

Quo Vadis?

Title: Quo Vadis?

Author: Ruskbyte

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Summary: It is the greatest threat the world of magic has ever faced. It cannot be reasoned with. It cannot be bargained with. It cannot be hexed. It cannot be cursed. It cannot be stopped. It cannot be killed. And only Lord Voldemort stands in its way.

Author's Note: An idea that sprang to mind after reading the classic *"Who Goes There?"* by John W. Campbell. There was also some inspiration from John Wyndham's seminal piece; *"The Midwich Cuckoos"*. Besides, how often does an author have the chance of turning the story's ultimate bad guy into the wizarding world's last hope? Couldn't resist.

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Quo Vadis?

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"Welcome, Rita Skeeter, to my parlour."

The intrepid reporter in question was desperately wishing that she had listened to her mother and become a respectable house-witch, an occupation that all but guaranteed that the current Dark Lord would not take much notice of you. Unfortunately, she had not listened to dear old mum and as a consequence now found herself in the presence of the much feared You-Know-Who.

Lord Voldemort, widely agreed to be the most dangerous and terrifying wizard alive, or dead, was standing at the far end of the room, in front of an impressively large stone fireplace. He was facing away from her, hands clasped loosely behind his back, and observing the crackling flames. The pair of Death Eaters that had fetched her from her home in Cambridge gave her a relatively gentle push into the room.

"Please, sit down."

Rita swallowed convulsively and did as the Dark Lord commanded, taking a seat in one of the chairs scattered about the room. She winced as her knee bumped against the low coffee table that now stood between her and her host.

"In case you were unaware, I am Lord Voldemort," he declared.

"B-but the Ministry—"

"Yes, my greatest, if unwitting, allies," Voldemort drawled. "Needless to say, Rita, my return to the land of the living is very, very real. Harry Potter is not, as the Daily Prophet claims, an attention seeking brat. No, I have indeed come back."

"Oh Merlin."

"I imagine you are curious as to why I have had you brought here," observed Voldemort, still staring into the fire.

"Y-yes," she managed to say.

"You are here, Rita, so that I might tell you a story."

Rita blinked in surprise and blurted out, "A story? Are you serious?"

Voldemort shifted slightly, causing Rita to squeak in alarm, but he did not turn to face her. He reached up with one hand and began to absently straighten the various knickknacks sitting on the decorative shelf above the fireplace. "You will find," he said, his voice rich and smooth, "that I am *always* serious."

Gathering what small amounts of courage she had, she was no Gryffindor after all, Rita managed to ask, "W-what kind of story?"

"A true story, Rita," replied Voldemort. "One that has never before been told."

Put that way, Rita had the strangely hopeful thought that the Dark Lord had brought her here to tell his life story. She could almost see it; *The Life*

and Times of Lord Voldemort, in his own words . If anything was going to earn her name a place in the history books that was certainly it.

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Voldemort nodded. “A story about the greatest threat the magical world has ever faced.”

“I, uh, don’t have a quill with me,” Rita muttered.

“I did not expect you to.”

“But—”

“I require only for you to listen as I speak, Rita. No more. No less.”

“Er, if you say so...”

“My tale begins nearly fifteen years ago. It was Halloween night, in the year 1981...”

-oOo-

I stood at the base of the stairs, languidly tapping my wand against my palm, and feeling somewhat disappointed. At my feet, less than a minute dead, was James Potter. He had put up very little in the way of a struggle. I had hoped that he would prove to be more of a challenge. Sadly, other than that old fool Dumbledore, nobody could truly accomplish that any more.

It had started to become boring, truth be told; encountering nothing but success after success, without any meaningful resistance. There is no true satisfaction to be found when everything is handed to you on the proverbial silver platter.

I mounted the stairs and made my way to the upper story of the Potter’s home. It was a quaint house, I recall. It did not take me long to track down Lily Potter, cowering in the nursery. No, I lie. She did not cower. Much like her husband, she stood ready to face me. Defiant to the last. An admirable, if pointless, display of courage. Behind her was the crib, in which the object of my attentions lay.

There was a prophecy, you see. A prophecy foretelling my downfall at the hands of a child. I knew that there were only two possibilities. Harry Potter or Neville Longbottom. Yes, Longbottom. I had, for reasons of convenience, chosen to deal with the Potter child first and intended to hunt down the Longbottoms and their boy some time afterwards.

At this point I made a token attempt to spare the muddblood’s life. I had no real reason to kill her. It was her son that I was interested in. Perhaps the hair had a little to do with it as well. I always had a bit of a thing for redheads. But, just like James, Lily held firm and refused to step aside. She begged, of course. They all do.

“Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead.”

Those were her last words, as well as the customary pleas for mercy. I, naturally, showed her none. The Killing Curse dealt with her easily enough. With both the father and now the mother out of the way, I moved on to the boy.

I will confess that I enjoy looking into the eyes of my victims when I kill them. There is something greatly satisfying about seeing the light of their life wink out and fade away. I could kill people for no other reason than to see that happen. As such, I took the time to move close and stare down at my young victim. I wanted to see the life leave the eyes of my prophesised vanquisher.

I held my wand at the ready and the words to the Killing Curse were on my lips. But then the boy stopped his hysterical wailing and turned his head to stare up at me. I was frozen in place. Utterly unable to move, as if I had been petrified. Those eyes... those green, green eyes. You have seen them perhaps? During your “interviews” with the boy during the Triwizard Tournament this last year. I cannot image that they would have escaped your attention.

I must have remained standing there for I don’t know how long. Minutes. Just standing and staring; entranced by those unnatural eyes that held me in place. I can remember having a distinct feeling of disquiet, of unease and uncertainty. There was something, something more than a mere baby looking at me through those eyes. Something... sinister.

Eventually I managed to shrug it off, pushing my concern aside as nothing more than the foolish worry that the prophecy might have actually been true. I raised my wand back to the ready and took careful aim. I made a point of targeting the brat’s head, rather than the body, as I normally would. A reaction against those eyes, which never once strayed away from me.

I summoned my hatred, my strength, and cast the Avada Kedavra.

I did not even have a chance to blink, let alone scream, when pain and darkness engulfed me.

-oOo-

You know the rest of the story. Everyone does. The story of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. But this was only the beginning of my tale. My downfall, which cost us so much time. Too much, perhaps.

As you can see, Harry Potter did indeed *defeat* me, but he did not *kill* me. Years, decades, before the prophesy had ever been spoken, I had taken steps to ensure that death would not be enough. Steps soaked in the foulest and blackest of dark magic. And it was enough, though barely. I survived. I should have died, but I did not. My body was destroyed, but my spirit remained.

The years that followed my defeat were not easy. Such adversity I had to face. There were times, yes, where I despaired, where my will began to wane and I almost gave up all hope of returning to my past strength and glory. And through it all I was haunted by the memory of those damnable green eyes; watching me, weighing my worth and finding me lacking...

It was not until the summer before Potter's first year at Hogwarts that I made true progress. Before then I had been forced to survive by draining the life energy from mere animals. Rats mostly and other vermin. I could take form, briefly, by possessing snakes and other suitable creatures. But then, finally, after what felt like an eternity, a foolish young wizard stumbled upon me. It was the perfect opportunity. I seized it without hesitation.

My return to Britain was hardly a triumphant one. Quirrell's knowledge that the Philosopher's Stone was to be brought to Hogwarts spurred me on. Turning base metals into gold is one thing. Using the Elixir of Life to regain my body was something else entirely. Were it not for that, I would scarcely have bothered to remain bonded to him. I did not have the strength needed for anything more than that and thus was forced to maintain a low profile. As Hogwarts' new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, this was an exercise in skill that would challenge any Slytherin. But I was worthy of the task. Dumbledore may have suspected, yes, and perhaps Snape as well, but neither had more than that.

Imagine my surprise when one of the first people I encountered upon returning was the very person that had caused my exile in the first place. Fate truly loves a jest. That Harry Potter's return to the magical world would coincide with my own... it could be nothing else.

We met once again, if only briefly, in the Leaky Cauldron. It was the boy's birthday and the half-breed, Hagrid, was escorting him on a visit to Diagon Alley. The oversized oaf has no concept of subtlety or tact. Everyone present knew of the boy's return within a minute of his arrival. And then, to my amazement, Hagrid actually led him to me, introducing him to my host.

Despite the fact that I was hidden, so well hidden that even the vaunted Dumbledore could not detect me, I found myself feeling exposed... naked. It was even worse when the boy shook Quirrell's hand. The sensation was horrible beyond any description. You cannot comprehend what it was like. The boy, Harry Potter, in that single moment, was able to instil in me a fear greater than death itself.

He... tasted me. That is the closest I can come to explaining what it was like. He tasted me. Not my body, as I had none. No, it was my magic that felt his cold touch. Perhaps even my very soul.

Quirrell, simpleton that he was, didn't even notice. Nor did anyone else for that matter. I think that unnerved me almost as much as everything else. That I could be made to feel so vulnerable, without any apparent effort on his part. And without leaving any indication that he had violated me in such a manner.

I had been interested in Potter before then. He had broken my power, after all. Now, however, my curiosity was piqued. Clearly, the Boy-Who-Lived was much more than I had anticipated. I resolved to be cautious, as any good Slytherin would, and to watch my nemesis closely throughout the school year.

oOo-

The attempt to steal the Stone from Gringotts, before it could be moved to Hogwarts, was a resounding failure. I still wonder that Quirrell was able to escape, not to mention keep his identity hidden from the goblins. Resigned to waiting, we departed to Hogwarts, something I both rejoiced at and despised. The next month was an exercise in tedium; preparing for the arrival of the students and their lesson plans for the year.

And then, there he was again.

Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, had come to Hogwarts.

Oh, the temptation! To command Quirrell jump to his feet and cast a Killing Curse, it was almost too much to resist. But I did. My power was weak, but my will remained strong. We sat there, at the staff table, and watched the Sorting. Potter, as everyone expected, was quickly dispatched to Gryffindor.

Well, perhaps not "quickly" so much as eventually. The Sorting Hat spent a surprising amount of time on the boy's head. I had expected it to reach a decision almost immediately, yet it actually took quite some time. Not enough that anyone would become suspicious or worried, but enough that I now wonder what was said. How did Potter manage to convince the Hat to send him to Gryffindor? Where did it really want to put him? It was only months later, just before year's end, that I asked myself these questions. Of course, by then, it was too late.

Dumbledore made his usual idiotic remarks. The man somehow thinks himself amusing, rather than senile. It is only his power as a wizard that keeps the common people from realizing just how far he has fallen from his once impressive heights. The welcoming feast was soon in full swing and I took the opportunity to observe Potter in a more comprehensive manner than our brief encounter in the Leaky Cauldron had allowed. It took a great deal of effort to augment my senses enough to see through the layers of cloth that separated us, hidden away as I was beneath Quirrell's turban. I was left exhausted, but felt that it would be worth the expenditure of energy to watch my foe.

What I saw was not a first-year student. He was not excited. He was not afraid. He was not awed. None of the emotions you would expect from a child beginning their studies at Hogwarts. No, there was only a cool detachment. I watched as he scrutinized and studied Hogwarts and the people within it. Potter was examining the people around him with all the dispassion of one free of the ability to care, to feel. They meant nothing to him. Nothing.

Oh, certainly his face and his body language spoke of his awe at the Great Hall's enchanted ceiling. His expressions were filled with amazement at the banquet before him, delight at the candles floating overhead and even the happiness of a lonely orphan finally having a chance to make friends. It was all a lie. A show, a mask, a façade. How nobody else saw it, I cannot imagine. Even Dumbledore seemed fooled. To me, though, it was as obvious as the noonday sun on a clear summer's day.

All that I had to do was look into his eyes. They call the eyes windows to the soul. Goblins, elves, trolls and centaurs... they are not that different from us. Look in their eyes and you will see the same thing you would in any human, be they pureblood or lowly Muggles. Hah, even the acromantulas, as far removed from humanity as you will find, have some measure of spirit in their eyes. They do have four pairs of them, after all.

Dementors, such foul yet useful creatures, have no eyes. They do not need them, for they possess no souls. That is why they affect us the way they do, and why they seek to consume the souls of their victims.

Gazing into the eyes of Harry Potter, I found myself lost and adrift, for that boy... that thing... has no soul. When he turned to match my gaze, as my idiot host prattled mindlessly with Snape, I realized that truth. The boy's eyes were blank and empty. He could outstare a mountain. And somehow, despite being hidden by Quirrell's turban, despite the dark magic muting my presence in the magical skein, Potter knew I was there. He looked at me.

And he smiled.

-oOo-

I cannot tell you how I survived an entire year trapped within the same castle as that monster. I myself do not know how I remained untouched. Quirrell's lessons with the boy were nerve-wracking. For the first time in my life I felt terrified, on a purely primal level. I was prey, cornered by a predator. Every hour, every minute and every second spent in Potter's presence was a trial to survive.

After the first week, I had the suspicion that he was playing with me.

By Halloween, I knew he was.

You have doubtless heard that tale, yes? Of the troll in the bathroom. Of how Harry Potter and Ron Weasley saved the life of the know-it-all mudblood; Hermione Granger. The one little incident that brought about the formation of the Golden Trio. The Gryffindor Three. From that moment on, they were inseparable. Yet no-one wonders if that is truly the case. If it truly was their encounter with the troll in the bathroom that caused them to grow so close.

It wasn't.

Really, a rampaging troll defeated by a simple Levitation Charm? Please. No, the truth behind that troll's fate is doubtless far more sinister than you could imagine. Even I do not know exactly what transpired.

What I do know is that when the professors finally arrived on the scene, McGonagall, Snape and myself, we found three children in perfect health. Potter, Weasley and Granger were standing calmly around the troll's body. They may as well have been having a picnic for all the excitement they were showing. I concentrated on Potter, as I knew he was somehow responsible. And yet, I noticed the other two regarding me with that same cool dispassion. Even as they crafted a wonderful web of lies, they watched me. And when they brushed by, ordered back to their common room by McGonagall, I felt them dip into my essence. It was that same, horrifying sensation as when Potter had shook hands with Quirrell in the Leaky Cauldron.

The lessons with the first-year Gryffindors were even more difficult from then on. I now found myself as prey, surrounded and being toyed with by not just one predator, but three.

I knew that I needed to grow stronger if I was to survive, but without the Stone that was impossible. I finally resorted to a stopgap measure, a temporary solution that was as dangerous as it was fortifying. Unicorn blood. It would force upon me a half-life, a cursed life, but with that came power. Power enough that I grew overconfident. Careless.

It was after Christmas. I had been out in the Forbidden Forest, once again hunting for sustenance. I was not overly surprised when my feeding was interrupted, but I had been expecting either Hagrid or those bestial centaurs. It was an unpleasant surprise that the interloper was Potter, accompanied by Lucius Malfoy's immature spawn, Draco.

Lucius's boy immediately screamed in terror and fled into the night. Potter remained. He stood perfectly still and watched. It was unnerving, the sheer lack of any emotion or feeling on his face. I made the decision to strike, to kill him before he could act. My unease grew as I approached him, for he remained in place and did nothing save stare at me with that same dispassion. For the first time I noticed just how bright those eyes of his were. Like a cat's eyes. Or some other wild beast, whose eyes seems to glow in the night's darkness.

"Voldemort," he said softly, though the words carried unnaturally in the night air.

Somehow, he not only knew that I was there, hiding, but he also knew who I was. I was torn. Torn between urging my host to attack, on the hope that he might actually manage to hurt the boy, or to retreat and hope that Potter did not follow. The choice was made for me when we were interrupted. I was saved by a centaur, if you would believe it.

I had Quirrell withdraw back to his quarters in Hogwarts, biding my time. The next few months were an excruciating trial of my will, my patience and my ability to remain hidden. Between Snape's incessant prying, Potter and his friends' stares and my general weakness of magic, I was sorely tested. Finally, relief came at the very end of the term, not a week before the start of the summer holidays. Dumbledore left the castle for the day, called to the Ministry by that bumbling Fudge. This was what I had been waiting for all year. It was my chance, possibly the only one I had left.

I took immediate advantage of it.

The traps and obstacles laid by Dumbledore were as nothing against my power and cunning. A mindless dog that fell asleep at the sound of music. A plant that shied away from fire. Flying keys. A giant chess set. A child's puzzle. These were the things Dumbledore sought to stop me with? Had I

not been so limited in my options, I would have been insulted by being so grossly underestimated. Mere children, first-year students, could have beaten their way through such a weak challenge.

It was only at the very end that I encountered a challenge. Naturally, it was Dumbledore's part in the Stone's protections. There was an enchanted mirror. The Mirror of Erised. A powerful magical object, true, but worthless to me. Somehow, the old wizard had managed to hide the Stone somewhere within the mirror. Quirrell, fool that he was, was left completely stumped by this final defence.

"Good evening, gentlemen."

My examination of the mirror was disrupted by an unexpected greeting. Quirrell turned and found himself confronted by the three monsters that had made the Defence lessons so uncomfortable for me. Potter with Weasley and Granger following behind him. I was puzzled by how they came to be there. Certainly, they should not have struggled overmuch against the bulk of the Stone's protections, but Snape's puzzle should have prevented all but one of them from reaching the end of the challenge. There had only been enough of the Flame Freezing potion for one person to breach the wall of black fire. Yet, there they were.

"Potter," snapped Quirrell, ignorant of the danger we had suddenly found ourselves in. I silently cursed his idiocy.

"Professor," the three chimed. It sounded playful, but I could hear the mockery in their voices.

"Did you come down here to try and stop me from getting the Stone?" Quirrell demanded.

"No. Don't worry; we won't insult the cliché of hero versus villain by ignoring your offers of power, glory and material wealth," said Potter as they approached. "So... please, begin tempting us."

He was wearing a bland expression on his face, but I could see the amusement in his eyes. He was silently laughing at me! But it was only later that I could rail against the insult. I had far more important things on my mind at that moment. The room where the Stone was hidden had only one entrance. One. And it was behind Potter and his two friends. There would be no escape, I realized, unless I went through them.

"Quickly, you fool, kill him! Kill them all!"

Quirrell responded remarkably well and snapped his wand up. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Potter did not even blink. He stood there, watching, waiting, as the Killing Curse struck him just to the right of the heart. The force of the impact knocked him off his feet and left him in a crumpled heap several metres back from where he had been standing. For a moment, I dared to hope. His "friends", Weasley and Granger, looked back at his fallen body and then turned their attention back to me.

"That was very impolite of you," said Granger, actually daring to admonish me.

"Yes, you're supposed to try and recruit us first, then torture us and *then* kill us. Not the other way round," said Weasley.

Still following my earlier command, Quirrell turned his wand on them. First the boy, then the girl. "*Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!*"

Again, both curses flew straight and true. Neither Weasley nor Granger reacted in the slightest. No attempt, at all, to throw themselves out of the way. The curses struck unimpeded and the pair was thrown back, much as Potter had been.

Quirrell paused to gather his breath. The weakling had strained himself by casting such a powerful curse three times in quick succession. With a sense of elation, at having finally vanquished the monster that had defeated me, I had the fool turn his attention back to the mirror. My deliberations on Dumbledore's trickery had no chance to resume, as I was almost immediately interrupted again.

"Are you done posturing yet?"

Quirrell spun around in terror, almost tripping over his own feet. The rapid motion left me feeling dizzy, but I was still aware of what was happening. Potter was standing before me, once more on his feet, and showing no sign of having taken a Killing Curse to the chest. His eyes were glowing brilliantly in the low light. It was a sight the remains forever etched into my memory. My disbelief shaded into horror when I noticed that Weasley and Granger were already beginning to stir and would soon be picking themselves off the floor.

"Impossible," muttered Quirrell, breaking the moment.

Potter smiled. It was a truly hideous sight. "Please. As if a little magic could hurt us."

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Again Quirrell cast the Killing Curse. Again, Potter did nothing to evade it. Again, it struck him in the chest. This time, however, he was not blown off his feet. Instead, he was rocked back, as if struck by a fist. He staggered and fell to one knee, using a hand to prop himself up. He gave what was either a grunt of pain or amusement, I could not tell. Within a matter of seconds, he had righted himself and was standing calmly in front of me once more.

I ordered Quirrell to be silent and then unwrap his turban. If I was to fight, I wanted to do it face to face. The snivelling coward was barely able to do as I had commanded, but before long I was staring into Potter's eyes. I also saw that his companions, standing just behind him, were also in possession of those inhuman green eyes. It was a sign, obviously, of their corruption.

"Who *are* you?" I demanded of him.

Harry Potter, of course," he replied with the ghost of a smile. "You already know that."

"Do not play games with me, boy!" I snarled. "Tell me who you are!"

"That's the wrong question you're asking," Potter answered. "You shouldn't be asking *who* we are, you should be asking; *what* we are."

"We?" I asked, suddenly wondering at his repeated use of the plural.

"We," confirmed Potter with a nod. "Regardless of how many bodies we use, there is always only one of us."

It was one of those tantalizing replies that I would normally expect from Dumbledore. An answer that told me nothing, yet hinted at everything.

Realizing that I was not going to receive an answer to my demands, or at least not a coherent answer, I made a play to ensnare the little monster's allegiance. I had no illusions that Potter would be a loyal servant, and certainly never a trustworthy ally, but I knew that I could not afford to have him as an enemy. So long as he was not actively trying to kill me, I would have the time to search out a way to destroy him. That is the Slytherin way; to make allies and then betray them once the opportune moment arrives.

"There is no reason for you to interfere in this, Potter," I told him. "We do not have to be enemies."

"An offer you should have made *before* ordering Quirrell to kill us," he retorted.

"I do not make deals with weaklings. That you survived the Killing Curse merely proves your worth as an ally."

"Sound logic. A rare thing to see in a wizard," commented Granger.

"Then do you accept, Harry?" I asked, using his name in an attempt to put him at ease.

"We do not see any benefit in doing so," he replied.

"The power, boy! Think of the power you will gain! Dumbledore would have you believe that it is a matter of good and evil, but it is not. Good and evil are nothing but an abstracted idea - a delusion of human morality. Power is *real*. Power is *everything!*"

"And yet you have none."

The worse thing about his words was the truth of them. I was a mere shadow of my former glory; barely strong enough to speak out loud to my foes, rather than whisper in Quirrell's ear. Even if I had been able to use the Philosopher's Stone to regain a body, it would have been months if not years before my power would be restored in full.

"Damn you, Potter," I cursed him, realizing that there would be no truce between us. I should not have ever thought otherwise. Predators, after all, do not make friends with their prey.

Potter gave no reaction, not that I expected one. My concentration was wholly focused on the boy, which proved to be a mistake. Granger and Weasley darted forward on some unseen signal, catching me entirely by surprise. I tried to warn Quirrell, but there simply wasn't enough time. They latched onto his arms before he could react. What they did to him I cannot say, but his cries of sheer agony were beyond anything that even the Cruciatus Curse could manage. Pain lanced through me, a sympathetic reaction to what my host's body was feeling.

"Your magic is... potent," commented Potter, watching as Quirrell crumbled to ashes.

Fearing for my life, my magic, my soul, I fled once more into the night.

-oOo-

I do not fully know how events transpired at Hogwarts, following my second exile, but I know enough. Granger left to find Dumbledore, ostensibly to inform him of my attempt to gain the Stone. Weasley returned to the chamber housing McGonagall's chess set and took the role of the martyr that sacrificed himself to allow his friends to continue. And Potter... Potter remained with the Stone, ignoring it entirely, while pretending to have exhausted himself while fighting Quirrell.

Dumbledore, the naïve old fool, was more than willing to explain away Quirrell's death as a side-effect of some imaginary protection against evil, left behind by Lily Potter in the defence of her child. How the man has survived so long is a mystery I don't think I will ever comprehend. In the end, it matters not. Quirrell and I were driven away, the Stone was saved (and then destroyed) and Potter and his two friends were lauded as heroes.

And thus the tale of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone passed into legend.

Yet, that was only the beginning. The very next year, even as far away as Albania, I heard whisperings of the Chamber of Secrets being opened. There was speculation that Potter was behind it. Bah, I sometimes think that the common wizard would believe anything told to him, so long as it wasn't the truth. Honestly, Potter, the Heir of Slytherin? If you believe anything, believe that he is much more dangerous than that.

Indeed, it was my own machinations that were the cause of the entire incident. Lucius had apparently grown impatient waiting for my return and sought to facilitate matters himself. He was fool enough to release my diary into the hands of the Weasley girl, using her to act as my avatar for a time. One has to wonder how Potter and his minions dealt with my memory incarnate, not to mention Slytherin's basilisk. I imagine that the truth of the matter is far different than any of the stories and rumours that are told.

I suspect that the Weasley girl fell to him sometime after that. More than likely before they even left the Chamber. That's how he works, I'm sure. He

waits, with that human patience, and strikes only when certain that he can get away with it. Without a risk of witnesses. Without the risk of accusations. There is no proof, but I suspect that Gilderoy Lockhart is not nearly as Obliviated as people would believe him to be. No, that is merely a ploy, a clever one, to grant him unlimited access to St. Mungo's, its staff and patients. As with Hogwarts, they will be consumed from within, though the process will likely take years.

And then, to even my surprise, Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban.

Mostly it was a surprise due to the fact that the newspapers were making a grand production out of the fact that Black was one of my most faithful servants. Truth be told, the man was utterly insufferable and refused my generous offers at every turn. Unlike his treacherous little brother, Sirius Black never so much as deigned to consider joining my ranks. The idea that he was a loyal servant was absurd in the extreme.

Surprised? Don't be. I have long known that the general public are hopeless followers. Sheep to be directed wherever the shepherd cares to move them. In this case, it was your very own Daily Prophet that nudged them along. I was somewhat surprised when the ignorant masses came to the remarkably accurate conclusion that Black had escaped on a mission of revenge. I was not, however, surprised that they thought he would be going after Potter - the completely wrong person.

News was difficult to come by, reduced as I was, but I was resourceful enough to keep myself somewhat informed. I predicted, days in advance, that Fudge would assign the dementors to chase after Black. I also knew that he would, in his stupidity, insist that the beasts stand guard at Hogwarts. What they would make of the Potter boy, I could not guess, but I hardly expected them to attack him. In hindsight, I suppose it was understandable. Like predators trying to prevent another from intruding into their hunting grounds.

Events throughout the rest of the year were difficult for me to divine. I could not, after all, go down to the local pub and listen to the gossip. Still, I had some small idea of what transpired at Hogwarts. Or at least, what seemed to happen there. As with the proceedings of the previous year, I am certain there is far more to the story than what is thought to be common knowledge.

The only thing I do know for certain, is that Black finally managed to catch up to his old friend, the betrayer; Peter Pettigrew. His quest for revenge was halted at the eleventh hour, however, by Potter and his creatures. The frustration the poor man must have felt - to be so close to finally claiming retribution, only to have it snatched away by the very boy he sought to protect. Potter's cruelty is subtle beyond all measure.

What happened next, I can only guess. Rumours only go so far, especially when the sequence of events is so tangled and confused. Hagrid's hippogriff escaped Macnair's axe. Pettigrew disappeared into the night. Snape claimed to have captured Black. Potter claimed that Black was innocent. And the entire compliment of dementors fled from Hogwarts in terror - terror brought about by their final encounter with that green-eyed monster. At the end of it all, the status quo did not seem to have changed to any great degree. A relief to Fudge, I am sure.

Then, not a month later, who should stumble upon me but Pettigrew himself. Over a dozen years I had been left alone, surviving through naught save my own skill and knowledge. No-one cared to seek me out. No-one dared to think to help me. Yet, only a scarce few weeks after his secret was revealed, Wormtail actually managed to track me down. Frankly, he was the very last person I would have imagined capable of such a feat.

At first I could not begin to imagine why Potter allowed his parents' betrayer to escape. It seemed... out of character.

But I was too excited by such an apparent windfall of luck that I did not bother wondering too deeply as to Potter's unexpected benevolence. A mistake on my part, for the reasoning behind Pettigrew's escape is perfectly obvious in hindsight. In any case, the truth would soon be revealed.

My plans to return were slow and stunted things to begin with. Pettigrew was a pair of helping hands, yes, but hardly the most competent hands to be found. Still, he did enough. A temporary body, little more than a twisted combination of dark magic and snake venom. It was enough for me assume physical form once more, however limited it might have been.

I had little hope for a speedy resolution to my problems, but soon encountered yet another fortunate happenstance. A second follower returned to me, this one not only more loyal, but much more useful. Not only did he bring his services, but information. Something that in many ways is much more valuable. More than anything, he brought with him the news of something that had not been seen in centuries. Yes, the Triwizard Tournament. It was perfect.

The plan to have Barty Crouch Junior infiltrate Hogwarts, disguised as Alastor Moody, was a calculated risk, but one that I was forced to take. There was an opportunity on the horizon and I could not afford to miss it through hesitation. There were close calls, yes, but everything proceeded almost exactly as I had planned. That Halloween, thirteen years after my defeat, I received word that the path to my ultimate return had begun. Harry Potter had been entered into the tournament as its fourth champion.

My main source of information was, ironically, the Daily Prophet. Pettigrew would faithfully read each and every article that reported on happenings at Hogwarts. The articles about the tournament itself, the first and second tasks, were the most useful, as they offered insight into Potter's reactions and strategies. Your own exposes, Rita, were little more than schoolgirl gossip. They always have been. Utterly useless for the most part, but containing just barely enough truth beneath the multitude of lies to be worthy of my attention.

He was clever. Potter possesses terrifying cunning, enough to beggar most Slytherins. Cunning enough to wind his way into the Lion's den, rather than the Snake's pit. None have ever suspected that he could pretend so well, could act so convincingly. You cannot comprehend the genius of hiding his power through the manic cover of flying round a dragon. He could, much more easily, have simply killed the beast, I am certain. But no, you, like the rest, never bother to gaze beneath the surface, to see what is truly happening before your eyes.

Barty did his utmost to help Potter along, playing the part of the grizzled old Mad-Eye. Potter was more than likely highly amused by this supposed help, provided that creature can even feel amusement. In the end, I don't suppose it matters. With or without Barty's help, Potter survived the tasks placed before him and finally found himself standing on the cusp of victory. And thus, he and one other fell into my clutches.

I ordered Pettigrew to kill the spare. The Diggory boy. I had no use for him and he would likely only get in the way. Potter, unsurprisingly, did nothing

to prevent the Killing Curse from striking its target. I do sometimes wonder though, why he targeted the other boy with him. I suspect there was some sinister motive behind his seemingly generous act of "sharing" his victory. Not that it matters any more.

With Diggory no longer an issue, we turned to the true reason for which we had gone to so much trouble.

"Hello, Lord Voldemort," he greeted, as mockingly calm as always. He ignored Pettigrew entirely.

"You fool, Wormtail! Bind him - quickly!" I commanded, ignoring the greeting.

To my surprise, the man not only did as I instructed, but actually managed to succeed. Potter was bundled up in thick magical bindings and tied up against the nearest convenient headstone. From ankle to shoulders, he was restrained. I had some degree of hope that this would be enough. Of course, he offered nothing in the way of resistance. That should have alerted me to the fact that something was wrong. But I was too excited, too eager to get things done. My salvation was at hand and I was not about to delay it through too much worry.

It was an ancient Egyptian ritual, originally used by the arch mage Osiris. Bone of the father. Flesh of the servant. Blood of the enemy. Of course, it was near infinitely more complicated than that, but those were the essential ingredients. Without them, nothing could be done.

The bone and flesh were easy to procure. My father is long dead, I killed him myself, thus it was not difficult to plunder his grave. Pettigrew, despite his hopeless cowardice, was able to supply the meat - though admittedly this was more out of fear than loyalty. Still, I do wonder how much of that fearfulness was an act.

The blood, however, the blood was the most difficult element to acquire. Potter, I knew, would not be easy to capture. And even then, I doubted the wisdom of using him for the ritual. I was at first leery of taking blood from such a creature. Who knew what it might do to me? But it was a risk I was willing to take. I had hopes that I would gain some measure of defence against his powers.

Oh, what a fool I was. To think that mere blood had anything to do with his magic. In the end it made no difference.

With Potter safely secured, Pettigrew began the final stage of the ritual. I was immersed in the bubbling cauldron, the potion therein sustaining me. Bone, flesh and blood followed me and those primordial magics began to stir. It was a curious sensation, unlike anything I had ever before experienced. I could feel it all. First, the bones of my skeleton forming one by one. This was followed by the various organs. Then the muscles and meat and then, finally, my skin.

At last, I had returned.

-oOo-

Using Pettigrew's Dark Mark, I summoned my Death Eaters. I would need them all, I knew, to aid in Potter's destruction. Ignoring Pettigrew's whimpers and entreaties for succour, I looked to the creature that was bound to the nearby headstone and found that it was watching placidly. There was not the barest hint of concern, worry or fear in its eyes.

"Nothing to say, Potter?" I asked.

"Not yet," he calmly replied.

"Ha! Mock me with your stolid façade if you like, boy, but your end will soon be at hand!"

Potter refused to react to my threat, seemingly content to remain bound in place and wait. I left him to it. I did not see the harm, as he was obviously willing to sit back and allow me to do as I pleased. That should have been my first warning.

Then, in ones and twos, they began to arrive.

My inner circle. My most trusted, most dedicated followers. Cowards all of them. More concerned with their freedom and other petty luxuries, than with the noble cause I had guided them along. Their numbers had shrunk over the years since my exile. Some had been lost to death. Others to prison. And a few, very few, to cowardice and treachery. I resolved to deal with them all. Rewards for the loyal. Punishment for the rest.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," I said quietly, once they had all assembled.

There was a sense of disquiet, of unease amongst them as they stood waiting for me to continue. Perhaps they knew how displeased I was in their abandonment of me thirteen years before.

"Yes, I have returned," I said, forgoing the usual theatrics in favour of getting straight to the point. I knew, somehow, that there was not enough time for anything else. "Finally, now, on the cusp of our world's darkest hour; I have returned as its saviour."

This caused a stir, though a subdued one. I was, I am, many things, but I have never been called a saviour. I could see them thinking, even through the anonymity of their Death Eater masks, I could see them wondering as to the meaning of my words. Most, I suspect, were of the belief that I was referring to our culture, that fragile monument to our history that the Muggles and their bastard mudblood offspring continually threaten.

"A beast has arisen - growing out of the ashes of my defeat."

I may not have been giving in to unnecessary dramatics, but a good oration was always needed when dealing with the pampered purebloods that so often flock to my cause. It would not do for Lord Voldemort, champion of magical purity, to merely raise a sword in the air and expect the huzzahs to sound. No, unfortunately things are not quite that simple.

This beast, this monster of magic, is known to all of you. You have plastered fake smiles upon your faces and cheered with the rabble for his victory over me, hoping to spare yourselves a visit to Azkaban. Some of you," I glanced to where Lucius Malfoy stood, "Some of you have even sent your own children to school with this... creature that dares walk among us in human form."

By now some of the smarter ones were beginning to understand who it was that I was referring to. Their heads moved minutely as they subtly tried to shift their gazes upon the tied up form of my nemesis.

I turned to regard the boy - the thing - that had brought about so much strife. As before, Potter remained serenely where he was bound. He gave no indication of struggling to free himself, nor any sign of even wanting to. He seemed perfectly content to continue watching the prelude to his demise. It was strangely disconcerting in its own way; how he seemed so impossibly calm. A fool might think that he was blissfully ignorant of the danger that surrounded him, yet, as I looked upon him... I saw it.

Potter's head was turned to face me. He sat there, bound to my father's tombstone, waiting patiently. There was something about his expression, so composed and unruffled, that seemed to hint that he was doing more than just wait for something to happen. There was... expectation. The expectation that his wait would soon be over.

In that moment, as I stared at him, I suddenly knew what I was looking at. Potter was waiting, as a hunter waits, waiting for his prey to come to him. The prey that he knew was coming, was already here, and was even now --unwittingly-- drawing closer to its doom. And Potter was patiently waiting until it was time. He would wait for as long as he needed to. He would wait until the moment to strike had arrived. But, even as he remained perfectly still, utterly motionless, he was just as perfectly and utterly ready.

And I knew then that I was wrong.

He was no mere boy, which I already knew, but he was also no mere monster.

He was a predator.

And we were his prey.

Not a muscle in his face moved, but I could swear that he was smiling. Trying to ignore the palpable sense of menace that now filled the air; I began to march round the rim of my circle of followers. At the time I thought I was merely being in dynamic motion, so as to properly capture their attention. I know now that it was an unconscious attempt to put as much space between myself and Potter as possible.

"I present to you all Harry Potter," I declared.

The Death Eaters turned their attention back to the boy in question.

"He is the greatest threat the world of magic has ever known."

"Milord?" questioned Lucius Malfoy uncertainly. He had the dubious honour of being one of the Death Eaters standing closest to where Potter was trussed up.

"Do not question me - there can be no doubt!" I asserted. I stalked across the circle, until I was standing directly opposite from Potter. I foolishly kept my back to him in some misguided show of contempt. Or perhaps it was that I was afraid. Afraid to look into those thrice-damned eyes. "While you have been fooled by his unassuming nature, let me assure you that there is far more to Mr. Potter than first meets the eye. Is that not right, Harry?"

"You are not entirely wrong."

Once again, all eyes (save my own) turned to Potter. Unfortunately, my forceful declarations had distracted my Death Eaters away from Potter by focusing their gazes upon myself. Perhaps my last mistake, as that provided the one moment he had been looking for. Startled gasps were my first clue that something had happened. Even as I began to turn, I heard the confirmation that the situation had just been flung completely out of my control.

"Master! He's broken loose! Potter's escaping!" cried Lucius, leaping forward to intercept the now unbound and standing boy.

There was no time to warn him.

Potter moved directly at him, startling him slightly. It was enough. With a sweep of his hand as he approached, he knocked Lucius's Death Eater mask away and then grabbed him by the face. I must reluctantly confess to being overwhelmed by my curiosity too see what would happen next. I suspect though, that even if I had acted it would have made no difference. Lucius collapsed to the ground, his screams so shrill and full of agony that you might think he was being Cruciated. Those screams were enough to freeze the blood of his comrades, making them hesitant to move to assist. Then, mercifully, Lucius's writhing figure went still and silent.

"How remarkably observant of you, Lucius," commented Potter in the sudden quiet, looking down at his kill.

This finally spurred the others on. I remained silent and stood back to watch for an opening to exploit. I did not like the idea of meeting that - that thing head on. Best to let my followers draw its attention and take advantage of its distraction.

"Spread out! Get around him if you can!" yelled Yaxley.

"Ah, yes," observed Potter, standing in place and watching as my servants moved to encompass him. "A very good plan, indeed."

"Don't let him escape!" commanded Macnair.

It was Goyle, never the brightest, who made the first move. “*Crucio!*”

Potter remained perfectly still, just as he had during our encounter over the Philosopher’s Stone. Just as he had before, he accepted the onrushing curse without flinching or trying to shield or dodge. I was hardly surprised that the crackling red of the spell failed to produce any reaction, just as Quirrell’s Killing Curses had failed to do the same. I admit I was worriedly hoping that my own greater power would be enough to accomplish what those weak fools had not been able to manage.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” said Potter once Goyle stopped the curse to stare at the boy in shock, awe and fear.

Then to the horror of my followers, and to my own alarm, Lucius Malfoy inexplicably rose to his feet alongside the cursed Boy-Who-Lived. He smirked in that manner which he was famous for and gazed across at his former colleague, his eyes now glowing the same smouldering green as Potter’s.

He took a moment to straighten his robes before finishing Potter’s childish little quip, disturbingly using the same voice as the boy.

“We’ve already eaten.”

That moment in time seemed to freeze, hanging suspended as everyone waited to see what would happen next. Potter and Lucius gazed impassively upon my Death Eaters. My Death Eaters stared nervously back at Potter and Lucius. I remained in place, apart from the conflict, and watched and waited.

The endless calm and silence was promptly annihilated when Crabbe began to shriek in unimaginable pain. All eyes turned to him, revealing Potter’s forgotten ace-in-the-hole. Peter Pettigrew. Wormtail. He was obviously just as much Potter’s creature as Weasley, Granger and now Lucius. There could be no doubt; his escape from Black and Lupin; his tracking me down and aiding me in reclaiming my body; it had all been done and accomplished at Potter’s command. This masterfully played deception was now discarded; as the traitor’s eyes now matched those of his master.

With everyone’s attention, even my own, turned to Pettigrew and the dying Crabbe, Lucius darted forth. He had already reached Macnair before we realized that he was in motion. The burly executioner desperately tried to fend the creature off, but Lucius was inhumanly tenacious. The others found their attention split; some trying to aid Macnair in fighting Lucius and the rest attacking the obviously weaker Pettigrew, who was clearly in the process of bleeding to death.

Potter continued as he had done the whole while; remained perfectly still and staring across at me. His plan, so intricate and masterfully crafted, suddenly coalesced and became perfectly clear in my mind’s eye. He had arranged all this for one single purpose.

To suborn my Death Eaters into his own service.

“Concentrate of Lucius and the others!” I commanded, finally taking action. “I will deal with Potter!”

“You’ll deal with us?” repeated Potter, even as my servants burst into action around him. “Oh, that’s nice. We were almost afraid you had forgotten us.”

“I will not let myself lose to some inhuman abomination!” I declared venomously.

Potter actually had the gall to laugh. “You humans are so silly! We thought you of all creatures, Voldemort, would understand. What’s important is the *magic*. Blood... blood is nothing - it’s just tissue. Magic... magic is *everything*. There is no good. There is no evil. There is no power. There is only magic.”

My control over my emotions slipped for the barest of instants as I jabbed my wand angrily at him.

“*Imperio!*”

Potter accepted the curse in much the same manner in which he had allowed all the other spells and curses to strike him. He actually held his arms out, as if welcoming it, and closed his eyes as if in rapture. The moment it connected I tried to assert my will, my dominance over him but there was no reaction at all to the Unforgivable placed upon him.

Then, to my alarm, I felt something. Something inhuman, something alien was brushing lightly against my Occlumency shields. I did not hesitate and ended the curse immediately, before whatever it was could concentrate its efforts against me.

“Ah, so you are not completely blind to the currents,” said Potter, opening his eyes to stare at me. His lips quirked in an almost playful smirk. “This is good. Had you left it but a few seconds longer... well, where would the fun be in that?”

This revelation, not only that Potter was immune to two of the Unforgivables, but that he could actually use the magic of the Imperious Curse to strike back at his foes... I freely admit that I began to fear for my survival. Even as I continued to face-off against Potter, his minions were battling my Death Eaters. And I did not need to watch closely to know that it was my people who were losing. The converted Malfoy and Pettigrew were striking down their former allies with alacrity. Those that fell would soon rise up again, their eyes now glowing that same unnaturally bright green.

I decided to try one last bit of magic against my foe, hoping that perhaps this time it would be different.

“*Crucio!*”

Potter allowed the curse to strike him with the same calm detachment that he always displayed. Throughout the graveyard, my surviving followers

paused to look, their defensive actions halted by what they saw.

"Foolish little man," said Potter without even a hitch of his breath. "How can you hope to hurt us with magic? We *are* magic."

Then, inexplicably, he turned and began to walk away - as if he were pausing our struggle to take a tea break!

Naturally, I took advantage of this.

"*Sectumsemptra!*"

This brutal curse, created by a young Severus Snape, would have injured anyone that did not shield from it in time. Even Dumbledore would not date to ignore it should it ever have been flung at him. Potter continued to depart, paying the spell no heed at all, even as it cut and tore at his clothing.

I was about to try something else when he paused. I readied myself, trying to anticipate whatever he might do in retaliation.

"Ah," he said, sounding smugly satisfied, "All done."

He resumed walking, leaving me to puzzle over his words. I am not a moron, but I must confess that it took several seconds before the meaning behind his words reached me. Suddenly, I noticed that the graveyard was now silent. Deathly silent, where before it had been awash with the yells and screams and cries of my followers.

I turned my attention away from Potter and took in my surroundings.

To my disquiet, I found myself surrounded. My faithful servants subverted and changed into the very thing they had been fighting only minutes before. Once again they stood arrayed in a loose circle around me. They had dispensed with their masks, allowing me to see their faces and the evidence of their turning.

Those alien eyes, such an unnatural shade of green, seemed to burn like lanterns in the twilight.

One of them, who had once been Walden Macnair, began to approach me. I blasted it with a combined Banishing and Slicing Curse strong enough to reduce a dragon to strips of meat. It was sent flying through the air and crashed through several gravestones before coming to a halt. It rose unsteadily to its feet, nothing to show of my attack, save its damaged robes.

My attention was drawn by movement to one side. Harry Potter, the thing responsible for this, was now standing where he had first appeared. He crouched down next to the body of the other boy; Diggory. He placed one hand on the boy's chest and regarded me with that same infinite and inhuman patience.

"Nowhere to run, Voldemort," he said to me. "Nowhere to hide."

I immediately fired off another Killing Curse, hoping that it might succeed where all the others had failed. The curse, however, again splashed against the boy's chest to no effect. I might as well have used a Tickling Charm. Potter replied with a look that was at once bland, yet also mocking. Like an adult, I suppose, faced with a child that had just done something incredibly stupid.

He reached out and the Triwizard Cup, the portkey that had delivered him to me, leaped into his hand. Wandless magic or something else? There was a flash of light, a rush of wind and then he was gone. Potter and Diggory's body had been returned to Hogwarts. Doubtless the monster already had an appropriate story prepared. All that remained in the graveyard was myself and my former comrades, whose green eyes followed my every movement.

"And now, Lord Voldemort," said the thing in Lucius' body, "Let us conclude our business here tonight."

-oOo-

Rita tried not to stare. Oh, she tried, but it was an impossible task. Clearly the dark lord was completely and incurably insane. Utterly bonkers. Harry Potter, some unstoppable magic eating monster? Slowly taking over the wizarding world without anyone being the wiser? Please, only a fool would believe this to be anything more than the ranting of a delusional mind. But, either way, it was one hell of a story.

Despite herself, Rita could not help but be enthralled by the Dark Lord's tale. His account thus far, a story that filled in a great many blanks, was intriguing to say the least. She was literally sitting on the edge of her seat, eager to hear more. Oh, if only she had been allowed to keep her Quick-Quotes-Quill. Or even an ordinary Dicta-Quill. For the first time since Lord Voldemort had begun his narration, she spoke up.

"So, what happened next?" she asked. Immediately wincing at the realization that this might sound a tad impertinent, never a good thing when one was dealing with massively power deranged madmen. She tried to moderate by adding, "If you don't mind my asking, that is."

"*You're* the investigative reporter, Rita," Voldemort observed, continuing his observation of the crackling fire, "Why don't you tell me?"

Still somewhat surprised by how congenial the Dark Lord was being, Rita mulled over the story she had heard. There were gaps here and there, quite a few. Lots of conjecture and speculation. Very little in the way of cold, hard facts. In some ways it was exactly the kind of story she liked best, as it allowed her a great deal of latitude to embellish.

Leaning back in her plush chair she said, "Well, obviously you won... or escaped."

"And how do you come to that conclusion, Rita?" asked Voldemort.

"Because you're here and I'm here," explained Rita. "If you hadn't, then why bother calling for me? I somehow doubt that a magic eating monster that can take over people just by touching them would want me to reveal its existence to the rest of the world."

"Why not? It's not as if they'd be able to do anything to stop us."

Rita's heart skipped a beat. A chill ran down her spine as she fixed her eyes on the Dark Lord's still figure, the fireplace blazing in front of him. She had long since decided that his tale was but a work of fiction; the result of a tainted and broken mind. Yet now, she began to doubt that.

"W-what d'you mean?" she managed to ask.

There was a long moment of silence. Then, finally and for the first time since her entry into the room, Voldemort turned away from the fire and allowed her to see his face. It was much as she had expected. Bald, without eyebrows or any other facial hair. A stunted nose that was little more than two slit nostrils. A broad, thin and almost lipless mouth.

And a pair of eyes that glowed a brilliant...lambent... green.

Fin.