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CURATED PORTFOLIO

NARRATIVE DESIGN

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#1 — The Hanging Tree

QUEST DIALOGUE for my solo-developed RPG project, [ROSETIA: A First Contact Simulation](#)

[Other ROSETIA-related content (design doc, worldbuilding, etc.) can be found in my [complete portfolio](#).]

GAME CONTEXT:

ROSETIA is a conversation-based RPG in which the PC must convince the denizens of an alien world (a race of tortoise-aliens with symbiotic gardens on their backs) to establish diplomatic relations with humanity.



SUMMARY:

A young political activist cuts down a single old-growth tree (a heinous crime in Tortan society), hoping it will start a revolution led by the player. They are instead jailed, and the PC has to decide whether or not to intervene. In a shocking twist (!), the activist is sentenced to replace the tree by violently growing a new one upon their back via a ritual that will surely tear apart their body. Does the player condone this execution (which the jailor insists is an ecstatic experience), or do they use their ship's tractor beam to liberate the

activist, risking their reputation with the elders whose support they'll need to succeed in their mission?

SKILLS SHOWN: This piece demonstrates...

- **Natural exposition** filtered through character opinions
- **Endearing characters** designed to evoke player sympathy
- Dynamic, **player-driven dialogue options** (i.e. not simple questions)
- **Ethical scenarios** carefully designed to evoke “choice agony”

[For ease of reading, this excerpt follows a **single critical path** through **four dialogues** with **two NPCs**.
Additional options and branching paths are outlined, but not fully explored.]

CONVERSATION #1:

OVERWORLD:

The player comes across a fallen tree. Beside it stands a Tortan 'police box': a pit built into the ground with a mirror angled above it to reflect light inside. Above the hole floats a non-diegetic speech bubble displaying text in RUNESTAMP, a Tortan language from a foreign continent.



NPC DESCRIPTION:

Within the hole sits TRAVELLER HEARTH, a tortan (university age) dressed in thick blue sleeves with star patches, marking them as an obvious foreigner amongst the blood-red buildings of the STRIP. The character's belief in industrialization is ironically subverted by their excitable personality, which plays into the stock character of the 'counter-culture activist' (naïve, radical); they are a young liberal advocating for interests that would, in our world, be conservative.

TRAVELLER (NPC):

"Oh, by the confluence of the constellations! You actually came! The alien! This is— This is—"

As the stutters continue, they begin to hyperventilate.

"This is— em— embarrassing."

The young tortan hides their head behind the hump of their shell and shuffles into the corner of the pit, facing away from you. Your *ROSETTA* translation system picks up a small infrasound frequency, which it renders as a whisper:

"... the blue moon retreats, the tide recedes... the red moon retreats, the tide recedes... be still, little Traveller... all is calm..."

After a moment, the blushing young tortan turns around and tries to resume the conversation as if nothing happened.

"I— I am pleased to confirm, my esteemed alien envoy, that a leafy titan is dead. Felled, by my hand."

They straighten their neck and raise their chin high.

"It lies still upon the forest floor as a portent of destruction, revolution: no longer will the young lie prostrate before the false green idols. No... we will tear them from the soil and cast them alight into the mighty hearth of progress! By soot and smoke, the tortan race shall ascend to the stars!"

They relax, suddenly breaking character.

"... Wi— with your permission, of course."

PLAYER OPTIONS:

1. "All I'm picking up here is that you really hate trees."
2. "I have no idea who you are, but I like your energy."
3. **"I'm no xenopsychologist, but it sounds like you need one."**
4. "It is suddenly very obvious to me why you were put in a hole."

TRAVELLER:

"My stars. The alien is not only wise, but understanding! Your empathy would be a boon to the people of this land, somehow deluded by their elders into thinking—*you would not believe, truly*—that each plant has... a soul. Can— Can you imagine? A conscious tree?"

They pause, clearly waiting for... something. A laugh? Can tortans even laugh?

PLAYER:

1. "Everyone's entitled to their beliefs."
2. "I know! Craziest thing I've ever heard."
3. "Haha. Ha."
4. **Say nothing.**

TRAVELLER:

"... You are right. It is not funny. It means they award respect to mindless things at the expense of real people. They eke out a meager existence on the bare hillsides, slowly shaping homes from dirt and branches over generations—all to preserve a lie?"

"So much of the earth is frozen, or else blinded by light. I had never seen a tree until I first left home. Yet here, in the *one* place life may thrive—it all goes to waste."

"How far might we be, if this land's abundance was used for the benefit of us all? Perhaps it would be *us* visiting *your* world, instead?"

"I... I would like to see another world."

PLAYER:

1. "The old elders on my planet wrecked the biosphere by enabling mass deforestation. I think your leaders have the right idea."
2. **"You're overselling the squalor these people are living in. They have sprinklers, man. A lack of free lumber hasn't kept them from developing, however slowly."**
3. "While you shouldn't be clear-cutting forests, it'd be silly to not use them at all. Why shoot yourself in the foot for the sake of imaginary beings?"
4. "You're right: the planet is a resource that must be harvested. The lives of all trees and elders are forfeit."

TRAVELLER:

"But it should not be so slow! The limitations are all self-imposed, I—"

Their face flushes with shock and embarrassment, like a child realizing they've spoken out of turn.
"My— My apologies, my envoy. You are our light, our guiding star. I should not have..."

PLAYER:

1. "Yes, grovel before me!"
2. "It's okay—I already know how great I am. Just keep going."
3. **"You shouldn't treat me like some superior being. I'm just a person, shouting into a hole. And you're just a person. Who happens to *be* in a hole."**

TRAVELLER:

"Oh, I... I merely assumed that to travel the void and visit our world, your people would require intellects far surpassing our own. It is... strange to hear otherwise."

PLAYER:

1. "I didn't mean to humble myself that much. I have a very cool spaceship. You have permission to think I'm cool."
2. "Now you're getting it. Humans are idiots, just like everybody else."
3. **"I'm going to pretend you didn't just call me stupid. Why exactly do you want to industrialize the world, again?"**

TRAVELLER:

"Oh. It's just... I think I would like to be a mother, somemoon. To bear sprouts of my own. And if I do, I want them to live in a better world than this one. I don't *really* want to tear it apart, but its trees and forests—they are *not* more important than tortan lives."

"Is this not why you came? To bring us the future we have not yet made for ourselves?"

PLAYER:

4. **"I'm only here to share human knowledge. It's up to your people to act on it."**
5. "I'll help if I can, but what helps is often a matter of opinion. Intervention can't be forced upon those who don't want it."
6. "You're right. I want to change this world. But if I'm not careful about it, you won't be the only one stuck in that hole."

TRAVELLER:

"But... but that's not who you were supposed to be. Even if you are not by nature wiser than us, you have experience, technology. I told everyone you were here for change. That if I felled the idols you would set the path. You would lead me, lead the revolution, you—"

They begin to hyperventilate again.

"Y—You didn't come here to save me, d—did you?"

PLAYER:

1. "Uh... I just wandered over here."
2. "I'm sorry, but I don't think things went the way you wanted them to."
3. "Wait—you told everyone I was a part of this?"
4. **"The blue moon retreats and the tide recedes..."**

TRAVELLER:

The young tortan looks up with confusion, then recognition, and then closes their eyes.

"The red moon retreats and the tide recedes... be still, little Traveller... all is calm..."

They take deep, shaky breaths as their gaze falls to the floor.

"They'll extradite me for this. Strip the plants from my back and ship me home... but... because of the sunspot, there won't be anyone to receive me. I—I'll freeze to death."

PLAYER:

1. **"Do you know that for sure? Let me at least find out if it's true."**
2. "I may not have come here to save you, but I can now."
3. "I'm sorry, but I don't want to be an accessory to this crime. If you still believe in my mission, you'll help me clear my name."

TRAVELLER: "I... I don't know who you'd need to talk to. The lawspeaker, maybe. Or Wetroot, though I hope they're not rendering judgment. I may have ranted at them as they performed rites for the fallen tree... Oh, stars!"

[CONVERSATION ENDS]

CONVERSATION #2:

NPC DESCRIPTION:

WETROOT EARTHSEED (age-related epithet: PRIMEVAL), an elder Tortan. They are not wearing clothes (*not* a social faux-pax in tortan society) and their shell is overflowing with unkempt plants (flowers, leaves, mosses) to suggest a deep connection to nature. The implication of a 'wildman' personality is subverted by a calm, eloquent speaking voice.

WETROOT (NPC)s:

"Ah! The visitor from the skies..."

The elder cranes their neck to stare at your backpack.

"It is true, then. Not a single life upon you, yet still, untethered from the earth, you live and breathe. I am the Primeval Wetroot Earthseed, speaker for the land, and your light is a gift to me... I only regret that I see it over a corpse."

They pause to collect themselves, overcome by the kind of unfathomable grief one can only feel for a big plant.

"My apologies. I haven't seen a true elder felled in three generations. We all return to soil, of course, by wind or tide or time. But by the hands of a person? It is... unnatural."

PLAYER OPTIONS:

1. "I'm so sorry for your loss."
2. "You can't seriously be talking about the tree, right? It's wood."
3. "I owned a succulent once. I think I understand what you're going through."
4. **"The actions of the turtle in the hole do not represent me."**

WETROOT:

They sigh, relieved.

"I am heartened to know that the spirit of life, and reverence for it, shines even in lands beyond our own. That some would use the discovery of new life to justify their destruction of the old... I cannot understand it. Perhaps I have merely forgotten what it means to be young: that desperate need to define yourself apart from the wisdom of those who came before. Doubtless, sprouts like young Traveller would protest with or without your coming. I ache for them."

Wetroot solemnly nods towards the pit.

"How do they fare?"

PLAYER:

1. "Traveller is ready to die for the revolution."
2. "They're putting on a brave face, but they're clearly afraid of being exiled."
3. **"You're going to strip their back and leave them in the snow to die. I don't think they're particularly jazzed about it."**

WETROOT:

They gasp.

"Do they really think us capable of such things? I do not know what depravities Traveller's people enact on one another, but in the middle world we are not so hardened by ice and shadow.

Restitution, rehabilitation: these bring justice. If you steal from a garden, you must work the garden. If you injure another, you must care for them. In doing so, you understand the harm you have caused."

PLAYER:

1. "That seems sensible. The elders of the middle world are truly wise."
2. "By that logic, Traveller's punishment should be to plant a tree!"
3. **"That's a nice thought, but some crimes can't be rectified. And those who commit them are rarely eager to assume responsibility."**
4. "I'm not here for an ethics debate, I just want to make it clear I had nothing to do with this."

WETROOT:

"Among your kind, that may be true. If it is, you have my sympathy. But we are not human. I have never known a criminal unwilling to rid themselves of the title, nor an elder council incapable of giving them the means to do so. It takes time, of course, to weigh circumstance against precedent, but an elder's good judgment cannot be rushed."

PLAYER:

1. "Wait—how much time, exactly?"
2. "If what you're saying is true, humans might have something to learn from your people."
3. "It sounds like, without juries or codified laws, your criminals are entirely subject to the subjective whims of those passing the sentence. In this case, a bunch of old coots."
4. **"This all seems a little sanctimonious for someone who threw a kid in a pit and called it a day."**

WETROOT:

They sigh.

"You are right, envoy. While I was only summoned after their interment, to render judgment on behalf of the forest, Traveller is my responsibility all the same. All I can do now is ensure their verdict meets my ideals."

Wetroot pauses, as if marshaling the voice of the very land they claim to represent.

"While the murder of an old-growth, a true elder, is a tragedy beyond measure, beyond words, let it not be said that its fellows are without mercy. Traveller will be given a gift: a second chance at life. They are charged simply with replacing the plant they have felled, to better understand what they have taken from the world."

PLAYER:

1. "Wait—really? They just have to replace the tree?"
2. "I still don't understand why everyone's so flustered over a tree, but that doesn't sound like much of an inconvenience."
3. **"That's... surprisingly reasonable."**

WETROOT:

Wetroot gently sticks out their tongue—the closest tortan equivalent to a smile.

"I am glad you think so. While the other elders will say that a dark outsider should not be granted such an honor, I will not see our grief perverted against a misled child. It would dim us all irrevocably."

PLAYER:

1. "Thank you."
2. **"I'll go tell let Traveller know."**

WETROOT:

"Wait—I have a request. Might you speak by my side as I make my judgment known? It may discourage those like Traveller from committing such crimes in the future."

PLAYER:

1. "Yeah, sure. I don't know if humanity's reputation can survive another tree-cutter."
2. "I'm not really comfortable making public pronouncements."
3. **"I want to talk to Traveller first."**

WETROOT:

"If you return to them again, knowing what they have done, others may see it as a statement of support for their cause. But I understand wanting to give them the pleasant news. Return to me when you are ready."

[CONVERSATION ENDS]

CONVERSATION #3:

TRAVELLER:

You see Traveller sitting upright, arms extended, drawing spirals in the soil at the bottom of the pit. They barely raise their head as you approach.

"Do you have any news?"

PLAYER:

- **"Wetroot isn't going to exile you. You'll be okay. You just have to replace the tree you felled."**
- "I had some questions, actually..."
 - "Did you mean to commit your crime directly next to a public jail cell, or was that just a happy accident?"
 - "How did you end up here, so far from home?"
 - "Do you not have anyone else on the Strip that can advocate on your behalf?"
- "Still working on it." [END CONVERSATION]

TRAVELLER:

Traveller's face lights up. They rise from the floor, stick out their tongue, and then—

"Wait... D—Did they say I have to *plant* a new tree? Or that I have to *replace* the tree?"

PLAYER:

- "I don't see the difference."
- "I can't be expected to remember these things. *Replace*, I think?"

- **“Wetroot said you would be given a second chance at life. That by replacing the plant, you’d come to understand what you took from the world.”**

TRAVELLER:

The young tortan’s eyes go dead. Stunned. After a long, long moment, Traveller speaks.

“Do you know where the Greenwoods are? The garden in the h—heart of the city?”

PLAYER:

- “It’s where I first landed. You should know that.”
- “Unfortunately, I have an astronaut’s sense of direction. Don’t know up from down. You’ll need to remind me.”
- **“Lots of trees, long shadows. Lovely place to read a book.”**

TRAVELLER:

“I—I thought so too, when I first got here.”

...

“It’s a graveyard. Within every tree is a corpse.”

PLAYER:

- **“You know what? That tracks.”**
- “It’s odd that they made a cemetery into a park, but every culture has its own methods of burial.”
- “Every day I discover more gross things about your people. No offense.”

TRAVELLER:

Traveller sighs.

“Here, on the Strip, the dead are only buried partly. Their shell remains above the soil, facing the sun, so their plants may continue to grow as the body decomposes.”

“For people like Wetroot, this is a kind of... religious process. So they hasten it by implanting Earthsbane—a fast-growing parasitic tree, bred to thrive off tortan flesh.”

“They will give me this plant while I still breathe. They will chain me to the ground, and— and watch as it splits my shell apart. Eating me. Enveloping me.”

“I will be the replacement for the tree.”

PLAYER:

- “Well... that’s fucking horrifying.”
- **“Wetroot talked about your sentence as if it were a gift, as if you’d be happy. Are you sure this isn’t just dogma coloring in your perception?”**
- “I could be wrong about Wetroot’s words. My translation database isn’t complete. ROSETTA’s still figuring out your language.”

TRAVELLER:

"I know the landspeaker. This... this is their crusade. It is not a mistake."

...

"I... I won't be having those sprouts after all, will I?"

PLAYER:

- "You will. I'm not going to let this happen." [INTERFERE; FREE TRAVELLER]
- **"I just can't believe this. Let me talk to Wetroot again."**
- "I'm sorry. If I never came here, this wouldn't have happened."
- "I tried to help, but I never asked you to cut down that tree. You knew what you were doing, and you need to accept responsibility for it."

[END CONVERSATION]

CONVERSATION #4:

WETROOT:

"Ah, envoy. I take it young Traveller was pleased? Whenever you are ready, we can begin our public address."

PLAYER:

- "I'm ready." [BEGIN ENDORSEMENT]
- "You're going to mutilate someone for cutting down a goddamn tree? What the hell is wrong with you?"
- **"Please tell me this is just a big misunderstanding and you're not going to turn my new friend into a plant."**
- "I won't interfere in your justice system, but you intentionally misled me about Traveller's punishment."

WETROOT:

"Turn them into...?"

The landspeaker purses their lip, confused.

"Ah! I see.."

"In the hidden places Traveller hails from, far from the light, the people cannot sustain anything more than mosses upon their backs. They do not know the ecstacies of true symbiosis with another life. And so ignorance has led them, and you, astray."

"To host a tree, and give yourself over to it entirely... it is not death. It is the melding of being, the creation of a new and better kind of life. Traveller will actually experience their own spirit reforming and reconstituting itself in nature."

PLAYER:

- “You’re not going to listen to any kind of rational argument when it comes to your religion, are you?”
- “This is insane. Spiritual energy, the melding of being... Homeopaths are more convincing.”
- “Even if that’s true, it’s wrong to force something so radical on someone who doesn’t want it. Find another punishment.”
- **“I’m sure the people actually forced to undertake this process are less complimentary about it. How can I be sure about all this?”**

WETROOT:

“I assure you it is true, as I have seen it myself. I have talked to the ascetics, suspended in their trees, having made the change willingly. They had no regrets. And one day I shall join them. I am only sorry, by virtue of your strange biology, that you will never experience it for yourself.”

PLAYER:

- “If you can give me some non-anecdotal evidence for this, I might be convinced.”
- “I assume I can’t go and talk to these ascetics? You know, on account of them being dead?”
- **“This still seems pretty barbaric to me.”**

WETROOT:

“What else would you have me do? What kind of sentence would they issue for this crime on your world? For the taking of a life?”

PLAYER:

- **“On my world, it isn’t a crime. People cut down trees all the time.”**
- “Well, for the destruction of public property, people usually are usually sentenced to community service.”
- “For the deliberate murder of another person, you might spend most of your life in prison. But again, we don’t see trees as people.”

WETROOT:

“If that is true, then your people are truly lost. That, or the biology of your trees is just as queer as your own.”

PLAYER:

- “I hadn’t considered that. This world has an entirely different chemistry. Maybe your trees truly are conscious.”
- “I still don’t agree with this punishment, but I’m not going to stop it. Let’s do the address.”
[BEGIN ENDORSEMENT]

- “As a diplomat, it’s not my place to interfere. But I’m not going to sanction an execution.”
[END QUEST, NO ENDORSEMENT]
- **“I’m stopping this.”**
- “I need time to think about this.”

WETROOT:

“If you do, I shall not raise a hand against you. What resistance might I muster against a ship such as yours? However, I promise that every member of the Frond will know what you’ve done.”

[END CONVERSATION]

FINAL OUTCOMES

1. PLAYER ENDORSES TRAVELLER’S PUNISHMENT

- Player enters another conversation with Wetroot, who asks questions from an audience perspective to clarify the reasons for the player's endorsement; what player says will determine the amount of reputation (i.e. GOODWILL) points awarded with the elder faction
- Screen fades to black, teleporting player to scene of the implantation ritual; for dramatic effect, growth of tree is near-instantaneous; animation shows Traveller calling out in pain, being mutilated as the tree grows through them
 - If player initiates follow-up conversations with Traveller, they will learn through conversation that it has actually become a pleasurable, enlightening experience; however, Traveller is very clearly losing all sense of self
 - If another conversation is initiated after a set period of time (two in-game days), Traveller will only be capable of communicating through moans

2. PLAYER CONDEMNS TRAVELLER'S PUNISHMENT BUT DOES NOT INTERFERE

- Player loses no GOODWILL points
- Traveller’s fate remains the same

3. PLAYER INTERFERES TO FREE TRAVELLER HEARTH

- If player talks to Traveller again, and agrees to save them, screen fades to black; player’s shuttle moves over the jail pit; tractor beam animation as Traveller ascends upward, then fade to black
- Player enters another conversation with Traveller, mid-flight, to clarify where Traveller wants to be set free. There are two options:
 - 1. The outskirts of the city
 - 2. Traveller’s home country (if the player has visited the Starside Observatory) [Leaves Traveller available for follow-up conversations at this location]
- Player loses significant amount of GOODWILL points with the elder faction

#2 — Deadushka **SHORT STORY** (2354 Words)

SUMMARY:

An old Russian man refuses to die and shuffles his own corpse around town to the consternation of nearly everyone. Told from the perspective of his grandson Gregor, a reluctant caretaker who goes to increasingly dramatic lengths to ensure his grandfather is put in the ground.

SKILLS SHOWN: Ability to...

- Craft a **meaningful narrative** with a **clear and compelling arc** of events
- Write **humor** (satire, wordplay, farcical imagery)
- Balance comedy with more serious **interpersonal drama** and **social commentary**

TEXT:

The morning after his 74th birthday, Iosif Stolyarenko woke up dead. He found this rather inconvenient, as he had not planned to die. He had planned instead to wake up precisely at dawn, hobble towards his radio-set, and howl for his grandson to prepare his morning tea (taken black), as the arthritis had long ago rendered him incapable of operating his Kashmiri kettle. This was his routine. From there he would hobble through the village market howling at strangers about his hatred of stairs, or the discourtesy of the sun's glare, or else about how everyone in the old Imperial army would be walking around with faces full of shrapnel were it not for him, spitting out chunks of metal into their morning porridge.

"Egads," they'd supposedly say. "Praise be to Stolyarenko, glorious carpenter, temporary savior of the empire!"

The old man had spent most of his twenty-year retirement pontificating about such escapades. His favorite unsolicited story was that of Galicia, where in a single day he fashioned a barricade over two hundred yardsticks high, a trench two hundred yardsticks deep, and an inter-continental ballistic missile only two yardsticks wide (despite the obvious anachronism). This he would say while popping tobacco snuff on his porch and petting his darling Anastasia—a whimpering, tumor-stricken terrier named after his late wife, which he insisted on keeping alive despite its myriad sufferings.

The task of caring for Stolyarenko fell unfortunately upon his grandson, Gregor, as his daughter Ivanka was too old herself to look after him. Even if she had retained some vitality into her middle age (which she hadn't, on account of the pneumonia), she would not have lifted a finger.

"Bless your babushka's wandering soul," she'd say to Gregor, "when I was a babe, that man never once cleaned my crap. I will not clean his now."

In an effort to pass on his duties, Gregor sought out caretaker after caretaker from the village, each demanding a higher wage than the last. It was all for naught, however, as none could long bear the affliction that was Solyarenko. The man himself, notorious for his thrift, could likewise not bear the expense of burdening a stranger with his care when he could easily burden his family for free. In his day, he often said, working women expected no more than a handful of rubles and a slap on the bum. Gregor asked for neither. Unable to bear the squalor of communal housing in St. Petersburg, Gregor had no choice but to accept no more than the musty childhood bedroom he once called his own.

This was the duty of a Russian son, and he expected nothing of it. He would wake before dawn to change the station on Stolyarenko's radio, or clean the dog's various fluids, and he would do so with no hope of recognition, nor promise of a government-mandated inheritance.

"Like the Tsars and Pharaohs before him," Gregor said (often in tears), "dedushka will carry what little he owns into eternity. He will see his home decay and his meager horde burn before ever acquiescing to the grave or the state."

The only foolish dream Gregor and his mother allowed themselves was that one day he would die, as all men do in their time. Like an old-growth tree, Stolyarenko was girthier and more grizzled than any man had any right to be. And so, when it came to light that he was just as cancerous as his beloved dog, Ivanka and Gregor awoke each morning in anticipation of his felling.

Stolyarenko, however, was not so keen on the idea of his death. He had already sacrificed so much: his youth, his dreams, his hands. All upon the altar of a long-dead nation. He had earned the right to sit on his money and do absolutely nothing of consequence.

And so, on the morning the cancer finally took him, Stolyarenko simply decided he would not go. His heart had stopped, but his will beat stronger, and it drove him to continue with his daily routine of news shows and loose-leaf tea, death be damned.

When Gregor finally entered the parlor sometime later, he found his dedushka. The old man was nestled in his favorite recliner, radio in his lap, almost unequivocally dead. His terrier, Anastasia, had already begun stripping the flesh from his heel as he stared into space, pale and indifferent. At this Gregor felt a strange tug in his heart. A feeling he could not describe. It was, however, soon replaced with the very recognizable feeling of disappointment, as he noticed Stolyarenko's hand still fiddling with the knobs on the radio. As if sensing the presence of his favorite grandson, the corpse turned his head, cracked his lips with a smile, and expectantly raised an empty porcelain teacup. After a beat, he thumped his fist against his chest and spat out a murky chunk of his own black lung, which landed very neatly inside the glass.

How rude, Gregor thought.

After waking his mother, the two absconded to the kitchen for hugs and a brief discussion of strategy. There they ruled that, while their dedushka was free to ignore his own death, he was, nevertheless, still dead. In the eyes of both God and the state, they had no moral or legal obligation to entertain his delusions. And so they decided to believe that Stolyarenko had passed peacefully during his sleep, and they would go about their lives as if it were really true.

To start, Gregor's mother covered every mirror in the house—a traditional funerary practice. She was not a superstitious person by nature, but it was well known in those days that after a death, the first to see themselves reflected in a mirror would be the next to die. And so Ivanka went carefully from room to room with a dishrag over her eyes and tablecloths in her arms. This she did not for herself, but for her son, who did not believe in the old magic.

Befitting his personality, Gregor gave himself a far more practical task: grappling the great rotting heartwood that was his dedushka. By then the old man's head had taken on a bluish hue as the remainder of his blood settled into his lower abdomen, but this did little for his hot-headed nature. After rising from his recliner and adjusting his suspenders, he swung his arms wildly at Gregor, who struggled in vain to push his grandfather in the direction of the morgue.

"Deda, please!" Gregor said as the old man assumed a squatting position. "Why can you not be decent?"

Ultimately, Stolyarenko would not be felled. He outmatched his progeny in both military training and sheer girth. He was thus free to go about his daily death with reckless abandon, spreading pestilence in everything he touched.

He went for his Tuesday bath in the nearby spring and contaminated the village water supply.

He fed his toes to pigeons in the park while polishing cataracts from his enucleated eyes.

He remedied the lack of available seats at the local kabak by burping a torrent of methane gas in the direction of his favourite booth.

He examined the artisan cheeses at the local food market by hand, holding each truckle towards the light at various angles, and then returned some days later to buy them all on discount, as the resulting mold seemed to bother him very little.

For many days it was like this, Stolyarenko happily hacking his lungs into the street and walking ever lighter with each rib fed to his terrier. In many ways, he came to see death as a new kind of life. No longer did he have to endure the endless tonics from dear Gregor, as he was now incapable of digesting them. No longer did his joints ache, as his nerves felt no sensation of any kind.

Gregor's life, however, was remarkably unchanged. He had wasted much of his twenties reluctantly doting upon Stolyarenko, and now he found himself doting still, wiping up bile and stray teeth so the man could continue berating children in the park without inconvenience. If Gregor could not convince his grandfather to go, he thought, perhaps someone else could.

The village doctor, to his credit, admitted that Stolyarenko's current state was very untoward and that he was, indeed, dead. "However," he said, "with his army pension, I see absolutely no reason he shouldn't live a long and happy afterlife." The doctor then got out his pen and scribbled a referral to the local embalmer, along with a prescription for a bottle of formaldehyde. "To be applied topically," he said, nodding solemnly at Gregor.

At this prospect, Gregor and his mother were particularly aghast. They felt, reasonably, that people who have died should at least have the decency to decay. Carrion should not carry on in such a manner. And so they ran to the switchboards for help, telephoning the local soviet, the magistrate, the militsiya—anyone of importance.

Stolyarenko knew all such men from his army days, however, and delighted in the realization that many of them were dead as well, and impeccably embalmed. Together they pretended to drink black tea and reminisced about all the men in their company who likewise refused to die, even under direct orders to do so.

They instructed Gregor to pour the wasted tea into the garden, and as Gregor did so, it struck him that so much of the pestilence of his country could be explained by the simple fact of these dead men. Those who took his youth, who told him what to do and who to love. When he died he would take his place among them, and together they would go on and on, hobbling over the old decay with boney stumps.

Rot upon rot.

In that moment Gregor knew, for his mother and himself, that he would have to act.

It was fortuitous, then, that on the fortieth day—the day of his embalming appointment—Stolyarenko found himself unable to arise from his bed due to the remarkably late onset of rigor mortis. All through the house his familiar moans rang until, finally, Gregor was at his side.

"Carry me," the old man said.

Gregor stood defiant at his grandfather's shattered visage, steeling his resolve. Rejected, Stolyarenko quickly turned to his daughter Ivanka, who was still very much recovering from her pneumonia.

"Carry me," he said. "It will take the both of you."

For this final iniquity, Gregor wordlessly left the room. A moment later he returned stringing the garden hose along behind him. With it, he blasted the old man with a torrent of water, starting at his waist, then downward, until all the remaining flesh had been stripped from his legs. Amid Stolyarenko's groans and his mother's protests, Gregor yanked a thick white tablecloth from the closest mirror, wrapped it tightly around his grandfather, and secured the package with a belt.

Dedushka was finally light enough to be carried alone, Gregor thought. And so he would carry him. Not to the embalmers, but down the street to the Orthodox Church.

There the priest immediately demanded an explanation for the sinful language that was erupting from the rug, and upon looking inside found himself quite aghast at their putrefying patriarch. Not for the fact of his death, but for the impropriety of it. And so the old man promptly received a lecture on his Christian responsibility to properly die.

"How else will you be resurrected?" the priest said.

When he bent over to better shame the dedushka, the old man seized the opportunity to kick him in the mouth with his bare skeleton leg. For this heresy, the holy man ran off to alert the local bishop while shouting verses from Revelation.

Thus Gregor took it upon himself to grab a spade from behind the altar and dig a hole in the corner of the church graveyard. It faced east, toward the rising sun. His mother prepared the traditional funerary dish of boiled wheat and fruits, which they ate in silence after setting the cadaver in the grave. Far too much had been said about their dearly undeparted over the past several weeks, they reasoned; the screams now issuing from his grave would be eulogy enough.

Ivanka left soon after eating, as she was unable to help with the internment and unwilling to watch idly as her son buried her father. The dog also needed to be fed, and she felt it was only right that Anastasia partake of the wheat as well. This left Gregor to carry out the last rites alone. As he shoveled clumps of dirt back into the hole, he muttered something about dust and ashes.

"Open wide, O earth, and receive him that was fashioned from thee."

Once the cries were muffled and the ground reasonably level, Gregor made the sign of the cross and produced a pot of consecrated black tea. With this he anointed his grandfather's new tomb, saturating the loose soil with darkness.

For many days and months did Dedushka Stolyarenko lie within the earth contemplating his new place in the totality of things. When he awoke in the morning, he heard nothing. When he slept at night, he saw nothing. In truth, his eyes had rotted through his sockets some time ago, but on account of the darkness, he had little way of knowing. While he was not entirely happy with his predicament, the consistency of his days soon became a comfort, as they were his comfort before. As the years went by he melted away into the

surrounding soil, tendrils of him growing out in all directions, giving forth to new life. It was good to not be bothered, he thought. It was good to once again be of use.

On the day of the arbitration for his grandfather's estate, Gregor awoke precisely at dawn, just as he always had—stirred not by the blare of the radio or the whine of the kettle, but by the sound of absence. The stillness of morning.

He did not fall back asleep.

#3 — Tom Riddle and the Mirror of Erised

CREATIVE IMITATION of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* by J.K. Rowling (3359 Words)

SUMMARY:

Harry and Dumbledore relive the professor's memory of Voldemort's encounter with the Mirror of Erised. This sparks an argument over Harry's frustration with his headmaster's mistakes, and unwittingly reveals that Harry's own chance encounter with the Mirror was anything but chance. Written as a 'lost chapter' exploring threads established earlier in the novel.

SKILLS SHOWN: Ability to...

- Perfectly **emulate an established writing style** (diction, imagery, description)
- Work within and **expand upon an existing IP** (plot, themes)
- Intuitively **adopt character voices** (sound, cadence, sentence structure)
- Construct scenes through dynamic back-and-forth **character dialogue**

TEXT:

Harry broke the cool silver surface of the memory and fell once again through darkness. They were standing in an unused classroom, desks and chairs piled high against the walls, and on the other side of the room, rising towards the ceiling, Harry saw something he recognized at once—

An ornate, golden mirror, standing on two clawed feet. It all was exactly as he remembered it. Had they fallen into Dumbledore's memory of that night?

'I don't understand, sir. What does this have to do with Voldemort?'

'Ah, so you recognize where we are, then?'

Harry turned towards the doors, expecting to see himself barrelling through in his invisibility cloak.

'My first year,' Harry said. 'I was running away from Filch and Sna— Professor Snape, and I found it. The mirror.'

Dumbledore stood for a moment, marshaling his thoughts, and then said, 'Hogwarts is a very old and exceptionally vast place, Harry. Hidden chambers, hallways and dungeons, all folding in on one another ... parts of it go unchanged for centuries. This room, for example, has not been in proper use for a hundred years.'

Harry thought back to that evening, to the two of them sitting on the floor together. ‘You said... hundreds before me had discovered the Mirror of Erised.’ Then it dawned on him. ‘You don’t mean...?’

Dumbledore smiled. ‘Your memory does you credit, Harry. I would advise you to look at this one a little more closely.’

Facing the mirror — in a spot that had been very empty a moment ago — was a head of hair much neater than Harry’s, but still the same blazing dark black.

Harry walked towards him, slowly, and Dumbledore followed. With each step, Tom Riddle seemed to back further and further away from his reflection. His expression hardened, finely carved features contorting into the same terrible face Harry had seen in the orphanage. But then his lip quivered slightly, and then his hands, and for the first time Harry saw color in Voldemort’s pale, hollow cheeks.

Tom Riddle was crying.

He didn’t make a sound, nor lose his composure entirely, but it was unmistakable. As far as he knew, he was alone, and unseen, and — however faintly — he was crying. It then occurred to Harry that possibly no one had ever watched Voldemort while he believed himself to be alone.

Harry turned toward Dumbledore for an explanation, but before he could open his mouth — Dumbledore spoke.

‘Fine evening for a stroll, is it not?’

The younger, auburn-haired Albus Dumbledore revealed himself, sitting calmly on the desk nearest the mirror.

All trace of sadness on the young Voldemort’s face vanished, replaced by shock. He clenched his jaw and turned white — a face that reminded Harry of the one he would see years later in Little Hangleton.

‘*You were watching me,*’ he said, his voice ringing with incredible force. Dumbledore had caught him again, unprepared and entirely exposed. ‘*You shouldn’t do that.*’

Dumbledore appraised him, smiling. ‘Nor should you be outside the dorms after dark. Yet here we are, both of us. I believe I told you, Tom, that this type of behavior would *not* be tolerated at Hogwarts.’

As if recognizing the situation for the first time, Riddle’s face went blank, suppressing whatever personality he’d mistakenly allowed Dumbledore to see. ‘Of course, sir. I’m sorry, professor.’

‘*Are you?*’

Riddle seemed to purposefully avoid Dumbledore’s eyes, staring far beyond the mirror. The stains of tears still glistened on his cheeks, but he did not dare wipe them away in Dumbledore’s presence.

‘How’d you do it?’ he said.

‘How did I ... become invisible?’ Dumbledore laughed. He did not seem to mind the evasion. ‘I have ways of concealing myself. Though I suspect that answer will not satisfy you. It is called a Disillusionment Charm. Not something you would learn in your classes for many years.’

Riddle nodded.

'I find it strange, Tom, that your curiosity would extend to a common charm, yet skip entirely over the unique and far more powerful magical object before you,' Dumbledore said, nodding towards the mirror. 'I apologize for the invasion of privacy, but are you not surprised, as I am, at what is reflected within?'

Riddle flashed a clear, calculating look into Dumbledore's brilliant blue eyes. He grinned widely. 'You can't see what I see.'

'Ah. What makes you say that?'

'You looked at the mirror,' he said, quickly returning his gaze to the floor. 'Pretending. The place you looked — there's nothing there.'

'Very astute, Tom. Can you make any other guesses, about the mirror?'

Riddle thought for a moment and smiled, his features becoming somehow less human. 'You made it for me. Nobody would leave an object so unique and powerful, like you said, just lying around to find. You made it for me, to find out what I would see. But the magic wasn't good enough, so you don't know.'

Dumbledore straightened up on his desk. 'I am afraid,' he said, 'that you are completely wrong. The Mirror of Erised was not forged for you. It is far more ancient than you or I — older, perhaps, than Hogwarts itself. It shows us what we desire. What would, in our deepest hearts, make us happy.'

While Dumbledore was right, Harry thought, Riddle did have a point: it *was* odd that he had simply *happened* upon the Mirror, that Dumbledore just *happened* to be watching. Harry had not thought much of it at ten years old, but now, watching the scene play out again...

'Come, Tom, let us speak plainly to one another,' Dumbledore said. 'If you tell me what you see, I shall tell you what I see, hmm? Does that seem fair? I imagine us more similar than you think.'

If he was startled by Dumbledore's comments, Riddle did not show it, though his voice was suddenly softer than Harry had ever heard it. With careful, measured hesitation, he said, 'I'm head boy. And I've gotten Outstanding on all my N.E.W.T's.'

Dumbledore brought a hand to his long, auburn beard. 'Hmm. Somehow I suspect you are not being entirely truthful, Tom. That you will achieve those things, I have no doubt, but your performance in school matters to you far less than you would have the other teachers believe. Am I wrong?'

'You *are*,' he said. 'I worry, about my future.'

'You have already lied to me once tonight, Tom. And such poor lies, too, that I wonder whether your heart is really in it. Whatever his faults as caretaker, I do not imagine Mr. Pringle would fail to notice a first-year wandering around the library past midnight. It would take a powerful Disillusionment charm to make it here undiscovered.'

'I'm afraid, sir, that —'

'Please, Tom,' Dumbledore interrupted. 'Would it surprise you to hear me impressed? Sixth Year magic in your first year ... and it is not yet Christmas. Of course, it is not a particularly difficult spell in its simplest

forms — we merely delay its instruction. You can imagine the chaos, I am sure, of young students as invisible as they are irresponsible, walking the halls as they wish. Young Gryffindors, even! The mere thought of it...'

'Professor?'

'Yes, Mr. Riddle?'

Voldemort rose from the floor to meet him. 'I believe Professor Slughorn will want a word with me.'

'Quite right,' Dumbledore said, giving the boy one last, long look. He gestured towards the door. 'If you would allow me the honor of escorting you back to Slytherin house...'

Riddle stepped past him, eyes hiding in his feet, as the scene faded into darkness.

'I thank you for indulging me this evening, Harry.' The white-haired Dumbledore spoke quietly, pulling them back through the veil. 'I believe that's enough.'

As Harry opened his eyes in the Headmaster's office, he saw that Dumbledore had already slumped heavily into his seat.

'I don't understand, Professor. What did Voldemort see in the mirror?'

Dumbledore sighed. 'Of that, I cannot be certain. As you saw, I took every reasonable effort to coax it out of him, but I knew that if Voldemort did not see something to gain from telling me he would not do so. You were a great deal more forthcoming in your experience of the mirror. Though I say so only as a credit to you, Harry. You, unlike Voldemort, had nothing to fear within yourself.'

'Could you not read his mind? Or use Veritaserum?'

'On a child, Harry? No. He was a student, then — not a monster. I was curious, nothing more. As for Legilimency, you'll notice that Voldemort was deliberately avoiding my eyes: an act that many others would have interpreted as embarrassment, but to me seemed very clearly in recognition of my skill. I do not imagine he knew proper Occlumency then, or even for some time. As we know, Voldemort is fiercely independent. He does not rely on others, and certainly not for his education. At the same age you were transfiguring goblets into mice, Voldemort was each night sequestering himself in the Restricted Section, teaching himself the magic his professors would never dare show him. I believe he would have loathed the idea of seeking out an Occlumency teacher. It would mean allowing another to probe his mind, his secrets, his ambitions. However inexhaustible the power of books, there are a great many lessons which can only be taught by another.'

Harry remembered his own difficulties with Occlumency. For weeks Snape had poked around his head, his scar burning ever more deeply after every lesson. As strange as it was to say, he understood why Voldemort might have had misgivings about taking on a teacher.

'But were you able to read his mind at all, sir?'

'Yes and no,' Dumbledore said. 'You will recall I had only one brief moment of sustained eye contact with Tom Riddle.'

‘... When he was trying to figure out where you were looking in the mirror.’

‘Correct. I confess that was a feint on my part, to draw him in. And it worked. Nevertheless, I still found him a most difficult mind to read. The layers of deceptions he employed — which, curiously, he found difficult to maintain in my presence — were not merely outward masks, but personas, false beliefs. Much of what you would learn in true Occlumency training I suspect Voldemort was predisposed to by his very nature. Though I was able to enter his mind with relative ease, I cannot be certain of anything gleaned from it.’

‘Do you mean ... Voldemort might have shown you something fake?’

‘In a manner of speaking, yes. I may have seen only what he wished for me to see. Though I will tell you, for whatever it is worth.’ Dumbledore paused for a moment. ‘I sensed *shame*.’

Shame? Harry didn’t know what to think.

‘That was all?’

‘Often times an emotion, strong and pure, can reveal far more about a person than any veiled secret. You were hoping, I suppose, for something more incriminating? Legilimency may interface with the mind, Harry, but that does not always make it a mind *game*.’

‘But sir, it just doesn’t make sense. What you felt, what we saw on his face ... isn’t the mirror supposed to show us what would make us *happy*?’

‘For some, perhaps — at least those less burdened — the mirror may present so simple a vision. But Harry, did you not feel a great deal more than happiness, staring into the glass?’

Harry remembered the ache he felt seeing his family for the first time. How he wanted to be with them so terribly he brought his head to the mirror, hoping to pass through to the other side. He would have returned every night, had Dumbledore not stopped him.

‘This is the power and menace of the Mirror of Erised, Harry. It shows us what would make us happy and in doing so hurts us, that we are without it.’

‘So again: what did Tom Riddle see in the mirror?’ Dumbledore continued, ‘Himself, the next Dark Lord, master of muggles, unopposed and undying? Perhaps. He *wants* those things, certainly. They drive him. But remember, Harry, that our deepest desires are not always known to us. Discovering them in the mirror and knowing them to be true, even when they conflict with such waking dreams — it can be a painful experience. Tom Riddle, who has never known true warmth or love, who has never cared for another nor received care in kind ... it does not surprise me, that he was frightened by what he saw.’

Harry stared. ‘Professor,’ he said, ‘It sounds like you’re saying we should feel sorry for Voldemort. That whatever he saw in the mirror suggests he’s not so evil after all.’

‘You should pity him, at least. If only for your own sake.’

Dumbledore looked to the window and stared sadly out at the stars.

'I have shown you this memory not that you might better understand Voldemort — though it may well serve that purpose — but for far more selfish reasons. In hope that you could forgive me for what I did. Or, rather, what I failed to do.'

Dumbledore rose from his desk and paced slowly to the center of the room, his back turned toward Harry. 'You have been wondering why I was not more cautious with Tom Riddle.'

It was not a question.

'Last we spoke,' he continued, 'I told you I had resolved to excuse his theft, his torture, to let him start at Hogwarts anew, and saw on your face — no shame in admitting it, Harry — a look of *incredulity*.'

Harry did not want to speak against Dumbledore, but the thought had occurred to him more than once. 'It's just ... he was here, sir! At Hogwarts. And it was obvious what he was.'

'Was it so obvious?'

'We saw it, at the orphanage! And like you said, he was studying dark magic in his first year, and you *knew* about it, but...'

'But I didn't do anything?'

'I know you were watching him. And I know everyone *else* liked him, didn't suspect, but ...'

'You will recall that I *did* see him punished for his late-night wanderings. On more than one occasion.'

Harry shifted in his chair.

'But I see your position, of course. *Dumbledore*, once again too trusting of those already proven untrustworthy. *Dumbledore*, who spoke of love, regardless of the cost. Perhaps you are right, in the case of Tom Riddle. In fact, you *are*. However, you regard his life in hindsight, Harry, knowing what he would become, what he would take from you. I had no such luxury. I saw instead a troubled boy still with the power to choose — to *choose* who he would become, Harry! I would not deny him that chance.'

'But he kept choosing the wrong things!' Harry said. 'You *gave* him a chance, and he used it to sneak around and lie — you saw that in the memory!'

'Sneaking and lying are not so terrible sins, Harry. As you yourself know.'

Harry sunk a little deeper into his chair. Dumbledore began pacing.

'In the memory you saw a young boy who, as I said, had never known love. A young boy *alone*, staring at the object of his deepest desire. A young boy *without* the masks Lord Voldemort has long worn in the company of others. And in this privacy, this vulnerability — he was *crying*. What conclusion would you come to?'

Harry hated to admit it. 'That maybe there was more to him ... something he didn't want anyone else to see. That he lied to you because he was ... *ashamed*.'

'Precisely, Harry. Much about Tom Riddle concerned me, of course, but after this I imagined that within him there must be another Tom Riddle, a *softer* Tom Riddle, however damaged, however hidden. That he might change with time. How could I indict him for crimes unproven, an *intent* to do harm? I couldn't, Harry.'

Dumbledore held his charred, grizzled hand up to his face.

‘And what a grave mistake. Hopelessly, foolishly naïve.’

Harry fell silent, staring at Dumbledore as the headmaster fell back into his chair. He seemed so much smaller.

‘You are right, of course,’ Dumbledore said. ‘The other professors all saw in Voldemort what he meant for them to see — a kind, eager, exceptionally gifted young man — and I alone saw through it. I watched as he gained power, tried his strength, inched towards what he would always become, and all along — I knew. How many souls maimed, how many families torn apart, all because I failed to act — to take the proper course of action, whatever the cost to myself!’

Harry did not expect Dumbledore to take his side, nor did he expect to suddenly find their roles reversed, saying, ‘You cared, sir! There’s nothing wrong with that. You knew where he’d come from, and what he’d gone through, and you hoped he would be better!’

‘But again, Harry, however decent my intentions — the results, the consequences! It was not too long ago that my care for *you*, my concern for *your* safety, *your* future, kept me from doing what was right!’

The room went quiet. Harry remembered the argument they’d had here last summer, all the broken glass and trinkets, how furious he’d been at Dumbledore. And now here he was, defending the headmaster’s mistakes.

Harry opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

‘An old man’s failings, yet again,’ Dumbledore said. ‘I let a duty of care take precedence over my duty.’

‘... It’s no use beating yourself up about it now, sir.’

‘As usual, you are quite right, Harry. Dumbledore straightened his back, collecting himself. ‘Quite right.’

Harry was at a loss. He decided to change the subject, not wanting to make Dumbledore any more upset. ‘Sir? Can I ask you a question?’

Dumbledore smiled faintly. ‘Obviously, you’ve just done so,’ he said, tired eyes sparkling through his half-moon glasses. ‘Though you may ask another.’

‘It was no mistake that I found the Mirror of Erised, was it?’

‘Ah,’ Dumbledore sighed. ‘No, Harry, it was not. You were, shall I say, *pulled* there by a magic far greater and subtler than any you might learn at Hogwarts.’

‘... Why?’

‘I was curious, nothing more. Riddle, in his case, truly did stumble upon the mirror. I suspected he might be sneaking around, and followed him, but with you ... when I passed on your invisibility cloak all those years ago, I saw it as an opportunity for an innocent experiment.’

‘You were testing me,’ Harry said.

‘I would not put it so bluntly,’ Dumbledore said, ‘but yes. Professor McGonagall had told me good things, of course, but I had to meet you to know for certain. And a means of comparison never hurts. You have proved yourself the better man to Voldemort by far. However — and please do not take this the wrong way — I believe your experiences were more similar than you might like to believe.’

‘... I’m not sure I understand, sir.’

Dumbledore rose from his seat, gesturing for Harry to do the same.

‘When the time comes, Harry — when you are forced to do what I failed to accomplish — remember that he was once not so different from you or I. Remember that while he cannot love, and cannot show empathy, that does not make him unworthy of it.

‘And now I must bid you good night,’ he said, pointing Harry towards the exit.

However, as Harry stepped through into the staircase, closing the study door behind him, he stopped.

‘Professor,’ he said.

Dumbledore looked up from his far desk, gaze still heavy. ‘Yes, Harry?’

‘When we met for the first time, I asked you a question. And I’m not sure I ever received an honest answer.’

‘You wish to ask me — *again* — what I see in the mirror?’

Harry nodded, sheepishly.

‘Well, Harry, I could not say. You see, this Christmas I received an immaculate pair of flannel socks from Professor Sprout. It seems my wish has been answered.’

Dumbledore smiled, and gave a little wave.

‘Goodnight, Harry.’

Harry sighed. ‘Goodnight, professor.’