking a finger at them. “You've chosen a blackjack tournament. That means that you are competing against your fellow players. Isn't this exciting?”

“What? Aren’t we playing against you?” asked Hermione, startled.

She rolled her eyes: “Each player still wins or loses against the dealer, yes, but your real goal is to finish with more chips than the other players at the table.”

They hesitated; then Hermione ventured: “But... sorry, but, they told us... aren't we supposed to compete as a team in this Shadow Tournament?”

“Oh, who cares? I'm the one who makes the rules here!”

They made faces at this.

“Now, a typical blackjack tournament consists of several rounds of play, with a standard elimination format. But! Since I don't have all day, we'll do it quick and dirty. 5 hands per round instead of 30 – whoever’s last in terms of chips is out, while the others advance to the next round. How does that sound?”

Sour glares were her only answer.

“Incidentally, you are from here on forbidden to communicate and discuss the game with each other. After all, you’re competing!” she said virtuously.

Jaws fell all around once more.

She started to hum smugly along with the background music, which Terry abruptly realized was incredibly irritating.

“Hold on.” Hermione narrowed her eyes, then widened them again. “She’s misleading us!”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” muttered Potter darkly.
“Granger, I think we can do without the conspiracy theories at least,” sighed Malfoy, sounding fed up to the back teeth.

“No, but don't you see?” exclaimed Hermione, afflicted. “It's just like the other times. It might seem like we have a straight-laced goal, but in reality, we must get something else on top of it!”

The woman stopped humming the rhythmic tune in favour of observing Hermione keenly. She didn’t lose her smugness though.

After a very short silence, Potter said gently: “That was rather cryptic, Hermione.”

The witch sighed: “We can play against each other straight out. One of us will win.”

“Yeah…?”

“Isn't that the point?” asked Neville.

“No! We don’t want to win the tournament, we want to get the key! She’s just trying to distract us from our real goal!”

Getting the point, Terry realized out loud: “And there’s no guarantee that the winnings will be enough to get that key.”

“Oh.”

Potter groaned. “Knew there was a catch.”

The woman chuckled. “You’re a perceptive one, aren’t you? Seeing further than your little friends. But... further enough?”

Hermione glowered at her.

"Layers upon layers, darlings. Deception and misdirection. Strategies interlocking as beautifully as gears, personal goals in the shades of common ones... That's the way of true Gamers!” The woman looked far too pleased with herself.

“So we have to cooperate?” asked Neville in confusion. “Only, she just told us we aren't a team. Not this time.”

“I know,” admitted Hermione. “One of us is going to be eliminated in every round. But we must make sure that the total of all our winnings will be sufficient!”

“How?”

"It's not the cards that matter much, I don't think," said Hermione slowly. "It's the way we play our hand. The betting, in short." She looked up, a little rueful. "It is called 'informed gambling' for a reason, I suppose."

"But... we're all competing against the same dealer, aren't we? That should mean that we will all have similar outcomes on any given hand," said Terry. "Right?"

"Well, you see--" started Hermione, but she went no further.

“If you’re quite finished blabbing?” interrupted the woman pointedly. “I do have better things to do than listen to your pathetic prattle, you know. And what did I just say about communicating?”
She glared at them.

They stared back.

“Your bets!” she shouted, throwing her arms in the air in a show of exasperation – which Terry personally found completely unwarranted.

Glowering, they all pushed their single red coin onto the betting boxes.

“Not like we have a choice,” muttered Terry angrily.

“Not my fault you’re cheapskates,” retorted the woman without missing a beat. “You could have bought more, spiced up your bets a bit.”

Terry felt like snarling.

Crossly, she started turning cards for them, slamming them down rather more forcefully than needed.

Two eights to Potter, a four and a six of spades to Terry, a queen of hearts and a six of diamonds to Hermione... This time, Terry didn't have any qualms in craning his neck to see the furthest hands - Neville got a jack of spades and a queen of diamonds and Malfoy the three and nine of hearts.

A five of hearts was turned in front of the smirking dealer.

“So what will it be, darlings?” she asked sweetly. “Hit, stand, double, split? Or... surrender?”

“Your smile is disturbing,” Potter informed her with the uttermost seriousness.

Terry and Neville muffled a nervous snort.

The woman glared at Harry. “Hit for taking a card, standing for ending your turn,” came the brisk – and not exactly unwarranted - explanation. “I told you this already! Surrendering means you give up a half-bet and retire from the game. And my favorite, double: double wager, take a single card and finish. Now... choose!”

“What about... was it - split?” asked Potter.

“That's only allowed in your case because the two cards have the same value,” she pointed out. “You can separate them to make two hands.”

He didn't look like he understood the point of it, but when he opened his mouth to ask, the woman glared him into silence.

“No talking!” she reminded them sternly.

“You said we can’t discuss the game amongst ourselves! That doesn’t mean we have to keep quiet!” protested Potter at once, mulishly.

An echoing voice sounded in Terry’s mind, almost making him fall from his chair in shock: The prohibition to talk doesn’t matter. I can communicate with the Rod.

Neville. Of course.

Steadying himself by grabbing the table, he caught the glow of the silver Rod out of the corner of his eye, where Neville was hastily pushing the thing under the table. He also noticed that
Hermione seemed quite delighted, while Malfoy looked positively disturbed, as well as quite pale, prompting their opponent to ask after his health in mock-concern.

*Your idea about sending a thought to more than one person works, by the way.*

This time Neville’s mind-voice sounded closer and less rumbling, making him suspect that the tall Gryffyndor was directing this thought to him alone. He mustered a smile to acknowledge this.

Potter, for his part, seemed to have taken this development in stride: he shrugged and asked for a card without much thought - and was promptly punished for it, when a seven of hearts made him bust and the woman cheerfully demanded that he forfeits his bet.

A little less cavalierly, Terry also hit and got a nine, with which he was quite content: 19 seemed a reasonable point to stop.

Hermione had a calculating glint in her eyes, but after a long moment of consideration, she chose to surrender; the smirking woman exchanged her red chip with a blue one, which apparently was worth half as much.

Neville, who really had no other choice, considering he was already at 20 points, chose to stand, while Malfoy shrugged and hit, making Hermione hiss in displeasure, though she was careful not to say anything discernible; he was lucky enough to get a five, anyway, and stopped there.

Very efficiently, the woman completed the round by turning in quick succession an eight of hearts, a two of diamonds and a three of spades.

“That’s it!” she said with professionalism. “Broad Shoulders wins…” she jerked a thumb at Neville, who glared weakly at her. “And in case you’ve forgotten, bets are paid 1:1 - so…”

She handed another red chip over.

“Wait, what about me?” asked Terry. “We’ve got a tied score.”

“A push,” corrected the woman. “Oh, your bet is simply returned without adjustment. While Blond Git…” she made a come hither gesture, smirking for all her worth. “Hand it over, hun.”

“So if we tie, it’s like we didn’t play?” clarified Hermione pensively.

“Yeah. Of course, a blackjack beats any hand which is not a blackjack, even with value 21.”

“Wait, hold on. I think I missed a step,” said Potter, sitting straighter. “I thought ‘blackjack’ was the name of the game?”

The woman rolled her eyes heavenwards: “Where have you lived ‘till now, hun? In a hole? An Ace combined with a card worth 10, for a total of 21, is a blackjack!”

“Oh.”

“How can you possibly not know this?”

Terry ignored the exchange and commented instead: “Even if Neville shares his win, one of us won’t be able to bet now.”

The woman shrugged. “You’re betting 0 and getting 0 even if you win,” she said offhandedly. Then she added slyly: “Unless you want to buy more chips, that is.”
Hermione rolled her eyes, muttering about ridiculousness, but Terry was busy scowling darkly: “It’s a long way to fifty bloody coins.”

“Place your bets!” sing-songed the woman, ignoring them and despite all their complaining, they had no choice but to do just that.
Chapter 60

The following hands were played tentatively, and the changing of the background music from one groovy rhythm to the next was the only thing attempting to break the almost grim, uncomfortable silence that was blanketing them.

Of course, the woman didn’t seem fazed. She took whatever situation the cards created with the same little, amused smile, grabbed or released chips with quick ease and hummed along to the various tunes as if there wasn’t a care to be had in the world.

Terry found her attitude vaguely depressing.

The four of them won some, when their smug dealer busted twice in a row – enough that they were all betting again; but since none of them dared bet everything once they got past their single, initial chip, it was not enough to shake off the feeling that they were walking the slow, slow path towards the longed-for key with all the speed of a snail.

Malfoy was the one with less chips at the end of the first round and he didn’t look at all upset at being eliminated – simply pushed his one red chip towards Neville carelessly.

“Thank Merlin!” he commented, relief and disgust in equal measure in his tone and pointedly turned his back to their dealer, crossing the kaleidoscopic room towards the bar.

“Oh, sure! Help yourself!” chirped the woman with sarcasm.

Either ignoring her, or more probably, not noticing, Malfoy pivoted to shoot her a scornful glare: “You mean there are no servants in this place? Morgana! We’ve ended up in some slums,” he spat. “Lower Knockturn is classier than this!”

Neville and Terry snorted.

Supremely unconcerned with his feelings, the woman deftly dealt out another hand and with a sigh, they all focused on the game again; although Potter was snickering under his breath over ‘a certain poncey prince being stumped by the arduous task of fetching his own glass’.

Before they could place their bets, however, Neville relayed a message into their minds: Hermione thinks we should start doubling, or we’ll never get anywhere. She says any hand of 9, 10 or 11 should be safe enough. And we should split all sevens, eights and nines, if we get the chance.

Almost immediately his mind-voice sounded again, with a rather irritated tone: Because, Malfoy!

Terry almost rolled his eyes. Typical of the Slytherin, to be contrary when he wasn’t even playing. Out loud, however, the blond merely complained – in a very pointed way – about the low quality of the drinks on display.

Nobody paid him any mind.

The second round started with a surprise, as Potter received the Jack of Clubs, closely followed by the Ace of Spades.

“Blackjack!” they all cheered.

“Lady Luck is with you!” the woman said evenly, not looking the least surprised. Terry put that
down to professionalism. "That’ll be paid 3:2," she added, contriving to appear as if she was bestowing a boon upon them all.

“Yes, yes, we remember," retorted Hermione without much patience. “Too bad you didn’t bet more, Harry; but still, it’s something.”

As if to counterbalance Potter’s luck, however, they all lost more than they won in the rest of the round – to the serene contentment of their self-satisfied opponent, who looked like she’d expected no different any time they busted.

And since, following Hermione’s lead, they’d started betting more than one chip per hand, the tide was very clearly turning against them. When Neville was eliminated, the count of their chips was barely any higher than after the first round.

“Argh!” burst out Hermione, her hand grabbing a lock of her hair and pulling.

“Now don’t be like that, hun. You’ll get wrinkles if you scowl so much,” said their opponent in honeyed tones, while she shuffled the deck expertly.

Hermione glared, and the busty blonde smirked back: “Between you and me, you should really be more careful with your looks, darling. Work on it a little more, perhaps? You have so much potential. Lovely features and not a bad body, if you cared to show it off a little more. Some make up, and taming that hair of yours, of course…”

"I don’t need beauty tips from the likes of you!” cried Hermione shrilly.

“Why, with a good hairdresser you might catch the eye of someone as loaded as Valon was…”

“Why, you!”

“Of course, there’s the flip of that coin… become too attractive and everybody’ll want a piece of you…” She gave a long-suffering sigh while running a hand through her luscious tresses, conveying exactly what an annoyance it was for her to be so admired. “Some man just can’t take no for an answer.”

Various snorts greeted this declaration.

The woman gave them all a very superior smirk: “Remember that actor I told you about? Jean-Claude? Really, that... scoundrel would do anything to get a girl’s attention!”

“And we really don’t care,” grumbled Hermione, but the blonde went on as if she hadn’t said a word: “He actually had the guts to kidnap me once; right after I beat him in a duel. He was so determined to make me his wife!” She sniffed haughtily. “As if I would lower myself to the likes of him.” A put-upon sigh. “At least he finally realized I’m way out of his league.”

“I thought he was a famous actor?” asked Terry idly. “Weren’t you proud that you’d caught his attention?”

“Ha! He is a fraud. Can't even do his stunts on his own. How pathetic is that?” she spat.

Terry was rather amused at how she’d changed her tune about the supposedly famous actor in so short a time and privately wondered if it was the same with all of her men.

Then she got a dreamy look in her eyes: “Now, my Joey instead… He was the one who saved me from that kidnapping, you know. It was sooo romantic!” She sighed happily. “A real action hero,
resting just a step or two from me. Really, how could a girl resist?”

“Real action hero?” guffawed Potter.

“He was sooo sexy!” she said dreamily.

“Sorry, but… didn’t you say you divorced this Joey bloke? Why did you, if he’s so wonderful?” asked Neville, sounding confused.

She sniffed. “What, you think sweeping a girl off her feet is enough to keep her? I’m not that shallow,” she said with great dignity.

They couldn’t help snorting loudly again.

“Besides, I had kind of promised to return one day to Valon, you see. I’d even left my Cyber Harpie Lady with him, as token of my promise. I couldn’t very well ignore him!” she added primly.

“Your what?” asked Potter, to absolutely no avail.

“He wasn’t the one for me, however. In the end, our relationship just… tapered off.”

“But don't you--” tried Terry.

“Enough!” shrieked Hermione. “I don’t care about her ludicrous love life! And neither should you!” She shot a glare at Terry, who shrank back instinctively. “I'm trying to remember what little I've studied of probability and statistics and your chatter isn't helping any! Am I the only one who's concerned with the game!?”

"Hermione, breathe!" said Potter hastily.

"Don't you 'Hermione' me! The Law of Great Numbers says the more we play the more likely we are to lose and that is not a comforting thought! I want to finish this, and quick, so let's go back to playing, already. The sooner we're out of this room..."

"The sooner we're out of this ridiculous tournament," muttered Malfoy in agreement – making Terry start, because he hadn’t noticed the Slytherin coming back to stand behind them, a glass of something amber in his hand.

“Bah! Could you be any more boring?” their opponent asked the air rhetorically.

“Come on, Hermione. You've got to admit, the gossip is better than all this math,” said Potter with an almost-whine. “There is a reason why I stayed the hell away from Arithmancy!”

“Yes – because you're an idiot,” interjected Malfoy with a sniff.

“Arithmancy is fabulous. And stop distracting me!” retorted Hermione, who looked both frazzled and intense. "There is something I'm missing about this whole thing, I just know it, and if I could only..." she trailed off into undistinguishable mutterings, though Terry caught words like 'odds table' and 'percentages on dealer bust'.

Why Potter thought this had anything to do with Arithmancy was beyond him. Arithmancy was easy.

“Boo-riiing!” sing-songed their dealer. “Gambling is about fun! It should be thrilling! Entertaining! Exciting! Not... school work!”
Malfy snubbed her: “Granger, you may be a lowly commoner, but there’s no denying that you’ve got more sense than your idiotic associates.”

“They’re friends, Malfoy,” she bit out, not impressed with his compliment. “Apparently you’re unfamiliar with the concept, but do try and remember the word, at least.”

“And you could have brought drinks for us, as well,” complained Potter.

Malfy’s jaw fell in utter shock: “Potter, do I look like a house-elf?! Go get your own drink if you want one and feel free to play servant for your little friends while you’re at it.”

He took a sip of his drink ostentatiously, but Potter’s retaliatory stinging hex made him choke on it and then he promptly shrieked because half the content of his glass had ended up all over his shirt.

Potter had to propel himself backward to dodge the bluish hex Malfy sent his way and fell to the floor, stool tumbling under him; which didn’t slow his spellcasting any, seeing as his next jinx collided in mid-air with a *rictusempra* from the Slytherin, showering stinging sparks every which way.

“Enough of that!” barked the woman. “Put your toys away. This isn’t a playground, kiddies!”

Distracted by their antics, Terry had missed her giving out the next hand and found he’d got a five and six combination. Time to try doubling, then.

Meanwhile, the woman went on grumbling: “Humph. I was right about you. Bunch of rude brats. Never paying attention to *me*, always disruptive, no respect whatsoever, why, I have half a mind to demand a conference with your parents…” she ranted to herself.

“It’s not like you’re a teacher!” exclaimed Terry in sheer disbelief. “Honestly!”

“And we’re not unruly children, you know,” insisted Hermione sharply.

“Could have fooled me!” she retorted. “Here I was hoping for some good company to stave off the boredom of this mess I’ve been roped into, and not only you arrive late, but you’re also uninteresting! Where’s the scintillating conversation I deserve?!”

“What?!” Potter gaped at her loudly from where he still was, on the floor.

“You call your gossip ‘scintillating conversation’?” commented Hermione sarcastically. “And why should we care about your prattling anyway? I thought we were here for the game.”

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!” their adversary proclaimed, loudly and smugly.

“This is a *game*!”

“Exactly. Serious business – especially ‘round these parts. You need ways to lighten up!”

“What, like gossip?” reiterated Hermione sourly.

“It’s good for the soul,” threw out the woman and then seemed to freeze, going unexpectedly serious and thoughtful, much to their surprise. “Or... you know what? Scratch that. Let’s *not* get into *that*.”

“...That what?” they asked, bewildered.

She shuddered a little, muttering something about souls better being left alone - which made no
sense at all to Terry - and then she shook herself, glared and patted the table sharply, calling them to order. “Make. Your. Call.”

They glowered at her, disgruntled, but returned to their cards. Just to be contrary, however, they also returned to strict silence.

“You know, someone might even approve your dedication to the game, but me? I find you a truly boring lot. Where’s the entertaining conversation I demanded? More than once, I might add?”

As she mocked them, she’d casually grabbed Potter’s bet even as she was still turning the nine of clubs that made him bust, as she declared an instant later.

“Scintillating, I believe I requested. Amusing. Enjoyable… Surely you can manage some approximation at least?”

This was the point when Terry suddenly realized something that he’d subconsciously been noticing for a while.

“They probably can’t,” she went on, oblivious. “Dull – the lot of you.”

Their opponent was reacting _before_ she saw the cards.

Careful not to let his thoughts be accidentally picked up by Neville, because he wasn’t entirely sure of what was really bothering him, Terry contemplated this while he absently lost the next hand and won the two after that.

But when she smirked in triumph a split second before turning a five of hearts over her seven and nine of diamonds, topping all their hands despite their having 19s and 20s, much to Hermione’s irritation, Terry burst out: “How could you know? How could you possibly know? You’re always reacting as if you’d already seen the cards!”

“Yes, I noticed that too,” said Hermione quietly. “Care to explain?”
Chapter 61

“Oh, darlings, that’s easy. I have psychic powers that let me know the cards beforehand!”

Their jaws fell in shock.

Malfoy yelped: “How is that fair?”

“What's life got to do with fair?” she scowled.

Their glares went up a notch.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. It’s not like you chose poker after all. Now, that would have given me a true advantage!” She grinned sharply.

Hermione sniffed, disdain in her eyes. “In truth, I don’t see how this ‘power’ of yours can give you any kind of advantage in this game,” she said very logically. “After all, the bets are up to us.”

“Exactly!” the blonde smiled angelically.

But even so, they all felt unnerved and, needless to say, quite unhappy.

Besides... Terry just couldn't shake the feeling that the woman's 'power' wasn't that irrelevant after all. He couldn't put his finger on it, but there was undeniably something-- something puzzling. And when he tried to focus and convey his uneasiness to Neville, he got back an equally uneasy feeling and a grim I agree.

But what could they do?

Their only option was to go on playing. And listening to the fast-paced ambiance music, which was starting to be Terry's only way to keep somewhat track of the elapsing time.

He realized after losing – though barely – another couple hands that, unlike him, Hermione was playing very conservatively. From the way their eyes glazed over, she and Neville and even Malfoy were also in a deep conversation over whatever link the Rod was granting them. Were they hatching a plan of sorts? He couldn't help feeling a bit insulted at being left out.

Suddenly, the mind-link bloomed into his head once more, but instead of just Neville’s voice, he could hear all four of the others, only with an echoing quality, as if they came from down a distant tunnel.

After a brief moment of confusion, the babbling sorted itself out in recognizable sentences.

This is so cool. The first somewhat coherent thought was Potter's amused contribution. Imagine having this kind of link during Potions exams... or History of Magic!...

Harry! chided Hermione. This isn't the time to get distracted. And anyway, that would be cheating.

I'm just saying...

Hermione’s sigh was so deep that it echoed through the connection Neville was holding up. Harry. You're not helping.

They got a somewhat confused impression of pouting from the green-eyed wizard and Terry
mentally scowled at him, irritated by his childishness.

It's time to start winning more. Which means... we have to risk more, stated Hermione in a determined tone. And we should try and pool our resources, too, so that we can win more in one go.

Wouldn't it be better to only bet small, though? countered Neville. His mind voice was both closer and less echo-y than the others, Terry noted. That way, if we make a mistake it won't mean much.

Yeah, but we won't win much either, volunteered Terry, half his focus on the discussion and half on the absolutely fascinating mind-link they were sharing. We'll be stuck here forever... Had anyone called him on it, he would have steadfastly denied the note of whining in his comment.

We'll be just as stuck if we lose everything, pointed out Neville reasonably.

So you do a bit of both. Malfoy managed to roll his eyes without using his eyes. It's basic strategic thinking. Weigh the risk and reward of your choices. Then adjust your decision to the circumstances. Honestly, even a child knows this!

He's right, agreed Hermione, over Potter's indistinct, wordless grumbling. Then she added firmly: Here's what we're going to do...

In a burst of quicksilver thoughts, Terry got the gist of the basic strategy she'd worked out: they were to avoid taking the risk of doubling if they had a score of 12 to 16, as busting with a single hit was a very likely outcome, and they had to keep an eye on the dealer's card – if it was between 2 and 6 they were to bet more heavily; of course, if they had 17 or better they would have to stand.

After a moment came Malfoy's reluctant approval: It should work.

Yeah, sounds good, agreed Terry. After all, when he thought about it, the only real advantage that they had as players was that their dealer couldn't continue hitting after she reached 17, even if it meant losing to everybody. If they could only bet when there were more high cards then low cards, they would ultimately win for sure! Sadly, that wasn't possible – but they could still use as a guideline the idea of betting as much as possible when there were more large cards, and as little as possible when there were more low cards.

Keep count of the cards if you can – like, add one for every low card and subtract one for the high ones! That'll make it easier to keep track! added Hermione authoritatively.

Isn't counting cards illegal? worried Terry, although he wasn't entirely sure.

The burst of thought/emotion he got from all four was too confused and tangled to make sense of the details, but the overwhelming feeling of WHO CARES! came through loud and clear. Wisely, Terry gave up on all of his objections.

Instead, he returned his full attention to the world outside his mind and realized, with mild surprise, that their dealer had gone off on another reminiscing gossip session, though for the life of him, he couldn't tell about what. Another of her husbands, possibly?

Potter seemed to be the only one who'd paid her any attention and now was regarding her strangely.

“...Wow,” he commented in a murmur. “And here I thought Aunt Petunia's convoluted soap operas were complicated...”

“You really need to try a love triangle some time,” she retorted smugly.
“Gurgh!”

“Terry, you do realize you were about to die, don’t you?”

“Of course! It was just a momentary lapse in judgment.”

“The hedgehog is back,” said a familiar voice.

“‘The hedgehog is back’? What does that mean?”

“A warning.”

“No, wait. I think I see what you’re saying. ‘The hedgehog is back’ means that the game is ending. And I’m just saying, it was a close call.”

“Close call? You were about to die.”

“I know. But, you know, the hedgehog is back.”

“Yeah, but the hedgehog is back.”

“I know. It’s just that the hedgehog is back.”

“Okay, okay. You’ve made your point. But, you know, it was a close call.”

“Close call? Yeah, I know. I know.”

“Okay, okay. You’ve made your point. But, you know, it was a close call.”

“Okay, okay. You’ve made your point. But, you know, it was a close call.”
“Oh, dear Lord, no. Of course not.”

That derailed all of their thoughts effectively.

“What do you mean?” asked a wary Potter.

“Well... as I have mentioned, I really don't have all day. Things to do, people to harass... a wedding to plan! ...You know how it is. I can't very well waste time with you punks when there's so many better ways to employ it!”

“But you're part of this... Shadow thingy!” sputtered Potter eloquently. “Aren't you supposed to stay and, I don't know, do your part?”

“Well, sure. But! You've passed my little test, haven't you?”

“Passed?”

“Test? What test?”

“What do you mean!?”

“You recognized my secret, proving you're smart, observant, perceptive, yadda yadda yadda. Surely you don't need the whole speech?” she scowled. "Here's the highlight, hun. You. Passed. And now I'm free.”

A long, baffled silence followed.

“So now you're giving us the key?” asked Terry hopefully (if a little uncertainly).

“Whatever makes you think so? I don't see your 50 coins!”

They goggled at her, unable to process this unexpected development, while the woman cheerfully gathered her jacket and purse from somewhere around.

Finally, Potter found his voice: “Are you... leaving? You're leaving. I don't believe this. You're seriously leaving?”

“What was the point of passing your test, then?” asked Hermione, sounding unaccountably lost.

“Oh! You're right - where’s my head? Here, darling.”

And she handed over to the stunned witch a stiff, silver eyepatch. Hermione stared at it and the thing, a silver half-orb, hand sewn onto a strip of buttery black leather, chiselled to depict a gaudy, bulging iris encased in the gap of thick, symmetrical lids, stared sightlessly back.
Not only did the bulbous eye-patch look freakishly alert, despite being inanimate: where the pupil and the whites would be, holes showed the black leather beneath, making it frankly creepy.

“Another Millennium Trinket?” asked Potter, more acidly than jokingly.

Hermione couldn’t quite help herself: “It’s horrid.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t complain,” warned the woman with a smirk. “The original one was an actual eye, you know. Peggy had to lose his left eye and replace it.”

“Urgh!”

“My thoughts exactly!”

“...Who's Peggy?” asked Terry weakly.


The woman glared at him half-heartedly. “Millennium Eye. Mind you, this is just a copy – the real thing was much worse.”

Hermione's fingers were hovering over it, mimicking light strokes but not really touching, as if uncertain between grabbing it and throwing it far away.

“What does it do?” she asked faintly.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” was the far too cheerful reply.

They stared at her at that.

She busied herself donning a cute little hat that matched her gloves and then smiled serenely at them.

They glared some more.

The woman's beautiful eyes widened innocently: “Is something the matter, darlings?”

“Fine, well. What did the original do?” tried Hermione impatiently.

“Oh, darling, how could I possibly know?”

Hermione goggled in honest incomprehension: “How can you possibly not know?”

“It’s not like I was ever a part of that particular madness,” said the woman in a virtuous tone, casting her eyes around for something or other. “Well, not willingly. And not too deep,” she amended.

“How come you have this, then?” asked Neville suspiciously.
“Oh, well, isn’t it obvious? Pegasus palmed it off on me! Thankfully, it was just in time for Yugi and the gang to get rid of the horrid things, so I never had to handle that madness straight on – I only got saddled with the, shall we call them, consequences?”

Hermione took a fortifying breath. “Pegasus?”

“Maximillion J. Pegasus. President of Industrial Illusions! Professional gamer, collector of rare cards and overly dramatic cartoon-obsessed businessman!” she said in a grand tone. “The man who brought Duel Monsters out to the eager public! Benefactor of orphans everywhere! Prince of all the foppish-mannered dandies of the world!”

At their wide-eyed gazes, she quickly added: “Although to be honest, I kind of admire him. Sort of. A bit. Hard not to – he's an excellent businessman, after all, very, very rich and a man of his word. Kind of rare, that.”

Terry looked at the others and was only marginally comforted that they seemed as lost as he felt.

Hermione was the first to collect herself somewhat. “Would that be the same Pegasus who organized that tournament of yours?” she asked through clenched teeth.

“Well, of course! How many of him do you think there are?”

“So this Pegasus is the real holder of the Millennium Eye?” the witch postulated, fingers finally clenching around the disquieting eye-patch.

“No-ope! Didn't I tell you the Items were sealed off? Or... whatever it is Yugi did? They aren't around anymore, that's the important part,” said the woman decisively.

“But he was the rightful holder? Before?” insisted Hermione.

“Ah, what do I know,” she replied carelessly. “I think perhaps I remember Kaiba winning it off him and then giving it back 'cause he wanted none of that nonsense. Smart brat, that one, for all that he’s got streams of numbers instead of blood. I doubt old Peggy wanted it, though. Not that I blame him, I don't know anyone who actually liked the horrid Items, except for Yugi of course, and those bloody Egyptians, and that annoying dancer-girl, and Joey I guess and... alright, maybe I did think they were cool at one time. So. Perhaps a lot of people actually liked the cursed things. Certainly not Pegasus, though. He was rather disgusted by it when he hired me…”

“How do I know?”

“Yup. And don’t look at me like that. It’s not my fault I lost my fortune. Bloody Donald Harrow, bloody lawyers and bloody prenuptial agreements! I only married him because he was loaded, but did it do me any good? No-o… He goes and cheats on me and I don’t even get a penny out of it! And just what is a girl who’s down on her luck to do? I ask you!”

She seemed to reflect on that a moment. “Of course, had I known what all would be involved, I'd have told him to stuff the Eye where the sun doesn't shine! You have no idea what it's been like to be part of the Court right after Joey and I divorced...! But to be fair, Pegasus did try to warn me. Ruthless he might be, but he's also honest.”

Nobody seemed to know what to say to that.

The woman didn't need much encouragement, however. “Anyway, he told me he’d tried his level best to stay as far away as possible from the Court, and I should do the same, but anybody who’s met Yugi knows that’s a losing battle. Bloke could rope you into his world even when he was just
a boy. And now? Hah!” She shook her head ruefully.

Considering their current situation, Terry rather thought she had a point.

“Old Peggy boy said he'd attempted to dump the creepy thing on Yugi at first but he kept being called back anyway, would you believe it? Only he finally decided he was too old for this shit.” She shrugged. “Or too busy. Or both. His head's full of nothing but his lost love in any case – that's how he got involved at first, he wanted the Items to revive her – very sad and all, tragic really – but since it didn't work, he kinda lost interest-”

“There's no magic that can revive the dead,” protested Malfoy weakly.

“Oh, it's not like people will ever truly believe that!” commented the woman. Her eyes took on a sad, faraway look: “I mean, who wouldn't want a chance at getting a loved one back? As long as we live, there'll always be that niggling hope in the back of our minds.” She smiled sadly. “Not that Pegasus is any closer now than when he started – and the Items were a huge let down, I suspect. Besides, he’s never been the same after losing his title to Yugi, whatever happened back then crippled his spirit.”

“Losing his title?” Hermione asked sharply.

“And now he's got his mind full of fairy tales and resurrecting stones and that weird Lovegood guy's nonsense about the Deathly Hallows. Know what I mean?”

“No,” they chorused shortly.

Potter had latched onto another detail, though: “Lovegood? As in Luna Lovegood? Is her dad involved in this?!”

The woman paid them no mind: “Not that I care what he does with his life. He’s paid me through the nose to take his place in Yugi’s little Court and more importantly, he keeps paying me. If it means I have to be involved in the King's brain-haired ideas now and then… well, at least I get to spend time with my Joey – since there’s no getting one without the other. Best friends and all that.” She sighed sappily. "Come to think of it, Yugi will probably end up standing up for Joey at the wedding. He did last time, after all. Urgh, that means I won’t be able to talk my Joey out of the leather…”

“But didn't you ask anything about it?” yelled Hermione, clearly at the end of her rope. “You were handed a priceless magical artefact from the night of time which you knew was both powerful and dangerous and you didn't ask anything?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for Dragon-vine33 for pointing out that Hermione might not like the idea of losing an eye to wear her Millennium Trinket (hadn’t thought it through, had I?), and to Daryl Hanna for playing Elle Driver in Tarantino's Kill Bill and turning eye-patches (and, unrelatedly, the word 'pantagruelic’) into very sexy things.
The woman looked at her blankly. “Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't,” she said in an unexpectedly hard tone. “Sometimes it's just best not to know.”

Hermione gaped and sputtered, horrified and indignant.

Terry could understand her frustration very well. Imagine getting your hands on something like that and not try and find out anything about it? Unthinkable. He absently caressed the Ring hanging on his chest. Even with Ryou telling him the basics, he desperately wished for a chance of having the thousand and one more questions he had come up with, answered.

After all, it's not as if they could find out much if nobody told them. Or could they? Would there even be a book about this kind of thing?

Momentarily distracted by the thought of how a book like that would look – not to mention what its content might be – he missed Hermione's expression growing darker and steely determined.

She turned her Eye-patch over and over, then with a deep breath, she proceeded to prove why she was a true Gryffindor after all, by tying it in place.

At once, she gasped loudly.

“What? What is it? What does it do?” asked Potter frantically.

Hermione's visible eye was round and glazed. “I... I can see...”

“What?” they asked avidly, getting closer.

“I don't know! But... it's beautiful...” she ended in a whisper.

Potter swivelled around to glare at their baffling opponent: “Tell us what you know,” he ordered, power almost pulsing in his voice. “I don't care how dangerous you think it is, ignorance is worse! I've had it with people keeping secrets to 'protect me'!” he raged.

The blonde woman was turned away from them, but even from her back it was obvious she was tense. Her shoulders were stiff, her legs rigid.

“I don't know what she's talking about,” she said starchily.

Hermione gasped again. “It changed!”

Potter rounded on her: “What changed?”

“It... the colour, the feel of it... I can't explain!” The witch was waving her hands in the air haphazardly, slightly frustrated with her inability to describe her experience, but also still slightly woozy.

The woman turned with a tense, oddly bitter smile: “I'm naturally blonde,” she told them bluntly, eyeing Hermione.

Potter and Malfoy made noises of impatience, but Terry noticed Hermione's expression focusing in almost-understanding.
“Your feel/colour went back to what it was earlier,” she commented pensively.

The woman's odd expression didn't change. “I'm 25 and so is my Joey,” she added a propos of nothing.

Hermione gasped once more, but this time in triumph: “You're not! The colour/feel changed! You're lying!” she crowed in delight.

“Are you saying that that... thing, can see the truth?” asked Terry, torn between scepticism and awe. If it could, it might well be the most powerful of their 'Millennium Trinkets'. He frowned and caressed his Ring again, feeling oddly defensive about it.

“I don't think so,” said Hermione slowly. “It only lets me tell if you're lying – I have no way of knowing what the truth is, or even what exactly she's lying about.” She brightened with interest: “Maybe the original could see the truth in full?”

They all turned to the blonde woman, who hadn't moved a muscle while the witch worked things out somewhat.

“Hmm,” she mused non-committally. “Seeing beyond what normal eyes see...” she whispered what sounded like a quote. Then she shrugged. “Well, it is common knowledge that Pegasus used it to peep into the minds of his opponents, see their strategy before they implemented it.”

Ignoring Hermione's squeal, she returned to moving about with forced nonchalance and casually threw out: “Mind you, there were rumours about it stealing souls, too...”

“What!?” Their horrified yells stopped her briefly.

“I did mention some things are best left unknown, didn't I?” she said with quiet intensity.

They all gulped, suddenly frightened.

“Rumours... or truth?” asked Potter, swallowing.

She had a most peculiar look, grimmer than they'd ever seen her, and although she did not speak, it was all the confirmation they needed.

Hermione tore the Eye-patch from her head violently, looking revulsed.

“But I wouldn’t worry about any of that,” the woman went on in an uncomfortably cheering tone, despite refusing to look at them still. “Yugi promised me that power was locked away for good.”

“Hold on. Back up a minute,” said Malfoy unexpectedly. “Test. Figuring out your trick. Millennium Item. We-- you-- argh!”

Everybody looked at him, perplexed.

“We could have gained the Artefact just by observing you!” He raged. “We could have simply... not played!” He stared at her, looking mortally offended. “You forced us to gamble!”

“And you had us pay for it!” added Neville with equal outrage.

She looked at them indifferently: “And you went for it.”

“That's practically stealing!”
All at once, she was back to being the irritating, sweet-talking shark they'd come to know:
“Nonsense, darlings! You agreed to all of it!”

“Because we didn't know better!”

“Ignorance will always work to your opponent's advantage,” pointed out the woman smugly. “That
doesn't mean your opponent's to blame.”

“Yes you are!” they chorused.

She whipped her hair over her shoulder seductively. “It’s the con man’s old adage. *I don’t take
their money. They give it to me,*” she said, very self-satisfied.

Their jaws fell.

Then she pierced them with an intense, unnerving stare: “Remember this, if you remember nothing
else. The Game *has* to be fair... but the circumstances that lead to playing are another matter
entirely!”

And she was abruptly back to humming along with the background music as she sauntered around.

Was this woman for real?

Hermione had ignored the whole exchange, hovering and fretting over her trinket, unable to bring
herself to touch it again.

“Oh, stop panicking, will you?” scolded the woman airily. “I told you, that power’s gone, now.”

“Are you sure?” worried Hermione.

She shrugged again, careless. She'd never looked so much like an airhead. “The brat-King said so.”

“And you believe him?”

“Oh, yes. He may be many things, but above all, he’s totally trustworthy. He wouldn’t lie, not on
anything like this. Not on anything at all, I suspect. He takes honesty and fair play very, very
seriously.”

“You seem to respect him a lot, for all that you call him a brat,” pointed out Potter.

She looked at them thoughtfully. “There was a time in my life when I thought my Harpie Lady
cards would always be the closest thing I would ever have to friends,” she said very seriously.

Her continuous mood-swings were making Terry seasick.

"I convinced myself that I didn’t need friends. Joey’s the one who taught me how empty a lonely
win is… but it was Yugi who helped me find my self-esteem and pride as a true duelist. At first,
you know, I was only in it for personal satisfaction and power - and the for prize money. Of
course, I’m still in it for all that,” she added as an afterthought. “It’s just that now I know it isn’t
enough.”

As she blabbed on, she’d finally located an elegant purple blazer that she draped over her arm.
“Don’t just let your friends go, brats. They’re what makes it worth living. And... that is that,
darlings!” she concluded cheerfully.

"Wait, but... we haven't won enough for the key!” blurted out Terry in alarm.
"And how is that my problem? I've got better things to do than hang around with a bunch of silly kids! Like planning the wedding to my Joey!"

“But, but...”

"I can't believe you're marrying him again,” said Potter irrelevantly.

"It's destiny! Destiny, I tell you!"

Terry regarded her warily, disturbed by how he could almost see bright pink, heart-shaped pupils in her eyes, manga-style.

“Wait...!” tried Hermione unsuccessfylly.

The woman just skipped away happily, whipping out a card where a strange picture was encased by a gree frame and the words 'Emergency Teleport' glittered above it, and vanishing under their rather depressed eyes.

“...And she never even told us her name,” was Potter's immaterial comment.

After a long moment of baffled silence, Neville asked, sounding half in shock: “Did all that really just happen?”

They looked at each other disconsolately.

"What now?"
Chapter 64

Potter collapsed bonelessly on the nearest seat. “She's gone. She's... she's actually gone. I can't believe she just... She left us here! She just... up and left us here!” he repeated in shock.

Terry lowered himself slowly on a seat of his own, reeling. All of his nervousness and undefined fears were crystallizing. What was going to happen? Were they really stuck? Would they be simply disqualified from the Tournament? Not that it would be a bad thing, if it would return them to Hogwarts, but... what if it didn't? No-one had mentioned what, exactly, losing would mean...

A glass crashing loudly against a wall startled him: Malfoy had thrown it.

Hermione sighed: "Let's just calm down--"

The Slytherin rounded on her, furious: “That crazy bitch has left us trapped!” he shouted.

Potter made a noise that conveyed at once agreement and disgust and the witch grimaced.

“What now?” asked Neville again. His tall frame looked almost hunched, leaning on his Rod, that he'd propped on a stool at an angle.

“I... don't know,” said Terry, sounding dazed even to his own ears.

“What about those?” said Hermione hesitantly.

They all turned to see what she was pointing to.

“The slot machines?” Terry asked, surprised.

He looked more closely at the line of bright, happily chiming gambling machines, upright along one wall of the room. They weren't the modern kind, with a video screen that displays the random combinations of symbols when a button is pushed; rather, they had three mechanical reels which spun when an old-fashioned lever was pulled. They were also covered in clashing, vintage colours, piping overly-cheery tunes and with a few parts in constant movement: definitely attention-catching, but in a slightly irritating way. How were they going to help?

“We still need to get the coins for the key,” the witch elaborated a little dubiously. “I suppose we should try those.”

Potter snorted and jumped to his feet. “Scratch that. No-one's here, why can't we just take the stupid key?”

Unhappily, Hermione started to say: “Harry, I don't think...”

Potter cut her off: “Look, she's gone, isn't she? Doesn't that mean she... I don't know, forfeited or lost or something?” He shrugged. “At the very least, the Game's over, right?”

“Perhaps,” muttered Neville dubiously.

“So. What's stopping us from just taking the blasted key?”

Suiting action to words, Potter marched decisively to the display of prizes and made to vault over the counter, hand already outstretched – but the moment he passed some invisible line, a flash of purplish light blinded them, accompanied by a brief feeling of displaced air as he was propelled
The ward itself made no sound, but it was compensated by the loud clangour of Potter crashing into a craps table, stools skittering away or collapsing over him with roaring clangs. They started and cried, swivelling towards the groaning heap of Potter on the floor, behind them.

“Harry!” shrieked Hermione.

They all ran towards the crumpled form, wide-eyed and worried.

“Harry, are you ok?” asked Hermione anxiously.

“Ow,” moaned Potter.

“...So, that's what's stopping us,” commented Terry faintly, even as Potter exploded in a series of curses against the psychedelic carpeting, which he was coming to know far too closely for his tastes.

An annoying little giggle caught their attention.

They snapped their heads up to find a dreadfully gaudy cross between a monkey-shaped piggy bank and a cheap music box, about the size of a cat, with a hole the size of the coins in its mouth. It was tottering on its plastic legs along the counter, waving its arms and tail in a sort of dance to attract their attention and rolling its fake eyes exaggeratedly in a continuous cycle underlined by its very irritating giggle.

“I guess we'll get the key once the monkey get the coins,” sighed Hermione in a tone that was almost amused.

The toy tittered tauntingly.

Potter made a face at it, but it didn't interrupt the cycle of dancing and giggling.

Terry, for his part, was narrowing his eyes at the odd cashier. “What if we use a duplicating spell?” he wondered aloud. “On the coins we already have, I mean.” Meeting the others' perplexed gaze, he elaborated: “Well, it's not like it's a real person, who can tell us off for it! And as Potter said, the Game's over, right?”

“It's not going to be fooled that easily, Boot,” scorned Malfoy.

“Worth a try, though,” said Potter cheerfully and Hermione obligingly duplicated a few coins, then transfigured a couple others from her school robe's buttons, just to cover all options.

When they tried to feed them to the monkey, however, it contorted its plastic muzzle in a grimace and spit them out with such force that they clanged against the wall like bullets.

Terry shook his head faintly, disappointed: “Alright. Slot machines it is.”

They turned to contemplate the chirruping devices.

“How do they work?” asked Malfoy quite suspiciously.

"Err..."

Between Terry and Hermione, they managed to jumble together an explanation about how the mechanical spinning reels would reveal one or several symbols when stopped and, if the patterns of
symbols that appeared matched a combination according to the rules of the game, the slot machine would give the player cash or, more likely in this case, coins.

Hermione started going over the most common variety of symbols, listing brightly coloured fruits and simple shapes such as bells or diamonds; but Potter stopped her and simply pointed out the winning combinations, posted on the face of the machines, to the side.

Malfoy was openly put out: “It's not even a game of skill!” he protested. “It's pure chance. The player's participation is nothing more than an illusion. Why would anyone want to waste their time like this?”

“Never mind that,” grumbled Potter. “The problem is that we need coins to get them to work so we can get coins! How daft is that?”

“As daft as any gambling game, I'd say,” muttered Neville with a disapproving frown.

“Can we use fake coins this time?” wondered Terry aloud.

“Because it worked so well earlier,” commented Potter sarcastically.

Terry shrugged. He didn't see much hope of getting out of this room by relying solely on luck.

“I wouldn't waste time trying. From what I know, slot machines include a currency detector that validates the money inserted to play,” lectured Hermione.

Malfoy looked at her sharply: “Like a ward?” Her eyebrows rose, but he didn't notice: “Hmm.... Based on what?”

“The weight and size of the coin, I believe,” she answered with some perplexity.

To their surprise, Malfoy made a satisfied sound. “Now, that we can fool!” he said, pleased.

Terry couldn't help himself: “Trust you to know how to sneak around and cheat, even with muggle stuff, Malfoy.”

The blond looked unsure whether to preen or scowl.

“Come here and help,” he ended up ordering curtly and whipped out his wand with a flourish.

In less then ten minutes of experiments, the blond, assisted by a curious Terry and an interested Hermione, had worked out that the machine would not, after all, accept anything but the 'official' coins; however, he was confident that they could enchant the coins to disappear from the insides of the machine and reappear in their hands, ready to be used again.

Then Hermione had to go and up the stakes: “Do you think we can render the whole process automatic? Just enchant the coins to reappear over the insert hole and start the process again on their own?”

Intrigued, Terry turned a coin over and over in his hand: “I suppose it’s a matter of timing. Won't do any good if it falls in while the reels are still spinning...”

“And we’ll still have to collect the winnings by hand,” added Malfoy speculatively. “Although - an acquisition array, perhaps?”

“We'll have to weave a compiling parameter in it,” replied Terry thoughtfully. They had done something similar for an extra credits project in Arithmancy, though that was about extracting
certain mineral components from water.

“And modify the array to work for countable rather than uncountables!” nodded Hermione enthusiastically, getting his idea at once.

“...Neville?” came Potter’s voice from behind them, in a loud mock-whisper. “I think we should let the geniuses sort this out on their own.”

“Err... yes. Good point. Wouldn't want to be in the way, right?” agreed the taller Gryffindor.

They backed away with exaggerated wariness and smothered chuckles.

Hermione snorted, amused by their antics, then met Terry’s eyes and smiled widely. “Let's get to work!”
Chapter 65

Even as focused on the fascinating project they'd tackled as he was, a part of Terry's mind marvelled.

Working with Malfoy and Granger was a novel experience.

Aside from brewing in pairs in Potions and, sometimes, cooperating in Herbology, assignments at Hogwarts were mostly individual, especially after third year; team work wasn't exactly encouraged, and it mainly took the form of study groups and cramming sessions towards the end of the school year.

This was different.

Almost reluctantly, Terry found himself deep into one of the most stimulating discussions of his entire academic career – and it felt brilliant.

Wasn't it sad that it was the second time he felt surprised like this in so many days? He was a Ravenclaw. Shouldn't this kind of thing have been normal? Part of his daily routine? Weren't the Ravens supposed to do this all the time?

But truth was, discussions like this were only common among the first years. The more you progressed in your magical education, the less you were ready to engage in this sort of things.

Oh, there were debates of course: highly structured and well-organized events, where the participants could show off their research skills and the knowledge they had accumulated, as well as their reasoning skills and their ability to arrange their arguments in rational and rhetorically sound speeches.

But... they were never very interesting. Mostly because everybody else had generally researched the topic in advance, too, and knew as much as the participants if not more.

Sometimes, (more and more rarely in the upper years), such things might even spontaneously happen, especially among group of friends; but even then, it was never a matter of sharing knowledge to build new ideas – not in Ravenclaw.

Simply put, none of them ever wanted to admit ignorance – about anything – so whether the topic was familiar to the listeners or not, everybody would nod knowledgeably. It was the same whenever someone quoted a text: if you knew it, you would either counter or support the thesis and possibly quote something yourself, be it from the same source or something else; if you didn't know it, you'd pretend you did and then research it on your own as soon as you found time.

Nobody would share too much knowledge, though. It just wasn't done, unless you were a silly Firstie. You hinted at your knowledge, offered the bibliography you'd consulted (because everybody wanted to know what books they should get their hands on), but left it at that, because it let you keep your superiority and it also let the others keep face, in the case they weren't as knowledgeable as you in that topic.

The older you got, the more any 'discussion' became instead a game of quotations and allusions, where everybody wanted to boast and nobody ever risked truly discussing anything, unless they had a pile of authoritative quotes ready and memorized to support their stance.

Debates in Ravenclaw were just a chance to show off.
Their impromptu research and development team was completely different; and the bigger surprise was that Malfoy was surprisingly adept at managing a team.

Hermione seemed to relish in sharing her vast knowledge, never backing out of long-winded, but surprisingly effective explanations; she had a wealth of knowledge at her fingertips and was ready to offer it with astounding generosity. She also never seemed anything but delighted if someone else mentioned something she didn't already know. She didn't get offended – and she only got upset when she remembered she couldn't go off to the Library at once, to fill her knowledge gaps, because there wasn't a Library here to turn to.

However, for all that she was so very helpful, the Gryffindor was prone to inadvertently excluding them and taking far too much on herself; she didn't really seem to expect that the boys would do their part. Terry suspected she was used to 'study groups' being more like 'lessons by her to her friends', really.

The Slytherin, on the other hand, was quick to delegate tasks left and right, while at the same time giving the impression of being in charge, and was admittedly good at gauging their respective strengths as well as keeping track of everything they were yet to do.

Plus he had an amazing willingness to use the things he knew outside of the usual schemes – in fact, he was downright careless with the supposed authoritative wisdom of books, which Terry and Hermione had difficulty questioning, and didn't bother with where whatever he used came from, so long as it got him the result he wanted.

Really, it was a pity that the git had conditioned himself to ignore and dismiss anything outside his narrow field of experience: whenever his prejudice didn't interfere, he was intelligent, intuitive and able to piece together pieces of knowledge that Terry, and sometimes even Hermione, wouldn't have thought to relate.

Terry himself was perilously close to feeling inadequate, which was simply unacceptable; therefore he was making more and more of an effort to be forthcoming with what he knew, be it magical or muggle in origin, even as he made careful mental notes about everything Hermione and Malfoy brought to the table, to check out and examine in depth as soon as possible.

They were bouncing through topics with a bubbly effervescence that Terry just wasn't used to; ideas were thrown back and forth among them with little regard to the existing literature (not that they had any chance to check their books here, admittedly) and no care for properly citing their sources, as they cheerfully ignored what was conventional and formally accepted (that is, to be found in books) in favour of new combinations that no patient study of publications could spring.

The brainstorming and subsequent honing of the charms and arithmantic arrays they needed was a deeply rewarding experience, satisfying in a way Terry had definitely not expected.

Why didn't the Ravenclaws do this, again? (Other than the fact that he felt unequal to the rest of the group, much to his chagrin?) Wasn't this what they were supposedly about? Knowledge and rationality and research and problem solving? But then, Slytherins were supposedly all about cunning and ambition and if you looked at his yearmates, you wouldn't tell it. Not even Malfoy lived up to the image.

Terry sighed with a pout, however, at having to admit to himself that, contrary to his long-held belief, Ravenclaw wasn't the best House after all.

Sure, he was still proud to be a Raven, but... maybe the Hat wasn't completely barmy, with his “staying together” and “unite the Houses” spiel. Terry's mind felt more alive in this challenge with
non-Housemates than it had in years.

Food for thought.

Time flew as they put together a project that Terry secretly planned to write up and present to Vector as soon as they were back (not that he expected any less from his partners) and managed, to their lasting satisfaction, an enchanted chain of automated spells that would keep the same ten coins playing over and over until the counter they set up reached the number they needed to get the key.

They emerged, triumphant, from the brainstorming session, to find Potter and Longbottom engrossed in a game of darts, playfully insulting each other's aim.

Figured.

The target was as irritatingly garish as the rest of the room, partially lit like a neon light and rather noisy: every action seemed to trigger a different sound effect and inaction set off a jingling tune. Potter and Neville seemed to like the game, however, and Terry made his way over.

He frowned as he got close enough to follow the match. Maybe he didn't know the game as well as he thought, because Potter hit the bullseye – a perfect throw, in Terry's opinion – and yet he groaned loudly in dismay.

A moment later he started coughing helplessly, as the target had squirted a cloud of horridly smelling, pink smoke right at him. Even from the side, the odour was cloying and Terry wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"What is that?" he asked.

"We're not sure, but it's worse than gobstones," said Neville cheerfully. He got into position in Potter's place and took careful aim.

Under his breath, he murmured gloatingly: "Number One... you're mine! I'm going to pin you down!" He raised his voice on the last words, finishing the thought with a forceful throw that did, indeed, hit the sliver marked '1'.

"Literally," commented Terry, amused, while Neville cheered loudly his achievement and the sector lit up with a neon glow that was shared by most of the target area. "Shouldn't you want the centre, though?"

"Nah," explained Potter. "We've already got that." Then he elaborated: "Whoever hits a field for the third time gets the points, that's when they light up by the way, but after that, if you hit it again you're penalized."

Case in point, Neville's next dart buried itself in the '10' section, which was already glowing, and a few moments later, the hideous pink gas sprayed all over him, making Terry gag again.

The Gryffindor took it in stride. "It never lasts long, anyway," he told Terry with a smile, wiping himself down with his sleeve.

"Ok. I've re-checked. Everything's working properly!" called out Hermione as she bounced up to them, beaming.

"Great!" smiled back Potter.
“It's going to take a while, but it'll work,” confirmed Malfoy with satisfaction.

“Anybody wants to try this while we wait?” asked Hermione with a hesitant smile, holding up the game she'd taken from the cabinet early that morning.

On the front of the box, elaborate lilac lettering spelled Ivanhoe. Terry snatched it from the witch's hands with a smile and read aloud from the back: “Take on the role of a knight and join the prestigious tournaments at the king's court. Use your cards to win the jousting competitions, and to fight with your sword, axe or morning-star!”

They looked at each other. “Why not?”

“Just let us finish here,” smiled Neville and he eyed the last dark section on the target evilly.

They chatted easily, clearing a space on a poker table while the slot machines pinged and jingled on in the background, ignored.

Ivanhoe was an interesting game, all in all. Clever use of the action cards could 'unhorse' opponents, switch weapons in use or perform a flashy move; gaining the support of a maiden could lead to a heroic success, or turn into a shame-filled defeat; knowing when to rally the squires or gracefully bow out could mean a victory token won or lost.

Malfoy, who despite complaining loudly about the lack of 'proper effects' (“What kind of cheap cards wouldn't even conjure the knights on the playing mat? It's got to be the bargain version of this game, I tell you!”) seemed to genuinely like the game, got a distinct advantage when he made everyone drop their weapon, changing the tournament into a fistfight in which the number of cards, rather than the quality, was the determining factor; and became the insufferably smug overall victor.

There was a lot more strategy involved in the game than first met the eye. It wasn't, however, the kind of game that could hold Terry's interest for long.

“I want to try my hand at the darts,” he announced after only a few rounds.

“I'll take you up on that!” said Neville, jumping to his feet.

Leaving the others to their cards, they braved the smelly pink clouds and annoying victory jiggles with great good humour.
Beating Neville at darts was almost as difficult as beating him at fast spellcasting during DA meetings. Apparently, good aim with a wand translated into good aim without it.

Terry wasn’t discouraged, however: throwing darts was fun. He was so going to buy himself a target when they got back.

“Well, you're going to need the practice, after all,” commented Neville lightly, making the Ravenclaw realize he'd said it aloud.

Laughing, he glanced about and noticed the others had stopped playing.

He spotted Hermione at once, bent over the bowl they’d rigged to hold the coins they were winning, either checking or fiddling with something.

He was shocked, however, see Malfoy and Potter immersed in an apparently solemn conversation. Potter was serious and earnest, and Malfoy looked outraged, vicious, pained and venomous in turns, but was clearly paying attention nonetheless.

A few steps brought Terry to the edge of what he recognized as a typical Slytherin silencing ward: he was all too familiar with it, as any Slytherin third year and up made a point to use it in their corners of the Library, and despite all their attempts, the Ravenclaws hadn't yet managed to glean that particular House secret.

(They had managed better versions of the spell thanks to their research, but it still stung to not know.)

He knew that if he tried to get closer an annoying little tune would start up in his ears and last forever (or seemingly so), so he stepped back, trying to pretend that curiosity wasn't eating him alive.

“What was that all about?” he asked later, once the two had separated with thoughtful looks and taken up waiting positions on opposite sides of the room. “You and Malfoy?”

Potter shrugged. “Riddle.”

Terry's eyebrows rose in disbelief: “You were talking about riddles?”

Potter quirked a strange smile. “Nah. Just the one.”

Before Terry could ask anything more, Hermione called from the door, where she'd at long last managed to use the dreadful key effectively and that distracted him. She looked, after all, mightily strange with the bulging Eyepatch tied over her forehead, holding her bushy hair back like some sort of weird ribbon.

He looked back down at the Ring hanging on his chest and with a slight grimace he had to admit that, yeah… all of the Items were garish. Oh, well.

The corridor beyond was much like the first one, but seemed friendlier somehow. Perhaps it was just that they were all immensely relieved to leave the casino-like room behind. The cool air, neutral stone walls and dim light beyond it were unspeakably soothing.
Out of nowhere, understanding hit Terry and he felt like smacking his forehead. *Riddle*. Of course! Just one riddle... or rather, Riddle. That's what Potter had said He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's real name was! How could he have missed the connection? It was obviously the one topic on which the Boy-Who-Lived and the Slytherin Prince would have something to say to each other about...

Busy berating himself for his lapse in attention (no wonder he was only fifth in their year, grade-wise!), Terry took a few moments before he stopped, intrigued by the implications.

Was Potter trying to drive Malfoy away from You-Know-Who? That seemed unlikely to happen... but what if the Golden Boy could pull it off?

That was... well. And Malfoy had looked like he was listening. Not liking what he was hearing, mind, but listening nonetheless. Well, well. That was... something. Good? Impossible? Incredible? A source of hope?

Intriguing, in any case.

Swearing to pay more attention to the interactions between the two, Terry hurried to catch up with the others.

“Merlin, it feels like we've been here for weeks!” was complaining Hermione.

“It's barely been a few days,” countered Potter, amused.

Neville snorted: “Not even that.”

Terry frowned. He cast his mind back, trying to focus on the time elapsed. The Chessboard, the Egyptian statues, the Temple in the Jungle. A meal there. Then the Corridor of Hell and the Temple on the Water. Playing and eating and sleeping. Then this morning, the tongue-twisters and the casino.

“Neville's right. I don't think it's been two days yet!” he exclaimed.

“Merlin!” said Potter, astounded. “You're right!”

“However long it's been, I want it over. *And* I'm hungry!” moaned Hermione.

“I know. Me too,” replied Potter sympathetically. “But I didn't want to stay in that room a minute longer. Come on, I think we can manage a picnic of sorts over here!”

He moved towards the wall of the corridor, taking off his robe to transfigure a blanket as he went. They all stared at him, too perplexed to help, as he turned a few things from his pockets into pillows and threw himself down with a heartfelt sigh.

“Harry?” asked Hermione in an odd voice. “What are you doing?”

“Lunch!” was the blithe response. The Gryffindor swung his book bag in front of him and started taking out stuff.

They all got closer as they watched him spread out some cheese, stale bread rolls, a jar of pineapple jam, a bag of fried chicken morsels...

“Where did you get all that!” exclaimed Malfoy.

Potter blinked owlishly up. “At that Temple. Remember? I packed up the leftovers. Those not too squashy, at least.”
Their jaws dropped.

“Why didn't you share this last night?” yelped Hermione, quite indignant.

“Because then we wouldn't have had it now,” answered Potter patiently.

Hermione's crossed arms, tightly defensive, weren't any less ominous then Malfoy's grinding teeth or – Terry hoped – his own scowl.

Potter sighed, sitting up a little straighter, and explained in long-suffering tones: “Look, we had one good meal yesterday. It was better to have a scarce dinner and save enough food to have another good meal today, than to eat well twice in a row and have absolutely nothing else...”

He rolled his eyes at their indignant grumblings and simply got himself some raspberry jam.

They didn't waste time doing the same. But they still glared at him.

“It's odd,” said Neville softly after a while.

“What is?” asked Terry.

“We've all sort of accepted this, haven't we?”

“Huh... I – I guess,” agreed Terry. He frowned. Had they?

It was true that they'd stopped complaining (for the most part) and they weren't freaking out anymore (much). He didn't feel scared any more, he realized, and hadn't for a while. They hadn't even fought much against doing this, had they? That...

He shook his head.

Was it normal? Were they being influenced? Had they just shut off their disbelief to protect their sanity? Was there any sanity left to protect?

He really wasn't sure.

They'd been kidnapped, for Merlin's sake. They'd met some seriously weird people. They still knew next to nothing about this whole mess.

They were really taking this all too well...

“Shall we go?” asked Potter expectantly.

...but perhaps it was best not to think too deeply on the matter?

They got to their feet and packed up the last of their picnic. They all made eye contact before starting down the corridor again, sharing the unspoken agreement: they were ready for anything.

Unvoiced, there was the knowledge that they were drawing to a close, that the next big 'challenge' would be the last one. The determinant one. The one they absolutely couldn't afford to lose.

The one that would – hopefully – gain them answers.

Not to mention a lift back to Hogwarts.
Colours soon caught their eyes from a little farther.

They picked up their pace and stared in wonder. Beautiful paintings in the style of Ancient Egyptian ones covered both walls, varnished reds and luminous greens, gleaming golds and deep blacks shining against a brilliant white background.

Terry admired the inventive details and brilliant colours of the one on his left, a scene of leisure in what looked like a garden by the water, interspersed with strings of hieroglyphs.

The biggest figure, shown sitting before a game board of some sorts, had improbably spiky hair in three colours, red, black and gold; he was wearing pants and an elaborate blue cloak and a strange inverted pyramid in gold hang on his naked torso. His opponent was dressed in blue and gold and wearing an elaborate head-set; a golden version of Neville’s Rod was planted by his side. His figure was slightly smaller than the spiky haired-one, but not by much.

Above them, huge monsters floated in the featureless background.

Smaller characters populated the rest of the wall: a scowling man with a turban and round earrings, grasping what Terry knew to be a golden Ankh, stood before a huge hanging board that reminded him vaguely of mah-jong, with a tile in his outstretched hand; a smiling, black-haired girl in a long white dress waiting her turn by his side; a tall woman dressed like the Ishizu they’d met, with the Necklace in gold gleaming on her thin shoulders, and a very thin man, with incredibly long white hair and a golden Eye, throwing dice over a long and narrow board… Terry quickly found the white-haired man who’d given him his Ring: he was shuffling a deck of cards with intricate dragons on them, about to hand them out to two other players, their figures even smaller than his; he wore black all over, a gold Ring prominent above his heart.

All of them were playing in one way or another. He chuckled: appropriate.

Then he turned to watch the opposite wall even as he walked forward.

“Oh! It's identical!” he exclaimed, surprised. “What's the point in that?”

“Maybe it's a very important message?” quipped Potter. “That they had to say it twice?”

Hermione promptly set to study it more closely.

“It's not identical,” pointed out Neville. “See this lotus plant here, the Nelumbo nucifera? It's a Nymphaea lotus in the other painting – a water lily. See how its petals are less pointed than those of the blue lotus? They're not related at all.”

“Hmm,” agreed Hermione. “And this board is a different colour, too!” she added, tapping the depiction.

Quickly and neatly, she pointed out three other minor differences in the two paintings. Her fingers brushed the spots almost reverently.

“So it's a game of spot the mistake?” snorted Terry.

A moment of silence followed, nobody wanting to voice what everybody had just realized.
Terry rolled his eyes: “Of course it is,” he muttered.

“Look at the bright side,” smiled Potter. “At least it's an easy one.”

And easy it was. They only had to catch, and touch, one more difference before all the spots glowed for a moment and triggered the release from a panel in the ceiling of what looked like a piece of... something.

Just as easy was the next set of pictures – an intricately detailed series of carved stone panels, separated by slightly protruding columns, in which the Millennium Items had been hidden in a jumble of, well, junk. Boxes, rocks, toys, tins, coffers, cloths, gadgets, watches, tools, jewels... it was like the window of a badly cleaned second-hand store. The gaudy pieces were rather distinctive, though, even in greyscale, so the task didn't give them much trouble.

When they picked up the second 'piece' and combined it with the first, the 'something' became, very recognizably, a key.

“Looks like it only needs one more piece,” commented Neville looking closely at the smooth, broken edges of the bow and cuts.

“And there's the Game to get it,” confirmed Potter, nodding to somewhere down the corridor.

This third setup was somewhat more arresting than the previous two, albeit much less artistic. Huge stone tiles hovered above them, hanging unstably from the ceiling in five rows of five that blocked the passage from one side of the corridor to the other.

With more confidence than Terry would have showed, Neville marched up and touched one right in the centre.

It flipped over at once and the Gryffindor barely avoided being knocked out by the heavy stone as he jumped back with a startled cry.

The tile hovered a little, kept in place by thick steel cables, and swung a little back and forth around its centre of mass, until it settled into stillness: they could now see that onto the other side was carved the outline of a pair of dice.

Potter decisively pointed his wand to the next one to the right and let loose a Knockback Jinx: the etched shape on the other side was a deck of cards, the top ones spread in a fan.

The next tile had the dice again and it flashed brightly before vanishing, along with the first one they'd touched.

“Oh! It's a Memory!” exclaimed Terry rather happily. He'd always loved the game.

With a shared smile, the five of them raised their wands and set to knock the stones around to find all the matching pairs as quickly as they were able. Coins, pawns, tokens, domino tiles... As soon as the twelfth pair of tiles (player pieces) disappeared, the central one, which had resisted all their attempts at turning it, released the third piece they needed.

It clicked into place satisfyingly, making the key whole: a beautiful, heavy piece of a brass-like metal, with an intricate bow and numerous cuts but a very simple cylindrical body.

They looked at each other. Then at the empty corridor. Then at the bare walls.

“Err… where do you think it goes?” said Potter, sounding befuddled.
“Search me,” muttered Malfoy with clear irritation.

With a sigh, they moved about, looking for a way out of the apparently sealed area.

Hermione moved decisively towards the end of the corridor, pulling her Eyepatch over one of her warm brown eyes – which, combined with her determined scowl, gave her a startling resemblance to their previous year's Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, a former Auror very aptly nicknamed 'Mad-Eye'.

Malfoy started running his hand and wand over the wall on one side and Potter quickly imitated him on the other.

Neville seemed to wander aimlessly, probably hoping in a stroke of luck.

Terry thought for a moment, then called up a *lumos* and started moving the ray of light slowly over the ceiling, trying to see if there might be another hidden panel or something. There was nothing of the sort however: just some odd geometrical shapes painted in dark blue. One looked maybe a little like a rabbit, perhaps, if he looked at it the right way, and there was another that was maybe a swan, if he squinted; much in the way clouds could at times look like cats or cakes or whatever, except that the figures you made out in clouds usually had soft, fluffy lines, while these ones were straight, geometrical shapes – the bunny's ears were a parallelogram and the swan's beak a triangle and...

A startled shout made them all turn to Malfoy, hoping he'd found something. It wasn't a cry of triumph, though.

The blond was on his knees, white-faced and trembling slightly, one hand still flat against the stone wall, the other clutching his silver Necklace. Even Terry recognized the signs at once this time: the Slytherin was having a vision.
They ran to where Malfoy had fallen and crowded around him.

“What did you see?”

“Anything useful?”

“Do you know how to get out of here?”

“Are you alright?” Potter's concerned voice overcame their babble and Terry winced, a little ashamed. “Um, yeah, Malfoy… are you ok?” he muttered belatedly, while the others also subsided.

The Slytherin shrugged all over and climbed to his feet: “Yes. It wasn't as bad as the first one,” he said brusquely, ignoring their helping hands.

A red-faced Hermione forced a glass of conjured water into the blond's hands, and for once, Malfoy didn't protest or complain in the least, simply accepted it with an almost polite nod of thanks and drained it.

He swayed a little in place, gazing at the blank wall as if he could still see something incredible there.

“I Saw… a Library, I think?” He looked somewhat dazed and even a bit perplexed. “But one like I have never seen before. Rows of shelves filled with scrolls and tomes and manuscripts and codices, but also small rooms filled with sunlight, furnished with armchairs and desks and bookrests, and gardens of exotic beauty,” he described longingly, talking more to himself than to them. “It was the most impressive collection of books I've ever seen!”

Considering that he'd been in the Hogwarts Library, which held tens of thousands of books in the hundreds of narrow rows of shelves Terry would never tire of browsing, and that the Malfoy private collection of magical grimoires, according to the rumours flying in Ravenclaw Tower, was supposed to be the largest in Britain, and the fifth in Europe, Terry really had to wonder about this mysterious Library.

“I was wandering through the rooms, running a hand along spines in dozens of languages, and then I went out into the shade of some trees, towards a deck chair among red flowers,” murmured Malfoy dreamily. “It was beautiful.”

Terry and Hermione sighed with longing in unison. The Ravenclaw itched to grill him about the place he'd seen, but it was clear as day that the Slytherin wasn't much inclined to discuss his vision; so he bit his lip and tried to force his curiosity down.

“Right. Well! You aren't going to see it again if we don't find the exit of this corridor,” said Potter bluntly, shattering the moment.

“Honestly, Harry!” huffed Hermione, but she turned away without protest and they all went back to their search.

Terry, to be honest, was feeling a bit discouraged, not seeing how they were ever going to find an invisible door in an essentially bare corridor; that is, until Neville stumbled upon something and tumbled to the floor, where he proceeded to curse quite heartily.
“What the hell did I trip on this time?” he grumbled over Potter's good-natured laugh.

“Looks like...” started the green-eyed Gryffindor, then fell silent. He bent to examine whatever it was and studied it silently with a frown of concentration. Then started looking intently around the floor nearby. Neville joined him.

Terry and Malfoy drifted closer, suspecting what they might have found.

“Yup!” confirmed Potter with a big grin. “Looks like you tripped on the next Game,” he declared.

“Never let it be said that being clumsy isn't useful,” commented Neville ruefully.

Malfoy opened his mouth but, surprisingly, shut it again. He sneered contemptuously down at the Gryffindor, but seemed to be making an effort not to antagonize them too much anymore. Terry was ready to cheer – except it would likely be counterproductive, given the Slytherin's prickly pride.

Instead, he asked with resignation: “What is it this time?”

Neville, still sitting on the floor, dragged over and up a big, flat shape. Terry was surprised to realize it was made of wood, painted to resemble stone. To think they'd walked over it! How had they not noticed?

Potter was busy attempting to dig out a nearby shape, running his fingers along its border to feel for any groove. Malfoy snapped out a muttered insult to his intelligence and levitated the large right triangle right up from under the Gryffindor's legs. It got him an indignant yelp and a sharper insult thrown back, but judging by his smug countenance, he wasn't bothered by it.

Terry rolled his eyes at the two and turned to levitate another wooden triangle out.

In the end, they had two large right triangles, two small ones (their area about a fourth of the large ones) and a medium one (double the small ones); one square (same area as the medium triangle) and a parallelogram.

“Tangram,” proclaimed Hermione authoritatively. “One of the most popular dissection puzzles in the world. It was invented in China and arrived in Europe thanks to trading ships in the early 19th century.”

“How do you play?” asked Potter curiously.

“Well, usually the objective of the puzzle is to form a specific shape, given only a silhouette of it, using all seven pieces, which may not overlap,” explained Hermione chattily.

“Oh!” said Terry flatly and pointed his lumos up to the ceiling again.

The geometrical shapes were looking mockingly down at him, he just knew it. Even if they had no eyes.

It took a little while to shuffle the huge flat shapes about in a way that mirrored the swan-like silhouette above them properly, but when they did, a flash of light released another piece of the same material as the key, which fell onto Potter's head.

“Oh! Oh, joy,” he commented, turning it over. “It's a piece of the lock!”

“Oh, for the love of...!” groaned Hermione, sitting down on the floor and crossing her arms. “This
is ridiculous.”

“It's more fun than gambling, though,” retorted Neville, who had a small smile on his face as he tried various combinations of the figures.

The Eyepatch she still had on gave her quite a fierce look, so he hastily shut up when she glared at him.

Terry didn't see what she was upset about. As tasks went, this one was probably the tamest of the last two days!

It didn't take long to form the other two figures, which Terry had dubbed the Rabbit and the Horse, and Neville clicked the three pieces of the lock together firmly, holding it out for Potter to use the key on it.

The rumble of heavy doors opening at the far end of the corridor was strangely satisfying.
Chapter 69

Less satisfying was the sight of a spiralling staircase running up into the unknown. Up and up and up… Terry felt a wave of fatigue hit him just at the thought of all those steps.

It was entirely made of stone and wound in a clockwise direction, only large enough to let them ascend in a single file, blocked as it was between two walls of grey stone. Flickering shadows and tongues of orange light from the floor above hinted at the presence of torches. All in all, it was a terribly middle-age-y setting.

“Oh, joy,” commented Malfoy flatly. “Stairs. And not even proper ones. Who built this – and why were they tasked to if they couldn't even manage to make the steps regular?”

Indeed, some of the steps were taller than comfortable and others were too short for an average man, but Terry, who'd always loved tales of sieges, knew it was on purpose: “They're uneven by design,” he explained. “It's a defence measure, to slow down any assault. The defenders are familiar with the pattern and can move quickly up and down, but the attackers will easily fall and get bogged down in the stairwells, especially in this dim light. Same with the curving clockwise thing… any attackers coming up have their sword hands against the interior curve of the wall, which makes it difficult to fight, while defenders have more room to swing.”

“Smart,” said Potter.

“Is it me, or was this taken straight out of a picture book?” wondered Neville in an amused tone.

“Yes, yes. Very fairytale castle,” sighed Hermione, sounding unimpressed. “Are we going to be met by talking chandeliers, do you think?”

Terry burst out laughing, but no-one else seemed to get the reference. He was vaguely disappointed in Potter. Wizards being deprived of Disney was one thing, but what was his excuse?

“Well, no point dawdling,” said Potter at last and started up the stairs.

Like in the best medieval towers, the stairs had the disadvantage of being very steep and tiring. Muscles already proved by the unrelenting pace of the last two days protested with dull pain. Terry reflected that he'd had more exercise since this madness had begun than in the rest of the previous year. His legs didn't approve in the least.

“I just want it on record,” he said at one point, “that as soon as we get back home, I'm going to sleep for a week.”

He pointedly ignored Malfoy's grumbled “If!” behind him. 'When' suited his peace of mind much better.

The first landing of the staircase tower was nothing more than a bare, square room with a torch hanging on the wall, opening to their left while the steps continued climbing around the stone newel on their right. It wasn't much larger than a walk-in closet, and was utterly uninteresting.

On the floor above it, however, the landing was behind a door: opening it, they found quite the surprise.

The room was about twice the size of the one below and looked like a shop. A very modern shop, with tiled floor, a digital cash register (turned off) and neat rows of low shelves, as well as a glass
table to the side. Nothing medieval at all.

Colourful posters on the walls advertised various games – Terry recognized *Risiko* and *Stratego*, and was intrigued by the cartoonish art for *Stone Age* and the fireworks depicted for *Hanabi* (whatever those two might be).

Game boxes of all colours and sizes were stacked tidily; on the top of the shelves, a few boardgames were displayed.

“A… game shop?” wondered Potter in disbelief.

“Seems so,” agreed Hermione, who was examining everything critically through her Eyepatch.

Sadly, the room was deserted and calling out to whoever might be around yielded no results, so they just shrugged and moved on.

They passed another empty landing, identical to the first one (“Bet they only put it here to make the climbing longer!” grumbled Terry) and then found another door… unexpectedly, locked.

Potter tried the handle in vain, but they were reluctant to give up: voices could be heard within, cheerful if indistinct, and when the green-eyed wizard rattled the door a bit, they also heard steps coming closer.

The lock clicked and the door was wrenched open, making Potter stumble back a bit and almost stomp on Hermione's foot.

“What?” demanded an irritated blond man from the doorstep. “There is a game in progress here! Don't you know better than to disturb the players?”

Terry thought he was somewhat familiar, but couldn't really place him. He was dressed simply in jeans and a green t-shirt, but he looked somewhat menacing anyway. Behind him, they could glimpse a small group of friends around a table, cards in their hands and spread out before them.

“How were we to know…?” started Potter indignantly.

“I think the locked door might have been a hint!”

“Joey?...” a sweet, girl's voice came from the room.

The peevishness in his hazel eyes faded a little as he glanced over his shoulder. “It's alright, Serenity, I've got this covered!”

While he said this, he pointed to himself with his thumb and the gesture jogged Terry's memory: even without the KaibaCorp Duel Disk that graced his arm in all official videos and promo pictures of him, he recognized one of his father's favourite Duellists. ...Wheeler, wasn't that his name? John, or Jim, or something Wheeler?

“I know who you are! You're the bloke who used the Baby Dragon – Time Wizard combo in the Duellist Kingdom tournament!” he said excited. Then he realized something else: “Wait. You're that woman's husband! Err… fiancé! Er...”

“Mai, you mean?” asked the bloke, turning to him with a smile. He crossed his arms and leaned against the door jamb, looking suddenly more relaxed and rather pleased. “Yeah, I am. All of it,” he smirked a little. “So you're a fan?” he preened.
“Uh...” Terry briefly considered précising that it was his father who was the Duel Monster fan, really, and quickly decided it would not serve them well at all. “Yeah. I... It was very impressive. The duel, I mean. Uh. Saw it on TV,” he said a bit helplessly.

The man – Joey, if he remembered what the woman had called him correctly, which would make him Joey Wheeler, and yeah, that sounded about right – sighed, but he was smiling: “Would have been more impressive if the tactic hadn't turned against me when I duelled Yugi.”

Terry frowned, trying to remember, but Neville saved him from awkwardness by asking: “What do you mean?”

The man was bright-eyed and animated as he explained, gesturing expansively with his arms. “Well, the idea was to use Time Wizard to age Baby Dragon into Thousand Dragon and at the same time, weaken enemy monsters – and it worked like a charm at first! The commentators called it my 'signature move'. Only then I had the bad idea to use it against Yugi in the Final... which, yeah. It was a miscalculation – big time. Time Wizard's magic turned Yugi's Dark Magician into Dark Sage: it didn't weaken it at all, and it gave Yugi the ability to play a Spell Card every turn, his or mine, even if it wasn't set. After that, I had zero chances of winning.”

He didn't seem upset by recounting his defeat: it was clear that he loved Duel Monster a lot and losing a match didn't detract from the fun of the game for him. Terry could see why he would be considered one of the greatest Duellists in the world.

“Anyway! What can I do for you?” the man asked, a lot more friendly than at first.
They traded uncertain glances, but were spared the trouble of coming up with an answer.

“Honestly, Joey!” exclaimed a different female voice from within the room.

A nice-looking woman with a fringe of dark brown hair obscuring her kind amber eyes came up to his side and punched his shoulder companionably. She had a cute face, but something in her features spoke of determination and strong will.

“They're obviously the latest Millennium Group!” She beamed at them brightly.

Mr. Wheeler snorted, nudging her with his shoulder. “I can't believe you. Why are you still using that ridiculous name?” he mocked light-heartedly.

“It's not ridiculous!” she protested immediately, punching him lightly again.

“Is too!” retorted he.

And just like that, they turned into bickering siblings, for all appearances having forgotten the teenagers on their doorstep. Too perplexed to be offended, the five wizards wavered, moving their weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably.

The sound of chairs scraping on the floor and hurried footsteps resulted in two more faces peering at them around Wheeler's broad shoulders: a frail-looking young woman with long auburn hair, who smiled sweetly at them, and a wiry man with thick, short brown hair and sharp black eyes, who glowered instead.

“Well, you don't look like much,” he proclaimed, drawing the bickering to a halt and making Potter and Malfoy scowl. He paused for a moment: “Then again, neither did we.”

The first woman promptly punched him too.

“Ouch! Anzu!” he protested, scowling.

“You're being rude!” she scolded, then smiled at the five youngsters: “I'm Mazaki Anzu. Pleased to meet you all! I hope things are going well?”

“Err… I suppose,” said Potter with a little uncertainty. “I'm, uh, Harry Potter and these are--”

“Don't bother,” cut him off the dark-haired man. “If you manage to win, we'll have all the time to get to know each other. If you don't, I'd rather not remember much about you.”

He abruptly left.

The five wizards stared at each other in various degrees of surprise and uneasiness.

Miss Anzu snorted, irritated. “Rude!” she muttered, drawing a giggle from the other young woman. Wheeler, too, was scowling at his friend: “Well, they made it this far, didn't they?” he pointed out. “No need to be a jerk!”

"Exactly!" exclaimed Miss Anzu, hands going to her hips.
“Me? A jerk?…!”

They looked like they were gearing up for another round of squabbling, and were probably forgetting the five wizards again: it was pretty obvious that they were good friends and far too used to their tight-knitted group to pay much attention to outsiders.

It was Hermione who plucked up enough courage to interrupt them: “Excuse me?… Excuse me!” Everybody turned to look at her. “Right! Thank you. Just… are you-- err… is any of you the next… should we--?” She motioned to entering the room, unusually inarticulate.

“Oh! No. No, no!” Miss Anzu said with a warm smile. “Your next challenger is upstairs. All the way to the top! Come, I'll show you the way!”

“Hey!” protested Wheeler at once. “What about our game?”

The amber-eyed woman rolled her eyes good-naturedly and proceeded to ignore him, snatching Potter's and Neville's arms in passing and beginning to drag them up the stairs.

Bemused, they didn't resist and Terry, Hermione and Malfoy could only follow.

“See you when you're done!” Wheeler called after them, disappearing back into the room and closing the door firmly behind himself.

They climbed in wide-eyed silence for a minute or two, each of them silently trying to get the others to interrogate their guide, and finally Potter ventured cautiously: “So… Ms. Anzu…”

She mock-glowered at him: “What's that, now? Ms. indeed! I'm not that old!” Like most of those they'd met so far, she had an American accent, but it wasn't as strong as Wheeler's and her voice, while pleasant, was oddly staccato at times. Terry wondered where she might be from.

"Anyway, if you insist on being formal, it should be Miss Mazaki: that's my surname. But really, it's not necessary! You can just call me Anzu!”

She really had a nice smile, but Potter regarded her warily anyway. “Err… right. Sorry. Thank you?” Hermione elbowed him and the wizard winced, biting his lip. “Right. So… you part of this madness, then?” he tried again.

Terry, Neville and Hermione all rolled their eyes at that; but she just laughed: “Since I was fifteen.”

She twirled and started moving backwards before them, which Terry had to admit was an impressive display of grace and coordination, since the steps continued to be uneven.

Chattily, she confided: “Yugi and I are childhood friends. He gave me a handheld game when we were in elementary school and we've been close since.”

“Must have been a really good game,” said Hermione with a tight smile.

Anzu grimaced: “It was horribly difficult! I was so frustrated that I smashed it! He wasn't offended, though, just brought me an easier one the next day. Yugi's always been kind.”

She twirled again and stepped onto another empty landing. “Can't say the same for those two downstairs. Them, we met in high school – and they were such bullies! Don't take me wrong, I love them like brothers, but it's a good thing they've got me. Someone has to keep them in line! I
swear, those two can be the most foolish pair in Domino City when they put their minds to it.”

“Domino City?”

She ignored their curiosity and just went on: “We've been friends for so long now, I can barely remember what we were like before becoming-- well. Us.” She chuckled. “They're my family, in a way. I don't know where we would be without our friendship, I really don't! We've seen so much… lived through so much; you have no idea. But no matter how dark things may get, the special bond I share with my friends will always find a way to shine through! I know it. I have been scared many times, but that fear hasn't ever kept me from fighting!” She winked at them: “Or playing, as the case may be!”

“You're a Duellist too, then?” asked Terry curious. He didn't remember seeing her on TV at all.

“Oh, no! That is, I'm not on the professional circuits or anything. Mind you, I could hold my own against any of them at the beginning, but they soon left me behind when it comes to Duel Monsters. Especially Joey!” She smiled warmly. “I just don't have the same passion, you know? It doesn't matter if I'm not a good Duellist, anyway. I can still cheer them on! And help with...” she gestured vaguely, “...the rest of it.”

Terry itched to ask about this 'rest', but she was still talking: “Besides, I prefer other types of games, if I must play. Which I sort of do: I mean, I wasn't much one for games in general back in the day, but if you hang out with those three... And now, well. You know how it is.” She laughed lightly to herself. “It's just as well they taught me to enjoy games, all things considered.”

Terry felt about a million questions building up – who were they all, really, why were games so important to them, what was this Court that kept getting mentioned, why had they kidnapped five strangers, why the five of them in particular, why giving out the Millennium Trinkets, what was this all about, why had she called them Millennium Group…? – but much to his irritation, he couldn't quite manage to form any of his queries. Every time he opened his mouth, another thought would hit him, or someone'd say something that sent his thoughts spiralling down another direction; he felt like a toddler confused by too many toys!

Hermione, who was lagging behind a little, asked something completely different instead: “You mean you're just here because you're friends with them?”

“Yes and no. I mean, I wouldn't have ended up here if I wasn't friends with Yugi, now, would I? But I am part of the Court – not like Honda, who never really got involved, just hangs around with us.”

“That's possible?” yelped Hermione in real surprise.

Malfoy pushed himself into the conversation however: “What, exactly, is the Court?” he demanded.

Anzu smiled enigmatically and said nothing.

Potter, who seemed to have a knack to ask better questions, or at least questions more likely to be answered, drew even with the blond: “What does it mean, to be part of it?”

“Oh, well, that depends; for example, I'm in charge of the Shadow Library.”

That halted them in their tracks.

“Shadow Library?!”
She'd caught their interest and no mistake.
“Shadow Library?” they echoed eagerly, crowding Anzu.

“The greatest repository of information and knowledge about Shadow Magic in the world!” she claimed proudly. “Home to a veritable collection of books and manuscripts of incomparable quality!”

She laughed at herself: “Don't I sound like the perfect tour guide?” she joked. “But really, it is an impressive collection.”

She tapped a finger on her chin thoughtfully: “In fact, I'd say it's the largest archive of Shadow Magic ever built. No-one else before had gathered knowledge from all over the world, after all, not even the Tomb Guardians in Egypt. Plus, it holds the most complete records of the history of Shadow Magic we've managed to put together!”

She threw her arms up in enthusiasm: “From the earliest experiments of Egyptian sorcerers to the Last Ceremonial Duel – including all of our own chronicles! Well, Serenity's chronicles really. None of us had the patience to write it all down, let alone in some kind of order…” she admitted sheepishly. “Serenity, though, found it all fascinating and she's a fairly good chronicler, all told. The Chronicler, in fact. She was never involved directly, but she made a point to corner each of us to get our versions down – and you wouldn't believe how nitpicky she can be! For such a sweet and soft-spoken girl, she can be quite stubborn…”

She looked like she could go on and on and, while Terry found it both fascinating and informative (she was a veritable fount of information!) the other boys weren't as interested – or as patient.

“Yes, yes. But what do you do?” interrupted Malfoy quite impatiently. “Surely you don't just stare at books all day?”

“What any librarian does, I imagine,” answered Hermione instead. She was looking at Anzu with undisguised admiration. “Organise the books in an accessible way, ensure library services are used as much as possible, deal with enquiries and assist library users… Madam Pince mentioned stock maintenance and budget managing too, when I asked her.”

She blushed at the looks she received, but truthfully, no-one was surprised that she'd inquired about the job of librarian.

“Not quite,” corrected Anzu, however. “It isn't a public Library, you know, we don't grant access to just anybody. Mostly, my task is to focus on the preservation of the most rare books and manuscripts. Quite the responsibility! Some are truly unique.”

“Like the Millennium Spellbook?” asked Terry eagerly. “Is it where it's kept?” He had certainly not forgotten Ms. Ishtar's tale!

He felt excitement build. Just imagine – a priceless, unaccountably old tome of exotic magic! If there was a chance to read, nay, even just see that book…! Just think! He caught Hermione's eyes and saw that they were of one mind on the subject.

Their guide had stopped abruptly and was regarding him with a frown: “How do you know about that?” she asked harshly.

They faltered, but Potter rallied quickly: “Ms. Ishtar – our first opponent – told us the tale of how
the Millennium Items were created,” he explained.

“She did?” Anzu looked genuinely surprised. “Hmm, I wonder why.” She wrinkled her nose in slight disapproval: “Oh, well. She must have had a good reason. She generally does,” she added in a mutter. Terry got the impression that she didn't like Ms. Ishtar too much, but still respected her.

Leaning against the wall with a sigh, Anzu told them: “Nobody knows where the Millennium Spellbook ended up. Come to think of it, nobody knows where it came from, either… It was already ancient when the Millennium Items were created. From what we know, it had been in the possession of several Pharaohs and countless scholars had tried to translate it, without success.” She paused for a moment. “We don't generally talk about it much.”

“Whyever not?” asked Malfoy appalled, and for once, Terry felt like agreeing with the Slytherin. “What could be more important than that?”

Anzu's amber eyes grew dark and serious. “It's a matter of safety. Shadow Magic can be… horrifically dangerous. If you know how the Millennium Items were created, then you also know what price was paid for them!”

They lowered their eyes, ashamed; but Malfoy, even though a little subdued, wasn't cowed: “That doesn't mean you should just ignore its existence! Such a source of power should--”

“Be kept secret in order to shield the world at large from its effects?” completed Anzu tartly. “That is part of our duties – to protect everybody else from the damage Shadow Magic users could inflict upon them, unwittingly… or by design.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes, irate: “That's not what I mean and you know it!”

“But it is what I mean,” Anzu countered. “After all, there is a reason – a very good reason – why Shadow Magic was sealed away in ancient times; why Yugi made sure most of it is once again beyond reach. The last thing we need is a repeat of Egypt's magical wars! Or even the disastrous events that followed the release of Shadow Magic in the modern age!”

“What events?” Terry and Hermione asked together, eagerly intrigued, but Malfoy's protest was louder: “It's not like wanting power makes you evil!” the Slytherin sneered. “Only the weak believe that.”

Potter went rigid: “There is no good or evil, only power and those too weak to seek it? That what you think?” he spat, rounding on the blond.

Everybody looked at the green-eyed wizard in surprise. The venom in his voice was so strong and unexpected that Malfoy visibly hesitated.

“I wouldn't go that far,” he said very cautiously. He was regarding Potter warily, but didn't back down: “However, I don't like asinine generalizations either. Being powerful doesn't equate with being evil!”

Potter relaxed a fraction. “No, I guess not,” he admitted.

Malfoy pressed his advantage: “Neither does being dark!”

Potter tensed again at once, but to everybody's astonishment, Anzu interjected: “Agreed.”

The surprise derailed Potter's impending rant. Terry, too, looked at her curiously: what did she mean? Everybody knew Dark Magic was evil… wasn't it?
The woman went on neutrally: “Dark and light are a completely different axis than good and evil; however, according to legend, the Millennium Spellbook lists spells capable to create invincible armies, to seal souls into slavery, to drag someone unwilling into an alternate, harsh dimension to face punishment. So ask yourselves: what kind of person would wish for this kind of power?”

Potter frowned: “It sounds a bit far-fetched, if you ask me. How do you know it’s even real?”

“Because we saw it – in the Memory World, which is far too long a story to get into now.” Anzu shook her head. “Answer the question.”

“Look,” said Malfoy, looking exasperated, but determined. “I know that some forms of power are--wrong.”

Potter scoffed loudly.

“No, I do!” the Slytherin insisted, glaring at him. “My mother made sure I knew the difference between simple Dark Arts and the kind of stuff Magic itself would find a perversion--”

“Simple Dark Arts?” yelped Potter.

“--and to warn me that the wrong kind of power can be... tempting. Even addictive.” He grimaced lightly. “Her own sister is a cautionary tale on the matter – abuse of the forbidden arts drove her to madness.”

It was Neville's turn to stiffen, but Malfoy didn't even notice: “That doesn't mean all power is to be eschewed! Besides, there are times when less than pleasant means are required for a worthy goal,” he finished haughtily.

“Oh, and who's to decide what kind of goal is 'worthy'?” demanded Hermione hotly.

“I don't think any kind of goal could justify those particular means,” said Neville with stony disapproval.

Hermione was gearing up to a proper rant – something about the rights of muggleborn wizards – and Potter was adding his two cents about power-hungry psychos, both bitter and indignant, while Malfoy defended his position with less hauteur and more rationality than usual. Terry didn't say anything. He felt uncomfortably on the fence (and was also busy wondering if he could find the courage to ask about 'the kind of stuff Magic itself would find a perversion'. Sometimes he felt like Purebloods lived in another world entirely…)

Anzu's voice rose above the squabbling: “The old texts say that whomever deciphers the book would be able to control a power known only by the Egyptian Gods themselves. Be honest: would you really trust yourselves with such power?”

She was regarding Malfoy very seriously, and Terry had the uncomfortable feeling that saying the wrong thing could do a lot of damage here.

Perhaps the Slytherin guessed the same, because he frowned, but appeared to be considering his answer carefully.

“I wouldn't,” said Potter very quietly. He was looking at nothing, lost in thought. “I'm too similar to-- well. Never mind.” He shook himself and glanced at Anzu: “Does the Court make these judgement calls often?” he asked seriously.

“Hmm.” Anzu winked: “Great power, great responsibility,” she quoted, mock-solemnly – but with
underlying soberness.

Terry laughed, then quickly stifled it at Potter's uncomprehending look. Huh. No Disney, No Marvel… goodness, the boy was deprived!

Making a mental note to pass some of his comics to the Gryffindor at the first opportunity, he turned to Malfoy, who seemed to have reached a conclusion, and was back to being condescending: “Regardless, the very fact that the Millennium Spellbook is so dangerous argues for its importance, does it not? Precisely because it can be misused horrifically, wouldn't it be better if it was in safe hands?”

Anzu raised her eyebrows: “Whose? Yours?”

Malfoy drew himself up, visibly offended. “Maybe not,” he said through clenched teeth. “But surely someone worthy could be found? If the keeper of the Spellbook was a good witch or wizard, then--”

Anzu regarded him calmly: “Akhenaden was a good man, from what I could tell: kind and merciful; yet the power that the Millennium Spellbook granted him corrupted him to the point that he murdered an entire village. Ninety-nine innocents dead and harvested because his desire for power took him too far. Even though he was a good man.”

Malfoy looked mulish: “So you would prefer for the knowledge to be lost, and the power forever out of reach? That's stupid!”

She shook her head. “Perhaps. Or perhaps it's wise to avoid temptation, hmm?

“But don't you want to find it? The Spellbook?” burst out Terry in disbelief, unable to keep silent anymore. When she frowned at him, he hurriedly insisted: “I don't mean using any of the spells in it, but… the history, the-- the knowledge!” he protested weakly.

Anzu sighed again: “I won't deny that a part of me wishes we had it, of course… Let's face it: such a tome is a librarian's dream! But as fascinating as the Spellbook would be, I'm not sure I'm not relieved it's been lost.”

Potter and Longbottom nodded in approval and Terry bit his lip to refrain from protesting.

“In any case, it's a moot point, since we haven't found any trace of it,” she concluded briskly. “Although, the Adventurer looks for it in his spare time, so it might still turn up sooner or later. And then we'll have to face some hard choices.”

“The Adventurer?”

Anzu smiled: “You've met him.”
Chapter 72

“The Adventurer… Ryou Bakura?!” exclaimed Hermione loudly, and promptly blushed. The boys rolled their eyes. Anzu laughed gently: “The one and only!”

Then she pushed off the wall and started up the stairs again, though slowly: “Ryou is the one with the most flexible schedule – he's a freelancer after all, works as a game tester and promoter.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, you know. He goes to conventions and such, organizes encounters to introduce children to this or that game – boardgames, miniature games, role-playing… He's quite successful. The kids adore him.” She thought for a moment. “A lot of adults, too. And he gets called to try out new games, evaluate their playability, give advice to the game designers, that kind of thing.”

“Cool!” said Terry in undisguised envy.

“Yes,” agreed Anzu with a small smile. “Of course, it leaves him a lot of free time to go exploring, so he's the one who usually checks out the reports of Shadow Magic that get to us – though we all help out if the occasion calls for it. Let's just say, he travels a lot. But someone has to do it and, well: he likes it. I guess exploration is in his blood; his father was an archaeologist, and not the kind who spent his time dusting bones in a museum, either.”

“Reports of Shadow Magic?”

“Oh, yes! You see, to seek out all sources of Shadow Magic in the world is also a responsibility of the Court, just like preserving what we've found; it's up to us to contain or monitor it, regulate or repress it, as the case may call for.”

“And study it?” guessed Hermione.

“Of course! A lifetime endeavour – no, actually, I don't think anyone could become a true expert in one mere lifetime. Just the translation of all the documents we've gathered will take ages! Of course, the Diplomat has made great strides already; but then, he speaks seventeen languages fluently – three of which extinct.”

“Do you all have titles?” asked Potter curiously. “The Adventurer, the Chronicler, the Diplomat…”

Anzu winked.

“What's yours?”

“The Librarian, of course!”

Terry almost rolled his eyes. Of course...

“What kind of things do you find?” asked Neville, just as curious. When she turned to him with a raised eyebrow, he elaborated: “You said you're supposed to seek out all sources of Shadow Magic. What are they?”

“Hmm, let's see. Games, more often than not. There was a boardgame a few years ago, that could trap players in the jungle, for instance, and release jungle creatures in the players' house – you can imagine the utter chaos. Books, of course, are a classic – some can be quite dangerous; you never
know when opening one will send you on a merry chase for odd magical entities, or trap you in a pocket dimension! Reading carelessly can cause all sorts of troubles!” she lectured, an admonishing finger in the air. "Sometimes it's items… trinkets; amulets, rings, the like. And cards, obviously. I end up seeing all of them, since I'm the one who records and classifies what the others find for the archives… It sounds boring but it really isn't!"

Smiling happily, she rambled on: “The funny thing is that I was never the scholarly type. There was a time when, if you'd told me I would spend most of my time as an adult among paper and parchment, I would have laughed in your face! Now, though, I couldn't imagine myself anywhere else. The Library is so serene. I love to spend time in the gardens there… the beauty of flowers all around and books just a few steps away! I cannot even describe the collection of manuscripts and scrolls we have – or rather, I could go on and on for hours and still not do it justice!” She sighed dreamily: “It's such a beautiful place!”

“I know,” said Malfoy automatically.

She shot him an odd look and he coloured. “Never mind,” he mumbled, fingering the silver Necklace he was wearing absently.

She gave a lingering glance to the Millennium Trinket, but made no mention of it and just went on, deliberately casual: “If you win this, the Library will be one of your responsibilities.”

They traded apprehensive glances. There it was… the elephant in the room.

The thing that had been hinted at, but never stated. Potential successors. Newest candidates. The latest Millennium Group. The very reason they were here...

At least, they guessed it was. It's not like anyone had actually said it outright. Would Anzu tell them anything concrete, if they confronted her? No-one had been forthcoming so far, whenever they'd asked a question…

Yet for one reason or another they were all somewhat hesitant to tackle the topic.

“I don't know if working in a Library might suit me,” commented Potter idly, staving off the confrontation.

“Never say never!” retorted the woman cheerfully. “Look at me. When I was your age, my dream was to be a dancer! Now I'm the head curator of a secret, magical Library.” She laughed at herself.

Hermione was vibrating with subdued excitement: she looked like Anzu's job might well be the pinnacle of all her dreams. Terry sort of understood her – even though the job she'd described did sound a little boring; still, to have unlimited access to all those books!

They drew up to another door, a wooden one with iron bars, perfectly in tune with the Middle Ages theme of the staircase; and there their guide stopped.

“Well, here we are,” she motioned cheerfully at the door. “The top of the Tower of Games… and your last hurdle!”

They hesitated.

Malfoy actually took half a step back, before aborting the motion. Terry understood perfectly.

This was it. The last challenge, the last opponent, the last Game. Whether willingly or not, they'd worked hard to reach this point. If they lost now, right at the end… but on the other hand, if they
won, then what…?

Either way, the past two days had been all to get here.

What would they find beyond that door?

...Did they even want to find out?

Anzu smiled kindly and suddenly looked much older than she probably was, and wiser than they had suspected so far.

“I know you're probably confused and a bit scared,” she said softly. “I would be! I remember what it was like to be swept up in events that only ever make sense when it's all over. I could tell you such stories! You haven't lived until you wake up inside a miniature, let me tell you. But…”

She hemmed and hummed a little, then nodded decisively to herself: “...I guess what I'm trying to say is that you shouldn't look at the unknown as your enemy… you should see it as an adventure!”

Terry was less then enthused by the impromptu pep-talk, but Anzu was pushing the door open and gesturing them through.

“Go on in!” she encouraged.
Chapter 73

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Terry liked the big, round room at first sight.

It was as vast as the Chessboard one, indeed, they could not see its perimeter walls (and how such a vast space could be the top floor of a tower whose lower levels were much smaller, was a mystery that only people used to Hogwarts' creative architecture could take in their stride) but somehow, it managed to be welcoming and almost cosy. A first in their adventure.

It also appeared to be devoid of anyone's presence – their opponent, it seemed, was not laying in wait for them – and Terry let himself relax a fraction, freeing his curiosity a little, for the room was certainly not empty.

Low tables with beanbag stools in all sorts of lively colours were scattered in snug groupings, each with a lamp shedding light over them. Low cupboards held shelves where boxes of games and other toys were stacked in cheery haphazardness: building blocks, stuffed bears, puzzles, a toy plane... Kid stuff, really. Terry half-wondered what that might mean.

They moved in a little, spreading out in a hesitant wander, sort of browsing even if they were too tense to be truly intrigued. A lush carpet, made to look like spongy grass, softened their steps.

Board games were set up just about everywhere.

Terry smiled as they passed some old favourites of his like Scotland Yard, with its sprawling map of London and the coloured tickets marking Mister X's unseen passage, and Masters of the Labyrinth, with its moving tiles and the 'potions ingredients' coins scattered everywhere (Snape would have a fit!).

Most were unknown to him, though.

He found himself tensing again as he wondered. Would one of these games be the one that would decide their fate?

He watched curiously a board map of North American train routes and the countless coloured train cars scattered orderly over it (he would have liked to try that one); a spread of dark, sci-fi themed cards with truly beautiful art (what kind of game could they belong to?); a handful of meeples inside the car and on the roof of a 3D train with gems, bags of loot or suitcases seeded randomly (that looked like fun).

He was very careful not to touch anything, however. The way things had been going of late, there was a chance the slightest sign of interest would trap them in his 'choice' for the last Game!... He did not want to risk it.

“Anyone here?”

Potter's voice echoed slightly in the vast room, and Terry almost jumped. The Gryffindor was far more at ease than Terry could hope to be, only the fact that his wand was, if not raised, still at the ready in his lowered hand betraying some nervousness; by the muttered curse from his right and the huffed “Honestly, Harry!” from his left, neither Malfoy nor Hermione were as relaxed either and Terry found some comfort in that.
“Hello!” called out a deep, cheerful voice in response, making them jump again.

A head of very odd, spiky hair in three colours – that made them stare for a good long moment, extravagant as it was – popped up nearby in the middle of the cheerful chaos, swiftly followed by the body it belonged to, that had evidently been lying on the grass-like carpet somewhere, but now got himself quickly sat at one of the low tables.

The games around them promptly lost all their appeal.

Terry studied the stranger and found himself more fascinated than even curious. The man was such a study in contrast!

He dressed simply: a black linen shirt over black leather pants, dull wrist-chains and leather bangles on his arms; nothing shiny, nothing gaudy, even the collar circling his neck was discreet, almost elegant.

His hair, though. His hair was something else. Long blond bangs for his fringe, crooked and pointy, looking almost golden against the large black spikes that made up the most of it, stiff and pointing upward, and a magenta sheen halloing the edges of each lock: it caught the eye, that was for sure.

He was tall and noticeably muscular, with the kind of controlled power over his own body Terry had only seen in his uncle the soldier, not at all like an athlete, but like a fighter; but sat cross-legged on a bean bag, in an almost undignified sprawl, so casual and relaxed as to seem years younger than he had to be.

He was also regarding them curiously and sporting a huge, warm smile, but his eyes – his purple eyes, Terry noticed with surprise – were alight with an intense, determined gaze.

“I am very glad that you made it this far!” he called out in a genuinely happy voice.

He was raising a hand in greeting and smiling with all of himself; and he was cheerful, and welcoming, and kind. But his voice was deep, stronger and more confident than any Terry had ever heard, including Dumbledore, and it reverberated with power.

Terry couldn't have explained it if he tried.

The man was so openly friendly, with a big kid's smile and wide delighted eyes. Yet… there was such an aura of strength around him. It marked him as dangerous in spite of appearances.

“Do sit down!” he invited them, gesturing to the nearby beanbags.

Terry hastily dropped on one and the others did the same, some more hesitantly than others. He was privately amused that Potter chose a red one, and Malfoy a green one, but since he himself had picked a blue one, he kept his mouth shut about House colours. Besides, given their current situation, he had a niggling suspicion that fixating on such details was more about coping with the tension than anything.

“Who are you?” asked Potter bluntly.

Terry winced – would it kill him to be polite? – but the man wasn't fazed and just leaned back comfortably, smiling his contagious smile.

“Call me Yugi,” he told them with friendly ease.
They froze.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, so some of the board games mentioned here, strictly speaking, weren't published in 1995; but they're personal favourites... and this is wildly AU anyway. Those not openly mentioned are Ticket to Ride (Days of Wonder), Race for the Galaxy (Giochix Editions) and Colt Express (Asterion Press). And of course, Scotland Yard and Masters of the Labyrinth are Ravensburger classics.
“Yu—*Yugi*?”

“As in… the King of Games?!?”

“So this is all your FAULT!”

That last was, predictably, Malfoy. Terry himself was too stunned to say anything. It wasn't that he hadn't expected this, because he had, but… they were *actually* meeting the all-too-mysterious Yugi!

The man, for his part, threw his head back and laughed happily: “Well… yeah. Technically,” he admitted.

Terry actually felt his jaw drop.

“*Technically*?” snapped Hermione.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” asked Potter with a scowl.

“Send us back!” demanded Malfoy at the same time – but as usual, he was ignored.

Yugi laughed again: “*Technically*, I am, indeed, the King of Games. And, *technically*, this Tournament is my fault… kind of…” He ran a hand through his weird locks, with just a touch of ruefulness.

They gave him a moment to elaborate, but when it didn't seem as if he would, Potter exploded: “Gaargh! I'm sick and tired of half-answers! Hinting and insinuating and alluding and never *saying*! Pretending you're taking everything for granted just to keep us in the dark! I've had ENOUGH!”

Yugi looked inordinately amused. “And what would you like me to do about it?” he asked, polite as they come.

Potter snarled: “How about some *real* answers, Your Majesty?”

The man's smile became impossibly bigger: “Yugi's quite fine. You make my title sound so terribly serious!”

“Isn't it?” asked Terry curiously.

“It is and it isn't,” replied Yugi – which was no answer at all.

“But you *are* the King of Games, right?” clarified Hermione, with the insistence of someone who was trying to put some order in the notes for a lesson whose teacher was unable to stick to one topic through a whole sentence, let alone a period (Terry *knew* what that was like, he felt like that every time he had an Ancient Runes class, and it was positively galling).

“Oh, that!” Yugi shrugged nonchalantly: “That started off as nothing more than a publicity stunt, back when I was your age – first Pegasus declared the winner of the Duellist Kingdom would gain the title, he always had a flare for the dramatic I'm afraid, then Kaiba insisted on advertising it for his KC Grand Prix… and it kind of grew from there... and then people started getting offended.”
That took them aback.

“What? Why?”

“Because, they insisted, I had only won the greatest World Tournament of one game. And, well, they had a point, didn't they? Why would being good at Duel Monsters make me a champion at any other game?” He smiled beatifically. “The Go players were the first to protest… then the Chess players added their voice… and the Poker players... and then… well, you can imagine.”

“So you, what? Won every other game in existence?” asked Potter incredulously.

“Oh, no, no, no! That would be impossible.” Yugi shook his head earnestly. “They did try to make me do just that at first, though. I got invited to all sorts of Tournaments. Go, Chess, Shogi, Mahjong, Stratego, Backgammon, Othello, Contract Bridge, Settlers of Catan… urgh. I feel tired just thinking back on it. For a few years there, I kept bouncing all over the world like a spinning top, from one Tournament to another! It was quite stressful.”

“And you won them all?” asked Hermione, wide-eyed.

“Well, yes.” He looked faintly embarrassed, but also pleased. “I am quite good. But there was always one more.” He sighed. “It was Kaiba who put a stop to it. He's always been good at knocking sense into people… especially me. He yelled and ranted at me for a good hour, and then proceeded to set rules. And standards. And stuff.”

“What kind of rules?” asked Terry, fascinated.

Yugi smiled easily and raised one finger: “If someone wants to challenge me for the title of King of Games, they have to beat me at all the games I'm a champion of, not just one,” he said. “If I lose to a champion in one game,” a second finger joined the first, “I don't lose my title, just lose that game from my list until I win it again. Oh, and the title of World Champion for every game stays separate from beating me, completely. That was a huge relief for a lot of people. Me included!”

He chuckled, then raised another finger, and then hurriedly one more: “Also, I can only add to my list games for which an official international tournament exist. Which is a relief! I couldn't possibly keep up with all that get published. Upward of 4,000 new games are released every year!”

“You're joking!”

“No, not at all.”

Terry goggled at him. That many?! Was it even possible? He didn't look like he was pulling their leg. But still! How could there possibly be that many different games? Who invented them all?

Malfoy narrowed his eyes: “And how many do you add to your… list, every year?”

“Oh, just about a dozen or so,” Yugi shrugged, nonchalantly.

Terry couldn't help but frown: “That doesn't sound like much.”

“Doesn't… Merlin, Boots! That means that becoming the King of Games becomes twelve steps more difficult every year! They get added to the previous ones, they don't replace them!” snapped Malfoy and Terry blushed. Right.

“I do lose sometimes. To World Champions and such,” pointed out Yugi. At their Looks, he admitted: “Not very often.”
They shook their heads in awe. “Unbelievable!”

It was, once more, Potter who voiced their protest. “How do you expect us to be able to take your title from you, then?” he not-quite shouted.

Yugi frowned, eying him with bafflement, of all things: “Well, now. If you wish to try becoming the King of Games, you’re welcome to it, of course. It might take you a few years, though.”

“I thought that was the point of this mess?” asked Neville in confusion. He coloured when Yugi just looked at him inquiringly. “Just… Everybody keeps mentioning successors, is all.”

Yugi nodded earnestly: “Yes, yes. But to the Shadow Court! That's got nothing to do with games!” He stopped. “No, wait. I just said a very stupid thing. Please, forget it.”

The five wizards exchanged wide-eyed glances.

Potter cautiously said. “Ooo-kaay...” Then he seemed at a loss to go on and just frowned.

Hermione clenched her hands tightly before her and took over: “Why is it stupid?” she asked in a tightly controlled voice.

Yugi smiled easily. “The Shadow Court has everything to do with Games, but nothing at all to do with… professional tournaments and championships and so on.”

He was, Terry reflected, very good at answering without giving answers.

Hermione was visibly fighting frustration: “But aren't you the King of Games? And the others we met your... Court of Games, or something?”

But Yugi laughed gently. “No, no, they are the Shadow Court. Completely different thing. Court of Games, hah!” he chuckled, inordinately amused.

Then he noticed her glare and hurriedly explained: "I am the King of Games because I hold that title, the same way Linford Christie holds the title of Olympic Champion in athletics, or Grandmaster Xie Jun is the Chess World Champion. And that's one thing. I am the King of the Shadow Court by right. It's… a different matter, though I'll grant you that there is some confusion around it.”

“Why?” said Potter through gritted teeth.

Yugi grew serious: “Because…” he trailed off and looked into the distance. “Because of what Shadow Magic is, and how it came to be released in the here-and-now.”
Chapter 75

“Aaargh!”

Potter flopped backwards onto the nearest beanbag, letting his head dangle upside down and grumbling indistinctly about 'annoying personages', 'crypting answers' and – if Terry guessed it correctly - 'nutty tri-coloured jerks'.

“We would greatly appreciate it,” said Hermione with more dignity than any of the boys could have managed, “if you could stop deliberately murking the waters–”

Yugi's eyes widened in a show of innocence: “I'm not!” he exclaimed. “Why would I?”

“Well then you won't mind giving us some real answers at last!” she almost yelled.

“That stumped them for all of a moment. What did they wish to know? Besides, you know, everything?

“Why us?” Everybody turned to look at Terry and he felt himself redden, realizing it had been him who had blurted out the first question.

But Neville, at least, was nodding vigorously: “Excellent starting point. Why pick the five of us? How did you choose us?”

“Potential,” was the prompt response. “By which I really mean a combination of factors. Power, naturally… you need a certain level of raw power to handle Shadow Magic.”

Malfoy straightened in his seat, looking awfully smug.

“Some familiarity with using your power, too – it's not indispensable, look at Serenity, she manages despite barely having any connection to magic, but it is preferable, as you may imagine. Hum… Cleverness,” he went on.

It was Terry's and Hermione's turn to look smug and Yugi smiled at them.

“The ability to work under odd conditions, to develop strategies and evolve them as needed. And... some enjoyment of games, for obvious reasons.”

He smiled wider. “Also, an open mind. That's possibly the most important requirement, come to think of it.”

“And how, exactly, did you judge us to have all these requirements?” asked Malfoy disdainfully, shooting Neville and Potter a look that said, clear as day, that he did not believe they had any of the listed quality.

Potter wasn't fazed and shot him a sweet smile: “Yeah, because, frankly, Malfoy and open mind just don't go together, like, at all,” he told Yugi, but looking at the Slytherin.

Predictably, the blond hissed and sputtered in indignation, Potter's eyes narrowed and both wizards' hands strayed to their wands; but Yugi didn't seem to pay either of them much mind.
“You all completed the preliminary test, of course,” he said calmly – as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“What?”

“Did not!”

“When was this?”

“What do you mean?!”

“I think I’d remember…!”

They all started hotly, but tapered off quickly because the King of Games (or was it the King of the Shadow Court?) was holding up a very familiar magazine and they could only gape in shock.

“The Quibbler?!?” they chorused.

“You all completed the Very Special Christmas Sphinx Page,” Yugi explained cheerfully.

They stared at him.

After a while, Potter turned to look at Malfoy in incredulity: “Wait a minute,” he said faintly. “YOU read the Quibbler?”

The blond blushed and looked away, mumbling something, embarrassed. Terry thought maybe he caught the name ‘Loony’ and perhaps ‘persuasive’ in there somewhere, but he didn't pay much attention: he was too busy trying to remember what had been on that particular page.

He'd seen Luna reading the Quibbler at a DA meeting and the Everchanging Crossword had caught his eye. He'd been quite surprised: quizzes and puzzles weren't standard presences in the Quibbler. Luna had noticed his interest and gladly relinquished the magazine. She was always eager to promote it, after all, and as she pointed out, she had several other copies anyway.

He'd found the games challenging and fun and had spent the entire ride home on the Hogwarts Express working them all out, quite proud of himself for completing even the Runic Sudoku that had Tony and Su Li give up, annoyed at the difficulty level.

To think that such a thing would have such impact on his life!

Okay, so he had solved it, and he'd quite enjoyed it, truth be told. It had been a mix of enigmatography, odd trivia quizzes and magical moving puzzles, from what he recalled, with a riddle or five thrown in. He couldn't remember anything truly special about it, though. Could there really have been a hidden test in it? And if there was, surely more than the five of them had solved it?

Neville had grabbed the magazine from Yugi's hands and was glancing through it, surprised. “I remember this! Luna gave it to me after Nott pushed me in front of him when we botched that Potion. It put me in the hospital wing for a week, last January. It was quite a relief to have something to occupy my time!” He looked up and asked curiously: “How did you arrange it?”

“Oh, Pegasus has struck up quite the friendship with the editor. I don't pretend to understand what they're about, with all their fanciful tales of Death and Hallows, but Mr. Lovegood was quite pleased to help us out. We came up with the games ourselves, of course.”
“Well, it wasn't much of a test, if you ask me. Anyone could have solved them!” protested Hermione, who looked almost as embarrassed as Malfoy at having to admit she read the wacky magazine. “It took me no longer than an evening to complete it, when Luna passed it to me!”

“It was Luna for you too, huh?” commented Potter thoughtfully. “Anyone get the feeling she's had a hand in all this?”

Yugi laughed freely: “She knows more than she should,” he agreed. “It's too bad she has no interest in games – apparently competitiveness makes no sense at all to her. We had considered her, but with her attitude…” He shook his head ruefully. “I tried to play a simple game of cards with her once. She was completely unpredictable, her moves made no sense at all. When I asked her to explain her strategy, she told me that she'd chosen to keep the cards that looked well together – aesthetically!”

They burst out laughing.

“That sounds like Luna,” admitted Potter just as ruefully.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I don't care if she's involved, it's still ridiculous. What kind of 'preliminary test' was it supposed to be anyway?”

“Yeah, I've got to say, the games were rather easy, I bet hundreds of people got them right!” added Terry, feeling almost disappointed.

“Uh-uh!” Yugi shook his head, smiling. “First of all, not very many people read the Quibbler, fascinating though it is. It takes an open mind to appreciate it. Of course, readership has increased now that you've released an exclusive, Harry, but our plan was set into motion before Christmas. Second!” he raised two fingers, widening his smile. “We enchanted that particular page so that only those with enough power could see it. The others just skipped it without noticing it.”


Yugi went on as if he hadn't spoken: “Third… well. A number of people solved some of the puzzles, sure. But you five were the only ones who managed all. Which shows skill, obviously, but also dedication. Very important, that. And that you enjoyed the games – you wouldn't have spent that much time on them around Christmas otherwise!”

To that, nobody could retort.

“Hence our choice,” Yugi concluded happily.

“But why did you have to choose at all?” asked Hermione, more curious now than indignant.
Chapter 76

For the first time, Yugi seemed to lose some of his cheerfulness.

“Because we've seen what happens when you hold onto power too long. It is not a risk we're willing to take,” he said with finality. “The last thing this world needs is another Akhenaden,” he muttered in a dark undertone, looking to his lap; “or worse, another Akhenamkhanen, too tired and weary to pay attention to his own advisors and all too ready to pick the easiest way without wondering about the price...”

He suddenly blinked at them, as if remembering they were there, and returned to a normal tone of voice to conclude: “Passing the baton – so to speak – is mostly a safety measure. Against, you know, ourselves.” He gestured nonchalantly to himself and appeared to find his smile again: “Power corrupts...” he sing-songed.

“...and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” Terry and Hermione finished the well-known quote in a chorus.

Malfoy scoffed. “Pretty words, to hide behind... because you're scared to simply admit you want it – power, influence, recognition, call it as you please, we all want it. Pretending we don't is just hypocritical.”

“That's not...!”

“Speak for yourself!...”

Yugi looked at him gravely. “Maybe we do at that - from a limited point of view you're certainly right. After all, who has never wished for the power to strike back at a bully who's bothering us? The influence to be chosen for a task we want to perform? The recognition of our friends turning to us for advice or guidance?” He smiled wanly at the way they were all fidgeting, knowing they, of course, desired such things. Like he said… who hasn't?

“But...” Yugi's voice deepened. “Power over others? Power to change dozens of lives for the better… or for the worse? Power of life and death? That's another thing, isn't it?... True power means responsibility. A heavy one. It is... a burden. And not one I would have sought on my own.”

“And yet you have it,” pointed out the blond wizard, as smug as if he'd proven a point.

“For now,” specified Yugi.

There was a brief silence. Then...

“You would truly just... give it up?” The Slytherin sounded genuinely baffled.

The man nodded, nothing but sincerity in his eyes.

Malfoy's stare was blankly incredulous.

Everybody else kept quiet, eyes darting between the two, unwilling to intervene.

Yugi shook his head sadly. “I don't know whether to pray you'll learn the price of power soon... or that you'll never need to.”

Malfoy scoffed, but he wasn't as self-assured as usual. After a moment's hesitation, he blurted out:
“I just don't understand why.” The Slytherin wasn't even petulant: just honestly puzzled.

“Relinquishing power is an integral part of wielding it. Or it should be, at least,” said Yugi sternly. “The hunger for power is a frightening drive.” He was silent for a long moment, before concluding softly: “Perhaps the worst one.”

Malfoy rested his chin on a hand, looking at him with a thoughtful, displeased frown. Nobody said anything for a good while. At last, the Slytherin declared, voice low but steady: “I don't believe there is anything wrong with being ambitious. And nothing you've said or will say will change my mind!”

Yugi shrugged: “Of course not. Seeking to accomplish great things – or even small things – is good. Seeking to control or have power over others, however...”

He trailed off, and Malfoy hesitated again, looking as if he didn't entirely understand the distinction, but Yugi didn't give him time to voice his perplexity: “At any rate, it is our decision to make, is it not?” he asked in a much lighter tone.

“But surely you haven't been doing... err... this, for that long?” objected Hermione politely. “You can't be that old...!”

Yugi chuckled: “No, and neither are we ready to step down.”

“But you just said--” frowned Neville.

“Not right away,” clarified Yugi.

“Then why...?” scowled Potter.

“Would you rather we picked you at the last minute? Dump all this onto you and wash our hands of it? Disappear into retirement and leave you to juggle the burdens and responsibilities of the Court all on your own?”

“Alright, alright, I get it already!” The Gryffindor raised his hands in surrender. “Err... thank you for not doing that, I guess.”

“You're welcome,” assured Yugi solemnly. Then he broke into a grin: “So, can we move to the fun stuff now? 'Cause there is still a game to be played...”

“No!” exclaimed Hermione forcefully. She blushed at her own outburst, but the steely glint in her eyes didn't dull and she raised her chin defiantly. “You said you'd answer our questions!”

The man's eyes widened comically: “You've got more?!” he mock-whined, his grin betraying his amusement.

Hermione ratched up her glare a notch and fired off rapidly: “What, exactly, do you want from us? Do you really want us to take your place? What is it that you all do? What's with the games, really? Why this whole complicated circus? And what was that about Shadow Magic?”

“Hmm...” Yugi adopted a thinking pose, chin resting on a fisted hand and all. “I think I've answered the first two already. So. Next-- what do we all do, let's see... Kaiba's busy with his corporation, of course, plus he Duels now and then and he's a game designer when the fancy strikes him, and so's Mokuba, some of the time, besides being Vice-President of KaibaCorp, though he is also studying law... Ryou, well, he's... out and about, either testing and promoting games, or off on some exploring gig or other... Serenity's a teacher, Pegasus... eh. He's a billionaire, mostly
he does whatever he pleases… Who even knows what Shadi does…” He frowned thoughtfully, as if just realizing he had no clue about one of his friend's profession, while the five magicals tried to remember if they'd maybe met or heard of whoever this Shadi was.

“Ishizu has her museum and Anzu is in the Library most of the time,” went on Yugi, “and Joey is an actor, some of the time, and a game animator, and a Duellist still – point of fact, I'm the only Dueller in the world he still hasn't beaten.” He smiled widely.

“As for me, I am often busy with tournaments and such, plus there are occasions when I'm invited to play for a charity event or another, sometime I'm a tester too, and of course there's Grandpa's shop. We sell games,” he informed them happily. “Or, he does at least, and I help out when I have the time.”

“So… basically you spend your time playing?”

“Huh… yeah. Yeah, I do.” He added thoughtfully: “And I study. A lot. We all do.” He almost seemed apologetic and Terry could not figure out why. It's not like there was anything wrong with studying.

“With how little Shadow Magic is known and understood, still… and we can't afford to let it pass out of all knowledge again, I don't think. I have been shielded from knowledge far too often, to preserve my innocence or some such rot, and it always ended in disaster.”

That clearly struck a chord with Potter. “Keeping you ignorant for your own good. I know how that feels,” he said darkly.

“Well, think of it this way. Letting Shadow Magic be lost again would be kind of the same thing, only on a much bigger scale.”

“That's got to be the best incentive to studying I've ever been given. And I got threatened with a dragon once.”

Terry and Malfoy turned to stare at him with identical expression of horror (and a touch of hopeful disbelief. Surely he was joking? Except... well... he had faced a dragon... Oh, Merlin!)

Neither Neville nor Hermione seemed bothered by Potter's proclamation.

“You still haven't explained what games have to do with anything,” insisted Hermione stubbornly.

“This is really bothering you, isn't it?” asked Yugi curiously. “Why?”

“Well... because... because games are silly!” protested Hermione, floundering a bit. "They're for children, you shouldn't waste time playing once you've grown up..."

"You just don't like losing at Wizard Chess," interjected Potter, with laughter in his voice.

She blushed.

“That's very silly,” was Yugi's comment. Then he frowned a little and clarified: “Both what you said about only children enjoying games, and being upset at losing. Humble in victory, gracious in defeat!” he quoted.

“Oh, because you have such experience with defeat?” grumbled Malfoy, who seemed, if Terry was any judge, to be taking the comment rather personally.
“But playing is… childish...” protested Hermione weakly.

“As my Regent would say… Games aren't childish. Games aren't boring. Games purify our souls and leave room for new development that challenges the mind! They are the products of human wisdom!” Yugi proclaimed grandly.

“Nice slogan,” commented Terry blandly, making Neville snicker.

“What if we don't want to spend our lives playing?” asked Hermione mulishly.

Yugi looked at her strangely: “Then you don't,” he said slowly, as if he couldn't comprehend why she was even asking something so dumb. “The entire point of games is to enjoy them, if you don't, there's no reason to play.”

“Except here we are, playing whether we enjoy it or not!” she cried.

“That's different. This is a Shadow Game Tournament. Once you're caught in a Shadow Game, you have no choice but to play.”

“Yes, about that,” Potter tried to interject. “Could you perhaps, I don't know, explain what this whole Shadow Games business is, at long last?”

But he was ignored.

“And isn't that what we'll always be trapped in?” Hermione sounded shrill, now. “Because of these?” she dangled her Eyepatch in front of them.

Now Yugi looked genuinely surprised: “Being the Bearers of the Millennium Items won't stop you from having a life! Just look at Kaiba, or Pegasus.”

“Then why are we here?” yelled Hermione just as Terry blurted out: “But we're not! Are we? ...I mean… these aren't real. Not… not real. Not real. Right?”

For some reason, Yugi seemed to hear him more clearly than he did the frazzled witch, even though she was louder.

“What's real mean?” he asked kindly. “They aren't the Items forged in blood and hatred in ancient times, no, and frankly, you should be grateful for that.”

Terry nodded fervently, and he wasn't the only one.

“But they're true symbols of the responsibility you've accepted. That makes them real alright. They wouldn't work if you didn't power them with your belief!” he declared, far too brightly.

“Hold on. We haven't accepted anything!” cried Potter, indignant.

The King of the Shadow Court gave them a knowing look: “Haven't you?”
Chapter 77

They all fell silent because damn.

Yugi said soothingly: “It’s okay. It took me ages to realize it too. I was in deep before I even started realizing I was being handed this power. At least you'll have some guidance: I'll see to that, and the others will help. You won't be as lost as we were, I promise.”

The five wizards clenched their jaws, still coming to terms with the realization that yeah, they were doing this.

After all, they could protest all they wanted, but none of them was running for the hills, were they? Terry even had to admit, he’d… more or less come to enjoy this. A bit. And he was undeniably curious (and a little smug to be here, in all honesty).

“We had to figure out everything by trial and mistake, it was unnerving,” Yugi went on blithely. “I think that's why everybody was on board with the plan of giving you some advice right from the start.”

Terry jolted at that. A number of memories flashed through his mind, quick as an edited sequence in a movie.

Ishizu whispering: “May it remind you of how foresight and schemes, while admirable tools, might benefit, at times, from quick thinking and daring!”

The blonde dealer – Mai, wasn’t it? – lecturing: “Remember this, if you remember nothing else. The Game has to be fair... but the circumstances that lead to playing are another matter entirely!”

Kaiba spitting: “It is a symbol of your having achieved the goal of being number one. You should be proud of holding it for that alone. Forget all that hocus pocus nonsense you’ve been fed, it has no place in Gaming!”

Ryou smiling smugly: “No words are needed among players… Let Chance speak!”

And Mai again: “Ignorance will always work to your opponent’s advantage!”

... They had been giving them advice, he realized. All along!

Now to decide… was that good or bad?

“Fine, alright, I’ll bite,” said Potter after a time, glowering darkly. “Suppose you're right, suppose we've... accepted. What, exactly, have we accepted? What do you expect us to do? And what the hell is Shadow Magic? You keep going around it in circles, just spit it out for Merlin's sake!” demanded Potter.

Yugi smiled but this time, it wasn't bright nor welcoming. “I just might, at that. If, that is, you complete this Tournament. Or have you forgotten there is still one Game to play?”

And they were silent again. Because. Damn.

The King of the Shadow Court rose, his presence powerful and intimidating against all logic (he had magenta hair, for Merlin's sake, who looked intimidating with magenta hair? Terry sort of wanted to learn the trick).
“Shall we?” he asked rhetorically, his voice reverberating with quiet strength – and Terry felt like no-one could oppose him.

Apart from Potter, apparently.

“Hold on!” demanded the Gryffindor with an undaunted scowl – though he, too, was a little subdued. “I have a question. Why should we want to win this? I mean, we could just... give up.”

They all gaped at him.

All, that is, except the King of Games. “Could you?” he asked, amused. “I suppose you could. I doubt you're the type to, after all, you wouldn't be here if you were the kind of wizard who gives up in front of a challenge...”

Malfoy made an odd sound.

Everybody turned to stare at him and Potter, who was evidently fed up with everything, instantly snapped: “What?”

“Nothing!” the blond denied quickly, alarmed, inching away from the furious green eyes and slightly behind the tall frame of Longbottom, who rolled his eyes.

“Malfoy, if you have something to say--” started Potter menacingly, fingering his wand.

The Slytherin started fumbling for his own and stepped further behind Longbottom, who pointedly moved away; at which point Malfoy had no choice but to grow a spine and face the glaring Gryffindor.

“I'm just trying to wrap my mind around it,” he drawled, admirably pretending that he wasn't at all intimidated. Though he had his wand in hand now, that was obviously bolstering his confidence. “You really solved all the puzzles? You?”

“What's so unbelievable about it?” replied Potter annoyed, gripping his wand in its holster.

“There were Runes in there!” Malfoy waved his free hand in the air in a move that clearly conveyed his shock that the Gryffindor even knew what Runes were, let alone how to use them. “And Arithmancy! And, and...!”

“It was mostly logic, and math, and stuff,” grumbled Potter dismissively (making Terry sniff, annoyed, because it wasn't just that, thank you very much).

“Still!” insisted Malfoy haughtily, though he was eyeing the other's wand nervously.

“Yeah, well, I'm not as stupid as I look. Get over it!” spat Potter, turning away.

Terry doubted Malfoy would – he wasn't exactly a shining example of openmindedness, whatever Yugi claimed – and yet... there was something speculative in the way he looked at Potter now.

The King of Games cleared his throat. “As I was saying...” he said delicately. “You don't strike me as a quitter; but let's pretend for a minute you choose to give up. What happens then?”

“...We go home?” guess Hermione, more hopefully than confidently.

“And?” insisted Yugi neutrally.

They all looked at him warily, waiting for the catch.
“Shadow Magic needs to be controlled, and in a way, cared for. That is a fact,” the King of the Shadow Court said, far too calmly. “There is no other option, not unless you wish to risk a magical catastrophe of unparalleled proportions. And you, my young friends, are peculiarly suited to taking up the mantle of this responsibility. That, too, is a fact.”

Terry snuck a glance at his companions, all in various stages of scowling, fidgeting, grimacing and wavering. All not protesting aloud.

“It's not that I don't understand where you're coming from,” Yugi said gently. “But try and see it this way: if not you… then who?” His eyebrows rose meaningfully even as Potter's glare intensified.

“Look at the bright side!” their strange host continued in a sunny tone. “It's not like you won't get benefits from it! Priceless knowledge at your disposal… magic lost to the sands of time within your grasp… power beyond imagining… a chance at being special.”

And there he had the rest of them. Undeniably. Terry himself couldn't help the longing that rose in him. He could see Malfoy's craving for what was on offer. Longbottom was blushing, as if ashamed to admit how much he wanted it; even Hermione had stars in her eyes.

Potter's voice was like a cold shower: “Not to be a mood-dampener, but could we skip to the protect-the-world-fight-the-evil-darkness part of the program?”

Yugi smiled sadly. “Trust you to understand that Shadow Magic is also a very real burden,” he commented.

They wavered, uncertain.

“A burden,” he continued with resolve, “that someone must shoulder.” Yugi looked straight into Potter's eyes: “Would you let someone else gain control of such power?” And then he added quickly, in the same level voice: “Would you leave someone else to pick up the burden you eschew?”

Terry watched the Gryffindor pale at the first question and flush at the second, and mentally tipped his hat off to the King of the Shadow Court. He definitely knew how to manipulate his audience.

No Gryffindor ever went down without fighting, however.

“What about Voldemort?” challenged Harry.

If he was hoping for a bad reaction from the King of Games, he was disappointed.

“What about him?” Yugi laughed. “Just because you have other responsibilities doesn't mean you can't save the world a time or five. I did!”
“What about Voldemort?” challenged Harry.  
*If he was hoping for a bad reaction from the King of Games, he was disappointed.*  
“What about him?” Yugi laughed. “Just because you have other responsibilities doesn’t mean you can’t save the world a time or five. I did!”

Potter, Hermione and Neville all gaped at him. Terry too, truthfully, but he caught himself and schooled his expression.

Malfoy was the only one watching *Potter*.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” he asked in a hushed tone of wonder. “About fighting Him?”

For a moment, Potter looked angry, then exasperated, then perhaps just wary, thoughtful, angry again and broody and weary and even cunning, his face cycling through a myriad expressions quickly until he shrugged and looked just tired.

“It's not like I have a choice, do I?” he settled for saying. “I didn't ask for this, Malfoy, he's the one who keeps coming after me. He won't stop, either. For whatever reason, he thinks I'm a threat…”

“It couldn't be because you keep beating him, could it?” cut in Neville with an amused murmur. Potter shot him a quick grin.

“It could be that,” acknowledged Yugi musingly. “Or he could still be trying to wrap up the Prophecy.”

There was a moment of weighty silence.

“The *what*?” said Potter in a strangled hiss.

“Hmm hmm…” nodded the King of Games unconcernedly. “Mind you, I hate prophecies… Nasty, pointless, uncomfortable things! They mess up people's lives like nothing else,” he went on blithely.

“What prophecy?” cut him off Potter.

Yugi gave a long-suffering sigh. “You mean you don't know? Why are you so adamant about fighting him, then?”

“Oh, I don't know!” exploded the Gryffindor. “Maybe because he keeps trying to kill me? Because he murdered my parents? And Cedric? And-- and Myrtle and... others – he almost killed Ginny! He ruined Hagrid's life! He did so many terrible things… and he'll go on killing people and ruining lives left and right and the idea of just *letting* him-- he's going to destroy the wizarding world if he's not stopped! I've got plenty of reasons – take your pick!”

A flame seemed to leap in his green eyes, blazing with strength and determination.

“Wow. Seems like you don't need anything as silly as that Prophecy after all, huh? Good for you!” Yugi cheered with enthusiastic sincerity. “Notoriously unreliable things, prophecies. Dodgy
reasons to do anything, if you ask me,” he finished in a mutter, and smiled hugely.

Potter gaped some more, he drew himself up in outrage only to deflate almost at once, and finally settled on resigned grimness: “What. Bloody. Prophecy?!?” he demanded through gritted teeth.

The King of Games looked up to the ceiling, thoughtful. “Now, how did it go?” he wondered; he cupped an elbow with one hand and tapped a finger of the other on his chin: “Oh, yes… The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...”

Hermione gasped and her hands flew to her mouth. Neville squeaked: “End of the seventh month?” Malfoy was mouthing Equal? Equal?! in shock.

Terry decided he'd reached his quota of world-changing disclosures for the month. Year. Lifetime, possibly. He sat down on the nearest pouffe, crossed his arms very pointedly, and refused to face any more revelations. And if anyone'd dared comment, he'd have pointed out that yes, actually, he was being absolutely mature and reasonable indeed, thank you for asking!

Potter for his part… didn't react. He just stood and blinked. His breathing was laboured – as though something was almost choking him.

“Oh, Harry,” moaned Hermione after a tense long while. “The end of the prophecy… neither can live...”

Terry winced.

“Yeah,” said Potter painfully, seeming to dredge up the words from somewhere deep inside him, “yeah, well.” He swallowed convulsively. “It's not… not really a surprise, is it? That one of us has got to kill the other one… in the end?”

Hermione half-sobbed.

“You… are you sure… that, well, that it's you?” asked Neville in a surprisingly timid voice.

“Marked,” quoted Malfoy in clipped tones. He was pale and thoughtful and, typically, dismissive of the Gryffindor. But his tone wasn't as snide as usual. Nor as rude. “The scar, Longbottom – I'd say it's clear enough.”

For some reason, Neville looked enormously relieved at that.

Terry filed all this away in a rather detached manner. Maybe one day it'd all make sense. Not that he particularly wanted it to, mind.

“Now, gentlemen – and lady,” the King of Games said briskly, startling them all. “No reason to worry about a silly Prophecy right now. We have a Shadow Tournament to complete! Let's set all these grave matters aside for a while and get this show on the road, shall we?”

A deck of cards was suddenly in his hands, being shuffled carelessly.

Terry buried his head in his hands. Was the man serious? He dropped a bombshell like that and just expected them to go on with the damn games?
“This Game has one of my favourite settings – I really love it. The Kingdom of Xidit!” Yugi fanned a few cards out, showing glimpses of their bright colours off for just a moment before chattering on: “There's actually more than one board game set in this fantasy world, you know? And this one, I chose especially for you... I thought it was particularly appropriate for you wizard-types. The legendary Tournament of Twelve Seasons! A three-years competition to select the new Archmage! Ancestral magical items, faithful familiars! Unexpected effects! Are you ready to face the challenge?” he asked exuberantly.

“Years?” yelped Neville paling. Terry raised his head, alarmed. Surely it didn't mean... but with how things had been going...

“A year as in Four Seasons – that is to say, a full turn of the Board,” explained Yugi reassuringly, obviously trying not to laugh. “Not an actual length of time.”

Neville sighed deeply in relief.

Chapter End Notes

So, this actually wasn't supposed to be included; but then my brother was all 'But what about the Prophecy?' and I was like 'Yeah, like Yugi would be bothered by the thing'… And then this happened.

"Seasons" (and its various expansions) is a Libellud editions game by Régis Bonnessée, beautifully illustrated by Naïade, M. Leyssenne, P. Mafayon, J. Rivière and P. Drouin.
“Here’s what you’ll play with,” Yugi went on quickly, before they could express any lack of enthusiasm. “Power cards and seasons dice!”

He showed them a sheer bag of dice in various colours, and jingled it cheerfully, trying without much success to draw their attention. Potter in particular looked a million miles away – not that Terry blamed him.

“Broadly speaking, the dice regulate your interaction with the board: how you move, what you get each turn and so on; while the cards have various effects that will let you build your own strategy.”

Terry closed his eyes briefly. Yugi’s enthusiasm was tiring him out.

“The game in itself is pretty simple,” the strange man assured them cheerfully. “To win, you must gather Crystals – which can be done in different ways, I’ll explain that later. Usually, the player with the most Crystals in the end wins the title of Archmage; however, we're playing with a twist!”

“You don't say?” muttered Malfoy, not exactly quietly.

To Terry's slight surprise, nobody snapped back. He opened his eyes and glanced around: Potter was pale and staring at nothing (that explained the odd lack of reaction to Malfoy’s grumbles) and Hermione, for her part, looked more taken with biting her lip and shooting worried looks at the green-eyed wizard than with the explanation. Or anything else.

Yugi fell silent, perhaps waiting for them to say something, but nobody seemed inclined to.

Terry fidgeted.

“Hey, you okay?” he whispered to the witch by his side. He didn't mean to attract attention, but everybody snapped their eyes to him at once, faster than if he'd shouted. He felt his cheeks heat.

“Hermione?” asked Potter, concerned, shaking himself out of his gloom to come closer and grab her hand.

Her eyes were huge and worried: “Harry, oh, Harry…”

“Hey!” Potter said with an unconvincing smile. “It’s all right. Really. I’m fine. Let’s just focus on this last Game, okay?”

“But, Harry… about the Prophecy…” started Hermione hesitantly.


“Unless you joined him,” pointed out Malfoy, sounding, unexpectedly, as if he himself didn't believe in his own words.

Potter snorted: “Yeah, no. Not in a million years. Besides, that door is closed; he offered, I turned him down, end of story.”
Malfyoy started. “He-- you-- what?!” he asked, looking horrified – whether at the idea of the Dark Lord trying to recruit Potter or Potter turning him down was anyone's guess.

The Gryffindor ignored him. “I was already going to fight him, Hermione,” he told her gently.

“Oh, of course,” she said, waving her hand impatiently. “We all were. Are. But, Harry, this says you have to-- to either kill him or-- or be killed!”

She stared at him, stricken, then whispered, “Are you scared?”

Potter was silent for a long time, thinking. Then he said, slowly but deliberately: “Not as much as I probably should be. It's a bit of a shock… but also not, you know? It seems as though I always knew I’d have to face him in the end. And after all… If I had never heard that Prophecy… I would still want him finished. And I’d want to do it.”

He paused, then nodded, a bit of colour returning to his cheeks. “It changes nothing,” he reiterated.

“Except this is like saying you never had any choice,” Terry blurted out without meaning to. He couldn't help it! He'd wanted to stay out of it all, it wasn't his business, but he was too used to think over implications and logical consequences – Ravenclaw House kind of trained you for this, from the doorknob up – and he'd been worrying at the Prophecy angle in the back of his mind even though he was doing his level best not to think of it and it just slipped out against his best judgement.

“Of course he had a choice!” Yugi interjected forcefully, to everybody's surprise. His body language was impatient, but his eyes were serious and kind. “In fact he had – has, really – many choices. He could, as was just pointed out, join his enemy. Strike a deal with him. Run away. Hide until it is all over. Pay someone else to kill Voldemort…”

Potter snorted.

He was still pale and determined, but he had a wane smile now. And a lot of sadness in his eyes: “It's just hard to know that were it not for something as ridiculous as a Prophecy, my parents would be alive.”

“You can't know that,” said Hermione swiftly. “They were fighting a war, anything might have happened. There's no guarantee they would have survived, even without the Prophecy.”

“Yeah,” echoed Neville, swallowing convulsively. “No guarantee.”

“Still...”

Yugi shook a finger at him: “The past is gone, you can not change it!” he scolded gently. “But the future is based on the decisions you make!” He smiled encouragingly: “The Prophecy does not mean you have to do anything! And in any case, there's more to life than fighting evil overlords.”

At that, Potter actually chuckled.

“But the actions of the Dark Lord determine his choices,” said Malfoy quietly.

Yugi shrugged: “No more, and no less, than the actions of any other influential person in his life, however. Do your father's choices not influence you? No Prophecy needed for that, right?”

Malfoy opened his mouth… and closed it.
“Now… are we done with this? Got all the nasty angst out of your system?” His eyes shone with both understanding and mirth as he offered brightly: “I could give you a speech on friendship to make you feel better. I'm good at those, ask anyone!”

Potter guffawed a short, but genuine laugh: “Okay, no, thanks. I'm good.”

Yugi was studying him closely, serious eyes at odds with his joking manner: “You sure? ...Ready to go on?”

Some colour was returning to the green-eyed wizard's face and he nodded, smiling gently.

The King of Games smiled warmly back: “Then, come and meet a dear, old friend of mine...”

Chapter End Notes

"Seasons" (and its various expansions) is a Libellud editions game by Régis Bonnessée, beautifully illustrated by Naïade, M. Leyssenne, P. Mafayon, J. Rivière and P. Drouin. Which... didn't actually exist before 2012, but hey, who's checking?
Chapter 80

Suddenly, Yugi was holding a card in his hand.

It was slightly bigger than the usual ones for Exploding Snap and all they could see was the swirling gold rays spiralling into a black hole at its centre, depicted on the back.

The King of Games was smiling fondly down at it.

After a moment, he took a deep breath, his eyes slipped closed, and he raised the card high.

A wave of power swept past them from all directions and sank into him for an instant, only to surge up again and out of the card, taking with it a rush of dark lights.

The sensation was indescribable.

Shadows flurried at the edge of their perception-- at the edge of Yugi's calling-- drowsy and awakened, caged and freed at once-- they swirled into tighter and tighter spirals, ready and eager and wild, and Terry felt suddenly drunk-- and if he could only reach out and tame them, coalesce them into-- but they were strong and wild and free and he would drown for sure and-- a flaring heat pulsed over his chest and he knew, he knew, there were things to be tracked and he would know where-- but the Shadows weren't part of the darkness as they should be and they would sweep him away-- but he'd know what path to follow, it rested over his heart-- but he couldn't find it, it was too much-- but there was a sense for it-- but the Shadows weren't ruled and he was lost and--

It lasted a fraction of a second. It lasted an eternity.

It swallowed them whole. It barely touched them.

It was overwhelming... it was over.

Someone was Ruling the Shadows-- shaping them, ordering them, choosing and regulating-- Terry could tell, he could feel that-- but he was losing the awareness of it all and it was a relief it was a wrenching disappointment it was--

Terry's scattered thoughts manage to realize that Yugi was doing... something – that what he just felt was a collateral effect – and he knew, he knew, that it was an echo of the real power being wielded; yet even so…

The King of Games' voice was both deep and joyous when he called out: “My ever-faithful companion… Dark Magician!”

A figure in dark blue armour, highlighted by vibrant purple lines, jumped out of the floor, somersaulted to a crouch and rose majestically, letting his staff float slowly up before sending it into a fast twirl with naught by a thought, showing off his control as shadows tinged of purple light haloed him, coursing with magic.

His polished armour, his warrior-like posture, his many-layered pointed helmet, his dead serious expression: everything marked him as a terrifying foe; his light blue skin and even his luminous blond hair looked intimidatingly alien; yet to their great relief, the gleam of his strangely glowing, aquamarine blue eyes was gentle.

He crossed his arms and settled, regarding them with unwavering intensity.
The wave of power ebbed, having been shaped and channelled properly, and Terry's dizziness abated-- he could barely feel the restless Shadows anymore but if he only could-- but he wouldn't dare risk it, the craving curiosity was balanced by the fear of being overwhelmed again and-- it was gone, all of it, lingering cold left in the wake of-- he could almost doubt he'd ever felt it at all, except--

“What... what was that?” gasped Potter from somewhere far away, by Terry's side. “It was...” He tried again: “It was...”

“Yeah,” said Terry hoarsely. It really was.

He met the King of the Shadow Court's gaze with his own bewildered one: the purple eyes were knowing and kind and implacable.

There was a long silence.

Terry's jumbled thoughts slowed down to some semblance of order again and he breathed deeply, steadying himself after the unexpected, disorienting rush.

No-one else seemed to be doing much better.

Their eyes kept returning to the wondrous creature in open fascination.

Finally, Malfoy gathered up the courage to ask what all of them were wondering: “Wha… what is he?” he whispered with reverence, a hand half raised towards the majestic creature Yugi had summoned. “He's not… he can't be… that is… what?...”

Dark Magician turned his attention to him and the blond faltered. He hovered in place, looking like a bird on the cusp of flight, both willing and unwilling to interact with the mysterious creature.

“Dark Magician,” was Yugi's simple, amused answer.

His eyes were sympathetic, and he didn't press them.

“Magician. Is he... is he a... wizard?” asked Potter with hesitation. He was still breathless and pale, but his eyes were gleaming.

“Like you, you mean?” asked Yugi with a fond smile. “He used to be.”

Terry couldn't make sense of the answer, of the strange magic, of the odd man's placidity in the face of such power. Yugi looked like he'd done nothing more strenuous than a phone call to a friend!

The King of Games glanced at the creature, who looked back with a strange kind of serene trust.

“Dark Magician has been a loyal and clever companion for thousands of years,” he said, with his peculiar way of not answering by answering. “Even before he gave his life to fuse his ba with his ka, the Magus of Illusion, in order to fend off his foe during a particularly harsh battle, he served the Nameless Pharaoh, who... well, never mind that. It's too long a tale to tell now... and he continued to serve the Pharaoh in the form of the Dark Magician, afterwards.”

“Err...”

Somehow, the confusing explanation managed to shake off the last of their vertigo and a jumble of questions poured forth at once.
“Fuse his what… with what?”

“Is he still…?”

“What do you mean, for thousands of years?”

“Gave his life?… Do you mean… he's dead?”

“But…?”

Yugi cut through their babbling: “Don't worry about it. It matters not.”

He rolled his eyes at their mulish expressions: “Suffice to say, Dark Magician used to be a human sorcerer, but he chose to become a Duel Spirit – meaning an otherworldly creature that dwells in the Shadow Realm but under certain conditions, allows himself to be summoned by Duellists.”

“Under certain conditions?” frowned Terry and Hermione said, puzzled: “I thought it was just a game?”

“Shadow Realm?” asked Potter sharply at the same time, while Malfoy, half transfixed half horrified, yelped: “That is possible?”

“Very much so,” confirmed Yugi, giving the blond an amused glance (and blithely ignoring the other questions). Then he grimaced and added: “Whether it is advisable, well, that's another matter entirely. Dark Magician had his reasons, of course, but still…”

“I can't believe this,” murmured Hermione, sounding completely overwhelmed.

“How is this possible?” asked Malfoy in a daze.

Yugi shrugged: “It's easy… well, no, no, it isn't. Not in the least. Forget I said that. It's isn't easy… but it is simple.”

“Simple,” repeated Potter flatly.

Yugi hummed. “There was a time when Ancient Egyptians would semi-regularly seal Spirits and the means to summon them in stone tablets,” he told them, “by ripping a person's ba from them, essentially, killing them in the process – that's what Dark Magician did to himself. And yes, there was room for abuse in that – as in everything to do with Shadow Magic, unfortunately. But it wasn't inherently evil, you must understand… rather the opposite… in order to summon the Duel Spirits, Shadow Masters would send themselves into an alternate dimension, a space where cheating is strictly forbidden, punishable by death.”

His eyes were distant, his voice was sure.

“There, their duel would not be interrupted, and more importantly, would not cause damage to anything but themselves. There, their skills would be tested against each other fairly: how powerful a monster could they summon? How powerful a spell could they cast to boost their monsters?… How clever a strategy could they implement against a stronger foe? It was a game… the earliest version of the Duel Monsters game, in fact… although it was never 'just' a game.” He smiled at Hermione. “There's no such thing as just a game – not in the Shadow Realm!”

“They played with people?”

“Everybody plays with people, in a way!” replied Yugi.
Malfoy and Potter gave him identical flat glares.

“It sounds horrible,” said Hermione, but in a small, uncertain voice.

Yugi glared at the witch. “It is an honour to be able to summon a Duel Spirit,” he said with conviction. “Dark Magician in particular – although, he and I go way back, so he indulges me more than most,” he finished softly. He was smiling again.

They all returned their gazes to the Dark Magician, fascinated and frightened in equal measure.

“But that was Ancient Egypt, right?” protested Neville in a wavering voice. “Not... not now.”

Yugi nodded – and so did Dark Magician.

“You used a modern card, though,” pointed out Terry.

Another round of nods.

After an expectant moment, Yugi seemed to realize they were waiting for something more.

“Pegasus got the idea for the nowadays version from those ancient sorcerers,” he elaborated. “He saw some of the carvings, heard the legends... The tablets actually looked a lot like our cards – or, I suppose it's the other way around.”

He fanned a few cards similar to the one he’d used to summon Dark Magician.

“Pegasus... recreated it all, in a way. In doing so, he sealed the Duel Spirits in the cards, in a similar way to how the sorcerers of old did in the tablets.”

Hermione interrupted him, standing tall in sudden indignation: “Sealed in the cards! Do you mean to say that they're slaves?”

Yugi gave her a severely unimpressed look. “No, of course not. Dark Magician became what he is of his own free will. And of his own free will he fights for his summoner!”

She cast an uncertain look at the Spirit, who was now glaring disappointedly down at her.

“In any case, not every card that is played is a Summon and not every duel is a Shadow Duel,” Yugi said with finality. “Duel Spirits are only truly summoned when magic forces are involved or when they choose to partner with certain individual players. It takes a special set of circumstances... or a special kind of person. They wouldn't just let themselves be summoned willy-nilly!”

The way Dark Magician stomped his staff on the ground expressed definite agreement.

“So what you did... it could just, not work?” said Malfoy with a frown, just as Potter asked: “What kind of person?”

“Well, they have their own lives, you know. Their own lands, their own societies. Sometimes they're busy with their own conflicts... They can't spend all their time at our back and call!” said Yugi earnestly.

“Oh,” commented Hermione in a small voice.

“Ok, but what do you mean...” tried Potter, but was ignored.
“Most 'monsters' you see in Duels are just holograms – Kaiba's contribution to Pegasus' game system,” Yugi concluded, twirling a card in his hand a few times.

“That is no hologram,” stated Potter rigidly.

Yugi hummed again. “I thought I should give you a little taste. So to speak.”

Their eyes widened.

“So we could really... do that,” clarified Malfoy, breathless with awe.

Yugi shrugged: “You might. You might not. No way of knowing yet.” He regarded them calmly.

“The Shadows are as ever-changing as they are eternal – and so is Shadow Magic, by nature. And so, by necessity, are its wielders.”

Dark Magician twirled his staff expertly, looking at his summoner with a small smile.

They fell into a thoughtful silence.
Yugi's perky voice recalled them to the present: “Right! So, like I was saying, we're playing with a twist. Specifically…” He pointed to the armoured Spirit by his side with a grin: “He'll be playing the current Archmage and you'll be challenging him for the title. As you can see, he has an official attack score of 2500, and 2100 defence points, so we'll go with that as your goal.”

Terry blinked, trying to understand what he meant: he was rather too awed by the Dark Magician (who was now smirking at them) to notice much of anything.

But Yugi was still speaking: “At the end of the Twelve Seasons, you will have to face him, to try and wrangle the title of Archmage of Xidit from him.”

Terry shivered. Oh, this sounded bad... However awe-inspiring the armoured creature was... he did not want to find himself on the wrong side of his skills. Not. Ever!

“The Crystals you collect will turn into your attack points, at the rate of one to ten, and similarly, the Cards you summon, which have their own value in points, will become your defence score, at the rate of one to twenty. Which means... that to match Dark Magician’s attack score, you’ll need at least 250 Crystals!”

Terry heard a whimper and didn’t bother figuring out from whom. It could have been him, really.

“Now, don’t expect this to be easy!” went on Yugi cheerfully. “I have, at times, needed over 500 Crystals to win, and yet other times, I’ve won with less than 50 Crystals. This is a slightly unpredictable game!” He looked far too pleased by this. “A lot of it depends on how your strategy interacts with the other players’ – so be careful of how your actions impact the rest of your team!”

He looked at them with an expectant smile, but nobody reacted. Terry doubted they were even listening to him, except vaguely. He certainly wasn't.

“Of course...” Without warning, the cheerful man of a moment before vanished and in his place was a positively dangerous man, sharp and strong, all ruthless pride and frightening intensity. “Should you fail to prove your worth in the Challenge... Dark Magician will rightly punish your arrogance!”

Shadow Magic flared around them, cold and suffocating and not in the least playful this time, with an undercurrent of-- of order. Of stability and structure, of directions and mandates.

Terry got fleeting impressions-- huge stone slabs, an iron fist, eternally dim frozen wastelands-- he could make neither heads nor tails of it but he suddenly knew, nay, he felt, what they'd already been told more than once, albeit indirectly: the ancient system of rules of the Shadow Realm was etched into stone and would be enforced.

He stopped breathing for a long moment, abruptly thrown back to the fear he'd felt at the very beginning of the Tournament. Cheating simply wasn't possible and neither was leaving-- forfeiting would mean losing. And there was no doubt in his mind, that if they lost this Game, the penalty would be severe.

The King of Games was regarding them all with a stern, determined gaze that offered no hope of
compromise.

At his side, Dark Magician was not-quite-smiling in a very smug way.

After a moment, the oppressive feeling vanished into nothing but faint chilliness and the King of Games went blithely on, listing the rules that would lead them to face off with the dangerous Magician as if they were nothing more important than a shopping list; not discouraged in the least by their visibly growing worry.

“You can get Crystals from the dice--” Yugi showed them a blue die with white markings: a number six on one side, then two drop-like symbols and a number three on another: “you can create them by transmuting Energies, when you get this symbol on the dice--” he turned the die to show them a framing pattern around two plume-like symbols, “and in that case, how many you'll get depends on what point of the Board you are at; or you can get them from the Invocation Cards.”

He showed them the deck of colourful cards again and stopped, gauging them for a moment, as if to give them a chance to comment, but they kept silent.

Dimly, Terry wondered if those cards would work like the Dark Magician one, and call forth other strange entities; but he was still reeling - all his concentration was required just to listen – questions were beyond him at the moment.

With the barest of pouts, Yugi continued his explanation: “There are four types of Energies: Water, Earth, Fire and Air,” he showed them symbols from the lower part of a card – a blue drop, a green flower, a yellow flame and a red plume in quick succession. “You can use them to summon Invocation Cards or transmute them into Crystals. So far so good?”

They all nodded, still silent. It was straightforward enough.

Yugi beamed brightly: “Now the fun part: drafting!”

To their shock, he threw the deck of cards in the air. They didn't fall, though: they floated for a moment, then sorted themselves into five groups of nine and a deck of the remaining, which glided back to Yugi.

Once again, the sensation of a dark, deep sea rising in a tidal wave all around them almost overwhelmed them; but this time it was infinitely more feeble than when Dark Magician had made his appearance.

The groups of cards flew to each of them and shot around in a quick swirl, growing and growing until they were about as tall as they, and arranging themselves in five circles facing a player each, then hovered.

The air felt heavy with magic.

It was not as overwhelming as it could be, however: in fact, it felt closer to the regular, everyday magic Terry was used to, if far less familiar. Not exactly controllable, no, but... regimented, in a way. Wild only within set limits.

Even so, Terry looked at the cards surrounding him warily. His hand crept to his wand of its own volition, though what good that could do, he didn’t know. He felt a tad bit caged in – and what was he supposed to do?

...Surely Yugi didn't expect them to summon, they way he had?!
Terry shivered in remembered cold and dread.

The cards were pretty enough, he supposed. Each had an eye-catching picture covering its upper half, numbers and symbols that presumably indicated their playability and a line or six of text underneath the image, detailing their effects.

The drawings themselves were beautiful, colourful and imaginative, some with a discreetly orange frame, others deep purple, and the fantastical details of the pictures were incredible, if not very realistic.

He watched the Hourglass of Time closely – a beautiful image of a warm-coloured sandy stone sundial in a floor of blue and purple cracked tiles, with an hourglass oddly filled with sand and water as gnomon, the outline of a stone town growing out of it and incongruous little birds fluttering around it.

When he raised a hand to lightly trace the illegible symbols marking (he guessed) the hours, the Card downsized unexpectedly, settling in his palm, while all the others flew in a blur all around him and then streaked away towards Hermione, like an odd swarm.

A very similar swarm arrived a moment later from Malfoy's direction, blurring in a circle around him until eight new giant cards resolved themselves, fencing him in.

Well, okay then. Terry sighed. At least it was straightforward. And less frightening than Yugi's summon; he could barely feel the pull of the wild Shadows now.

But how was he supposed to choose when he didn't know what cards there were?

“The number at the top left side indicates how many points the card will be worth at the end of the Game, if you have summoned it,” explained Yugi efficiently from somewhere beyond the wall of cards. “And, if you remember, that in turn will determine your defence score, so choose wisely. The various effects are explained in the writing and the invocation cost in Energies or Crystals is marked under the picture. Of course, you cannot summon anything if your invocation level isn't high enough – to increase it, you need a die roll with a star on it.”

Terry picked a second card – a cute little critter squatting in a blue pond, with the hugest, most soulful puppy eyes he'd ever seen, how could anyone pass it by? – and as the swarm flew away from him, he saw Yugi showing a star above two plumes on yet another side of the blue die. Then his view was cut off by a new set of seven Cards surrounding him.

He rolled up his sleeves and got down to it.

Chapter End Notes

"Seasons" (and its various expansions) is a Libellud editions game by Régis Bonnessée, beautifully illustrated by Naïade, M. Leyssenne, P. Mafayon, J. Rivière and P. Drouin.
"Now that you've chosen your deck, you have to divide it into three groups of three cards, one for each of the three years of the Game. Take a moment to do so," said Yugi kindly once they'd finished drafting. “Remember you'll only get the next group of cards once you've completed a full tour of the Board!"

Terry frowned. Caught in the enthusiasm of the beautiful cards, and the chance to not think too deeply on the whole, terrifying Shadow Magic thing, not to mention the magical war business that awaited them back at school (complete with Foretold Champion of Fate, apparently), he'd grabbed the first few as fancy struck him, without much thought; he'd quickly found himself with five out of six being outlined in orange – 'Familiars', as he'd learned reading them through, whereas the purple ones were 'Magical Items'.

So when he'd spotted the Familiar Idol card he'd eyed it for a good long while.

It was ugly, and worth zero points – it would give him no defence in the end – and it was expensive (one Energy of each kind, no less, when most other cards required only one or two) but, but, but. It gave 10 Crystals upon being summoned and then promised one Crystal for every Familiar he had at each turn. And with how many Terry already had…

Naturally, he had only found one other Familiar to draft after he'd picked it, but that was luck for you.

Still, the Idol should obviously go in the first group, to have it down as soon as possible. Same for the Hourglass of Time… what about the others? Was it better to have the cute critter around sooner or later? And that Kairn the Destroyer… was he going to be able to use it? It would lower the others' chances to gather Crystals and that wasn't good for Terry either… they were in this as a team...

Yet they were opponents at the same time, were they not?... One of them would have to win... So they were competing, right?... Should he play against the others then, aim to defeat them?... But then again, what about the final challenge?... Argh, this was confusing.

He shuffled the cards in his hands over and over, trying to study them quickly and work out a strategy of some sort.

Neville was muttering to himself, frowning in concentration, and Hermione was fidgeting by his side, and none of it was helping his focus.

Malfoy already had three tidy groups of cards hovering around him and was paler than usual, but also surprisingly calm.

Potter looked like he hadn't even noticed the cards he was absently shuffling.

All of a sudden, the Gryffindor turned to Yugi: “What happened before… what you did – whatever that was, that summoned Dark Magician; that was Shadow Magic, then? And so is... all this?” he stated more than asked, in a slow, thoughtful tone.

“Yes,” Yugi answered simply.

Everybody stopped paying attention to their cards and focused on the pair, breath held in hope of answers.
Potter nodded slowly. “And it comes from Ancient Egypt,” he clarified.

“Well, no. It's much older than that. Duel Monsters is from Ancient Egypt. As in, the game. Dark Magician, too, was born then. But the Magic that powers them both, plunges its roots into a past much more remote.”

They contemplated this in silence for a moment.

“How come it didn't feel like this before? With the others?” asked Potter abruptly.

“Because we were shielding you,” said Yugi bluntly.

That startled them all.

After a moment, the man went on: “I am still shielding you, actually, only... less. You're just too new to this – the risk...” he shook his head. “The full power of the Shadow Realm can be deadly. Even diluted, it can be painful, it can weaken you and drain you, it can drive you to madness... there's just no knowing how your soul will react to it, and no point in risking it before we knew it would be worth it. But now you've come too far.” He looked at them seriously. “If you cannot bear it, it's best to know before the endgame.”

“What happens in that case?” asked Terry in a small voice.

Because it had been frightening. And disorienting. And altogether unpleasant. And if it got much worse... He could bear it, if he really had to, but didn't necessarily want to.

Yugi hurriedly waved his hands to deny and reassure: “You won't get disqualified for it or anything! You don't need the ability to wield the Shadows to be part of the Court, though it helps, of course; but you don't even need magic really, just look at Serenity, and even Joey.”

He grew serious: “But some roles require it. Some of our most crucial duties revolve around it. Your... sensitivity, for lack of a better term, will determine your place in the Court... if you do join. But if none of you can take on those roles... or if none of you is willing to... then we'll have to keep searching. Whether you win or not.”

“Willing... we have a choice?” asked Hermione in surprise.

“Always.”

Terry felt a headache pulsing in his eyes. This entire thing was confusing. Did they really have a choice? They weren't exactly given one, were they? And hadn't Yugi mentioned a power requirement when he'd listed how they'd been chosen? Yet now he was saying it didn't matter?

Freedom and necessity, options and restrictions, choice and constraint - Terry felt like he was on a rollercoaster from which things never looked the same two moments in a row.

“You mean, we will have a choice... if we win this,” said Neville quietly.

“Yes.”

And they were back to must-dos. So much for choice... But on the other hand, Yugi had pointed out that they'd accepted this - all this - and he wasn't exactly wrong. Also, destiny was apparently a thing; how did it play into this?

...Were they free or not? Terry just didn't know anymore.
“Quite right. One thing at a time!” proclaimed Yugi. “So, back to the game...”

“But this. That,” repeated Potter sounding dazed, with a haphazard gesture towards the Dark Magician – who snorted audibly and crossed his arms, amused. “You're telling us that we could do... that.”

“You might. Yes. Or not,” was the unhelpful reply. “Shadow Magic is as unpredictable as it is powerful. Who knows what form it'll take for you? Our own preferences influence it, our personality, our knowledge and beliefs... but you can wield it. That's the important thing.”

“...Are you sure?”

“You know the answer to that. You feel it... do you not? You all have the potential.” The expression in Yugi's eyes went back to mischievous: “And I must say, you handled your first taste much better than I did!” he laughed. “I clean passed out, you know?”

“It's just... hard to wrap my mind around it,” Potter said in a lost tone. “Powers from the dawn of time and incredible creatures and deadly tournaments and... and responsibilities beyond our understanding, troubles we probably cannot even imagine... and, and... and a card game, of all things!”

He waved the cards in his hand as if they were proof of whatever he was trying to say.

"I mean, regular magic was mind-boggling enough, but this!...”

He took a breath.

"It's like playing Quidditch in the middle of a lightning storm, through relentless rain and howling winds!"

He ran an agitated hand through his hair.

"It's... a bit much," he concluded weakly.

Yugi didn't say anything, but he regarded him intently, with peculiar intensity.

It was Malfoy who pointed out calmly: "It's not like you'd stop playing Quidditch because of a storm, Potter."

"No, of course not," admitted the Gryffindor. "I mean, it's Quidditch. I'm totally ok with playing it even while soaked and freezing and tired beyond words." He bit his lip and finished in a rush: "It's just that I'm waiting for Dementors to show up any minute!"

Yugi nodded thoughtfully, still intently looking at him: "It's probably a good idea to be ready for that kind of thing where Shadow Magic is concerned, yes."

"How reassuring," deadpanned Potter.

"...You didn't stop playing Quidditch when Dementors attacked the pitch either," noted Malfoy.

Terry couldn't help but look at him in wonder. He'd never heard the Slytherin sound so... helpful.

"So we're playing in this storm?" grimaced Potter.

The blond shrugged. "Well, it's Quidditch."
"How, oh, how does that conversation make sense to me?" bemoaned Hermione, fond and plaintive. "I've spent too much time around Ron."

"It's not a bad metaphor," mused Yugi. "After all, Quidditch is a team sport, right? It might be freezing cold and wet and dark and dangerous out there, but you're not in that storm alone. That's important."

Potter sighed. "All of us?" he clarified, looking meaningfully at Malfoy. "Together?"

"I guess."

Terry's eyes widened in shock.

...Had that just happened?

"And you...?" Potter turned to Yugi, calmer and determined: "Are you going to be up in the air with us?"

“If you win the Tournament? Of course!” The man beamed brightly, unfazed by the dark glares they all aimed at him.

Terry was still stuck staring at Potter and Malfoy, now standing casually together as if it was no big deal. Quickly, he darted glances to the others, gauging their reactions - his own weren't the only raised eyebrows.

“Any other questions?” asked Yugi lightly.

Only about a million, thought Terry, but nobody voiced them.

“No, yeah, uh. Let's just play... uh...” Potter frowned down at the Cards in his hands, probably just realizing he had them. “Did anyone...?"

“Dice results give you stuff, that you can use in various ways to play Cards and gain Crystals, which we need, 'cause they'll give us attack and defence points to, hopefully, win against Dark Magician in the final challenge, which will happen as the game ends, after three tours of the Board,” summed up Terry succinctly.

“Right. Thanks,” murmured Potter, still sounding a little out of it, but ready to focus nonetheless.

Yugi smiled, and it had none of the earlier warmth: “Good. Come! It's time to play a Game!”
Chapter 83

“Where...?” asked Malfoy curiously.

Still reeling from the momentous exchange between the two arch-rivals (had he imagined it? Nobody was drawing attention to it. ...Maybe they didn't want to risk bursting the probably fragile alliance in its infancy), it took Terry a few long moments to drag his mind back to working order and realize what the blond was asking.

None of the games on the nearby tables had anything in common with the style of the cards. Where were they going to play?

The King of the Shadow Court smiled mysteriously: “Where is the Board of this game? Why, all around us of course! Just like Shadow Magic itself is!”

Terry had a very bad feeling about this.

He shuffled his three cards nervously, looking from his companions to the King of Games and back.

Hermione looked around through her Eyepatch. “I don't see anything overtly magical,” she wondered.

“How about I show you what Shaping the Shadow World can be like?” Yugi winked: “You might even like it...!”

The world, for lack of a better description, liquefied around them.

Terry tensed, more terrified than he'd ever been in his life, watching in horror as the world dissolved into unreality. Shapes – solid things, real things – slowly bled downwards, dissolving into cascading streams of confusing colours, losing all consistence and leaving behind only smoky shadows.

It felt like they were moving, rising upwards fast despite being still, but whether it was true or just an impression due to reality falling down into nothingness beneath them, Terry couldn't say.

Standing on nothing but darkness was too unnerving for words.

His muscles locked, fear coursing through his veins too strongly to dare any movement.

The new world that reformed around them was inconsistent.

That is to say... it felt solid enough beneath his feet and to his (cautious) touch, but Terry could not bring himself to trust it.

The real world (... that had been real, right? Right?) had felt solid too.

And then it had liquefied into vaporous streams. Right. Around. Them.

No, he did not think he would ever trust reality to be... real, again.

Plus, this place was all a triumph of pastels. Seriously. Light blues, soft greens, sunny yellows and cheery oranges. And pinks. Who used that much pink in his not-a-reality? Admittedly they were mostly in the distance, tingeing the sky towards the horizon, blue and white and brown being the
prominent hues in his immediate vicinity. But still.

He realized he was breathing heavily and tried to calm down.

The place, admittedly, wasn't bad. Wintry, with snow blanketing the hilltop he was on and dark, dark soil tracing a path downwards to a much greener grove in the distance.

Not in the least shadowy.

That... was probably good, right?

The sky was too blue however, just a touch unnatural, especially for a winter day – and all the lines were too... soft. Curvy. As if he'd been plunged into a cartoon (even though it looked real and certainly not like a drawing. I mean, it couldn't really be a cartoon, right? Did the people in the cartoons feel it was real like this? Oh, Merlin, had they been turned into cartoons? How would he even notice if they had?)

Before he could panic too much, he spotted the other four in the quiet landscape, too far away for his comfort but at least there. Potter was the furthest to his left, perched atop a nearby, rounded hill much like Terry himself; Malfoy the closest, crouched in the snow halfway down the slope; Neville and Hermione were both at the foot of the hill, the witch to Terry's right, the wizard to Malfoy's left.

Seeing them restored some of his equilibrium. Just a Game, he reminded himself, nothing but a Game. No reason to panic.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

This world, he decided, was not a cartoon (hopefully) but also definitely not real. It wasn't cold, for one. There was snow on the ground (and Terry knew about snow, Scotland had a way of teaching you) yet he was perfectly comfortable in just his school robes. Convenient, but absurd.

Hoping to close his distance from the others, he moved forward. That took time, because he just had to test the ground with every step before trusting his own weight to it. He just had to.

The soil seemed solid enough – springy, earthy, not even too muddy, with just a smattering of snow on the path, despite the soft heaps of white everywhere else; good for walking really (suspiciously so) – but Terry was still wary: the world had seemed solid all his life and then.

There was no telling when everything would liquefy into nothingness again.

And the silence. Dear Merlin, the silence. What kind of place had no sound at all?

He really wished the others were closer. They were too far for any comfort. Still in sight, thankfully – Terry didn't think he could take being entirely on his own right now – but not within talking distance. Shouting, possibly. But somehow Terry didn't feel like trying. Shattering that absolute silence might just be worse than enduring it.

He saw Potter raise his arms and wave and the others respond in a similar way. He raised his own arm in acknowledgement, wincing at how loud the rustling of the fabric sounded. Where were all the noises that should have drowned this simple one out? This place was unnatural.

It was so silent he didn't even feel like complaining out loud...

Why wasn't Neville using his Rod?
As soon as he thought this, he realized his own Ring was missing.

The surge of panicked betrayal that rose in him caught him by surprise. But damnit, the Ring was his! He might only have had it for… he tried to calculate how long and managed to distract himself.

Yugi’s amused voice sounded directly in his mind, startling him into a jump and a loud yelp. (Far too loud. This place was unnatural.)

*They would be too powerful here, even as mere copies. You'll get them back when you win.*

“If,” he grumbled automatically.

There was no answer.

Belatedly, he realized everyone was looking at him, worried (he could tell even at a distance). He tried to frantically signal he was fine.

Malfoy, who was closest to his left, crossed his arms with such an air, that Terry just knew he was scowling grumpily. Hermione, to his right, visibly relaxed – she almost looked suddenly shorter, just because her shoulders weren't as taut anymore.

Terry would have been embarrassed, but six ginormous dice popped (loudly) in mid-air, hovering – looming – over their heads and that effectively distracted him.

They were light blue (seriously, what was with all the pastels?) and marked with bright white symbols. Two drops above two dots on one, circled by an indented frame, a star above two plumes, with just one dot underneath, on another…

Potter pointing to the dice decisively distracted him from his examination.

One of the huge dice – evidently the one Potter chose – fell from the sky, losing size as he dropped, until it bounced to Potter's feet looking about as big as a basketball.

Another die dropped into Neville's waiting arms, then Malfoy picked one… then it was Terry's turn. Huh. Hesitantly, he pointed to one at random. And forced himself to stand his ground and not cower with his arms over his head as a light blue meteorite streaked down towards him, fast.

It was only when he picked it up – and of course the stupid thing hadn't harmed him in the least – and he was frowning at the inconsistency of it having bounced to a stop exactly on the face he'd chosen (how was that even possible, let alone logical?) that he remembered some of Yugi’s haphazard instructions.

Right! The symbols were for Energies, the numbers for Crystals, the stars for Invocation levels. Easy, really.

He stared at his die. A three was the point of a triangle formed by it and two water drops, above one dot. As soon as he focused on it, two blue-tinted orbs appeared by his side. He stared at them in awe. They were almost transparent, looking wet despite not being so. To the touch, they were squishy but resistant, like a jelly.

Fumbling, he managed to slip them into the bag that he found hanging from his belt (he carefully avoided thinking on the hows and whens of its appearance), feeling it grow heavier with an unexpected sense of satisfaction.
Patting the bag, he blinked in shock at the light blue bracer wrapped around his arm. When had it…? A Crystal peeked out of it, rather like a candy from a stick dispenser. Terry ran a finger over it: it was as hard as diamond, and the colour of amethysts, but looked more like a toy than anything.

The counter on his brand new bracer told him he had 3 of the things in the 'dispenser'. Well, good. It was a start, right? Right?

Feeling completely unsettled, Terry glanced around and did a double take at the odd, glittering flies he could see fluttering around Potter. Were those… tiny birds? Fairies, maybe? Where had they come from? And… were they attacking him? Terry was rather unsure. The Gryffindor's body language as he marched forward was slightly wary, but that didn't signify. He certainly wasn't slowing down because of them.

Well, if those things were attacking him, they weren't doing much damage at least. And Terry abruptly noticed that the green-eyed wizard was holding only two Cards.

Huh. So Potter had already started summoning, eh? By the looks of it, he hadn't made a very useful choice – Terry was quite content to not have those glittering things flying dizzyingly around his head, thank you.

Hermione, too, was moving forward, though not as quickly as Potter. Both Gryffindors seemed to be headed to the green grove at the bottom of the hill so with a shrug, Terry made to follow.

They didn't go far.

The ground suddenly and silently iced over - Potter yelled a curse as he slipped and tumbled – and they were forced to stop their progression. A loud pop heralded the reappearance of the dice in the sky and Terry rolled his eyes.

Clearly, they could only move so far each turn. Sigh. At least it wasn't energy walls stopping them this time.

Potter's faint cursing attracted his attention. He was pointing at a die angrily, jabbing his arm towards the sky, and still trying to keep his balance on the ice.

It wasn't until Neville pointed to a die himself that anything changed, though. Terry quickly worked out that the order of choice would change each turn and Potter, having been first earlier, would now be last.

A second die tumbled to Malfoy and then it was Terry's turn again.

Having worked out the symbols, he went for the plumes – he knew he would need them, given his Cards; there was a star as well on the die, and three dots underneath.

When Terry grabbed it, he got a glimpse of swirling red – these Energies were like contained whirlwinds in a smooth glass cage – but he was quickly distracted by his Cards starting to glow faintly.

Well, one of them. The Hourglass of Time and the Familiar Idol were still as dull as ever. The Amulet of Air, however, was outlined in a faint, neon glow.

Having an inkling of what was going on, Terry weighed his options and lifted the Amulet card high, willing something to happen. And something happened indeed!
The two red Energy orbs flew up, faint sparks trailing them like miniature comets, and dropped into the card. The glow intensified into a bright flash and when Terry managed to blink the spots behind his eyelids away, a heavy ornament, the size of his palm, was floating gently down into his hands. The smooth red stone in its centre was pulsing with dull light, quietly powerful.

Well, it wasn't nearly the weirdest thing that had happened to him as of late – not remotely.

It had a chain, so Terry slipped it around his neck and moved on, cautious of every step in case ice decided to trip him, or, you know. Reality decided to stop existing. Again.
This time they moved farther, however, all instinctively slowing down with every step, wary of what it might bring, especially when snow gave way to sparse trees, then thicker shrubbery, then a grove.

But it was a good while before intricate branches with nasty looking thorns barred their path.

Terry could still see Hermione through the trunks to his right, just about, and Malfoy seemed to have wandered closer (and he was now dragging a small treasure chest with him, huh), but Potter and Neville were lost somewhere in all the greenery.

The dice were green this time, which was surprising and not at the same time, and the symbols on them were somewhat different.

Terry chose another 3 above two flowers of sorts and watched his Crystals count go up even as his bag grew heavy with two new orbs. They were just as beautiful as the others: bright green, like spring leaves, gently glowing and feeling fresh to the touch.

His cards staid dull however and after a moment's thought, he realized he didn't have the right kind of Energy to activate them. Oh, well.

A mangy bunny ran up to him from his right, making him jump half a foot in the air.

It was pastel purple and came up at about Terry's knees when it stood on its hind legs. And it was wearing a bright lilac Elizabethan getup, complete with ruff, embroidery and a golden chain of office. And it had a wooden club not-so-discreetely hidden behind his back.

It was also tapping his paw impatiently.

“Very Alice in Wonderland,” Terry commented feebly.

The bunny glared, and he gulped. Maybe the dark, chilling horrors he'd been fearing wouldn't have been so bad, in comparison.

The oversized rabbit kept looking to his Energies bag, then up to his eyes, then meaningfully to the bag.

Suspicious, Terry tried to back away from it, but it just followed him around the clearing, wordlessly demanding. When he tried to shoo it away with mock-kicks, it narrowed its wild eyes and brought the club to the front threateningly. Why, the little mangy mob thug! The nerve!

Upset, but unwilling to be beaten up by a rodent, Terry handed his bag grudgingly over, wishing he had his wand (and when had it disappeared? How had he not noticed?!) to curse the little thief away; but to his surprise, the rabbit didn't steal anything: it got the Energy orbs out, examined them thoroughly, then with a snap of his fingers copied them and handed the bag back before running away with the copies at top speed.

Huh.

From behind him, Malfoy snickered and Terry turned sharply to scowl at him.

“Frightened by a bunny, Boot? Honestly!”
Malfoy was busy – he looked very pleased with himself and was carefully transferring Energy orbs to a huge tome he’d propped against a trunk: a very cliché grimoire, bound in dark leather, surrounded by an ethereal circle of probably-runes and covered in thick text and intriguing diagrams, so Terry could add envy to frustration when it came to the blond.

Just to be contrary, he pretended not to be curious about it, nor about the Slytherin's small treasure chest, into whose lock other Energy orbs were now embedded. Then again, Malfoy didn't ask about his Amulet either, so there.

The thorny branches disentangled themselves in front of their eyes – and what did it say about it all, that the unnerving noise of wood scratching on wood to tear up a passage for them was the most normal thing Terry had met in this absurd world? – and the two boys moved on, now able to walk rather more closely than they'd started off.

Despite Malfoy's smirk, Terry found the companionship comforting.

They moved even less than the first time before being stopped – and Terry really wondered about that – but it was enough to leave the grove behind and find themselves in a desert of all places.

A rather nice desert, mind: the glaring sun, that should have been scorching, was instead muted and pleasant and there were even sparse, thorny bushes of wild plants, rounded by the wind that blew dust everywhere - though somehow it didn't seem to stick to skin and clothes, or bother the breathing.

Reality being unreal again, urgh.

Further in front of them, the sea of sand turned from grey-green to more reddish-brown and golden shades, all rolling dunes and gentle slopes. Terry wasn't looking forward to walking on that, but silently admitted it could be much worse.

The fire bursts barring their path were a bit much, however.

On the plus side, he could see all his friends again.

There was Potter, further away than he'd expected – Terry could barely make out the flock of fairies that were still bothering him – and Neville was almost by his side, carrying... a crystal tree in a pot? ...It looked like one of those Chinese money tree made with amethyst or quartz, only it was pure white, and glowing. Neville was petting it.

Terry bit down a sigh. Of course Longbottom had managed to find himself a plant to play with in that shrubbery. He wasn't even surprised at this point, nope.

“Don't look now, Boot, but your mangy little friend has stuck around,” laughed Malfoy, making Terry pivot at once, of course.

The blond was right: the Elizabethan bunny was jumping merrily around Hermione! It didn't look interested in her Energies, though, and the wooden club was nowhere in sight. Terry glared at it half-heartedly. The damn thing was clearly playing favourites.

It was Terry's turn to choose first (the dice were yellow now) and he quickly snatched a two-flames-one-star die with three dots. The other dice tumbled down as usual in short order; Malfoy took the longest time to choose, frowning thoughtfully at his limited choices. In the end, he picked the one with a white rectangle on it – a card, Terry guessed. Sure enough, two cards sprang into existence before him, hovering like at the beginning of this latest madness. The blond added one to his hand and the other disappeared.
Hermione for her part had managed to procure a rather impressive crystal orb, dark deep purple and as shiny as polished marble, which amused Terry to no end: the girl was famous for having walked out on Trelawney's Divination lessons. Terry wondered what she might see in it.

When she stared intently in its depths, however, the swarm of Potter's fairies flew streaking by, buzzing and tittering like Cornish pixies, and attacked her.

Terry watched in shock as she tried to bat them away ineffectively, but they kept pinching her and pulling her hair and only once they had what they wanted, they finally left her alone and streaked back to Potter, chittering and laughing.

Terry gaped at the Crystal they had suspended among them with a spiderweb. Those little thieving…!

Hermione shrugged it off, but she was rattled and the hands with which she tried to tame her frazzled hair shook a little. The purple bunny patted her consolingly on the hip.
Chapter 85

The sand turned out to be less unstable than Terry would have thought – more evidence that this world wasn't right, if you asked him, but even so, a relief.

The fire wall stopped them far too soon again and Terry scowled at the randomness of it, before being hit by an inspired realization.

The dots! The little white dots at the bottom of the dice, that didn't seem to have any meaning. The leftover die had had only one dot the previous two turns, but before that, there had been one with three… and they'd walked a lot longer.

That had to be it!

The more he thought about it, the more he felt a quietly reassuring certainty grow within him, like a small candle flame; a feeling of faint but very welcome reliability, reining in the unease that this world inspired in him, at least a little.

Yes, the dots were determining their ability to move on the Board.

Feeling pleased with himself for cottoning on, he promptly decided to check his theory by leaving behind a die with three dots, now that he was last of turn.

The die he picked wasn't of much use to him – it gave him three more Crystals, which was nice of course, and two more fiery yellow energies, only one of which slid into the bag as usual. No matter what he tried, he could not fit the other into the already full bag, and after cursing and cursing, he was forced to let it drop and watch it vanish into a swirling nothing at his feet.

This time Hermione was ready for the thieving fairies' attack, and managed to use her crystal orb, despite their tiny ferociousness, to materialize what looked like a potion bottle covered in protective root bark. They still made it off with one of her Crystals, though.

Neville, on Terry's other side, was murmuring softly to his luminous tree and stroking the bark; he seemed to be sprinkling something over the roots and Terry would have made an uncharitable comment about wasting time on gardening, except... Neville was now coaxing a swirling red Energy orb out of a bloom.

That was impressive.

Less impressive was the fairies attacking him too. Neville shrugged it off, but Terry felt his annoyance mount. What had Potter summoned on them all? An Egyptian Plague?!?

He eyeballed the tiny menaces as they flew by, wondering when it would be his turn to be 'visited'.

Still, his theory about the dots seemed to be working: no flames rose to stop them as they marched on through the sandy dunes, and then further, through less and less dust and more rocky, red ground.

The flickering candle within him steadied, radiating a slight, but important comfort: there was order in this absurd world. He just had to figure out the rules, and the cold of precariousness would recede.

Feeling ever so slightly better, Terry admired the canyon they were entering, impressed by the
pinnacles of granitic-looking outcrops and the tall walls closing in around them. His admiration was doused however when a furious wind rose before them, roaring loudly in the narrow valley and pushing them back with frightening force. It stopped as soon as they took a few steps back, but Terry had no doubt it would pick up again if they tried to go further before playing another turn. Urgh. Maybe the fire was better, after all.

There was an advantage however: the canyon was narrow and all of their paths wandered close enough that they could now talk easily.

They all exchanged fleeting smiles.

Terry could now see that Neville was carrying a red and green die along with his tree and wore an amulet much like his own, but yellow, that glowed like a banked fire. Malfoy was still lugging around both the grimoire and the chest; Hermione had hung her potion from her belt and was carrying the crystal ball, accompanied by her faithful bunny in a ruff.

Potter, for some mysterious reason, was levitating a tall, green... rock. (And how was he doing it without a wand?!) It was absolutely cumbersome, as tall as he was, and too large at the base to hug it; it was smooth and shaped like the tip of a swirl ice-cream, with a dull shine, sort of like a jade monolith. It was also dotted with small hollows, one of which held a red Energy orb. Fairies fluttered about the monolith happily or perched on it, chattering nonsensically among themselves. One or two were curled up in the hollows. Was it... their nest?

The weirdness of it however didn't compare to what Potter did as soon as they'd chosen their dice – red now, of course – which was to drop an inordinate amount of red and blue Energy orbs into a card in order to summon a positively huge lantern.

Terry stared.

It was an actual wrought iron lantern, shaped like an ornate turret, with a merry flame burning brightly within. Only, it was taller than all of them – and Potter seemed determined to lug it around! What was he thinking?

Terry sighed explosively, fighting down his mounting, sharp annoyance. It wasn't his problem, was it? This place was souring his mood. He shouldn't let it affect him so.

The first thing out of his mouth was still venomous: "Potter, can't you control those tiny menaces?"

The Gryffindor spared him only a brief, vaguely apologetic smile, too busy trying different holds on his oversized burden. "They produce a Crystal from somewhere, for every one they steal, you know?" he threw out distractedly.

Terry made a face. That was just peachy for Potter, but what about them?

The other wizard slipped and lost his grip on the lantern, banging his knee painfully and cursing. Terry felt no pity for him whatsoever.

Turning away from the Gryffindor, he refocused on his own game. The good thing was that his cards were glowing again: the last die had given him the Air Energy he needed to play either the Hourglass of Time, or the Familiar Idol.

Without hesitation, he picked the Hourglass and watched with a pleased smile as four different
Energies dropped into the card one by one, charging it up until, with a blinding flash of light, two connected glass bulbs set on a stone disk marked like the quadrant of a watch appeared, with a series of small stone towers rising up in a short arc from the disk as decoration, and possibly as protection.

It was even better than in the picture that had captivated him during the drafting.

It was easy enough to carry and not as heavy as it looked; and the level of detail was amazing. There were even diminutive birds flying in and out of the small towers! Terry watched mesmerized the fine blue powder flowing steadily downwards, until Malfoy yelled at him to get a move on.

Which was uncalled for, seeing as Potter was still stubbornly dragging the enormous lantern with him (ha! Not even him could levitate both it and the monolith at once, huh?), paying no mind to the grating noise it made as it scraped the rocky ground, and had therefore fallen quite behind.

Neville was regarding him with a very puzzled expression.

Close to him, Malfoy had crossed his arms haughtily: “Potter, you ridiculous fool, must you always…?”

“Shut it, Malfoy.”

“You're slowing us down.”

“I said shut it!”

“Harry, are you sure…?” started Hermione from a little further, somewhat disapproving.

“YES!” Potter dropped his efforts with a puff and wiped sweat off his brow, but he looked at his friend with shining eyes: “Hermione, this thing gives me 3 Crystals every turn. Every turn, no exceptions, no matter what I do or don't…! Don't you see? It's amazing!”

“I don't understand.” started to say Neville.

“And it's worth 24 points!” Potter rounded on his fellow Gryffindor with earnest conviction. “I don't care if I have to drag it all the way to the final challenge, it's totally worth it!”

Terry regarded it with a lot more interest. It did sound cool, now that he knew what it did.

“I'm just saying…” tried Hermione, faltering quickly. Probably because, like Terry himself, she didn't know what she wanted to say.

“Well, fine, better you than me!” huffed Malfoy, who was already struggling with just his small treasure chest and heavy book. Then he added with disdain: “Just hurry the hell up.”

Terry rolled his eyes: the winds were already stopping them. There was no point in 'hurrying'.

But Neville kept shaking his head: “I just mean, well, it's just... I don't understand why you would... really, Harry. Why don't you resize it?”
Chapter 86

There was a pregnant pause.

“How?” huffed Potter, throwing his hands in the air. “Our wands have mysteriously disappeared!”

The other boy looked surprised: “You don't need your wand for this! There's magic all around, here. Shaping this world isn't that difficult! Just think it.”

There was a moment of absolute silence which the tall boy used to, very calmly, summon a light blue gem the size of an ostrich egg, literally radiating a bright, crackling magical energy all over.

“The Jewel of the Ancients,” he explained, misunderstanding their stares. “I wasn't sure I should risk it, because if I cannot charge it before the end it'll give me a penalty, but I think I can manage and the reward is good – 35 points on top of what it's worth in itself!”

“Right,” said Potter slowly. “Right. That's great. But, Neville… what do you mean, shaping this world?”

Neville blinked like the question had the most obvious answer in the world. “Yugi said we could!”


“Never mind that, just tell me how to do it,” interrupted Potter.

The tall Gryffindor fumbled: “Uh… I… that is... well, it's just... you just think it?” He ventured. “Like my tree, see?” He gestured helplessly to the sparkling plant. “When I played the Card, it grew to twice my height in a span of seconds, so I had to change it. I mean... How was I going to carry it around?”

“Well, obviously you managed. Good for you. The question is, how?” snapped Malfoy.

“I… I just...” Neville waved his hands about: “...willed it to a more manageable form? Just... do the same.”

Terry groaned. The Gryffindor was a terrible teacher.


“You just have to think it!” protested Neville earnestly. Then seemed to think it over. “Only, make sure you think exactly what you want to happen.”

They all stared at him some more, and he elaborated: “There isn't any room for interpretation, see? You can't say 'oh, but I meant something different'. That's not how it works. So you have to be precise, that's all.”

Potter turned to his lantern with a thoughtful frown and Malfoy exchanged a disbelieving look with Terry.

“But how is it possible? It goes against everything I've studied...” finally asked Hermione, wide-eyed and incredulous – but even as she spoke, Potter's lantern was shrinking to a more manageable size. And when it was about as big as his forearm, Potter bit his lip and focused on it even more, and it grew a handle. A thin but sturdy curved handle which actually grew out of the existing
metal, twisted itself in the proper shape and snapped into place.

And Terry tried to tell himself it was normal, he really did, but while normal magic could, indeed, achieve this effect, it couldn't do it with *nothing but thought*.

Potter grabbed his shrunk lantern with a sound of triumph and immediately turned to the jade green monolith.

Only to yelp in shock when a crack split its top in two, running down to about half its height with a dry noise. The fairies scattered in fright, their protests loud and piercing as they buzzed about in panic and irritation. Potter had to talk fast to calm them down a little – they kept glaring at him with a betrayed air, but at least they stopped pulling his hair.

“That's what I meant,” said Neville patiently. “You have to be careful. If you get distracted by some stray thought, and I know how easily that happens, believe me, you might end up with some weird effects. I almost got crushed by this thing earlier because I lost control and tripled its size by accident!” He showed them his yellow amulet proudly.

“You what?” exclaimed Terry in a strangled voice.

Neville didn't look as terrified as he should have. “This world will do exactly what you tell it to. No more, no less. I suppose that makes it dangerous,” he mused, “but it's also rather useful, is it not?”

*Well said.*

Yugi's voice echoed through the canyon, a light hint of laughter in it, and a touch of pride.

The world around them went ever so slightly grey, with an undefinable frozen feeling to it. Even Potter's fly-like fairies stopped in mid-air and greyed. The only thing that was still coloured... was Yugi himself, comfortably perched on a rocky ledge just above them.

Unnerving didn't cover it.

“Did you... pause the Game?” asked Terry with dread.

The King of Games smiled and nodded.

Terry felt ill.

He would never, ever trust reality again.

Yugi turned to Neville, and though they could see him talk, his voice echoed in their minds rather than in their ears.

>You have grasped this facet of Shadow Magic with remarkable ease, I must say*, he told Neville.

The Gryffindor went red to the roots of his hair, mumbling in pleased embarrassment.

*Not an easy thing to understand, either, Yugi added.*

“What, that reality isn't real?” burst out Terry bitterly. He regretted immediately, he hadn't meant to sound so scornful, but the whole situation was affecting him badly.

He desperately wanted Yugi to reassure him that it was only an effect of Shadow Magic, that it could not happen in the real real world, but... no such luck.
Reality is real. It just isn't very stable. The man told them casually. As if it was no big deal. Shaping it is one of the powers of a Shadow Mage – though not all of us have a talent for it. Ishizu for one never got the hang of it.

Because she was the smart one, thought Terry uncharitably.

You are quite right that it is dangerous, however, Yugi added, nodding approvingly to Neville. Not only it is so very easy to abuse it... it is also so very easy to loose control of it.

“Abuse it?” asked Hermione perplexed.

“You mean you could use it against someone else,” stated Malfoy, looking paler than usual. “Confuse them... Frighten them... Make the very world around them fight them...”

“Trap them?” added Potter in a dark tone.

Terry blanched.

Oh, yes, admitted Yugi grimly. That used to be a rather common punishment for cheating at a Shadow Game.

“In such a situation, you would be all powerful. Unstoppable!” murmured Malfoy. "You would have... the ultimate control!"

Terry didn't know what to make of the mixture of fear and yearning in the blond's tone. He tried not to think of it.

“Unless the other fighter could also do the same,” warned Potter.

“You could also do good things with it!” protested Neville. “Make it more comfortable, for instance... or, or use it to help someone study, like what we do with the RoR – this works more or less the same way! It's not so different from that, or from the environmental charms for the greenhouses!"

“It kind of really is,” replied Potter dryly.

“It's horrible,” added Terry sharply, hugging himself.

Neville flinched visibly.

It is a terrible privilege, agreed Yugi non-committally. But it can indeed be used for great good, if you so choose.

“What's the price?” asked Malfoy sensibly.

Yugi regarded him thoughtfully. People caught in your re-shaping might be disoriented and frightened by it, but never forget: you'll be the ones who bear the burden of it. Your minds could well snap under the strain.

“Could you... get trapped in it yourself?” asked Terry.

Far too easily.

After a long moment of contemplation, Yugi advised them: If you wish to wield this facet of Shadow Magic, however you might choose to do so, listen to yourselves. You'll know your limits. You'll loose control if you try to do too much at once, because you won't be able to take into due
consideration all the variables.

“Ah!” nodded Potter sheepishly. “My Thieving Fairies.”

Neville nodded along: “If you try to influence too many things at once, you'll forget some minor things that will derail the whole re-shaping. Am I right?”

Absolutely right.

"And you have to really accept the change, in order to maintain it."

Yugi hummed pleasantly.

Terry looked away. Fat chance of that happening.

“You really get this, don't you?” said Hermione wonderingly.

Neville blushed. “I like it,” he confessed quietly, hunching his shoulders to try unsuccessfully to make himself look smaller.

And why should you not? asked Yugi loudly. He grinned: It is rather fun!

With a wink, he mimicked throwing something in the air. Fireworks exploded everywhere, in a riot of bright colours. Instead of the usual booms and crackling sounds, however, bells started chiming all over.

Distracted, they missed Yugi's disappearance, but an echo of his laughter lingered.

Neville smiled and stood up straighter again.
They were back to the wintry area, crossing it at a good pace, and Terry was engrossed in the three new cards that had flown to him from somewhere.

The cute critter that had caught his fancy was there, as were two other Familiars, and he grinned.

His Hourglass of Time had chimed as soon as they'd left the canyon and, once he'd pressed down the right tower, had produced an Air Energy orb without much fuss. That meant he could now use his Familiar Idol card...

He looked up in time to see Neville leave a die with one dot behind. They wouldn't be leaving the snowy ground just yet. Oh, well. It's not like it was really cold, after all.

With a grin, he plopped the required four Energies into the Idol card and shielded his eyes while it materialized in front of him.

It really was ugly.

It wasn't very big, thankfully, but it was made of solid, weathered stone, with a compact, heavy pedestal of the same material. It was shaped like a dog wagging its tail, with its tongue lolling. It reminded Terry a lot of those garden ornament his Granny was so fond of – fake Greek statues and plump, mean-looking putti... she even had a small stone lion crouching in a corner, behind her hydrangeas. The Familiar Idol could have fit among those flowerbeds too.

Shrugging, he used his last Energy orb to power Titus Deepgaze.

Rather than a blinding light, there was a loud pop – like a House Elf – and then the Familiar was there, big, soulful eyes turned up to him, the barest trembling of tears in their depths. Terry cooed. Then caught himself and coughed awkwardly.

He glanced up into Malfoy's face. The blond was regarding him with incredulous mirth and after a moment, burst into laughter.

“Merlin, Boot! First the bunny, now this!...” he chortled.

Terry blushed and looked away.

The blond stopped laughing abruptly.

Worried, Terry looked back to him and saw the little creature – Titus, according to his card – pawing pitifully at his trouser legs. Its entire body language was beseeching and it was holding up a wooden bowl in a wordless plea. With its red skin and white markings, it looked like a diminutive Tibetan monk begging for his lunch, thought Terry, biting back his urge to guffaw.

The Slytherin seemed caught between incredulous laughter and horrified fascination. But Titus must have turned the full power of his puppy eyes on him, thought Terry meanly, because almost in a trance, Malfoy actually handed over one of his Crystals.

Happily, Titus ran away, to beg or con Crystals from Neville, then Potter, then Hermione (who gave her only one up without even putting up a fight) before returning to Terry's side with a full bowl and a smug, self-satisfied grin on his muzzle.
Feeling just as smug, Terry promptly petted the purring critter between its odd-looking horns and lavished it with praise. Ha! Who was having the last laugh, huh?

Then he turned his attention to the ugly idol.

It took some fidgeting with it, and a lot of grumbling, before he found the half-hidden button that activated it. He got up with a triumphant shout, holding a brand new Crystal, only to have it snatched away by Potter's Thieving Fairies. He yelled in outrage and tried to grab them, but they darted here and there with lightning speed, laughing at him and mocking him in their high pitched, incomprehensible babble.

Titus spent all the time happily splashing around in a small pool of melted snow and didn't appear to even notice the fairies.

With a disgruntled air, Terry resigned himself to moving on, dragging the heavy idol through the snow.

He suddenly realized they were spreading out again and turned his own path towards Malfoy, who was closest. The blond looked grumpy and was scowling at his cards, so Terry didn't say anything; but he kept close as they moved on. He didn't want to be alone here – and no, the small, red-and-white creature that had run up his back and now sat on his shoulder grooming itself didn't count.

Hermione seemed to be thinking along the same lines because she and her pet Shakespearian rabbit moved closer too. Terry watched the mangy bunny suspiciously, in case the wooden club should make a reappearance, but he was utterly ignored by the little beast.

Once the dice appeared, Terry realized he was first this turn and quickly picked one of the options that would give him an Air Energy. Then, just as quickly, summoned the Warden of Argos.

Or tried to. For some reason, the glowing card didn't react and instead, he felt a sharp pain on his forearm.

With utter horror, he saw a leech wrapped there. Sickly lilac in colour and positively disgusting, even worse than the ones he'd always hated using in Potions class, it was moving steadily towards his Crystals counter. Terry could do nothing but stare in horror at the thing on his arm, until it swallowed the topmost Crystal in its bracer and disappeared with a nasty pop.

An inhuman screech made him cry out in fright. He swivelled, and caught sight of a grey, monstrous creature with bat's wings and devil's horns baring its sharp, pointy teeth at him. His eyes widened as he recognized the very Familiar he'd wanted to summon.

Fast and cruel, it shot out a claw and slashed the air right before Terry's face, making him yell again and stumble backward, while his only remaining Energy orb was broken by the monster and vanished into a cascade of nothing.

Then the Warden of Argos flew off, flapping its wings noisily. Soon, the other four were shouting and jumping out of its way in fear and rage, as it attacked their Energy orbs too.

Malfoy tried to fend it off using his grimoire like a bat and Neville actually punched it, making it screech furiously, but to no avail. Each of them lost up to four Energy orbs and none of their ranting and cursing made any difference.

The living gargoyle came back and settled onto a shrub a little further along, watching Terry with a toothy, creepy grin.
He felt a little guilty, and when Titus ran off with his wooden bowl, to collect another round of Crystals, he was not surprised to hear both Malfoy and Hermione renew their rants against 'those accursed Familiars'.

But what was he supposed to do?

He scowled at nothing and activated his Familiar Idol. And was promptly attacked by Potter’s damnable fairies, which led him to join the ranting club too.

The shared annoyance at other people’s pets seemed to have drawn Hermione and Malfoy closer, at any rate: Terry watched them plot together out of the corner of his eye.

Their plan – whatever it was – hit a snag when Hermione found the very same leech on her forearm, and reacted by screaming and screaming and flapping her arm furiously to get rid of it and screaming some more (entirely without success: the disgusting creature got its Crystal from the witch before it disappeared). She shivered and whimpered a lot even afterwards, and for once, Malfoy didn't say anything mocking. The thing had obviously disgusted him too.

Eventually she calmed down and, blood price paid (so to speak) was finally able to summon a ratty rendition of the Pumpkin King, who pointed hieratically to Malfoy. One of his cards went up in smoke and Hermione received multicoloured orbs from the sightless Familiar. Both seemed pleased enough with the exchange.

A moment later Terry got quite the scare when the Pumpkin King wannabe suddenly invaded his personal space, peered at his cards intently, gave a disappointed pout and then vanished off to parts unknown.

Terry held a clenched hand to his heart and gasped until he could breath again.

Goddamn Familiars.
Entering the shrubbery from a different angle led Terry through a more beautiful part of it this time.

There were flowers with deep coloured, glittering petals dotting the undergrowth and soft moss decorating the trunks. He even spied a waterfall cascading into a clear pond some distance away. He wouldn't have minded getting a better look at it, but a screech coming from somewhere on his right startled him.

“WHAT?!”

He peered through the trees, trying to see what was upsetting Hermione so much now.

“What do you expect me to do, whip up the stupid knife and use it on some cute, fluffy, innocent little bunny?!”

...Wait, what?

Neville appeared from the trees on his left and exchanged a wide-eyed interrogative glance with Terry, silently mouthing 'knife'.

The Ravenclaw was momentarily distracted by the short golden staff the other was now carrying, which had the horrid leech wrapped around it (so it was Neville's fault!), but he soon let it go because Hermione was yelling again.

“No! I refuse!”

Breaking into a run, they made their way through the shrubbery, glad that the Game wasn't stopping them from moving sideways.

Hermione stood trembling in the middle of a small clearing, with an uncertain Malfoy hovering nearby. She held a dark, wavy dagger in front of her and stared down at it with frank horror.

Terry shivered, because the evil-looking weapon had an eye-shaped gem right at the top of its handle and it seemed to be looking back.

“Oh, why did I summon this? It's too horrible!”

“How did you even choose it?” asked Malfoy with less hauteur than usual.

“It was the last card left!” she wailed. “And anyway, I didn't think it would be so real!”

She looked at her Familiar desolately.

The bunny in Shakespearian garb was standing placidly by her side, apparently unbothered by the menacing blade.

“What's that?” asked Potter curiously from behind them.

He had his lantern, and the floating monolith behind him, and had added to his odd collection a drinking horn that emanated wispy swirls of white smoke. His fairies swarmed lazily forward, caught sight of the witch – or more likely, of the dagger she held – and scattered in sudden terror, high-pitched screeches filling the air as they dove to hide in the jade monolith or even in Potter’s
Terry felt a horrible suspicion rise in him, which was dreadfully confirmed when Hermione answered mournfully: “The Necrotic Kriss. It lets me sacrifice one of my Familiars to gain four Energy orbs of my choice.”

“Wait. Wait. Do you mean, you're supposed to actually kill the familiars? With your own hands?” he gasped.

Apparently, yes.

Terry could only gape in horror.

“I won't do it!” proclaimed Hermione stubbornly.

“I don't think you have to use it, Hermione,” said Neville consolingly. “Not if you don't want to.”

“Of course I don't want to!” she cried.

Potter hummed thoughtfully.

“Harry!” she exclaimed in dismay.

The boy held his hands up hurriedly: “I'm just saying! Of course you don't have to use it, but you know. Your strategy might suffer for it.”

“My strategy does not involve murdering a sentient creature!” she shouted back.

“That's chess!” snapped Potter meaningfully, apropos of nothing.

Terry looked at him strangely and Malfoy gave him a flat look and started to say, slowly and condescendingly: “No, Potter, this isn't chess...”

But Hermione seemed to get the real meaning of the short sentence, because she didn't even look confused: “That was different!” she snapped back, crossing her arms defensively.

Potter agreed to placate her: “Okay, okay.”

“This is barbaric!” she insisted.

“You thought so of Wizard's Chess too,” muttered Potter.

“...They aren't truly animals, if that helps. They're very good illusions, but ultimately, they're just Shadows.”

They turned around with scowls, trying to figure out where the strange man speaking in their mind was now.

Yugi was serenely settled on a huge mushroom (a ridiculously big, red-and-white, fairytale kind of mushroom that most certainly wasn't there a moment before), his tricoloured hair strangely suited to their surroundings.

“You said Shadow Magic was all around us. That it was reality,” accused Hermione.
“So how are these Shadows not real?”

They are very real. Their shapes, are not.

“They feel real!” She petted the rabbit, that closed his eyes and flattened his ears back in bliss.

Because they are.

“You're not making any sense.”

A gust of a sigh, a hint of a laughter. What is reality?

Hermione all but growled. “I'm not playing Alice to your Caterpillar!”

Yugi seemed lost in thought, a frown slowly forming on his forehead.

They waited. They fidgeted. They scowled at each other.

After a while, Yugi's frown smoothed out and he declared confidently: “Hatter.”

...What?

“I'm not much of a Caterpillar, I don't think,” he said earnestly. “I'm more of a Mad Hatter.”

Hermione closed her eyes, clearly praying for patience.

“Mind you, I would love to be the Cheshire Cat, but I think Ryou would lay claim to that part before anyone could get a word in...”

“I don't care about that!” the witch exploded.

Yugi blinked.

She glared. “I want to know what my Familiar is made of. I want to know what it means when you say he's real and not real at the same time. And I don't want any more riddles!”

Yugi's eyebrows rose in unfazed amusement. Do you now?

“I think I get it,” Terry interjected slowly. “We aren't really summoning anything, these Familiars don't even exist – they're just part of the Game. They just seem real while we're playing.”

Of course you're summoning them. They do exist as they are within the Game, because of the Game, corrected Yugi patiently. Their current shapes are defined by the confines of the Game.

“Are you saying that if we weren't playing they wouldn't be real?” asked Potter curiously.

Of course they would be real. But they wouldn't be real like this.

"This is giving me a headache," grumbled Malfoy.

“But they would still be out there somewhere!” cried Hermione.

No. There would be Shadows – there are always Shadows – but not these ones.

The witch scowled: “I don't understand. What is it that gives them shape then? I thought it was
your power.”

*It is the power of the Game.*

“Don't you mean the power of the players?” asked Terry hesitantly.

*No.*

“How can Games have power?” cried Hermione.

Yugi smiled brightly: *What an interesting question!*

And just like that, he was gone.
“Right,” commented Potter with a stifled sigh.

He seemed to shrug off the latest weird conversation and instead started dropping Energy orbs into his cards, even reaching into the hollows of his monolith for more, and though he yelped and then grimaced in disgust when Neville's horrid leech wrapped around his forearm, he didn't let it stop him. Clearly, he had a plan.

The foul leech devoured two of Potter's Crystals and popped away, and his cards produced another, bigger horn, leafy green and filled to the brim with Crystals, as well as a delicate garden statue of a gracefully arched elf with flowing hair, spurtng clear water into a small basin at its feet.

Potter looked delighted.

“I can't believe you have that many cards in play already while I – just – can't – aargh!” cried Malfoy, clenching the cards in his hands in visible frustration. “It's not fair! I've got plenty of powerful Cards and so many Energies I'm literally throwing them away like trash and the stupid Game won't let me summon anything! Grr!”

He stomped off.

Potter paid him no mind and dumped a green orb into his new horn, which instantly spit out five Crystals.

Terry's jaw dropped: “Is that thing going to give you that many Crystals every turn?”

“As long as I have an Earth Energy to feed it,” confirmed Potter happily. “Which I'll have, because the Beggar's Horn will give me one every turn.”

He fearlessly thrust his hand into the smoking horn and came out with a new, shiny green orb.

“And this beauty,” he added, petting the stone elf by his side, “will give me 3 Crystals every turn, as long as I have no cards in hand.”

Sure enough, the fountain spilled 3 Crystals in his waiting hand.

“That... with the lantern and all, you're guaranteed 11 Crystals per turn!” exclaimed Neville in shock.

Potter put his Energy orb in his monolith with a satisfied smile, under Terry's envious gaze.

“I may not be much of a planner, but proper resource management? Ha! I survived Dudley’s diet, you know!” he commented, awfully pleased with himself.

Terry contemplated asking... and decided it wasn't worth the likely headache.

They moved on.

Another stretch of wood path, then another expanse of desert. Dice rolls. Potter's card combo handing out Crystals like candies to the green-eyed wizard. Neville's electricity-riddled Jewel getting slowly charged with the tall boy's Energy orbs. Malfoy complaining about being unable to play his Very Cool Cards. Titus begging Crystals from the other players and the Warden baring its teeth at anyone who looked its way and occasionally screeching. The ugly Familiar Idol giving out
Crystals and Potter's annoying fairies stealing them.

It was almost a routine.

For a few turns, the only exciting thing was Hermione getting yelled at by both Potter and Malfoy, like-minded for perhaps the first time in their lives.

The witch had used an enchanted scroll to get a new card from the deck and she hadn't been entirely pleased when she'd got a Familiar called Syllas the Faithful, who, she informed them, if summoned, would force every other player to sacrifice one of their cards.

Hearing this, Terry had eyeballed the Warden and thought he wouldn't mind so much, but admittedly, it wasn't a smart move, when they would likely need all the advantages they could get for the final challenge – as the two rival wizards had made sure to point out, loudly and repeatedly.

Then Potter had made the mistake to try to convince her to sacrifice 'poor Syllas', arguing that it wouldn't be so bad if she hadn't summoned him beforehand (“You can't say that stabbing a card is barbaric! It's cardboard!”). Of course, the stubborn girl wouldn't have it. Someone named 'Fluffy' came up at that point and the expression of terror on Neville's face convinced Terry that he didn't want to know.

...That was a disturbing trend when it came to Gryffindors, he realized.

Besides that, there was just Malfoy screaming at the world at large when the dice didn't give him any stars to increase his invocation levels even when he was first of turn (“I hate this stupid game!”), and Neville getting distracted by a small oasis in the middle of the desert (which looked nothing like Terry'd always imagined an oasis to look. No palms for one. Just short tree-like bushes with slender branches and greyish, scale-like foliage encrusted with salt, pinkish flowers clustering in dense masses at branch tips. Yet Neville was lingering, clearly fascinated by the – whatever that plant was) and then growing himself another giant Chinese money tree and reducing it to a pot plant, probably to console himself that he had to leave the scaly plants behind.

And they were in the windy canyon again.

It was odd, how much more endurable this ridiculous unreal world became the longer they were in it. Terry got to the point where the idea of using Neville's trick to reduce the Familiar Idol's size didn't terrify him anymore, and he forgot the lingering sense of cold and weirdness for long stretches of time, while busy working out a strategy with his remaining cards.

The one he'd just fished – the Selenia Codex – had given him an idea... he gauged his Energies carefully and nodded to himself; decisively, he activated the Familiar Idol, getting his usual Crystals and resignedly letting the blasted Fairies snatch one up, then quickly summoned the Codex, which plunged to the ground in front of him with a satisfying, dusty thud. It flipped open, rushing through pages until it stopped on a line of instructions: Return a magic Item to your hand.

Terry grinned.

With a snap of his fingers, the ugly idol was back to card form, then he promptly summoned it again and re-activated it. Crystals poured into his counter. The satisfaction at his scheme working was enough that he didn't even bat the Fairies away, just let the tiny menaces do their stealing.

Really, he'd kind of gotten the hang of this game. And for all that the colours were still off, and the wrong temperatures left him uneasy, and the lingering distrust of reality was only slightly muted... it wasn't so bad, all in all.
And then little Titus died.
Chapter 90

It was, ultimately, Hermione's fault. (Except, not really, because how was she to know? And, really, why should she have cared anyway?)

The little guy had done his usual round of staring pleadingly at the other players until they caved and gave him his mite, but something had gone wrong: Hermione simply didn't have any Crystals to give him – Potter's Fairies had made off with her last one when she'd used her Crystal Orb to conjure herself a light blue, drop-shaped amulet and fill it with Fire and Water Energies. And when she'd shown her empty bracer to him... he'd staggered as if he'd been hit in the chest and let out a pain-filled cry.

It had chilled Terry, especially in the overall silent world they were in, where the Warden's screeches had been by far the loudest and harshest noise so far, and he'd turned around just in time to see Titus burst into fleeting transparent bubbles and vanish entirely.

The abrupt, unexpected loss had left him reeling, too stunned to do more than staring stupidly at the place where his Familiar had stood just moments before.

“Oh! Oh, Terry... I am so sorry...” fretted Hermione, but he didn't react.

“For what?! Honestly, Granger. Get a grip!” said Malfoy curtly.

“Wasn't your fault,” smiled Potter sympathetically.

Terry bit his lip not to retort.

It really wasn't her fault, she just didn't have any Crystals (but how could she not have any? This late in the Game?!) and the lack was lethal for Titus and there was nothing to do about it. That was all.

In fact, that was all. It was a certainty which Terry felt all the way to his bones. A sense of of unavoidability he didn't – couldn't – question. That was how things worked within this game and it was truth.

The Rules of the Game, he felt confusedly but surely, were as simply essential as the effects of gravity: unnoticed most of the time, yet holding the world together.

Neither he, nor Hermione, nor anyone else could have saved Titus from it – truthfully, he didn't even want it. Merely thinking it felt wrong. Especially after so long in the Game: he was quite used to the rhythm of the rules by now.

But, but, but… The small creature with the huge compelling eyes had been a quiet but cheering fellow traveller, keeping him company whether it was sitting on his shoulders or running off to whatever puddle of water or mud it could find to splash about, mischievous and smug and just a little mean, and in the short time it'd been with him, it had made Terry smile many times with its antics.

And now it was... gone.

And it didn't matter that it wasn't real... it didn't matter what anyone said... that he, himself, had argued that they were mere manifestations of the Game, with no actual existence…
It didn’t matter; it… no, he; to Terry, Titus was real enough…

Yet the Game didn’t allow him to sit and mope: at the end of the turn, they all had to move forward. After choosing their dice, they all had to play the next turn. That was all, too.

Terry trudged on through the rocky area without any enthusiasm.

It wasn’t even that he wanted to play with different rules, he admitted to himself, morosely. The ones they had were comfortable by now, after so long in this Game...

Terry's internal monologue stuttered. It... had been very long. Hadn't it? That is... not all that long, of course, because it made no sense to think it, but on the other hand, if he went with feeling instead of thinking...

The unease that had dwindled in the last few turns came back with a vengeance.

How long, exactly, had they been playing? Because a part of Terry would confidently answer months (which was terrifying on so many levels) yet another part of him would just as surely judge it an hour, maybe? (which made him fell marginally better, but left the dread-filled question of why was he so comfortable in this set of rules then?)

They couldn't have been here for months, he reassured himself. It was totally illogical. For one thing, they hadn't eaten. And really, the whole 'four seasons' thing was just a bit of flair for the game. Really.

The Warden screeched loudly, startling him out of his spiralling thoughts.

Terry shivered and muttered a curse. Everything around his was back to the alien, wrong look of the very beginning, when every colour was off and every noise was incongruous and Terry couldn't trust his next step to land on solid ground.

“What is the place doing to us?” he said into the empty air.

But a part of him knew: he remembered Yugi's words, a whisper in the back of his mind – the Shadow Realm can be painful, it can weaken you and drain you, it can drive you to madness...

“I'm going mad,” he whispered horrified.

The others had gone on, leaving him to trail behind and panic alone.

He hurried to catch up and wondered if he should share his concerns. None of his friends seemed to have realized just how badly this Game was affecting their perception of reality. Or if they had, they weren't worrying as much as they should!

Yet there was nothing to do but go on.

With a bit of effort, Terry roused himself enough to play Kairn the Destroyer to replace the cute little critter he'd lost – crying out in startled pain because he'd completely forgot Neville's disgusting leech – and the monster popped in with a friendly growl and a scary grin plastered on its triangular, elongated muzzle.

It had wings, but they were so full of holes Terry wasn't surprised it chose to lope by his side instead of flying.

The Ravenclaw kept glancing sideways at it. It was almost as tall as him, mulberry red and with thick bangles of long hair that looked like horns, giving it a disquieting and yet strangely stately
air. Its equilibrium was precarious on its ungulate hooves but its long devil's tail was effective in balancing it.

Every time Terry looked at it, it peered back with bland curiosity; once or twice, it gestured to the other players with its long claws, but the boy chose to ignore it.

His heart just wasn't in it.

Damn this Game.

He shook himself out of his funk only when a piratey rat walking on its hindlegs (with a needle hung from a cobbled together belt of sort by way of sword, no less) showed up, grabbed two of his Energy orbs with the flare of a roguish thief and sprinted off with a maniacal laugh, almost losing the striped trousers it was wearing.

Right.

Life goes on – or, the Game goes on, he supposed.

Oh, dear Merlin, he was starting to confuse the two. "What the hell is this place doing to us?" he repeated, half-frightened half-angry.
Terry didn't have any more time to panic properly, however, because they were closing the second turn of the Board and he didn't have anywhere near enough Crystals to feel good about it.

Time to step up his game.

Feeling grim, he pushed all thoughts of worrisome side-effects and weird philosophical doubts away with the determination usually elicited by an approaching homework deadline. He stood straighter; the Warden screeched his strange, disturbing call and the Destroyer gave him an alien, toothy grin. He nodded back firmly.

They emerged from the red canyon into wintry browns and blues again.

Terry stopped in the not-cold snow to observe his last three cards, which he'd all but forgotten by now. Three more Familiars – two of whom he could summon immediately and one that required a little more planning.

Glancing up, he realized everybody else was already half-way down the hills and almost at the wooded area once more.

“What's the hold up?” Malfoy shouted back at him irritably, making Terry scowl.

Just for that, he made his way through the snowy landscape very slowly, chin raised defiantly against the Slytherin's peeved mutterings.

When he reached the others, Terry lifted a card up and without letting himself feel guilty about it, summoned his own Rattus Nightshade.

The pirate rat – identical to the one who'd robbed him earlier, except that his pants were striped green and blue, rather than red and yellow – sprinted off to steal Energy orbs left and right, sniggering the whole time and occasionally bursting into loud guffaws, and Terry pointedly ignored the indignant protests it elicited.

He then used one of the Energies his rat brought back (an impressive loot, half of which he was forced to waste because there was no way his bag would hold them) to summon the other Nightshade – Sid.

This one was a strange blue creature with red bands above his claws, taller than any other Familiar he'd seen and with a thick, muscled tail rather like a kangaroo. It had a cartoonish thief's sack over a shoulder, but his scary grin soon turned into a disappointed frown and it sat down in the snow despondently, unable to complete its task.

Terry shrugged. He'd known it wouldn't do anything, since he wasn't in the lead in terms of Crystals, but it would still be useful thanks to the Familiar Idol – which, even with Potter's Fairies interfering where they shouldn't, would now give him a consistent three Crystals per turn. Not so bad, all in all.

He turned away from the pouting Familiar and tuned out his fellow players' tirades, staring straight ahead, waiting for the rhythm of the game to push them forward again.

It took a while.
His stunt with the Energy thief was not appreciated, especially so soon after Hermione had pulled the same trick, and the others seemed determined to voice their disappointment over and over.

Malfoy was especially furious, ranting equally against 'dratted Familiars' and 'stupid dice' – he was still struggling to gain enough invocation levels for what he wanted to do. Hermione was scowling and complaining too, and Neville was sighing and shaking his head at him in disappointment worthy of Professor Sprout faced with students being squeamish about Bubotuber pus.

None of them was happy having to delay their game because of Terry's guffawing rat-thief.

The only one even remotely relaxed was Potter, who seemed to have too good a set-up to be bothered by the other players' stunts.

Before they even left the snowy area, he'd played all of his cards – a fact Terry realized only because the Gryffindor was stretching smugly and showing off his empty hands, since neither the strangely twisted, golden tree by his side nor the ornate, silvery set of scales glowing with sky blue lights now hanging from his belt were very eye-catching.

Though the great whitish rock monument carved in the shape of a dragon's head holding a glossy purple ball to the sky... well, that Terry noticed immediately, because it was huge. (Seriously, what was it with Potter and cumbersome summons?)

That done, Potter had gone back to his standard combo, now with a few addition that he happily explained when asked: “It's called the Dragon Soul!” He waved at his dragon-head monument. “It requires a Crystal to work, but the Heart of Argos -” that was the small golden tree, going by his gestures - “will give me an Earth Energy if I do use it, so I can feed the Horn of Plenty to get the five Crystals from that and still have the Beggar's Horn available to get a different Energy! Isn't it great?”

Energies that were being put to good use since as it turned out, Potter's new set of scales could convert them to Crystals...

Terry had to admire the whole thing.

Potter basically had nothing to do but collect Crystals turn after turn... while the rest of them all scrambled and raced to play their cards effectively, he could just laze about in a makeshift clearing furnished with all his various-shaped rocks (...and a snowman with Potter's tie and a transfigured bicorn hat on. Terry felt himself sigh at the childishness of Gryffindors.)

Now if only Terry could get himself a similarly sweet deal...

Apparently the lack of anxiety he enjoyed gave Potter a lot of time to think, because out of the blue, he asked very loudly: “Why not laws?”
Chapter 92

Everybody stopped what they were doing and looked over.

“The Shadows, they obey rules, right? We can all feel it now, I think. But why do they need rules? Aren't there laws?” he elaborated, speaking to the air as much as to them.

The Game stopped too, greying out all around them.

Yugi appeared on top of a hill and slid down it on a children's sledding. He was grinning and didn't seem bothered in the least by the Looks he was getting. Simply let himself flop down on a mound of fresh snow.

*Congratulations!* he exclaimed breezily in their minds. *You have stumbled upon one of the key concepts of Shadow Magic.*

Of course, he didn't expand on it.

Distracted from his consideration of strategy and plunged back into contemplating esoteric matters right after he'd decided to table all worrying for the time being, Terry found it difficult to keep himself from losing his temper and curse the other wizard. Or worse, the awfully uncooperative King of Games.

He was all too familiar with the feeling of irritation which sweeps over someone when they're suddenly disturbed while absorbed in a book. There was nothing more disagreeable, in his opinion. This was a bit like that and he had to bite his tongue to keep from saying something ill-tempered.

Doubly so because Yugi wasn't doing anything useful. They kept looking at him for a while, to no avail: he was just waiting patiently.

Eventually giving the man up as a lost cause, Hermione turned instead to her best friend: “Harry, what are you on about now?” she asked tiredly.

Terry felt a pang of worry for the witch: from what he could see, she still had less than ten Crystals in her bracers. He wondered how they might help her – or if they even *could.*

Potter hopped on a low branch of his golden tree and settled himself more comfortably against it before trying to explain his reasoning: “Yugi said that the Shadow Court is all about games. You remember? He even said there's some confusion between his titles – King of Games and King of the Shadow Court – because of it, because of how important games are for Shadow Magic.”

“I remember,” said Hermione darkly.

Shoulder slumping a little, Potter rolled his eyes: “Hermione, give it a rest. There's nothing wrong with games, even if you don't like them.”

She crossed her arms defensively. “That's not--”

“Besides, it's not even true you don't like games,” interjected Malfoy sardonically. “Your presence here is proof of that.”

“Oh, do shut up,” she retorted peevishly.

“You even *stole* a game!” piled it on Potter with a grin.
“Exactly!” added Malfoy with an air of superiority.

“Would you two please stop agreeing? It's unnerving me,” grumbled Terry.

The Slytherin looked profoundly insulted.

The witch rounded on Potter, suddenly indignant: “I didn't steal it! I just borrowed it!”

“You so did. You still have it!...”

“Did not!...”

“Potter, get to the point,” interjected Malfoy brusquely. “If you even have one,” he added in a mutter, shooting Terry a glare, as if blaming him for... what, exactly?

Irritated, the Ravenclaw glared back in disbelief.

“My point? Oh, right, yes. My point. Shadow Magic and games,” the green-eyed wizard nodded, refocusing. “Or rather, rules. Right? Because I sort of get what Yugi meant now. Don't you?” He regarded them all in turn. “When he said that one of the reasons for choosing us is that we enjoy games and that's important... for 'obvious reasons' that weren't obvious at all. But I think they are now.”

“Are they?” asked Neville dubiously.

“Mm-mm. Don't tell me you don't feel it.”

“Feel what?” asked Terry, puzzled.

“The way this works. This whole... system. Steps, moves, turns, phases, actions... it's all there, all this succession of ways things should be done, might be done, in what order, under what conditions... this, this series of can-cannot-can if... I don't know! I don't have the right words!”

But he didn't need them: Terry understood. There were things he was aware of about this game – about its rhythm and the underlying structure of it, things that he hadn't been told but that he knew with bedrock surety. More importantly, things that he neither questioned nor challenged – things that just were. He recalled how naturally he'd accepted Potter's fairies or Neville's leech or his own Familiar's destruction...

He clenched his fists, thoughts growing dark again. What if this Game was truly changing the very way they thought?

But Potter's mind seemed to be travelling on a different path.

“Just--” he ran his hand through his hair. “Just let yourself think of it, really think of it, and you can feel it... you know, what you can and cannot do, what's allowed and what is not, and how far you can push the border between the two... You can feel it, right?” he added with sudden worry. “I'm not making this up, am I?”

“No, I feel it too,” agreed Neville quietly. “It's a bit like having a list of instruction written inside of you.”

Hermione grimaced visibly: “Way to put it, Neville.”

The boy shrugged.
Pushing away his irritation, Terry thought it over and then nodded warily, conscious of the small candle he imagined inside of him, spreading its light to the right steps, the *allowed* steps – he thought suddenly of what a comfort it was to *know the rules* – and then he wondered *how* he knew, when he'd barely paid attention to Yugi's explanations… when said explanations hadn't been very thorough in the first place.

Potter was still fumbling a description of sorts: “It's not just the rules, it's the arrangement of it all, the way the Game works because of the Magic, and the Magic works because of the Game…”

He was speaking to them, but he kept glancing over at Yugi, with the air of a student who has to do a presentation for his class, but isn't sure he's studied as well as he should have, and hopes for reassurance from his teacher.

“Maybe?” said Hermione sounding doubtful.

“…It's the sense, deep inside us, that we have no choice but to play… and play by the rules,” said Malfoy slowly, feeling his way through the unfamiliar concept. “And also the sense of where the limit is; the all important difference between a clever technicality and cheating.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Potter nodded vigorously.

“And that's because of what Shadow Magic is?” asked Neville just as slowly, his brow furrowed in concentration.

They darted a glance at Yugi, but he was still smiling and relaxing in the snow, the embodiment of amiable patience.

No help from the teacher, thought Terry inanely: they had to figure this out themselves.

“We don't know what it is,” said Hermione stiffly, deliberately looking away from him.

“But we know how it works,” countered Potter.

“No, we don't! ...Do we?” protested Neville bewildered.

“Well, yeah. It works through games,” said Potter like it was obvious.

Hermione interjected – still standoffish: “Wait. What does that even mean? Are you saying… that Shadow Magic is a game? That games are a form of Shadow Magic? What?”

Her brow was scrunched up in confusion.

Potter shrugged. “Either. Both. Um… maybe?”

“But that's ridiculous, Harry!”

“Well, then you figure this out!” he snapped back sourly, running an agitated hand through his hair.

“Ohay. Okay. So Shadow Magic has to do with playing games,” repeated Terry, hoping the idea would sound less ludicrous than in his head.

“It has to do with using rules,” précised Potter. He had a sort of quiet authority to him that drew Terry in; but then he ruined it all by adding hastily: “I think.”

They all looked at Yugi again. (They sort of couldn't help it.)
Serenely, he offered an unhelpful *Go on*, and waited.

“Right,” said Potter, looking a little spooked – like a student under interrogation, who isn't sure he's given the right answer and wishes the teacher would just tell him, one way or another. “But what I don't get is... why not *laws*? ...I mean, rules can be broken, can't they?”

“You sure do it enough,” muttered Malfoy.

“So can laws,” pointed out Terry, feeling unimpressed with the idea he was being presented. “Isn't that what crime is?”

Potter frowned.

“It's just that the consequences of breaking laws are more severe,” insisted Terry, but the Gryffindor shook his head.

“No, that's just a different sort of rules. Made by governments and such. No, I meant laws as in 'Gramp's laws on the transfiguration of elements'. Or gravity, yeah?”

Terry blinked, unable to reply.

Potter jumped down from the tree and moved to stand over Yugi, looking at him intensely: “How come Shadow Magic doesn't have laws?”

Terry frowned, not understanding his point – the rules were the laws here, weren't they? – but the King of the Shadow Court smiled proudly: *Because it is ever-changing. It is varying and inconstant, whimsical and mercurial.*

Yugi rolled up from his pile of snow and to his feet, clasping his hands behind his back. *It is erratic... unfixed... capricious. Unpredictable.*

His eyes bore into Potter, weighty and meaningful: *Adjustable.*

Yugi concluded with finality: *There are no laws. But there is order. Hence the Shadow Games.*

The Gryffindor was nodding slightly, looking at the ground without seeing it. The non-explanation seemed to say something to him and Terry felt a stab of envy.

He just couldn't see what the man meant. He felt suddenly like he was standing on quicksand, the cold and heavy drag of the Shadow Magic all of a sudden too close once more, shifting and fluctuating, restless and choking. He grabbed the nearest thing – Neville's arm – to stave off the cold panic growing in his belly.

*To be fair, Shadow Magic can be used outside of games, Yugi told them, calm and sure. Not just for summoning, either: some forms of levitation and telekinesis, some elemental manipulation, divination of course, a number of rituals, even healing; and a lot of less savoury endeavours: mind controlling and reading, soul swapping and stealing--*

“What?!”

Ignoring their horror, he went on without pause: *And if need be, it can be used in a single feat of great and flashy power – often lethal, always awe-inspiring. All the users can wield it thus, but... none of us likes it. Remember how it felt, when I called it up before shaping my use through the use of a Duel Monster card?*
They all shuddered and he looked at them knowingly.

_For thousands of years, Shadow Magic has come in conjunction with the Shadow Games – invoking one without the other led only to disaster._

“And so you play,” muttered Hermione, trying to find the words to shape a concept that eluded her.

And so we play, agreed Yugi. _All Shadow Mages play games – all Shadow Mages play by the rules. And I do mean rules… not laws, not even in the common legislative sense._

“Why?” asked Terry, still vaguely baffled.

His smile widened imperceptibly. _Because Games rely on everyone accepting the rules._

Yugi paused for a moment, looking at each of them, before continuing: _You can change the rules if everybody agrees, even for just a game. It's... a more flexible and at the same time, a more unbending system. Because once you've accepted the rules, that's what you must play with._

“Otherwise it's cheating,” murmured Potter softly.

_Otherwise it's cheating_, agreed the King of Games. He turned around and retrieved his sledding, starting to drag it back towards the snow-covered hills.

“What, no disappearing act this time?” asked Malfoy snidely.

Yugi turned and smiled brilliantly: _I want to take advantage of the snow a little longer!_ he exclaimed cheerfully. _Don't mind me!_
They mulled things over as they played the next turn and found themselves under the sparse canopy of trees once more.

“This whole thing is... urgh. It's like it makes sense and not at the same time,” pondered Malfoy. “It's giving me such a headache...”

Hermione scoffed.

“Oh, damn it. I didn't ask about the time thing...!” grumbled Terry to himself, annoyed. “I should have seized the chance!”

“Don't be like that, Hermione. I know you like the idea. You're all about rules! ...Except when you find it exciting to break them,” teased Potter, making everyone look at him strangely, except the witch herself, who just rolled her eyes.

“What time thing?” asked Malfoy, frowning at Terry, bewildered.

“Fine! All right! I like the idea,” Hermione replied to her best friend, chin raised belligerently. “What's not to like? Rules invoke a sense of order, fair play, and safety! That's great. Good. What I'd like to know, is what does that have to do with playing like children? Huh?”

“I wonder why he's telling us so much.” That was Neville, busy stoppering a smoky, cyan potion into a tiny crystal flask with extreme caution. “Yugi, I mean.”

“Who cares?” said Malfoy, not bothered by sustaining different conversations at once. He was tapping his foot impatiently and twisting the many cards in his hand: “Information is information.”

“Yes, but when you think about it, it's strange. All the others were more reticent.”

Terry shrugged. He agreed with Malfoy: information was information, no need to look a gift horse in the mouth. “What's wrong with games?” he instead asked Hermione curiously. “You seem very stuck on this point.”

“A point on which you've already been proved wrong,” interjected Malfoy in a drawl, sparing the witch half his attention.

“Do you think it's because he's the King?” wondered Neville off-handedly – clearly pursuing his own line of thought.

“They did tell us to ask him,” agreed Potter, looking back at the tall boy.

“True,” hummed Malfoy.

And Terry wasn't going to get used to those two agreeing, he just knew.

Recognizing the area where he'd spied the waterfall before, he tried to steer everybody subtly towards it. He'd like to see it up close. Only Hermione drifted off down another path, by the looks of it immersed in calculations of some sort. The others wandered on in a haphazard group, players and Familiars alike. The Ravenclaw soon spotted the small pond further away, beyond a tangle of thorns, and smiled in spite of himself. It really was pretty.

Hermione's voice rang from somewhere in the grove, where the brambles had retreated away from
the twisting path, sounding slightly distracted, but willing to continue the conversation: “I'm not stuck on anything!” she protested with exaggerated patience. “Nothing's wrong with games, but this is magic! Very dangerous magic! It should be more serious than that!”

Potter sighed looking up at the branches dramatically: “Hermione, stop for a moment and feel. This is serious. This is so serious we could die of it.”

“Don't remind me!” muttered Malfoy darkly.

“Um...” Everybody turned to look at Neville. The Gryffindor appeared on the verge of saying something, eyes darting between the trees hiding Hermione and the other three boys; then thought better of it and let one of his remaining cards flash into an ivory harp sculpted as a voluptuous Nymph hugging a Crystal. “Never mind,” he muttered.

As they came to a stop at the edge of the desert and waited for the next turn, Terry idly watched Potter pick a new card and promptly summon it – a gracefully ornate full-length mirror straight out of a fairy-tale, not particularly note-worthy except for how it was reflecting an icy landscape instead of the springtime surrounding them.

Still, nothing they couldn't find in Hogwarts (on alternate Tuesdays in the fourth floor south corridor, for instance). Terry found it soothingly normal.

Hermione rejoined them when they'd picked their dice. She looked grumpy and Potter ribbed her good-naturedly: “Come on. Admit it. You're having fun.”

“Oh, yes, sure. Aside for the whole 'could die any minute in a stupid game' part...” interjected Malfoy bitterly. “Such fun.”


Three boys regarded her uncomprehendingly, but Neville just tutted: “Is this to do with your parents?” he asked sympathetically and even Potter looked puzzled.

“Hermione?” he asked, bewildered. “What is he talking about?”

“Nothing,” she said softly. “Nothing at all.”

Neville gave Hermione an awkward, one-armed hug and they both ignored Potter's worried questioning.

Suddenly, Malfoy appeared by Terry's side, startling him. “Did you notice that the Shadow Realm doesn't feel as cold and overwhelming if we're playing?” he asked out of the blue.

Terry's Familiars hissed menacingly and flexed their claws, but Malfoy didn't bother to notice. He was eyeing Hermione with an expression of deep discomfort and had evidently decided it was time to redirect the conversation.

The Ravenclaw blinked owlishly at the blond, then his mind registered what he was talking about. “That's true!”

Very quickly, they were immersed into a discussion about the whys and hows, touching on Potter's theory, on the basics of what Terry was starting to think of as 'Normal Magic', on the relevance of intention and emotions in spell casting, even on Professor Flitwick's advanced lessons on 'listening' for their own or the ambient magic (although the verb wasn't the right one, not by far; just the only
one they – and every other student in Hogwarts – had managed to come up with)...

And on what constituted 'Dark Arts'.

"Shadow Magic really doesn't seem to have much in common with them," stated the blond pensively. "For all that it can obviously be used to cause harm and to control... well. This whole 'rules' thing. That's not... The Dark Arts are more about imposing your will on others and on the world. Dark Magic is often all about emotions...”

Terry tried to hide his discomfort with the topic. (And his reluctant fascination).

“Are you seriously giving him a lesson in the Dark Arts?” asked Potter incredulously.

“Don't be more of an idiot than usual, Potter,” said Malfoy tiredly. “We were just saying that normal magic – whether light or dark - is quite different from Shadow Magic,” he pointed out dismissively.

That, Terry agreed with.

He had never felt anything like the heavy, cold and draining feeling that Shadow Magic gave him. The magic they were used to was lighter, refreshing, tonic; but also rougher, more shallow and undoubtedly weaker. Far less versatile, too, and wasn't that contradiction just typical? Terry was starting to get familiar with the oxymoronic co-existence of opposite concepts being true at once.

The Gryffindor gave them both suspicious looks. “Whatever. Let's just focus on the game!”
Potter was right. Yugi's explanations were resting heavily on their minds, but there was still a Game to be played.

The last Four Seasons were going by impossibly fast and Terry was growing more and more nervous.

Hermione tried fiddling with some sort of device she was wearing around her neck, which changed the amount of dots on the leftover die – for the worst, despite her protests that she was trying to buy them time: before they even realized it, the desert was rushing past and there was no sign of the fires that should stop them.

Malfoy, for all that he gained something whenever they moved for a full Season's stretch thanks to his Chrono-Ring, instantly started yelling at her to “leave the bloody dice alone already, some of us can't afford to race like this!"

She looked offended, but the blond was so visibly frazzled, and grumpy, and frustrated, that she bit her tongue and let it go.

Terry was relieved. He was still almost 100 Crystals short of their goal of 250 and they were already at the edge of the desert area: the reddish canyon that would be their last stretch of the board loomed far too close. They needed more time!

What was the witch thinking, anyway? She was even worse off in terms of Crystals... but no, Terry was mistaken. She'd summoned herself a strange device, a sort of disc-shaped pedestal inscribed with runes, with smooth, wooden handles arching off into a claw-like arrangement around a central hole, and she kept dropping Energies into it like there was no tomorrow, getting Crystals upon Crystals in return.

A strange little demon-like creature made of wispy black smoke reached out of a purse she'd procured, throwing more Crystals on top of the ones she was getting and grinning its distractingly white fangs in a mimicry of laughter.

Then she thrust up a card that swirled and swirled in the air, morphing slowly into a simply terrifying crown, all black, indented surfaces and tall, sharp spikes oozing tendrils of dark smoke.

The crown hovered over her rioting curls, inhumane and menacing, and settled, looking terribly out of place over her kind and graceful visage, but she straightened proudly and bore its weight with the poise of a queen.

The rabbit and the pumpkin head were still lolling about, idly following her wherever she moved: they observed her manoeuvres keenly.

She fed one of her cards to the disquieting object – Terry actually got the impression of fangs detaching themselves in the black bone-looking surface, razor-sharp and dripping – and it vanished into ethereal bubbles, Energy orbs falling down from it like candy.

She quickly downed the potion that had remained dangling from her belt all this time and the orbs exploded into a shocking amount of Crystals.

The she summoned another potion, this one clear as water in a round-bottomed flask, and poured five more Energies from it, converting one and using the others for a third potion, as multicoloured
as a rainbow, which promptly produced a brand new card and four more Energy orbs.

The witch proceeded to summon a green amulet - which spit out *yet more* Crystals - and convert the leftover Energies into Crystals on the spot, always with the help of the tiny devil in the purse.

Terry could only gape.

In just one turn, her count had shot up to more than half what he had earned in the entire game!

On his other side, Neville gave a cry of triumph when he finally finished charging his Jewel of the Ancients.

Terry clenched his teeth: he needed to step up his game, and fast!

The Warden's eerie cry seemed to underline his resolve from where it perched on a grey, rounded bush.

Before he could decide what to do, however, the game took a sudden turn for the worse.

Malfoy had at long last put together a few invocation levels and he promptly started summoning Familiars... Familiars that kept giving out cards to everybody they crossed path with!

First came an eerie purple owl, with mascara-rimmed round eyes and a ring on his talons of all things (it reminded Terry uncomfortably of the Hogwarts Divination professor, what with the jewellery, and the tarot cards, and the star-dotted purple draperies, and the crystal orb that all somehow floated around it) who kept spitting out cards with enthusiastic hoots.

Then, almost immediately, a sly rodent of some sort dressed up as Robin Hood sneaked by, slipped a card into Terry's hand with the stealth of a ninja, then ruined it by sniggering loudly as it danced away.

“What the hell are you doing!” cried Potter, upset.

“What I have to!” retorted Malfoy hotly. “What do you expect me to do, just hold onto all my cards forever and do nothing?”

Potter grumbled indistinctly. Terry had little hope of understanding him: being in the desert didn't help – it wasn't easy to remain within talking distance among the dunes and they had all spread out quite far without noticing.

Malfoy was closer to the green-eyed wizard however and clearly could hear him better, because he soon snapped: “Stop whining, Potter!”

The blond was still frowning down at far too many cards – Terry realized that his latest familiars had given him as many as they'd given the other players; grumpily, he wondered what exactly had been his gain in this.

“What excuse me?” Potter raised his voice in loud protests. “My set-up was perfect, and now look at this! I practically have a full deck in my hands!”

“Don't be so dramatic!” replied Malfoy disdainfully, clenching his own hand of cards with a dark look.

“We should have compared strategies, just to be sure we wouldn't get in each other's way!” complained Potter, frowning at his new cards.
“Good thinking, pity it comes too late,” muttered Hermione sarcastically. She wasn't any happier about the new cards.

“Oh, cry me a river!” yelled Malfoy, finally fed-up. “You do nothing but bitch and whine!... What should I say? I have fantastic cards, a veritable grimoire, and not enough power levels to invoke a quarter of them!”

“And now you've got even more! How's that working out for you?” said Potter snidely.

But the blond's rant couldn't be stopped: “And the stupid dice keeps giving me anything but levels! I have more energies than I can keep, I'm literally throwing them away like trash, which galls, by the way, and I can't use them! Argh! I want my wand!”

“Why...?”

“I want to curse something!”

“Look at the bright side, it'll bolster your defences to have more cards, right?” tried Neville hopefully.

Terry gasped. He'd completely forgotten that collecting Crystals wouldn't be enough!

It was like turning a corner and unexpectedly passing through a ghost. Chilled to the bones, Terry stared at his collection of Familiars, trying to remember how many points were they worth. Was it enough? He'd need... 125, if he had his math right, to match the Dark Magician's attack points... or would the 105 to match his defence score be sufficient? Either way, he had a horrible feeling he was coming up short...

How much were his Familiars worth? He glowered at them, hoping for help that wasn't coming.

The creatures just stared placidly back.

Neville was already summoning a ridiculous looking device, a... stamping press? It consisted of a dark metal, square frame, a bolster plate holding up a heated cube of something and a flat ram plunging down from above, all of it presumably controlled by the rows of buttons, levers, gears and gauges underneath it: a set-up more suited to a sci-fi movie than to the world of magic Terry was used to, especially since, at a snap of Neville's fingers, a Water Energy was dropped into the cube, the square frame secured itself around it, flames engulfed the interior and the ram fell down to shape a glowing cube of radiant energy, only to reset itself, ready to churn out another, identical cube.

Terry shook his head and paid it no more mind: instead, feeling his gut tighten, he turned his attention to the new cards.

At least they were Familiars, and the second one was easily summoned too. With a sigh, Terry paid the necessary Crystals, including the one for Neville's leech, and found himself wilting under the assessing gaze of the predatory blue cat that popped into being.

It was walking upright and clad in rich Shakespearian garb, with brass ornaments sewed onto its flamboyant striped doublet, puffy trunkhose in the same fabric and purses bulging with Crystals hung on its wide black belt. It was leaning onto a walking stick and bouncing Crystals in his paw in a covetous way eerily reminiscent of Disney's Sheriff of Nottingham juggling gold coins.

Terry had a queer feeling about this one.
The other card looked to be a more complicated problem, seeing as it required an Air Energy, which Terry didn't have and which, if memory served him well, could not be got in the desert at all. He would have to wait and hope…
Terry wasn't the only one having troubles.

Hermione's hair was more frizzy than usual because she kept tormenting the locks in her nervousness. Malfoy was scowling at everything. And for the first time in a while, Potter was looking as frazzled as the rest of them.

Grumbling furiously against the uncooperative dice, the Gryffindor was forced, being last of turn, to draw yet another card, but brightened somewhat upon seeing it and quickly thrust it up into the air.

Terry watched it swirl and coalesce into the now familiar flash of blinding light; it left in its wake... a pair of boots.

Nice boots (Terry would love to wear them) made of soft leather, accented with golden buckles and tassels and even plates reinforcing the knee.

Wasting no time, Potter slipped them on and turned back, stomping towards the wood they'd left behind.

The world around him twirled into a cylindrical tunnel of blue-black lights, where stepping stones floated; he marched on into the wormhole without hesitation. An irresistible gust of wind swept the rest of them all up and pushed them violently down the same path – into the weird tunnel and on, amidst the kaleidoscopic blues, jumping hurriedly from floating slab of stone to floating slab of stone, relying on their reflexes to try to keep up. It was exhilarating.

They emerged from the wormhole into the shrubbery once more. The Gryffindor looked mightily pleased with himself: “This should give us a little breathing room...”

Malfoy promptly asked with eagerness: “Can you do it again?”

“Ah! No... it's a one-time deal...” admitted Potter.

Malfoy and Hermione groaned. Terry breathed deeply: it didn't matter. This stolen time, however brief, was better than nothing.

Darting a guilty glance at his friends, he steadied himself for a move that he knew would upset everybody all over again.

He had enough Energies to repeat the trick with the Selenia Codex now, using his last Familiar – Amsug Longneck. He summoned the haughty red dragon (slim to the point of looking underfed, with a short tail and a very long snout) and cowering a little under its imperious glare, retrieved the Familiar Idol, ready to summon the garden ornament again immediately.

Unfortunately, the greedy dragon had the unfortunate side-effect of forcing all the other players to retrieve one of their summoned Items as well.

 Needless to say, nobody was pleased.

Terry tuned out their ever more vocal protests, pleased with how many Crystals the manoeuvre yielded him, and chose to wonder, with more focus than it warranted, how Amsug was possibly managing to fly about, glaring everybody into submission, when it had no wings at all. Maybe its...
long pointy horns were magical? Really, it was anyone's guess.

...He still edged behind Sid Nightshade and Kairn the Destroyer in an attempt to block out the dark glares sent his way.

When they moved on, he was somehow not surprised in the least when, upon crossing into the desert, his blue cat-like Familiar collected a tribute from everybody else. He was just glad the avaricious thing was on his side. Even so, he had some difficulties looking his friends in the eye right at that moment...

In the hope of maximizing Potter's move, Hermione had tried again to re-roll the last die, but to no avail: the new face also carried three dots and the desert raced past just as quickly as before, even as they unconsciously slowed down their pace, trying to delay the inevitable.

The walls of the canyon loomed oppressively on both their sides.

“Oh, I don't know what more I could do!” fretted Hermione, pushing her unruly bang off her forehead impatiently. She used her last Energies to summon a mound of blackened shields and weapons, piled onto each other like slightly gory battle trophies, and a glowing winged helmet atop of it, and then crossed her arms, looking grim.

Terry blinked twice when he noticed a pile of tomes being carried by her mangy rabbit. Two of them were wrapped in ominously heavy chains. How had he missed them so far? ...Trust Granger to get herself a library in any situation.

Further along, Potter conjured a huge shield, twice as tall as he was. It looked to be made of solid stone and was carved on the outside in the effigy of a long-haired woman wearing a blindfold. Kind of like an allegory of Lady Justice. Weirdly, it hung from four heavy chains anchored in thin air. The shield was quickly followed by the dragon monument he'd had to retrieve, but Potter still had a card in hand at the end of the turn, much to his visible displeasure.

Malfoy frantically worked with arranging and rearranging his Energies for maximum effect, and to his credit, managed to effectively combine a blue potion, an odd, vaguely Celtic round amulet and another copy of the Selenia Codex very effectively, ending up with a delicate looking white staff with a green focusing orb and a set of white dice whose inky black symbols oozed a sinister dark fume; but he still ended up short on invocation levels as usual and could do nothing but hold onto his last two cards.

Neville on the other hand now sported an umpteenth jewel (he had a veritable collection by now), this one a bright purple rectangular prism embedded in a knot of silver threads, with three gold bands spinning around it like hula hoops. By the looks of it, he had exchanged some of his remaining cards for new ones that at first drew a distressed noise for him, only for it to suddenly turn into a pleased exclamation: “Oh, I can manage this!”

Under their interested eyes, he first summoned a burning ball of fiery lava, a miniature sun burning brightly in his cupped hands; then he promptly squished it, turning it into three fire Energies and with those, along with the green orbs he already had, summoned… a gigantic lantern.

Malfoy and Terry both snorted a laugh.

Unlike Potter's, this one appeared to be made of interwoven, thorny branches and the flame inside was actually a grumpy-looking creature with fiery limbs and hair and a disproportionately loud howl.
Unfazed, Neville reduced it to a manageable size - yowling creature and all - and beamed happily at them.

Terry for his part had grabbed the only die that could give him an Earth Energy with relief and it was with tempered triumph that he summoned the last card in his hands.

Serpent-like vines sprouted from the dusty rocks beneath his feet, as thick as his arms, and hovered menacingly, waiting for instructions; as soon as he pointed them towards Potter, they thrust out like frenzied whips and started snatching fairies out of the very air.

An Argosian Tangleweed. Professor Sprout would have loved it.

Potter's Fairies tried to fight back, but their tiny nails could do nothing against the thick skin of Terry's voracious plant. Their distressed wails were a testament to their sad doom. The Ravenclaw watched dispassionately. No more loosing Crystals to the damn thieving flies! Sure, it might seem cruel, but that's nature for you. Survival of the strongest and all that.

He activated his Familiar Idol for the last time, and breathed.

This was it.

He'd done all he could...

And now, the final challenge was here.

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