

## Transcript

### Episode 5.36

#### Book 5, Chapter 36: The Only One He Ever Feared

**Caroline:** You're listening to Harry Potter After 2020, an HP chapter reread podcast wherein two friends who read the books way back in the day as adults revisit the series through a post-2020 lens. Your hosts are Lorrie Kim, author of *Snape: The Definitive Analysis*, and JC, an educator and long-time HP fan. I'm your editor, Caroline. In this episode, Lorrie and JC tackle Book Five, Chapter Thirty-Six: The Only One He Ever Feared.

**Lorrie:** The Only One He Ever Feared. Harry attacks Bellatrix with *Crucio*. Voldemort learns his Death Eaters failed, and he has to do everything himself. He comes to the Ministry to kill Harry, but Dumbledore duels him. Voldemort possesses Harry, but it hurts so much he flees. Fudge sees him and realizes Dumbledore was telling the truth. So much happens in this chapter.

**JC:** Yeah, it really does, and this is the next to the last chapter, correct?

**Lorrie:** I think there are two more after this.

**JC:** Oh, there's two more. Okay, but we're definitely in that zone of it's two in the morning, and you're just flipping the pages, right?

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Do you want to talk about how it felt, or do you want to dive right in?

**JC:** Yeah, let's dive right in.

**Lorrie:** So we start off the chapter with this intense moment between Lupin and Harry, because Harry is reacting viscerally to the unbelievable sight of Sirius dying and it hasn't sunk in yet, and Lupin is right there knowing that Harry might be having these reactions. He's an elder who is on the spot to take care of Harry during this shocking death. Harry does not always have this, but Lupin has been through this before, so how do you know what somebody might be going through at such a moment unless you've been through it

before? I also believe that it helps Lupin in that very moment to have Harry to look after because it drags him forward into accepting Sirius's death. If he had had only himself to care for, he would have gone through the whole process on his own time, but you can't, right? There's a kid to take care of, a younger person, so like it or not, he has to accept that things are real immediately; he can't hide from reality. As terrible as it is, I'm glad for Harry he had Lupin there.

**JC:** Oh, yeah. If Lupin hadn't been there, Harry would have run through the veil.

**Lorrie:** Oh, my God.

**JC:** That's pretty clear.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Harry doesn't understand what the veil is at this point, so he thinks it's just like a pocket dimension or something, and "we have to go get Sirius out." He doesn't understand that it's death; even though later Dumbledore calls it the Death Room, he doesn't really seem to understand it yet.

**Lorrie:** But everything else in the Department of Mysteries is so weird. How is a person supposed to know?

**JC:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Thank goodness that Harry has an elder.

**JC:** And in the middle of all this, these battles have been going on. They're having a hard time taking Bellatrix down, but Dumbledore has --

**Lorrie:** Oh, my God, yes.

**JC:** Single-handedly gathered up most of the other Death Eaters.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Everybody but Bellatrix, with little bits of powerful magic that we haven't seen at this point because we're just in Harry's head.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** It is interesting. It's like you look around and you're like, 'Oh, Dumbledore just defeated everyone else while we were having this struggle earlier.'

**Lorrie:** He's really powerful, yeah. I love that Harry's first reaction is to be angry at Sirius. That is so real. That's something that I know from feeling when a loved one dies. 'How can you be leaving me? You don't have the right to leave me.' But then Harry realizes no, it has to be true because Sirius has never kept him waiting, and that gets

me so hard. Harry totally knows -- thoroughly knows -- that he was the most important thing in Sirius's life, and that is Sirius's true legacy. This kid knows Sirius loved him, and that's about to be really important in this chapter.

**JC:** Yeah. This is the point, yeah, at which Harry starts to understand what's happened and starts to process it, and I think the fact that he and Lupin are both there processing it at the same time is really good. These are Sirius's next of kin, basically -- this is his immediate family -- and the fact that they're both there and one of them doesn't have to go tell the other...

**Lorrie:** True.

**JC:** I'm grateful for that. They were just both there and now they can kind of hang on to each other in a way, and I think that's really, really good there, too. But yeah, Harry hasn't even started processing this, and I know that it's going to get worse. He's going to blame himself and all the things that can happen. I think I didn't let myself think about the pain of that too much, because I know that it's going to get worse.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Also, I was reading so fast at this point. It was like, 'Okay, yeah, that was painful, but moving on...'

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Harry doesn't have time to think about it.

**JC:** Yeah, that's true. He really doesn't, and his big emotion is anger that gets directed at Bellatrix.

**Lorrie:** Oh, my God.

**JC:** Once he accepts Sirius is dead... Sirius has been murdered and there's a murderer, and Harry's going to take care of that. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. We don't even know how much that would have happened, except that she's deliberately provoking him.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** There's so much emotional stuff happening. Tonks has been knocked out and Mad-Eye Moody has to crawl to check on her, and Neville wants to come comfort Harry, but he can't walk; he has to slide down the stone benches.

**JC:** And his legs are still doing the thing until Lupin finally does the *Finite Incantatem*.

**Lorrie:** Oh, which was such a relief.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** But I'm super impressed with Neville here when he says, "Was Sirius Black a friend of yours?" The last Neville knew, Sirius was a mass murderer, and in just a few minutes he's made all of these leaps and understands that Harry has this whole history with him. That was impressive. That was amazing.

**JC:** Yeah. Neville in this book... he's so empathetic.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Even though maybe he's not as powerful magically as the others are at this point, he's trying so hard to improve himself and to be better, and he is so concerned with everyone else and wants to be part of this fight so much. I love Neville here. He just seems so strong to me. Even though Harry kind of comments these are not the people that he would have chosen to bring along on this, these are the people he needed with him, and Neville is really proving that right now.

**Lorrie:** Thinking about this, the reason Neville's not as good at fighting is because his trauma messed with his physical abilities. He was so oppressed by his family that his confidence was wrecked, and he doesn't have the practice of being comfortable in his body in fighting, so he had to play catch-up. But, especially now that he knows that his peers have understood more about his parents, the secrets are more out in the open for him, and when he sees the losses and struggles happening to his peers during this battle, there he has a head-start in knowing how that would make a person feel. He's just an unusual case, and in some ways he has to play catch-up and in some ways he's ahead.

**JC:** Yeah, I can see that.

**Lorrie:** So yeah, here's something where he's ahead as he looks at Harry grieving somebody and goes, "Oh, okay."

**JC:** "I recognize..." Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** "And I know what to do here. I know how to comfort someone in this position." Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. The details don't matter; the important thing is Harry's emotion is unmistakable. Bellatrix... the story really shows that she's formidable. She beats Kingsley, and then Dumbledore casts a spell at her and she deflects it. That does not usually happen. Wow! Lupin did not foresee that he was going to have to stop Harry from going after her. I recognize so well that parental moment of failure -- "I'm sorry, I can't foresee everything" -- and oh, no, that one moment -- "Don't run into traffic! Are

you nuts?!" Despite Lupin, there goes Harry chasing down Bellatrix, who is deliberately and disgustingly taunting him on purpose.

**JC:** Right.

**Lorrie:** And there's this wonderful moment where Harry yells at the Department of Mysteries, "Where's the exit?" and that works.

**JC:** Yeah! Oh, my gosh. Before that, he's chasing her through all these other chambers and leaping over the bodies of his friends, basically, as he does... They're all injured; everyone he brought there is hurt, and in that moment of, 'Oh, my God, the casualties' -- all of the Order members that we just saw who were injured, all the kids he brought with him -- everyone is bloodied and injured. At some point Harry's going to realize that he's the person who brought them all here into that. I'm like, 'Oh, no.'

**Lorrie:** Well, he did try to stop them.

**JC:** He did. He did tell them not to come, but then there's this really interesting moment when -- I can't remember if Bellatrix smashes the tank of brains and the brains are attacking Harry... He just uses *Wingardium Leviosa* and it works, and I'm just like, 'That's a first year! Oh, my God.' But also, it shows (and we've talked about this before) the importance of training.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** He goes back (and this has happened a couple times in this book) to something that he knows really well and he's really comfortable with. An early spell is the thing that works, and it's just beautiful, I think.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Also, he's so focused. He doesn't have time to be distracted by other people's thoughts. Oh, my God... Now is not the time, brains.

**JC:** But it doesn't slow him down. He's got this adrenaline going, and he's just like, "Spell, spell." Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. I love that Bellatrix casts a spell; when it misses him, her spell makes the golden gates "ring like bells." That's such a good indicator: okay, this chapter is going into the mythic now. All right. That sound... I felt that sound.

**JC:** That's cool. That's cool.

**Lorrie:** Oh... then Harry does a thing that is such a big deal that I have to take a deep breath before we talk about it: Harry casts an Unforgivable. Oh...

**JC:** And I think this is the first time, isn't it? Because it's not the last time, but it's the first time.

**Lorrie:** It's not the last time, but nobody's making him do it. He casts an Unforgivable, and it's so strong that it actually knocks Bellatrix off her feet. Okay, it doesn't torture her, but it does that much? Okay, our beautiful, perfect golden hero, you just cast an Unforgivable.

**JC:** And it's interesting, too. I think what fascinates me about that moment, too, is that even though he's angry -- the thing that we know about things like Unforgivables is that you have to really mean it. Harry is as angry as he's ever been in his life, and it's not enough because it is righteous anger. Bellatrix basically tells him (I don't have any reason to think that she's wrong here) that you have to be sadistic to use *Crucio* and Harry is just not that. That's like... Damn. Damn.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. This is a super significant passage for understanding the world of this series and the values in it. Yes, we've heard all along, "Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy? You need to *mean* them." Fake Moody taught that, so we all learned it, but now she's really showing the practical lesson. "Never used one before..." That also tells you that if you start down that path and then you do it, it becomes easier and easier to overcome that internal barrier. Okay, "you need to *mean* them..." Well, he meant something, but yeah, righteous anger doesn't do it; that introduces the thought that there are other things that do do it, but she doesn't say what. What this is going to come to mean later by the culmination of the series (and this is something that Voldemort himself does not have what it takes to understand): this is going to be why *Avada Kedavras* from Voldemort are never going to work on Harry, whether or not Lily Potter is there to shield Harry. That's why they won't work, and Voldemort just is never going to wrap his brain around that. Oof. Yeah, but right now, Harry's just become somebody who cast an Unforgivable. Woof!

**JC:** So I read this scene as Bellatrix was leading him to Voldemort. I think I'm reading that correctly.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Um... No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. No, not yet.

**JC:** She's not? Okay.

**Lorrie:** No. She's taunting and provoking him into a confrontation.

**JC:** Okay, but she leads him... It felt like she led him to such a specific spot that maybe... Okay.

**Lorrie:** I think she's leading him away from people he could be fighting alongside, because she has no doubt that she could torture and play with this victim.

**JC:** Okay, but she's not leading him to Voldemort necessarily?

**Lorrie:** No.

**JC:** Okay.

**Lorrie:** No. She's drawing him away and knowing that if she taunts him, it's just going to get him more determined to depart from the others and chase her down and fight her, and then she's laughing at him because she says, "I know spells of such power that you, pathetic little boy, can never hope to compete --" which we know is absolutely true. She's villain monologuing, and he's trying to hide behind the Fountain of Magical Brethren; she just destroys it, and then she taunts him and says that she might spare his life if he gives her the prophecy, and that's when Harry laughs and realizes, oh, no, he has a negotiating point. He laughs in her face and says, "Oh, it's gone," and then she's the one to be scared. As soon as he says it's gone, his forehead sears; that tells us that Voldemort's been in his scar watching the whole time, so now he knows that the prophecy is gone and he is enraged. Harry is the one who gets to tell Bellatrix, "Hey, guess what? Breaking news: Voldemort knows that you guys screwed up." He knows what Voldemort is thinking even before she does.

**JC:** It's interesting, too, because Voldemort didn't notice when it broke before.

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** My interpretation of this is that Voldemort paid attention when Harry got angry.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** That's when he started paying attention; the rest of it he was not really paying close attention to, but now he's there and he's listening to see what Harry does.

**Lorrie:** By this time, his Death Eaters should have gotten the prophecy for him. What's taking them?

**JC:** Yeah. 'They're just kids. What's taking so long?' Yeah.

**Lorrie:** 'Geez, can't do anything without...'

**JC:** Yeah. 'People don't want to work anymore,' right?

**Lorrie:** I know. So now it's Bellatrix who's in denial, and she's shouting "LIAR!" knowing she's lost. Harry is taunting her, even though his pain is just getting worse and worse and worse and worse.

**JC:** Right, yeah. At this point, he's in that zone of 'I have nothing to lose.'

**Lorrie:** Nothing, yeah.

**JC:** 'I know I'm probably going to die here, and I'm going to laugh at you.' His behavior is so interesting, because it is totally the behavior of someone who thinks that it's done. 'It's over, I'm not going to survive this,' so he's just throwing everything out at her.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** And it is funny. It is funny to see her turning from 'nothing can hurt me' to 'Oh, shit.'

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** And then Harry finds out that the reason his pain is getting worse and worse and worse and worse is because, unbeknownst to him, Voldemort is there.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Oh...

**JC:** But it's also interesting in that there's something else in this confrontation between Harry and Bellatrix that makes me laugh. I think this is actually true in the book (and not just a fanon or a bit of movie wishful thinking) that Bellatrix wants to be Voldemort's right-hand person, and the fact that Harry can read his thoughts is like, "You thought you were his most specialest. I'm the most specialest boy. He likes me more than you." There's this feeling of that.

**Lorrie:** Yeah, very much.

**JC:** That is funny.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. "I'm telling you..."

**JC:** "I'm closer to him than you'll ever be." Oooh...

**Lorrie:** "I don't even like him." Yeah.

**JC:** It's like, wow.

**Lorrie:** "You can try..." Yeah.

**JC:** That's really funny, I don't know. I guess I'm looking for anything to be funny in all of this, and I find that funny.

**Lorrie:** Well, Harry is really enjoying this, even though he's in incredible pain and is sure he's about to die. Bellatrix and all the other Death Eaters are so pathetic and laughable, and they do know it -- at least, Bellatrix knows it at this moment -- and he's just going to show them how pathetic they are.

**JC:** And there's an interesting alternate reality that could branch off from here where Harry does become Voldemort's right-hand person, right?

**Lorrie:** Oh, yeah. No, he totally is. I just love that he gets to find out what Voldemort's thinking and first tells her. Meanwhile, she's staring into her imminent fate. Oops! There's that moment when Voldemort and Harry are in agreement about Bellatrix being pathetic. They're both looking at her like, 'Oh, you messed up,' and Voldemort showing up at the Ministry in this moment... He is so done.

**JC:** "I cannot believe I had to come and dirty my hands with this."

**Lorrie:** "I just --"

**JC:** "Can you not take one prophecy and kill one (1) boy?" Yeah.

**Lorrie:** What a fiasco! The way he says *Avada Kedavra* to Harry here is in such a done way. He's not even mad; he's just so tired of this ineptitude.

**JC:** So here's where I have a question. It sounds like from what you said earlier that the Killing Curse would not have killed Harry at this point.

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** Even though someone steps in... I think Dumbledore sends the statue in to protect him.

**Lorrie:** Yes.

**JC:** But what do you think would have happened if the Killing Curse had hit Harry at that point?

**Lorrie:** What we find out by the end of the series is that the moment Voldemort took Harry's blood into himself and rebuilt his body with it (that had love from Lily in it), then after that he connected with Harry and that enabled him to grow not only his body, but also grow in understanding what it is to connect with a person and feel more emotion. Then that activates Lily's sacrifice for Harry. At the moment that Voldemort first tried to kill one-and-a-half-year-old Harry, the sight of Lily's sacrifice shook him up so much that the spell rebounded on him. Now he has her blood in him. What Dumbledore ends up telling Harry in the King's Cross chapter of *Deathly Hallows* is that "as long as Voldemort has your mother's blood in him, that keeps your mother's sacrifice alive and also the charm she put on you," so Voldemort's just done it to himself. There is no way he can try to kill Harry without the same protective spell from Lily reactivating because he's carrying it around in his own veins. This is true with Harry, because instead of him thinking of Harry as just another bug of a human that is his to squash, he decided that there must be something about Harry and he identified with him enough to think, 'Okay, this is the kid that's somehow supposed to be powerful enough to be my equal.' He saw Harry as somebody to have empathy with, and then he admitted that he wanted the love that Harry had; he admitted that that thing which helped Harry grow is the thing he

needed to grow himself, and he let that love change him and he can't undo that. It's in his body forever now. He doesn't feel that with other people because he hasn't connected with other people, but when his spells connect with Harry and they create that golden connection, Harry's the only person where he knows how to see him as another person. That's an essential element of Voldemort being so effective with the Killing Curse with every other person: he doesn't see them as people. He doesn't see them as like himself. Harry, he does, and he doesn't know why that requires a change of mindset in him. 'Why doesn't this spell work on this guy? What's wrong with my wand? What's wrong with this kid?' It's not them; it's you.

**JC:** Okay, so then the spell would have rebounded again and killed Voldemort? Is that what... What would have happened?

**Lorrie:** Well, it wouldn't have killed Voldemort, as we find out later; we don't know this yet. None of this is anything that the series has given us yet (this is totally a reread luxury), but it would have rebounded on Voldemort and killed him if he had zero Horcruxes left. But he does have Horcruxes left, so it would cause him the amount of damage that would kill a person, except he can't be mortal. He feels the amount of pain that would make somebody wish they were dead, an amount of pain where it's a mercy to be done with life, but he can't get released from life. The only way for him to achieve mortality with that degree of pain is if he is switched back from the unnatural thing he's made of himself back into a mortal, and then he can have the mercy of ending a life the way it's meant to be. But until then, what he's done by dividing his soul into Horcruxes... all he's done is raised his capacity for experiencing pain to infinity. If he cast it and it rebounded, then he would be feeling that pain in himself with nowhere to go about it.

**JC:** So would it have destroyed the new body he constructed and he'd be like a spirit floating around again, like it was in the beginning of the series?

**Lorrie:** Might be, but now that he has Lily's love in him -- which is the thing in real Muggle life that enables infants to thrive and grow their bodies and flourish -- maybe he has what it takes for his body to regenerate itself. That was something that he was lacking before: he didn't have love magic in his body, so the first time he killed Harry or tried to kill Harry and it rebounded on him, his body disappeared and he was just his spirit, and it hurt so terribly. He thought, 'Well, if I can get enough unicorn blood, that should help. If I can get the Elixir of Life, that should help,' but none of it helped until he got that love. Just like when humans (regular Muggle humans like us) get an injury or an illness, the more care and love you have, the happier your body is and the more effectively your body can heal. When you have the same injury and you're under stress or you're lonely or something terrible is happening in your life, that same injury is going to take forever to heal. It is about nutrition and safety and all that, but a lot of it's about the emotion. So yeah, Voldemort has achieved some greater physical safety for himself,

but at a cost that he doesn't understand. But because of plot reasons, we don't have to deal with any of this yet because before that *Avada Kedavra* reaches Harry, Dumbledore shows up.

**JC:** Dumbledore shows up. I also love that when Voldemort first appears, Bellatrix falls to his feet and then tries to tell him that Dumbledore is there. "Oh, Dark Lord, I'm really sorry I failed you, blah blah blah, but you need to know that..." and then he doesn't want to hear it. His own impatience.... yeah. That's funny.

**Lorrie:** Oh, Bellatrix, nobody's listening to you anymore.

**JC:** But then Dumbledore appears.

**Lorrie:** Yes!

**JC:** Oh, and we had talked, I think, a couple of chapters ago about when the kids were first leaving, 'Wouldn't it be great if there was a grown-up who would come and save us?' and it actually happens!

**Lorrie:** Oh, my God, I know. I know. Yeah, this is a children's story, and therefore the grown-up shows up.

**JC:** The grown-up shows up and the grown-up is powerful, so powerful that I love the description of the fights here. What I wrote in my notes here was, "Now we get to see how the big boys fight!"

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** They're using magic and wordless incantations and things, and little tiny flicks of the wand that are so powerful that Harry can feel the power of it and he has no idea what they're doing. It's this moment of, "Oh, yeah, this little sixteen-year-old, fifteen-year-old kid... you thought you could come and do this? Look what you're up against. Look how much you have to learn." Oh... Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. They are manipulating elements. There's fire and water. I love that -- this is so sad. The sadness is not in this story; it's in our world, it's in 2025. Dumbledore is using the statuary to detain Bellatrix, to protect Harry physically, and to send messages through the Ministry Floos. He is using the power of institutions to protect from damage. We do know (as the U.S. learned from Timothy Snyder's marvelous book *On Tyranny* in 2017) that investing in the institutions that you believe in, that protect you... that's a really important thing. Here in 2025, it's a much more fraught, open question [of] how much the institutions are going to survive to help, but here, that's what Dumbledore is putting into place, and it's beautiful to see the institutions containing Bellatrix.

**JC:** Ugh, yeah. The rest of this chapter, I felt that sadness.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Good things happen, there's this incredible battle... Dumbledore calls Voldemort Tom, which I love.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** "Hello, Tom. In my eyes, you're just that little orphan boy who was looking for something..." Yeah, love it, and Voldemort's like, "Everyone else calls me the Dark Lord!" It's like the good version of dead naming someone. I like that he's showing all this power, and then he's not trying to kill Voldemort. A question that I have... We will get back to the politics and the parallels, but a question I have here: Voldemort is surprised that Dumbledore is not trying to kill him. There's eight reasons it could be, so I'm curious to know what you think it is. One is obviously that Dumbledore knows that killing people is a thing that will split your soul; it's a bad thing that you shouldn't do because it harms yourself, harms your own soul. I was also wondering: what does Dumbledore know now about the connection between Harry and Voldemort? Because we still have that moment at the end of book four where, when Harry reveals that Voldemort took some of his blood, Dumbledore gets excited about that. What do you think Dumbledore knows about this connection between them right now?

**Lorrie:** Okay, this is beautifully loaded.

**JC:** Ooh...

**Lorrie:** Yeah, there are a bunch of things going on. First of all, I want to pay reverent tribute to this beautiful moment where Dumbledore casts a spell at Voldemort that strikes a shield: "A deep gong-like note reverberated from it, an oddly chilling sound...." The text tells you that whatever that spell is, it sounds really reverberant. It raises the question "What the heck is this spell?" on purpose and then never answers it, so that's been puzzling me for a long time. 'What spell is it?' It feels like maybe a truth spell, like an answer, a parallel to when Voldemort says to people, "Tell the truth," and it's so powerful. Maybe it's Dumbledore saying to Voldemort, "I know who you really are, stop lying to yourself," and it's also a sort of judgment, maybe. I don't know. I don't know what the answer is, but it's really beautiful. When Voldemort says, "You do not seek to kill me, Dumbledore?" Partly, that's Voldemort goading him, wishing that Dumbledore would because there are reasons why Voldemort feels invincible and thinks that would be an easy way to win. We find out later, in the next two chapters, it's because of the prophecy (the part of it that Voldemort heard) where he believes that the only person with the power to defeat him is Harry. That has been part of what's motivated Voldemort's behavior all this time: he doesn't think he has anything to fear from anyone else, and that includes Dumbledore. Of course, at his level of power, there are many ways in which that was true anyway, but it's this extra thing he has. If Dumbledore tries

to kill him, there are two different ways where he thinks it's not going to work: one of them is that Dumbledore's not in the prophecy, and the other is that he has Horcruxes, which he does not think Dumbledore knows about. It would just add to his power for somebody to do what they could to try to kill him, and that he just comes right back (What terrifying thing is this?) knowing that nobody else has gone this far. That's Voldemort feeling like he's in a position to taunt Dumbledore, trying to goad him into this. Meanwhile, Dumbledore has his own feeling of confidence, which is scaring Harry because Dumbledore is just walking toward Voldemort and talking super calmly like he has no fear. Harry wants to yell out to him to be careful, but no, there goes Dumbledore. "Blah, blah, blah, blah." He says, "We both know that there are other ways of destroying a man, Tom." That line... Ooh, that really intrigued the fandom because that on purpose is mysterious, and then it's not answered for two more volumes. 'What?' Of course, Voldemort knows exactly what he's talking about. 'What are they talking about?' He says, "Merely taking your life would not satisfy me, I admit --" What? What are you talking about? Oh... That annoys Voldemort and gets under your skin; he says, "There's nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!" Dumbledore says, "You are quite wrong," which if I were Voldemort, that would annoy me because it's like, 'What? What do you know that I don't?' We find out later that one reason why Dumbledore might feel invincible here is that he knows he has the Elder Wand.

**JC:** Oh, that's true.

**Lorrie:** In a duel, it's just really powerful. I don't think that's a major part of it, because as Dumbledore knows, the Elder Wand is not invincible; it's just super, super powerful, and when you've got somebody like Voldemort, it probably gives you some advantage but it's not a guarantee. There are reasons, too, why Dumbledore's like, 'No, I know what I'm doing. I'm not worried,' and he's not scared of this guy. Between himself and Tom, he's not scared of him. Then he makes Tom go wrongfooted by saying, "Indeed, your failure to understand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness --" Now he's talking about souls, and Voldemort has no idea; he knows nothing about this area. Whether or not it scares him, he can't even answer, but they can fight, and their dueling power is so evenly matched. It's remarkable to watch.

**JC:** It's some of the most creative, magical fighting... It is the most creative, magical fighting we've seen so far in the series.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** After this entire book where Harry is trying to teach defensive magic to the kids, watching the grown-ups -- not even just grown-ups, but the experts -- do it is really interesting.

**Lorrie:** Yeah, and it also raises the equivalent thought of, 'Wow, the battle between Dumbledore and Grindelwald must have been something to watch,' because that was the true nemesis and arch-nemesis. Voldemort and Dumbledore are each other's nemeses, but also Voldemort is more focused on Harry, too, in a way. Dumbledore here has an advantage: he has Fawkes. The phoenix gives his life for Dumbledore and swallows a Killing Curse, and that's a reminder: okay, some people in this world have somebody who love them enough to give their life, although Bellatrix is right there... If Voldemort cared in that direction, he could have that, too, but he doesn't think that's important. We see Dumbledore demonstrate that with Fawkes, and then Dumbledore nearly (nearly, nearly) has Voldemort trapped in this elemental trap; then Voldemort disappears, and Dumbledore is frightened.

**JC:** Yeah. It's interesting that Harry notices the first time Dumbledore is scared. He was confident he knew what he was doing, and now he's scared because he knows what could happen next.

**Lorrie:** Really powerful of Voldemort to exercise his power of possession, even while he's very, very nearly contained. He was able to make that move -- it's a strong move -- and Dumbledore has had the terms of the fight changed on him. Between him and Voldemort, he's not worried, but Dumbledore has somebody he wants to protect. As the Death Eaters wanted the prophecy and Harry wanted to protect his friends, that desire to protect something creates your weak spot. Voldemort makes this strong move: he does his signature magic, which is possession, and it hurts so much Harry believes he's dead. "He knew he was dead: it was pain beyond imagining, pain past endurance... locked in the coils of a creature with red eyes.... They were fused together, bound by pain..." This echoes what Voldemort told his Death Eaters at the end of *Goblet of Fire* about how it felt for him when the spell rebounded on him the first time he tried to kill Harry. This is Voldemort's wish coming true: his whole life, he never had somebody where he could make them know, make them understand how it feels to be him. Voldemort has just gotten somebody (Harry Potter) to know how it felt for him to be in pain the time that Harry defeated him as a baby. Since infancy, Voldemort has never been able to know that somebody else understands how it feels to be him. That's the fantasy; that's what he hears when he encounters a prophecy saying that there's somebody who has the power to bring him down. "What? Is he in some way my equal? Bring me this person. Look, look, nobody knows. Nobody has ever known how I feel. Here... this is how it feels. How's that?" Well, it's terrible: "And when the creature spoke, it used Harry's mouth..." Wow, that's obscene. Oof, Harry... So now, Voldemort is having his dream come true, and he taunts Dumbledore to kill him: "*If death is nothing, Dumbledore, kill the boy....*" This is something I learned from Grace Candido-Beecher, who has the book *Voldemort* coming out in April 2026. She reads that phrase "*the boy*" as when Voldemort says it, he means Harry and he also means that part of himself that

was the young Tom Riddle growing up in an orphanage. I never saw it that way, and as soon as Grace said it, I realized it's very carefully written so that every time Voldemort says or thinks "*the boy*" and he means Harry, he definitely means the part of himself that relates to Harry. So yeah, "*If death is nothing, Dumbledore, kill the boy....*" This is the fight that Dumbledore has been afraid of this entire volume. This is the explanation for why he has been spending the entire year refusing to make eye contact with Harry, because he knew that Voldemort would want to take his fight against Dumbledore into the territory of this kid Harry, which he knew would cause Dumbledore a lot of pain. Everybody knows, after Voldemort does his signature magic of possession and then he leaves the host body, the host body dies. He does, in fact, have the ability to possess Harry. He has harmed Harry before; he can do it again. Dumbledore has been spending all year doing everything he can to try to put off that moment and maybe prevent it, but this is what he's been scared of and he knew that any connection to Dumbledore would intensify this desire in Voldemort. Every time that Dumbledore was near Harry, that would spike Voldemort thinking, 'If I could just get into Harry and confront Dumbledore there, then I could force this.' This is why Dumbledore won't look at Harry. He's been so, so scared of this because he can't actually prevent it. We find out later that by this point, he does know that there's a part of Voldemort's soul in Harry's scar.

**JC:** Okay, so he knows that at this point. Okay.

**Lorrie:** That was what he suspected (and then concluded) the night that Harry saw Arthur Weasley being attacked. Then he casts a spell with one of his instruments that shows the snake dividing, and that tells Dumbledore that the snake is both itself and also Voldemort, and just like that Harry is, himself and in himself, also a part of Voldemort. With that kind of connection and then doubled by Voldemort now having Harry's blood making up his own body, Dumbledore can try to prevent Voldemort from possessing Harry, but he does not have the advantage. Yeah, Voldemort's whole point is if Dumbledore is saying, "You can't have the boy, I won't let you," Voldemort's like, "I've hurt him before, and I can again. Just watch." There's a moment... In the chapter *The Centaur and the Sneak*, Dumbledore has this moment; he later on grows strong enough to grow past it, but there's a moment when he can't bear what he's doing in keeping Harry in the dark about all of this. This is when he has stunned the Aurors and he's about to take Fawkes and leave before Fudge can arrest him, and he makes really brief eye contact with Harry and he whispers, "You will understand..." That is such wishful thinking. You don't know that he will ever; you wish you could explain why all of this is happening. That's a moment of even Dumbledore having a hard time accepting that sometimes in this life, you have to do things to protect people. They will resent you for it -- they will never understand it, they will blame you -- and that really hurts because you're not doing it to harm them, but maybe they'll never know that. If you can't explain it to them, tough for you. Meanwhile, Harry... Quite understandably, all he can think is '*Let*

*the pain stop. Let him kill us.... End it, Dumbledore.... Death is nothing compared to this....'* Voldemort has succeeded in getting Harry to think of Voldemort and Harry as an 'us'. That's some companionship that Voldemort has always craved from Harry and Voldemort has arranged things so he can't die, but he can get Harry to die for him, which is fun and also the thing he was jealous of: somebody else dying for you. Say he did that... Would that even stop Voldemort's pain? The answer to that is, 'Does it ever?' Yet in life, people do that: hurt other people as they have been hurt and punish others by scapegoating them for the pain that they've gone through. That's Voldemort's game there, and Dumbledore's power to protect Harry from this is at an end. Harry is being tormented, and that's when it turns out that Dumbledore can't stop this but Harry can.

**JC:** 'The power was within me all along.'

**Lorrie:** Well, it is, but it's also not something Harry's doing when he thinks, '*I'll see Sirius again....*,' which is a thought that would have been more difficult if he hadn't accepted Sirius's death before and a thought that is profoundly possible because Sirius succeeded in every way before he died in letting this child know, "I'm your parent figure and I completely love you." Harry thinks, '*I'll see Sirius again....*' That is too much for Voldemort. It can be understood just as platitudes ('Oh, it's love. It's too good for Voldemort.') No, what it is is jealousy. It used to be that Voldemort could not physically touch Harry; we see at the end of the first book that physically touching Harry has this terrible effect because there's love in Harry, so now he has taken Harry's blood into himself, this idiot has moved the barrier. The barrier is no longer in Harry's skin. It's now in his very blood; there is no barrier. If he is connecting with Harry and feeling Harry's feelings, he can feel in his own body all of this love, grief, support, growth and all the other emotions Harry's known that Voldemort has always mortally craved, has never had, didn't understand, could function if he'd just shut off those feelings... But now that he's connected with Harry, he can feel them. That is enough to kill a person if you could die. He is feeling mortal jealousy and he has made himself unkillable. This is a degree of pain that should have killed a mortal. I find it sometimes hard to wrap my brain around when reading this series because it's so intense, but yeah, the mortal longing to just be loved... 'Could somebody love me? Somebody, anybody, ever? Could somebody care that I exist and came into this world?' Sometimes in life, the answer is no. That's intolerable. That's a pain that Voldemort can compensate for a lot by being the most powerful thing ever, and a pain that he can often anesthetize by simply not understanding it. No, he connected with Harry; now he understands that no, he was right. This is something that would have been great. Never had it, never will. Ow... Can't stand that. He's gone. It's the last time he ever lets himself share Harry's feelings. That's the answer. When Dumbledore says there are other ways to destroy a man, oh... Living with that sensation? Oof... Yeah, worse than death. Voldemort's gone, Harry is shivering

(poor thing), and it turns out that the statues that Dumbledore sent on a mission have come back with Fudge, summoned in his pajamas.

**JC:** I think that there's a moment when Harry first kind of comes to, I guess. It's unclear how long he's been out of it, and Dumbledore is right there staring at him for the first time in a long time.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** He's close, he's making eye contact, and it's such a relief because whatever Dumbledore was worried about before (which Harry doesn't really understand yet), it's gone because now Dumbledore's looking at him.

**Lorrie:** It's over. It's over.

**JC:** It's such a relief.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Oh, yeah, and then all the fires going off everywhere as people come in from the Ministry, and they've all been brought here by Dumbledore. Yeah, this is the part where it goes fully into fairy tale territory.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. This is the part where you and I feel mortal pain, and we want to flee the story because they have something we don't have. Oh, my God.

**JC:** Yeah, yeah. That is true. Yeah. Even though there are a couple moments when Fudge is still... The first thing we hear Fudge's voice saying is that he did indeed see Voldemort there in the Ministry of Magic, and he's trying to figure out -- he sees Dumbledore and he kind of wants to seize him and all this stuff, except that Dumbledore is clearly in charge here. The idea that there's a superhero who could come in and fix all the shit that is happening in the government... What would the fantasy be like right now at the end of October 2025? That there is someone who could walk into Congress and go, "Get back in here," and shut down the Speaker of the House and be like, "No. Seat the person from Arizona, get some shit done. Go." Then storm over to the White House and be like, "Stop tearing down this building," all the things. I want a Dumbledore so bad, and we're not going to get one. It's a fairy tale that there's a grown-up who could come in and make all these people do what they're supposed to do and set everything right. Oh, dammit.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. The element that got that level of pain from me was when Fudge saw the evidence and it was enough to change his mind...

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Because I used to believe in that, and it's become clearer and clearer that it's not that some of the people in our world don't know or need to see the evidence. No, they know; it doesn't matter.

**JC:** Yeah. The evidence doesn't matter.

**Lorrie:** But Fudge sees evidence and he recognizes his own defeat, and by degrees you see him deflating. When he first sees it, he still thinks maybe he has a chance of blustering. No. As the scene goes on, you see him accepting his defeat more and more and more. That is not a process that I can count on in our current politics, and that was very sad to see.

**JC:** Yeah. Yeah, all of that is... I don't know. I saw a headline a couple of days ago that gave me a little bit of that feeling. It was something about that behind-the-scenes, Obama was doing some things to do stuff, and that felt a little bit like 'Dumbledore's still out there,' but it wasn't. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** I can't... I can't let that happen. I can't let myself... That is like sitting night after night in front of the Mirror of Erised.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** "Get a hold of yourself. Get up!" The lamentable literalness of Fudge whimpering because he sees the ruined fountain during the week that the U.S. has been watching the demolition of the East Wing... Also, we knew this feeling after the attack on January 6th, where people with battering rams attacked their own Capitol building. Yes, Fudge, the foundations of your government have been attacked; that is, in fact, what happened. But since we are fully in fantasy land right now...

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** At this point, it's hilarious for us (not for him) that Fudge spins around and \*gasps\* "*Harry Potter?*"

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** "What?!" He's really, really far behind. He's so hopelessly not in touch with what's happening, so you see him slowly realizing Dumbledore had been right about everything. Dumbledore makes a Portkey staring at him in the face the whole time, and Fudge tells him it's against the law. "Oh, yeah, what law would that be?" "Well, Portkeys law." So yeah, it was beautiful to see Dumbledore's natural authority just asserting itself. He's not even saying to Fudge, "No, I have authority here and you don't." Fudge just sort of trails off. Dumbledore makes the Portkey and tells him to withdraw the Ministry from Hogwarts. It's been the withdrawal of the SNAP benefits that has been affecting me this past week. In this year 2025, there have been so many catastrophic things

happening and I don't always cry over most of them, but that one's been having me crying. 'What the heck are you doing? Start SNAP again!' Dumbledore deigns to promise Fudge half an hour of explanation before he goes back to people who deserve his time.

**JC:** But the fact that there is someone who is going to take the government aside and say, "Here's what's happening," and that that's going to fix everything...

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** That's a fantasy. Yeah, like you said before, the truth matters here, and that when the people in charge see the truth or are put in a position where they have to accept the truth... There are just so many things here that I'm like, 'Oh, my God, what's that like?' Do we live in a world -- I feel like I lived in a world where I believe that was true. I don't know now if it ever actually was true, but I feel like I lived in a world that felt like this. This part, the first time I read this twenty years ago, felt like this is what would happen.

**Lorrie:** Yes, it did.

**JC:** And now it's completely a fairy tale. You can go to these people and say, "Here are all the facts, here's the proof," and there's no guarantee that anything will come of that. The fact that this is going to fix things for now is just like, 'Oh, my God.' I am angry. I think I understand Voldemort now.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Yes. The first several times I read this, this chapter showed us a place that was worse than I could imagine us being in, and the resolution of this chapter (where things went back to rights because people had to stop lying to themselves) felt plausible as well as celebratory.

**JC:** Right.

**Lorrie:** Oh, yes, of course that's what would happen. Thank goodness that charade is over. Thank goodness Dumbledore exercised a power that we also have through avenues such as the Supreme Court to say, "No, this is the truth and you have to stop your bullshit. Everybody knows the real truth." This chapter end is one of the clearest markers that we're in a significantly darker stage in the U.S. than the *Harry Potter* series is here.

**JC:** I think that I kind of just realized that this entire time, I have been reading this as Fudge just suppressing the information about Voldemort being back. Fudge knew Voldemort was back and he was just suppressing it to cling to his own power or maybe he was actually working for Voldemort, or hoping that if he just paved the way for Voldemort, he would be rewarded like the current Speaker of the House of the United States. But this scene actually kind of upends what I thought was happening, and it was actually much more innocent.

**Lorrie:** Yes.

**JC:** He really didn't believe it.

**Lorrie:** And I had noticed that about your reading.

**JC:** Oh, my God! I could not believe that this political leader would just be in denial.

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** It was like, no, it must be something more sinister.

**Lorrie:** Right. Everybody we see all the time already knows and they're completely cynical, and they're doing it anyway.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yes, these Republican Congresspeople who are not reporting to work know perfectly well that their own constituents are going to starve.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Showing them what's happening is not going to change anything, because underneath those human masks, they're just monsters. I don't know what. No, Fudge is just ignorant. He has let himself hope; he has lied to himself because the truth was too scary, so he chose to cling to his fantasy and it was easily disproven by reality.

**JC:** That's what's making me wonder: who else in the Ministry? Is Umbridge in that category? Was Umbridge also, like Fudge, completely in denial of reality? It isn't like this doesn't happen.

**Lorrie:** They don't care about Voldemort.

**JC:** All the people that were... Yeah, I guess. I'm trying to figure out who knew and was using it to their advantage rather than was fighting because of it.

**Lorrie:** I think in-universe, the answer is that very few people believed it, and the ones who did said, "No, Harry Potter is correct, Voldemort truly is back. What's coming ahead for all of us is way worse than you want to think, and remember that war from ten years ago that you thought was over forever? It wasn't, and it's going to be like that again. I know nobody wants to hear that, and they would rather kill me than admit that." It's easier to point to those people as crazy and dismiss them because nobody wants to go back to that. I guess the analogy that I think works is if there's a COVID upsurge and the people who recommend putting on a mask then get penalized for it, that surprisingly does not stop a virus from transmitting itself, but you can make the people who are knowledgeable about this suffer before you go get COVID again. It's just that people don't want to face what terribleness this is and how bad it's going to be.

**JC:** Yeah, And hey, we definitely see that in our world, too, and I feel that for sure. I also prefer to go through my day with as little thinking about the reality as possible, because I don't think I could function if I did. I wouldn't be able to do the shit I need to do...

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** But here we are, until it hits a point where you just have to. You can't deny it anymore, or you can't put it aside anymore or not let it rule your life anymore.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. It's not a choice for many people, but for Umbridge, it is a choice. Is it more important to sigh and admit reality and go ahead and fight it, or is it more important to go after and punish the people who brought the truth to light? Here's Fudge changing from one of those kinds of people to admitting defeat, saying, "No." He can't anymore. Fudge objecting to everything Dumbledore's doing right now is beneath Dumbledore's notice.

**JC:** And there's still hope at the end of this chapter that things are going to be... 'set right' is not the right way of saying it, but it's ticking up, right?

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**JC:** That's the part that I'm also kind of like, 'Oh...' So as of the time of this recording --

**Lorrie:** It's confusing, isn't it?

**JC:** Yeah, So as of the time of this recording, a week ago today were the No Kings version 2 protests. My kiddo and I went and we held our signs and we did the march, but all the speaking that was happening before and after... One thing I noticed that was so interesting was all of these speakers got up and talked about how important it was to vote, and I could just see the crowd around me deflate a little bit more every time they said that.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** My child in particular... The sign came down and they just kind of stood there looking defeated, because we all know that that's a fantasy at this point that we're going to be able to vote our way out of this. Not that it's not important to vote, obviously, but that's not going to be enough, I really believe at this point. It wasn't until there was a speaker later on who basically said (and it uplifted the crowd again), "Look, voting... we need to vote. We need to do that civic duty, but we also need to accept that there are things that we're not going to be able to change by voting, and the only way to change that is on-the-ground organization. You have got to go join an organization, you've got to get out in your community, you have to organize, you have to... That's what's going to make a difference now," and that's when the crowd started to get enthusiastic again.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. 'Thank you for acknowledging...'

**JC:** 'Okay, thank you.' Yeah. Oh, that feeling...

**Lorrie:** "And do not stop voting."

**JC:** Yeah. "Do not stop voting, but don't think that's going to save us, because it ain't enough anymore," and I feel like we're kind of heading that way in this story.

**Lorrie:** Oh, yeah. One thing a friend of mine from Chile has been writing -- someone who has lived through some horrific autocracies -- is reminding American friends, "You still have a democracy to protect. It's not gone yet. There is still something to protect." That's true at the same time that we have to recognize that things are worse than we foresaw or some of us foresaw.

**JC:** And got worse. There's these spurts of it getting worse.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** It's not a steady decline. They'll be this sudden drop of, 'Oh, shit, I think this just got so much worse in 24 hours. How did that happen?' Then it'll be kind of more of a slow decline for a while and you'll think, 'Okay, maybe we can recover,' and then it'll drop again. It just keeps happening over and over.

**Lorrie:** You just have to keep rebuilding.

**JC:** Oh, man.

**Lorrie:** So we have Harry here to speak for us because Dumbledore sends Harry back to Hogwarts, where we know that Harry's going to be safer. Harry is "past caring what he did next or where he went."

**JC:** Yes, indeed.

**Lorrie:** That kid... He has been through a lot this night. Are you ready to exhale?

**JC:** Yeah, I think so... And we have two more chapters.

**Lorrie:** The next chapter is called The Lost Prophecy, and it's one of those 'Dumbledore explains everything, but does he?' kind of chapters.

**JC:** 'But does he?' But also, the fact that there is still a grown-up who can explain things at all...

**Lorrie:** Well, we will find out that he explains as much as he can, and then there are things that are so awful that he can't. He takes on himself the responsibility and guilt of knowing that he is still withholding things, some of them because they're too awful to say. I love grown-ups. I love grown-ups. Well, talk to you next week.

**JC:** All right.

**Caroline:** You've been listening to Harry Potter After 2020 with hosts Lorrie Kim and JC. You can find show notes for this and all other episodes at [HPAfter2020.com](http://HPAfter2020.com). There, you will also find ways to support the show, contact the hosts and more. If you like what you heard, consider giving us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. Harry Potter After 2020 is produced and edited by Lorrie Kim and Caroline Rinaldy. Original music was composed by C.L. Smith. Thank you for listening.