

Harry Potter and The Sacred Text 1.16- Through the Trapdoor: Destiny

Casper- **'In years to come, Harry would never quite remember how he had managed to get through his exams when he half expected Voldemort to come bursting through the door at any moment. Yet the days crept by, and there could be no doubt that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door...'**

Casper- I'm Casper ter Kuile

Vanessa- And I'm Vanessa Zoltan

Casper- After I graduated from college, I moved to London and started working in the nonprofit sector—much of which I loved, but after a while I got the sense that I wasn't quite doing what I should be doing, and I started to think about graduate school. And there was for some reason a pull in me to look at America, to come to the U.S. I had traveled there a couple of times before, and I'd felt at home, and even though this was a big stretch and not many of my friends were making these kind of decisions, it felt like the right move in a way that I couldn't quite explain. And so when I did finally move here, I felt, you know, a little bit like this was kind of my decision and that I had reached here because of the choices that I'd made.

But as I started to think more about it, I remembered that my parents had lived in the U.S. for three years. And then I learned that both sets of my grandparents had lived here too. My paternal grandfather lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as a child, and my maternal grandparents both lived and studied in Chicago for a number of years, and even my uncle was born there. And so suddenly this new place that I had thought of as so foreign actually started to feel much more familiar, because I had all of these family connections to America. And so I suddenly started to rethink how I'd ended up in the U.S., and I wondered, you know, how much of the choice of me moving here was really about my choice and how much of it was really predestined.

And I think in this chapter, where Harry is engaging in this final adventure of going through the trapdoor to solve the mystery of the Philosopher's Stone, there's that same question of how much did we always know that he would do this? How much did *he* know that there was a destiny about him which would make him make this kind of choice? And how much is there a choicefulness or a destiny around what Hermione and Ron do in choosing to come with him? So I'm looking forward to exploring that theme of destiny in today's chapter.

Vanessa- I love that way of thinking about destiny, that it's even multigenerational, and it just comes out in all these complicated ways and we don't know how different aspects of ourselves and our histories and our family histories are manifesting in how we live out our destiny. And I think your story shows that beautifully.

Before we really get into our conversations about destiny, I think I'm destined to beat you in the thirty-second recap, especially because it's your turn to go first. So, are you ready to go?

Casper- Bring it on.

Vanessa- On your mark, get set, GO!

(tick-tocking sound begins)

Casper- Harry, Ron and Hermione are stressing about exam results. They've finished their exams and it seems like they have a week left of pure joy. But Harry has these horrible nightmares and is in real pain because of his scar. Um, and they learn that Dumbledore is away. They're told they're not allowed to hang around the third-floor corridor where Fluffy is, and so they go, decide to go through the trapdoor. They Stun Neville, they use the cloak, underneath they go. There's plants growing—they have to burn it. Then there's keys flying all over the place, they have to catch it and open up the door, then, then OH MY GOD THERE'S SO MUCH IN THIS CHAPTER.

(Buzzer sounds—118 words in 30 seconds!)

Vanessa- I thought you hit a lot of key points. It's still my destiny to beat you, but actually, your destiny is to make it—

Casper- Is to make you succeed, Vanessa.

Vanessa- No!

Casper- That's why this works!

Vanessa- Are you ready to time me?

Casper- Yes. Alright. Three, two, one, go!

Vanessa- Harry realizes that Hagrid was not given the dragon egg by accident and that he probably revealed how to get past all of the different stages to get the Sorcerer's Stone. So he, Ron and Hermione, they have to Stun Neville in order to go on their little adventure, and then Ron, Hermione and Harry all do different things, and their skills really come out in trying to get to the Sorcerer's Stone. Ron gets sort of sacrificed and Hermione also gets a little bit sacrificed but in a complicated way, and then Harry finds the Sorcerer's Stone and he opens the door!

(Buzzer sounds—103 words in 30 seconds!)

Casper- Close. Yeah, that was pretty good. I feel like we miss the excitement of the chess game and the potions and the logic skills, but *(sigh)* you know.

Vanessa- It's your destiny to try to sneak things in in a Slytherin way.

Casper- Vanessa, we both mentioned Neville in our recap, which is unusual, because he only has a very small amount of page time, as it were. Why did you want to pick out Neville in this theme of destiny?

Vanessa- Neville has this great moment in this chapter where he stands up to the trio. And what's interesting to him standing up, to me, is that they've created this monster, right? Harry and Ron and Hermione have been super supportive of Neville; I think that they have really contributed to Neville's confidence, and then Neville is using that confidence against them. And we're going to see Neville's destiny is to really be a leader and to be this great force of standing up to things that he thinks is wrong. But what's interesting is that it starts in this friendship, you know, his friendship with Harry and with Ron and with Hermione.

Casper- That's so interesting, 'cause I read it not necessarily opposite but that there was a sort of missed opportunity. Because the first challenge that they have to overcome is this plant, right, that wrangles them as they land on it, as they jump through the trapdoor. And Herbology is Neville's favorite subject and his real gift. And it made me think, 'Well, what would have happened if Neville was with them?' He would have known immediately that this is Devil's Snare, that you shouldn't wriggle, that you shouldn't fight it, how you can overcome it. Because Hermione only—well, she remembers how to get rid of it, but she doesn't remember to use her wand to light a fire. And if Neville had been there—it just seemed to me like an illustration of a destiny that wasn't fulfilled. You know, instead of talking about a trio, we could've been talking about a quartet, and that Neville would have been an equal part of the team. So it just questions for me this idea of destiny, that maybe we have many destinies, but we can only fulfill one.

Vanessa- Or, what that made me think of, is that for this very logistical reason of a fourth person wouldn't fit under the invisibility cloak, that often our destinies are thwarted for, like, really silly reasons, right, and reasons that we often don't even understand get in our way. And I don't think—I agree with you, that there could have been an invitational moment here that Harry, Ron, and Hermione just missed. There's certainly a missed opportunity of clueing him in as to what's going on, right? I understand that they have to move quickly, but why not create another ally? He could be on the lookout, a lot of things. But I love your point about Herbology, I think that that makes that point very explicit.

There's the obvious, big thing that I feel like we have to talk about in terms of destiny, which is that these series of challenges that they have to go through are really set up for the trio to succeed at and have had some sort of destined component, right? So Hagrid teaches the kids how to get past Fluffy, and if they weren't friends with Hagrid, they would never have known that. So their love of Hagrid and their loyalty to Hagrid is what is allowing them to reach their destiny of getting the Sorcerer's Stone, protecting the stone. And then we really, as you said, feel Neville's absence in the Devil's Snare challenge. And then the next one is the keys, and, you know, obviously Harry being a great Seeker is really helpful in that moment. And then Ron with the chess, and we know that he's good at chess, and then we know that Hermione is clever, and so it seems like with the right people, the people who you love around you, you're destined to solve your problems, you're destined to be able to conquer things.

Casper- YES. And I think there's one thing which we can't omit, which I'd totally forgotten about until we reread this chapter again, is that when Harry and Hermione are advancing to that potions challenge, they walk past a dead or a knocked-out troll, which the person who's already

gone on ahead has completed that challenge, so they don't have to redo it. This is such a strong reminder of the incredibly frightening episode with the troll earlier on in the book during Halloween, and I don't quite know what to think about the fact that the troll is already defeated. Is that sort of reward for the fact that they've already overcome this challenge earlier in the year? What do you think that means?

Vanessa- Well, I don't think they would be able to beat the troll without Ron, but I also like the idea that they are karmically being taken care of by their past selves, which is something that we see with the Time Turner later, that by doing certain things ahead of time, you can just take care of yourself later. So yeah, there is an echo of that, that they've already done this, they don't need to do it again. But there is that explicit line about Hermione, like, having to crawl over this troll's leg, and I also wonder if maybe that's a confidence boost for her? Of like 'I've done this before—'

Casper- 'Bring on the next challenge.'

Vanessa- Yeah. Casper, can you help me figure out how the symbolism of the three kids and their relationship to their chess pieces works? Because Hermione is the castle, Harry is a bishop, and Ron assigns himself the knight. I mean, Ron assigns these roles to everybody, but I do think that there is something in the destiny of this, that Ron is saying that he will try to be the brave one but he will also be the first to leave?

Casper- I never thought about this, Vanessa. This is very cool and I think you're really right. You know, a knight is often a piece that, after a couple of pawns go, a knight is the next to go. And so there's that kind of humility, which I think Ron—you know, Ron knows he's not the smartest, he knows he's not the most decisive, or the best planner, and so he's willing to make that sacrifice, so I think that's really right on. Often a bishop is certainly a useful piece on the chessboard, and often one which is the most difficult to follow as an opponent, and so often the piece that will make a check or a checkmate. So I'm wondering—

Vanessa- It moves diagonally, right? It doesn't move in a straight path in order to get its way, and I'm wondering if we see that in Harry: that he doesn't always go straight away, but he has to take detours in order to get where he's going.

Casper- While Hermione is a much more 'following the rules' type and is kind of straightforward, just as a rook or a castle moves. Ahh, I love that!

Vanessa- And also, the castle is an amazingly powerful piece, right? It can move across the whole board—

Casper- And if you get a pawn all the way across the chessboard, you get to turn a castle upside-down and it becomes a queen! So there's this kind of, like, extra-powerful wizardry imagery in that Hermione has this incredible capacity for magic which is just waiting to be transformed. OH, that's so cool!

Vanessa- A quote that came to mind a lot while reading this chapter through the theme of destiny was the Lao Tzu quote, which is very famous, but it's, 'Watch your thoughts, for they will become words. Watch your words, for they will become actions. Watch your actions, for they will become habits. Watch your habits, for they become your character, and watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.' And I really saw that with the three kids, that just in Ron's assignments, we are seeing characters and — how Lao Tzu talks about — we're seeing their little habits of they're going to behave in this chessboard be an example of how their destinies are going to play out throughout the seven books.

Casper- The final piece on that: If Harry is the bishop, that's a very religious name, right?

Vanessa- Yeah, absolutely. Is that, like, priestly? How are you taking that?

Casper- Well, I think you're right, there's, you know, there's a real leadership piece, and perhaps we could even talk about Harry ministering to Neville, particularly, and really kind of releasing what's there. But I think I'm thinking more of the kind of sacrificial element of Harry, and the religious overtones of that. And from a kind of Christian narrative, the idea of sacrificing your life for your friends, you know, that's not unfamiliar if people know the story of Jesus and kind of the broad Christian narrative. But I know that we can see all sorts of different religious narratives onto this book, so I don't want to push that point too hard, but it does strike me that there's that religious language there, which comes up quite unexpectedly.

(Sacred Practice music)

Vanessa- Casper, this is going to be our last havruta for a little while, and I'm really excited to bring you this question, which is: So Hermione and Harry, it's just the two of them now, and they go into a room which is sort of the antechamber before the final challenge, and they walk into this room and there are seven potions out. And some of them will kill you, some of them are just wine, one of them will help you escape and the other one will allow one person to go into the next room. And as soon as they get the riddle to help them figure out what is going to happen, Hermione is like, 'Oh, phew. This is a simple problem.' But I'm curious: How does Hermione know that—we already know that somebody has come in before them. There's the bent wing on one of the keys and there's this killed troll. How does Hermione know that the potions haven't been messed up in terms of their order, which is what the riddle is based on?

Casper- That's a good question, Vanessa, but you have to give me an answer first.

Vanessa- I just, I think Hermione believes in fairness of play, and we've seen that before. She believes, right, that if she can raise her hand high enough the teacher is going to call on her, and so I'm wondering if her character is what is allowing her destiny of solving this riddle to come through, because the fact that she believes that if you follow the rules and if you read carefully and if you do the challenge in front of you, it will pay off. I just, I think Hermione believes in magic. I think she just has faith in that system, and it turns out to be true.

Casper- I think the best answer I can come up with is that she's really good at pattern recognition. Because although there is a bent wing on the key with wings, and although the troll is dead, the chess pieces are back whole — you know, we know that they get kind of broken to pieces when they get knocked off the chessboard, so all of them are back whole on the board. Um, we know that the plant has regrown, the Devil's Snare has regrown, there's no real damage. So perhaps she's just seeing, 'Okay, two things so far have regenerated magically, and I'm going to trust that this is a third piece of that pattern.'

But in response to your question about whether she has faith in magic, I think it's the opposite. I think she loves the fact that this challenge is not about magic, it's about reasoning skills. And she comes from the Muggle world. You know, she is thrilled that she is a witch, her family is thrilled, but ultimately she's delighted that this, you know, doesn't depend on her wand skills. It's really, it's a math problem. So there's something about the delight that she has in the reasonable, or in the — I don't know how better to describe the kind of the opposite of magic, but it seems like she has real faith in that, to answer the question, even if it doesn't answer the question of why it's back to normal and why we should trust that. So maybe it's a mix of both. Maybe she has faith in the combination of what she comes from and the skills she's building now at Hogwarts, that she trusts the system of magic enough for those bottles to be rearranged and refilled but she trusts her reasoning skills and her Muggle home life enough to figure out the problem.

Vanessa- So Hermione really is, like, extra-destined to solve this problem, because it's both a Muggle problem and a magical one, and so she's sort of the only one who could really do it in that way.

Casper- Vanessa, as well as learning more about Hermione, I'm wondering if these series of challenges also have a sort of moral message in them. We start with some pretty magical stuff — Devil's Snare, this kind of crazy plant that wants to kill us, the flying keys that have been enchanted by Professor Flitwick — then we become more human or more non-magical in the challenges that face us. The chess game, of course, they're Transfigured pieces, but ultimately it's a Muggle game, and then here, this riddle, which is really all about logic and problem-solving. And we know that the final test that awaits Harry in the final chapter of the book is one that really depends just on Harry's ability to love and be loved, something which is, y'know, more elemental than problem-solving.

And so it seems to me that as we come closer to the goal of the whole book, which is that Philosopher's Stone, and if we read into that as some sort of image for what it means to live a good life, or honor and justice and all these values that we hold, the way to get to them — yes, you need some clever tricks and knowledge about Devil's Snare, but the closer you come to it, the more important are the things we already have. You know, some ability to solve problems and love and be loved.

Vanessa- I completely agree, and I really love that. I think that that is the overall message of the book. But I'll just say: You're in America, so it's Sorcerer's Stone.

Casper- (*Laughing*) You can take a boy out of England, but... (*more laughing*)

Vanessa- You took yourself out of England. You just told us the story. (*Casper is dying a little bit in the background*) I didn't, like, take you out of England, and I'm not making you now say Sorcerer's Stone.

This week's voicemail comes from Mika Herstan from New York City, and we're really excited to hear it.

(*voicemail beep*)

Mika: Hi Vanessa, Casper, Ariana, and everyone else there. This is Mika Herstan from New York City. First off, I just want to thank you for this beautiful podcast and all your engaging discussions on such a beloved text, and also for introducing many of us to this idea of sacred reading. I think there's a lot of us who don't feel that connected to the sacred text of our ancestors, but we love the ability to now have these tools that we can use in our day-to-day reading to find more personal connection and more meaning in the texts that we read. So thank you for that.

But my question for you has to do with your discussion on hope. I know you already had a voicemail on this, but I really think it's an important point and I think there's going to be a lot more examples as this series progresses to discuss hope. And so I just want to point out — Vanessa, I know you said that you think hope is something that should really wait 'til the end, that you think the epitome of hope is Hermione with her fingers in her mouth, and I want to ask you what your thoughts are about prayer. Do you also feel that prayer is something that should wait 'til the end, that you can't replace action with prayer and therefore you should act first and pray later? Or, perhaps, is prayer something that if you do it first, it can give you a sense of focus, it can give you a sense of self-acceptance and connection to the universe so that when you're acting, you do it more efficiently, you do it with greater purpose? And then, to flip that back, is hope, perhaps, a form of prayer? Is hope something that can give you that sense of purpose and all those things? You know, if we jump further in the series to when Ron thinks he's given the lucky potion from Harry, and that sense of hope then makes him into the Quidditch star. Whether or not that hope was misguided, just having a sense of hope helped his action to be that much better.

And so I just want to make an argument that hope, if it comes first, can actually be super valuable, and that while hope can be seen as a tool of the oppressor or things like, we can use our hope. I think you also mentioned, you know, 2008 was this time of hope in this country because, you know, Barack Obama — at the time, President Obama — said to us, 'Hey, we can make a better future, if we hope first.' And so I just want to make that argument, that hope first may be valuable.

Casper- Thank you, Mika. That's a beautiful response, I think, to the episode, and one that really makes me think about when to hope, and maybe that gives me permission to hope before I act as well. So thank you for that.

On the question of prayer, it's not a word I use very often, but the best definitions that I've heard for prayer are whatever helps me or you to get into a place where I'm coming from love. You know, if there are different ways to be in the world, one which is guided by fear and one which is guided from love, what helps me move from fear to love. And sometimes that may look like someone kneeling next to their bed and saying words that have been pre-written. For other people, it might be being in nature, or singing or dancing. It could be so many things, as long as that intention to transition from, you know, an ontology, a way of being which is afraid of the world to one which is about loving. And I think that your point about hope really fits in there, and so if, you know, I can do something — and it might be sacred reading, it might be responding to this podcast — if that helps me live in a way where I'm the best person that I can be, then for me that's prayer.

Vanessa- This week, I am really excited to bless Hermione, not for her strength but actually for a moment of weakness. So we see Hermione fail in this chapter. Her knowledge comes to her immediately with the Devil's Snare. She immediately recognizes it, and she knows how to get herself out of it. But she really fumbles when she is trying to think through how to save the boys. And I think what we see in Hermione is her vulnerability. We'll see this again and again in Hermione, that she's not great at conjuring a Patronus, she gets stressed in crisis situations, and I love that we just see this weakness in her.

And I think that if you're a leader, if you're a strong personality, if you're successful, it can be really hard to have these moments of failure and these moments of weakness. And she just follows instruction from the boys and then goes on to the next challenge, and proves incredibly useful in these next challenges. And it's just such a gift to me to see that it's okay to fail and to not get embarrassed about it, and just to let your friends help you and then to move on to the next thing, and just not to dwell on our failures, but learn from them and get going. And so I want to bless people who are in a moment of feeling like they have failed something, and just remind them that even our great Hermione fails, and you just get up and you keep going.

Casper- Well, my blessing is for Ron, so these go really well together. And I want to bless him because there's a moment where they realize it's a chessboard, and they realize they have to play their way across. And the text says, **'Harry and Hermione stayed quiet, watching Ron think. Finally he said, "Now, don't be offended or anything, but neither of you are that good at chess.'** And I really love the way that—we all know, sometimes, a situation that you're in, um, you know, might be that you're with a group of friends or you're with your partner, and you're in a kind of disagreement but you really know that you're right. And Ron does his best so much by trying not to offend them, but to still be really clear, like, 'The way we're going to win this challenge is if you follow me.' And I just want to bless Ron here for trying to be tactful, but still being very clear about what needs to happen. And I think that's something, you know, that we can all benefit from, sometimes: to remember that if we really know something, it's good to

speak up, but to try and always hold other people's feelings in account with how we share the knowledge that we have. So a blessing for Ron this week for being really smart and great.

(outro music plays)

Casper- You've been listening to Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, produced by Ariana Nedelman, Vanessa Zoltan, and me, Casper ter Kuile. Next week, we'll read the final chapter of book one, "Chapter Seventeen: The Man with Two Faces," through the theme of love. Please subscribe and review to the podcast wherever you get it. It's such a good way to help spread the word. And you can follow us on Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Facebook, where we always continue the conversation, have some bonus content, and send updates and announcements. You can usually find our handle at HPSacredText.

Big thanks to Jenn Stark, our social media coordinator. Our music is by Ivan Pyzow and Nick Bohl. Thanks to Rebecca and Charley Ledley, Lauren Taylor, Shane Bannon, and Rufus, the Harvard Communications Office, the Humanist Hub, and our Harry Potter and the Sacred Text reading group. We'll see you all next week.

(outro music ends)

Casper- And actually, the word 'omen' appears in the chapter, which was really exciting, because we do choose these themes to read toward before we read the chapter. So it's always a bit of a flash in the dark to know if it's going to really resonate, but—

Vanessa- Maybe we were destined to read this chapter toward destiny.

Casper- *(laughs and starts singing what sounds like the X Files intro music)*

Vanessa- How many of our listeners just gagged? *(Casper laughs)* Ariana did.

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