



# HARRY POTTER AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY

VOLUME V

CHAPTERS 88-96



BY ELIEZER YUDKOWSKY

Based on the characters of

**J. K. Rowling**

and her books:

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Year One at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

Year Two at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

Year Three at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

Year Four at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

Year Five at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

Year Six at Hogwarts

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

Year Seven at Hogwarts

*Something, somewhere, somewhen, must have happened differently...*

PETUNIA EVANS married Michael Verres, a Professor of Biochemistry at Oxford.

HARRY JAMES POTTER-EVANS-VERRES grew up in a house filled to the brim with books. He once bit a math teacher who didn't know what a logarithm was. He's read *Godel, Escher, Bach* and *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* and volume one of *The Feynman Lectures on Physics*. And despite what everyone who's met him seems to fear, he doesn't want to become the next Dark Lord. He was raised better than that. He wants to discover the laws of magic and become a god.

HERMIONE GRANGER is doing better than him in every class except broomstick riding.

DRACO MALFOY is exactly what you would expect an eleven-year-old boy to be like if Darth Vader were his doting father.

PROFESSOR QUIRRELL is living his lifelong dream of teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, or as he prefers to call his class, Battle Magic. His students are all wondering what's going to go wrong with the Defense Professor this time.

DUMBLEDORE is either insane, or playing some vastly deeper game which involved setting fire to a chicken.

DEPUTY HEADMISTRESS MINERVA MCGONAGALL needs to go off somewhere private and scream for a while.

Presenting:

HARRY POTTER AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY

You ain't guessin' where this one's going.

All text taken from <http://www.hpmor.com>.

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# CHAPTER 88

## TIME PRESSURE, PT 1

April 16th, 1992.

12:07pm.

Lunchtime.

Harry stomped over to the mostly-deserted Gryffindor table, determining at a glance that lunch today was breen and Roopo balls. The ambient conversation, Harry could likewise hear, was Quidditch-related; an auditory environment which rated somewhat worse than the sound of rusty chainsaws, but better than what the Ravenclaw table was still *blithering* about Hermione. Gryffindor House, at least, had started out less sympathetic to Draco Malfoy and had more political incentive to wish that everyone would just forget certain unfortunate facts; and if that wasn't the right reason for silence, it was at least silence. Dean and Seamus and Lavender were all gone for the holidays, but at least that left...

"What was all that ruckus at the Head Table?" Harry said to the Weasley-twin group-mind, as he began to serve himself his own plate. "It looked like it was just ending as I walked in."

"Our beloved, but clumsy Professor Trelawney -"

"Seems to have gone and dropped an entire soup tureen on herself -"

"Not to mention Mr. Hagrid."

A quick glance at the Head Table confirmed that the Divination Professor was waving her wand frantically as the half-Giant dabbed at his clothes. Nobody else seemed to be paying much attention, even Professor McGonagall. Professor Flitwick was standing on his chair as usual, the Headmaster seemed to be absent again (he'd been gone most days of the holiday), Professors Sprout and Sinistra and Vector were eating in their usual grouping, and -

"You know," Harry said, as he turned his head away to stare at the ceiling illusion of a clear blue sky, "that still creeps me out sometimes."

"What does?" said Fred or George.

The powerful and enigmatic Defense Professor was 'resting' or whatever-the-heck-was-wrong-with-him, his hands making fumbling, hesitant grabs at a chicken-leg that seemed to be eluding him on the plate.

"Eh, nothing," said Harry. "I'm not quite used to Hogwarts, yet."

Harry continued to eat in moderate silence, as various Weasleys discussed some bizarre mind-affecting substance called Chudley Cannons.

"What sort of deep mysterious thoughts are you thinking?" said a young-looking witch with short hair, sitting nearby. "I mean, just curious. I'm Brienne, by the way." She was gazing at him with one of those looks which Harry had firmly decided to just ignore until he was older.

"So," Harry said, "you know those really simple Artificial Intelligence programs like ELIZA that are programmed to use words in syntactic English sentences only they don't contain any understanding of what the words mean?"

"Of course," the witch said. "I have a dozen of them in my trunk."

"Well, I'm pretty sure my understanding of girls is somewhere around that level."

A sudden hush fell.

It took a few seconds for Harry to realize that, no, the entire Great Hall wasn't staring at *him*, and then Harry twisted his head around to look.

The figure who'd just staggered into the Great Hall appeared to be Mr. Filch, Hogwarts's token hallway monitor; who, along with his predatory cat Mrs. Norris, constituted a low-level random encounter whom Harry often breezed past wearing his epic-level Deathly Hallow. (Harry had once consulted the Weasley twins about pulling some sort of prank on this deserving target, whereupon Fred or George had quietly pointed out that Mr. Filch was never seen to use a wand, which was odd, really, considering how many spells would be useful in that position, and it made you wonder why Dumbledore had given the man a position at Hogwarts, and Harry had shut up.)

Right now Mr. Filch's brown clothing was disarrayed and soaked with sweat, his shoulders were visibly heaving as he breathed, and his everpresent cat was missing.

"Troll - " gasped Mr. Filch. "In the dungeons - "



Minerva McGonagall stood up from the Head Table so quickly that her chair fell to the ground behind her. " *Argus!* " she cried. "What happened to you?"

Argus Filch staggered forward from the huge doors, his upper body streaked and dotted with small crimson dots as though someone had spattered steak sauce over his face. "Troll - grey - twice as tall as me - it - it - " Argus Filch covered his face with his hands. "It ate Mrs. Norris - ate her all up, in just one bite - "

Minerva felt a stab of dismay in her other self, she hadn't liked the other cat very much but the two of them had still been felines.

An uproar started from the Great Hall. Severus stood up from the Head Table, somehow doing so without drawing any visible attention to himself, and strode out the huge doors without another word.

*Of course*, Minerva thought, *the third-floor corridor - this could be a distraction -*

She mentally consigned all such matters to Severus's care, drew her wand, raised it high, and let out five sharp cracks of purple fire.

There was stunned silence but for Argus's broken sobs.

"It seems we have a dangerous creature loose in Hogwarts," she said to the faculty at the Head Table. "I will ask you all to aid in searching the halls." Then she turned to the stunned and watching students, and raised her voice. "*Prefects - lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!*"

Percy Weasley leaped up from the Gryffindor table. "Follow me!" he said in a high voice. "Stick together, first-years! No, not *you* - " but by that time the other prefects were raising their own voices as a renewed babble sprang up.

Then a clear, cool voice spoke under the sudden rush of sound.

"Deputy Headmistress."

She turned.

The Defense Professor was calmly wiping off his hands on a napkin as he stood up from the Head Table. "With respect," said the man of unknown identity, "you are not expert in battle tactics, madam. In this situation, it would be wiser to - "

"I do apologize, Professor," said Professor McGonagall, as she turned toward the great doors. Filius and Pomona had already risen to follow her, with Rubeus Hagrid towering over all of them as the half-giant stood up. She'd been through similar experiences too many times, at this point. "Sad experience has taught me that

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on occasions such as these, it is not a good time to take any advice the current Defense Professor may offer. Indeed, I think it wise that the two of us search for the troll together, so that no suspicions may be cast upon you for any untoward events which occur during that time."

Without any hesitation, the Defense Professor swung smoothly on the Gryffindor table and clapped his hands with a sound like a floor cracking through.

"Michelle Morgan of House Gryffindor, second in command of Pinnini's Army," the Defense Professor said calmly into the resulting quiet. "Please advise your Head of House."

Michelle Morgan climbed up onto her bench and spoke, the tiny witch sounding far more confident than Minerva remembered her being at the start of the year. "Students walking through the hallways would be spread out and impossible to defend. All students are to remain in the Great Hall and form a cluster in the center... *not* surrounded by tables, a troll would jump right over tables... with the perimeter defended by seventh-year students. From the armies only, no matter how good they are at *duelling*, so they don't get in each other's lines of fire." Michelle hesitated. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hagrid, but - it wouldn't be safe for you, you should stay behind with the students. And Professor Trelawney shouldn't confront a troll on her own either," Michelle sounded much less apologetic about this part, "but if she's paired with Professor Quirrell the two of them together can form an additional trusted and effective battle unit. That concludes my analysis, Professor."

"Adequate, for being put on the spot," the Defense Professor said. "Twenty Quirrell points to you. But you neglect the still simpler point that *home* does not mean *safe*, and a troll is strong enough to rip a portrait door off its hinges -"

"Enough," Minerva snapped. "Thank you, Miss Morgan." She looked to the watching tables. "Students, you will do as she said." Turned back to the Head Table. "Professor Trelawney, you will accompany the Defense Professor -"

"Ah," Sybill said falteringly. Beneath her overdone makeup and mess of shawls, the woman looked rather pale. "I'm afraid - I'm not entirely well today - indeed, I feel rather faint -"

"You won't have to fight the troll," Minerva said sharply, her patience taxed as usual when dealing with the woman. "Just stay with the Defense Professor and do not let him out of your sight for an instant, you must be able to testify afterward that you were with him at all times . " She turned to Rubeus. "Rubeus, I am leaving you in charge here. Keep them safe." The huge man straightened at this, losing his glum look and nodding proudly to her.

Then Minerva looked at the students, and raised her voice. "It should go entirely without saying that anyone leaving the Great Hall *for any reason*, will be expelled. No excuses will be accepted. Am I understood?"

The Weasley twins, with whom she'd been making direct eye contact, nodded respectfully.

She turned without another word and marched off toward the hall doors with the other Professors behind her.

On the far side of the room, unnoticed on the wall, a clock showed 12:14pm.



...and he still didn't realize.

*Tick.*

As Harry stared with narrowed eyes at where the Professors had gone out, wondering what was actually going on and what it meant, as the students came together into a more defensible mass and wands flicked to levitate the tables out of their way, Harry still didn't realize.

*Tick.*

"Shouldn't the Professors *all* have formed up into pairs?" said an older Gryffindor student whose name Harry didn't know. "I mean - it'd be slower, but it'd be safer, I think -"

*Tick.*

Someone else replied to this, raising her voice, but Harry didn't catch much of it, the gist was that mountain trolls were highly magic-resistant and incredibly strong and could regenerate but they were still *noisy* so if you heard them coming, it shouldn't be that hard for a Hogwarts Professor to wrap them up in Vadam's Unbreakable something something.

*Tick.*

And Harry still didn't realize.

*Tick.*

The crowd noises were subdued, people were talking in low voices to each other while they glanced around, listening for the sound of a crashing door or an angry roar.

*Tick.*

Some students were speculating in whispers about what the Defense Professor could possibly be trying to achieve by smuggling in a troll, and whether he was angry that Professor McGonagall had caught on to his attempted distraction, and what it was a distraction *from*.

*Tick.*

And the thought still didn't come to Harry, not until after all the students had formed a mass of perhaps a hundred bodies patrolled by proudly grim-looking seventh-year-students with their wands all pointed outward, and somebody suggested doing a headcount, and someone else replied sarcastically that this might have made sense on some other day, but right now practically everyone was gone for the spring holiday and nobody really knew how many students were supposed to be in the room, let alone if any were missing.

*Tick.*

That was when Harry wondered where Hermione was.

*Tick.*

Harry looked over at where the Ravenclaws had clustered, he didn't see Hermione but then everyone was packed tightly-enough together that you wouldn't expect to see smaller students through the crowd, amid the upper-years.

*Tick.*

Harry then looked over at the Hufflepuffs to see if he could spot Neville, and even though Neville was standing behind a much taller student, Harry's visual processing managed to spot him almost immediately. Hermione wasn't with the Hufflepuffs either, not that Harry could see - and she certainly wouldn't be with the Slytherins -

*Tick.*

Harry pushed his way through the packed crowd, stepping beside or around older students and in one case just ducking between their legs, until he was standing among the Ravenclaws and could definitely verify that, nope, no Hermione.

*Tick.*

"Hermione Granger!" Harry said loudly. "Are you here?"

Nobody answered.

*Tick.*

Somewhere in the back of his mind was a rising sense of horror, as other parts of him tried to decide exactly how much to panic. The first Defense class of the year was rather fuzzy in Harry's mind, but he distantly remembered something about trolls being able to track prey that was alone and undefended.

*Tick.*



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Another track of thought searched frantically through inchoate possibilities, what could he *do* exactly? It wasn't 3pm yet so he couldn't reach this *now* using his Time-Turner. Even if he could sneak out of the room - there had to be some way to put on his Cloak without being noticed, some sort of distraction he could use - he had no idea *where* Hermione was, and Hogwarts was huge.

*Tick.*

Another part of his mind tried to model possibilities. From what that other student had said, trolls weren't *silent* predators, they were noisy -

*Hermione won't have any idea it's a troll, so she'll go investigate the noise. She's a heroine, isn't she?*

- but Hermione now had an invisibility cloak and a broomstick in her pouch. Harry had insisted on that part for both her and Neville, and Professor McGonagall had told him it'd been done. That ought to be enough to let Hermione get away, even if she was lousy on a broomstick. All she had to do was get onto a section of roof, it was a clear day and sunlight was supposed to be bad for trolls somehow, Harry remembered that part and therefore Hermione would remember it exactly. And surely, even if Hermione wanted to prove herself again, she couldn't possibly be dumb enough to attack a mountain troll.

*Tick.*

She wouldn't.

*Tick.*

That just wasn't *her*.

*Tick.*

And then it occurred to Harry that somebody had previously tried to frame Hermione Granger for murder using Memory Charms. Had done so inside Hogwarts, without setting off any alarms. And had arranged for Draco to die slowly enough that it wouldn't set off the wards until at least six hours later when nobody could use a Time-Turner to check. And that whoever was clever enough to infiltrate a troll past the ancient wards of Hogwarts without the Headmaster coming to investigate the strange creature, could be clever enough to *also* take the obvious step of jinxing Hermione's magic items...

*Tick.*

There was a part of him that felt something like slowly rising panic as perspective shifted, a Necker Cube changing orientation, what the *hell* had Harry been thinking, letting Hermione and Neville be kept inside Hogwarts just because of them being given a few stupid trinkets, that wasn't going to stop anyone who wanted to *kill them*.

*Tick.*

Another part of his mind put up resistance, that possibility wasn't *certain*, it was complex and the probability could easily be under 50%. It was easy to imagine going into a huge panic in front of everyone and then Hermione getting back from the washrooms outside the Great Hall. Or if the troll ended up not going anywhere near her... like in the story of the boy who cried wolf, nobody would believe him the next time if she really was in trouble; it could use up reputational credit that he would later need for something else...

*Tick.*

Harry recognized an instance of the fear-of-embarrassment schema that stopped most people from ever doing anything under conditions of uncertainty, and squashed it down hard. Even then it was strange how much willpower it took to muster the decision to shout out loud in front of everyone, if he just hadn't seen Hermione in the crowd it was going to be embarrassing...

*Tick.*

Harry drew in a deep breath and shouted as loudly as he could, "*Hermione Granger! Are you here?*"

The students all turned to look at him. Then some of them turned around to look around themselves. The noise around the room went down in volume as some conversations stilled.

"Has anyone seen Hermione Granger since - since around ten-thirty today or so? Does anyone have any idea where she might be?"

The background babble stilled further.

Nobody raised their voice to shout anything at him, in particular not, *Don't worry, Harry, I'm right here.*

"Oh, Merlin," somebody said from nearby, and then the background babble started up again, taking on a new and excited tone.

Harry stared down at his hands, shutting out the yammering and tried to think, think, *THINK* -

*Tick.*

*Tick.*

*Tick.*

Susan Bones and a redheaded boy with a battered-looking wand both shoved their way through the crowd to Harry at the same time.

"We've got to let the Professors know somehow -"

"We've got to go find her -"

"*Find her?*" Susan snapped, rounding on the other boy. "How'll we do *that*, Captain Weasley?"

"We'll go off and *look* for her!" Ron Weasley snapped back.

"Are you nuts? There's already Professors searching the hallways, what makes you think we've got any better chance than them of running across General Granger? Only *we'll* get eaten by the troll! And then expelled!"

It was odd, how sometimes hearing bad ideas made the right idea obvious by contrast.

"*All right everyone! Listen up!*"

People turned to look.

"*QUIET! EVERYONE! SHUT UP!*"

Harry's throat ached after that, but he had everyone's attention.

"I have a broomstick," Harry said as loudly as he could manage with his throat still hurting. He'd remembered Azkaban, and the broomstick which had only sat two, when he'd requested one that could carry three. "It's a 3-seater. I need one seventh-year from the armies to come with me. We're going to fly through the hallways as fast as possible looking for Hermione Granger, pick her up, and come back immediately. Who's with me?"

The Great Hall became entirely silent, then.



Students glanced at each other uneasily. The younger students looked expectantly at the older students, while they in turn turned to look at the students who were guarding the perimeter. Most of those were staring straight ahead, pointing their wands just in case the troll picked that moment to burst through a wall.

No one moved.

No one spoke.

Harry Potter spoke again. "We're not going to *fight* the troll. If we see it we'll just fly away and there's no way it'll be able to keep up with us on a broomstick. I'll take responsibility for squaring it with the administration. *Please.*"

People went on looking at other people.



Harry stared at the silent crowd, the dozen seventh-years looking sternly outward, feeling the coldness coming over him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Professor Quirrell was laughing scornfully and mocking the idea that ordinary fools would ever do something useful of their own will, without a wand pointed at their heads...

*Tick.*

The standard remedy for bystander apathy was to focus on a single individual. "All right," Harry said, trying to keep the commanding voice of the Boy-Who-Lived who didn't doubt obedience. "Miss Morgan, come with me, now. We've got no time to waste."

The witch he'd named turned from where she'd been staring steadily out at the perimeter, her expression aghast for the one second before her face closed up.

"The Deputy Headmistress ordered us all to stay *here*, Mr. Potter."

It took an effort for Harry to unclench his teeth. "Professor Quirrell didn't say that and neither did you. Professor McGonagall isn't a tactician, she didn't think to check if we had missing students and *she* thought it was a good idea to start marching students through the hallways. But Professor McGonagall *understands* after her mistakes are pointed out to her, you saw how she listened to you and Professor Quirrell, and I'm certain that she wouldn't want us to just ignore the fact that Hermione Granger is *out there, alone* -"

*Tick.*

"I'd expect the Professor to say she'd not wish any more students roaming the halls. The Professor said if anyone left for any reason, they'd be expelled. Maybe *you* don't need to worry because you're the Boy-Who-Lived, but the rest of us *do*!"

*Tick.*

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Professor Quirrell was just laughing at him. Expecting some *normal* person to act without perfect strategic clarity, without a clear focus of responsibility on them personally, when they had a *good excuse to do nothing*... "A student's life is at stake," Harry said in a level voice. "She could be fighting the troll right now. Out of curiosity, does that mean anything to you at all?"

*Tick.*

Miss Morgan's face twisted. "You - you're the Boy-Who-Lived! Just go off by yourself and snap your fingers, if you want to help her!"

*Tick.*

Harry was hardly even aware of what he was saying. "That's just cleverness and bluffing, I don't have any power like that in real life, a young girl needs your help *now are you a Gryffindor or not?*"

"Why are you saying any of this to *me*?" cried Miss Morgan. "I wasn't left in charge here! Mr. Hagrid was!"

There was an awkward pause that suffused the whole room.

Harry spun to look up at the huge half-giant towering over the crowd of students, as all other heads also turned toward him as one.

"Mr. Hagrid," Harry said, trying to keep his voice commanding. "You need to authorize this expedition and you need to do it now."

Rubeus Hagrid looked conflicted, though that was hard to judge with his vast head so surrounded by his unshorn beard and locks; only his eyes looked alive, embedded in all that hair. "Eh..." said the half-giant. "I was tol' to keep yeh all safe -"

"Great, now can we also keep Hermione Granger safe? You know, the student framed for *a murder she did not commit* who needs *someone to help her*?"

The half-giant startled as Harry spoke the words.

Harry stared at the enormous man, desperately willing him to pick up on the hint, hoping the words hadn't given it away to anyone else - he couldn't be just muscle, surely James and Lily had been friends with this man out of more than pity -

"Framed?" called out an anonymous voice, from somewhere over near where the Slytherins gathered. "Ha, are you still on that? It'd serve her right if she did get eaten."

There was some laughter, even as cries of indignation came from elsewhere.

The half-giant's face firmed up. "Yeh stay here, lad," Mr. Hagrid said in a booming tone that was probably meant to be gentle. "I'll go and look fer her meself. Truth is, trolls can be a mite tricky - yeh've got to catch 'em by an ankle and dangle 'em just right, or they'll rip yeh clean in half -"

"Can you ride a broomstick, Mr. Hagrid?"

"Eh -" Rubeus Hagrid frowned. "No."

"Then you can't search fast enough. *Sixth-years! Calling all sixth-years! Are there any sixth-years here who aren't worthless cowards?*"

Silence.

"*Fifth years?* Mr. Hagrid, tell them they're authorized to go with me and keep me safe! *I'm trying to be sensible, damn it!*"

The half-giant wrung his hands with an agonized expression. "Eh - I -"

Something snapped inside Harry and he started to stride directly toward the doors to the Great Hall, pushing aside anyone who didn't get out of his way as though they were doughy statues. (He didn't run, because running was an invitation for somebody to stop you.) Somewhere in his mind he was moving through an empty room filled with mechanical puppets by whose meaningless lip-moving noises he'd been *distracted* -

A huge figure interposed itself in his way.

Harry looked up.

"I can't let yeh do that, Harry Potter, not yeh of all people. There's strange things afoot in this castle, and someone might be after Miss Granger - or they might be after *yeh*. " Rubeus Hagrid's voice was regretful but firm, and his gigantic hands lay at his side like forklifts. "I can't let yeh go out there, Harry Potter."

"*Stupefy!*"

The red bolt crashed into the side of Hagrid's head and made the huge man startle. His head snapped around faster than anything that large should've moved, and bellowed, "*What do yeh think yeh're doing!*" at the young form of Susan Bones.

"*Sorry!*" she screamed. "*Incendium! Glisseo!*"

The huge man's hands, now slapping at the fire in his beard, didn't quite manage to catch himself as he crashed to the floor, but it didn't matter by then because Harry was past him and -

Neville Longbottom stepped in front of him, looking desperate but determined, the Hufflepuff boy's wand already level in his hand.

Harry's hand went for his wand in a sheer reflex action, he barely managed to check himself before Neville could fire on him, staring at his Lieutenant as though the world had gone mad.

"Harry!" Neville burst out. "Harry, Mr. Hagrid's right, you *can't*, this could all be a trap, they could be after *you* -"

All of Neville's muscles went rigid and he toppled to the ground, stiff as a board.

A pale-looking Ron Weasley stepped out from behind Neville, his own wand level, and said, "Go."

"*Ron, you madman, what are you doing* -" came a voice distantly identifiable as Miss Clearwater's boyfriend, but Harry was already dashing for the door without looking back, even as Ron's voice and Susan's voice rose again in incantation. There was a huge indignant bellow, and unknown voices began to yell.

Then Harry was through, his hand reaching into his pouch and his voice was saying "*broomstick*", as behind him the great doors began to swing shut again.

Harry continued running through the Entrance Hall even as the long three-person broomstick and its sets of stirrups began to protrude from the pouch, repeating a number of swearwords in his head and thinking *this is what happens when you try to be sensible* with the part of his mind that wasn't trying to figure out a search pattern to cover places where Hermione might be. The Library was on the third floor and practically on the other side of the castle... Harry had almost reached the great marble staircase by the time the broomstick was in his hand and "*Up!*" he was in the air and accelerating up toward the second floor -

"*Gah!*" Harry screamed, and barely managed to spin his broom in the air so that he didn't impale one of the human figures lurking at the top of the stairs. There was a ghastly moment of trying not to fall off the broom, perform the twists that would keep him in the stirrups, despite being really close to the ground and having almost no room to maneuver and then -

"*Fred? George?*"

"We can't figure out how to find her!" one of the Weasley twins blurted, hands twisting in distress. "We snuck out because we thought we could find Miss Granger - there *has* to be a quick way to find anyone inside the Hogwarts castle, we're both sure of it - but we can't figure out what it is!"

Harry stared at both of them, from where he was hanging upside down from the broomstick where his desperate maneuver had brought him, and entirely by reflex his mouth said, "Well, *why* were you so sure you could find her?"

"*We don't know!*" cried the other Weasley twin.

"Have you been able to find people inside Hogwarts before?"

"*Yes!* We -" and the Weasley twin who was speaking stopped abruptly, both redheads staring off into the distance with a blank expression.

There was a thundering crash, as of two huge doors being shoved open by someone very, very strong.

Harry spun around in the air to present the two open stirrup-positions on the broomstick to the Weasley twins, he didn't say anything, there was no reason for them to give away their positions if they didn't have to. Time seemed to move too slowly as the Weasley twins scrambled into the stirrups, Harry's heart beating hard despite his mental calculation that Mr. Hagrid, running, shouldn't reach even the foot of the stairway in time. Then the three of them were accelerating *hard* and away toward the nearest corridor, the stone floor beneath them blurring and the walls seeming to make an audible whooshing sound (though that was just the wind in their ears) as they went past; Harry remembered that he was riding a longer three-person broomstick barely in time to *slow down* for the next turn.

And now all the broomstick seats were occupied, but if they actually found Hermione then - Harry could put on the Cloak of Invisibility, that should hide him from the troll, and that would free up a seat for Hermione -

Harry ducked hard before a sudden archway took his head off.

"We found Jesse!" the Weasley twin seated behind Harry blurted. "I know we did! That time we needed to tell him that Filch was hunting for him!"

"How?" Harry said, most of his brain engaged in not dying in a horrible air accident. He should have slowed down for safety, but there was a tension rising in him, a sourceless dread. He *couldn't* slow down, something terrible would happen if he slowed down...

"We -" said the Weasley twin seated lower down. "We can't remember!"

Another sharp turn taken at, Harry estimated, roughly 0.3% of the speed of light, and they were going through a twisty curving corridor that Harry always took to get from the Great Hall to the library only it *wasn't* the shortest way if you were *on a broomstick*, he should've taken the long straight West Corridor instead -

The part of his brain that wasn't steering caught up with reality.

"Someone's been tampering with your minds!" Harry yelled, as he weaved through the curving corridor so fast that the tail-end Weasley sometimes lightly smacked into the wall as the length of the broomstick conflicted with Harry's maladapted air skills.

" *What?* " cried Fred or George.

"Whoever got to Hermione messed with your minds too!" It could be an Obliviation, it could be a False Memory that hadn't been planted right, but right now Harry couldn't *think* -

The broomstick turned and shot upward beside a spiral staircase, all three of them flattened themselves against the broomstick so they could make in through the gap in the ceiling that opened onto the third floor, and then they were in front of the library, the broomstick slowing to a halt with a shriek despite the lack of anything it could be friction-braking against. Harry shot the Weasley twins a quick glance to *stay put* , as he clambered off the broomstick to shove open the doors of the library, controlling his breathing as he shoved his head inside.

Hermione Granger wasn't there.

Madam Pince, who was eating a sandwich at her desk, looked up with a sudden glare. "Library's closed!"

"Have you seen Hermione Granger?" Harry said.

"I said the library's *closed*, boy! Lunch hours!"

"This is extremely important. Have you seen Hermione Granger or do you have any idea where she might be?"

"No, now be off!"

"Do you have any fast way of contacting Professor McGonagall in an emergency?"

"Eh?" said the librarian, startled. She rose up from behind her desk. "What is -"

"Yes or no. Please answer immediately."

"Ah - there's the Floo -"

"She's not in her office," Harry said. "Do you have any other way of reaching her. Yes or no."

"Young man, I insist that you -"

Harry's brain flagged this as *I'm talking to NPCs again* and he spun on his heel and dashed back for the broomstick.

"Stop!" cried Madam Pince, bursting too late from the doors as Harry and the Weasley twins shot off again, out of the librarian's sight. The pressure in Harry's mind still rising, like a physical hand squeezing his chest, *he had to find Hermione* and he had no other notion of where she could be, unless it was the witches' dorms in the Ravenclaw tower and that he couldn't enter. Searching all of Hogwarts bordered on a mathematical impossibility, there probably was no continuous flight path that entered all the rooms at least once - *why* hadn't he thought to demand for Hermione and Neville and him to be given a set of those neat little mirrors the Aurors used to communicate -

The realization that he was being *stupid* hit Harry like a blow to the stomach. He didn't need mirrors to send a message, he hadn't needed mirrors since January. Harry slowed the broomstick to a halt in midair of a hallway, his wand already coming into his hand, the driving will to *protect Hermione Granger* rising to the front of his mind like a sun of silver fire and flowing down his arm as he cried

" *EXPECTO PATRONUM!* "

and the blazing white humanoid burst into existence like a nova, the Weasley twins' voices crying aloud in shock.

"Tell Hermione Granger - that there's a troll loose in Hogwarts - it could be hunting for her - she needs to get into direct sunlight, now!"

The silver figure turned as though it was departing, and then vanished.

"Merlin's underpants," breathed Fred or George.

## CHAPTER 88

The silver outline blasted back into the world, and said in the strange outside version of Harry's own voice, "Hermione Granger says," the blazing figure's voice became higher-pitched, "*AHHHHHHHHHH!*"

Time seemed to fracture, like everything was moving very quickly and slowly at the same time. A desperate impulse to accelerate the broomstick, fly at its maximum speed, only Harry didn't *know where* -

"If you know where she is," Harry shouted to the blazing humanoid figure, staring into it as though it were a sun, "then *take me to her!*"

The silver blaze moved and Harry accelerated after it, the Weasley twins giving out high-pitched shrieks behind him as he fired through the air like a cannonball, moving faster than sanity, he didn't focus on the walls whizzing past him or how fast he was moving, just followed the silver light through corridors and flying up staircases and blitzing through doors that Fred or George cried desperate incantations to open and it was *all still taking too much time*, somewhere deep inside Harry felt like he was sinking through molasses as windows and portraits shot past.

The broomstick screamed through a final turn that whacked one of the Weasley twins against the wall not quite as hard as a Bludger would hit, and then they followed the brilliant Patronus through an open space in the ceilings, blasting up and upwards, rising past one floor and then another in less than a breath.

His Patronus slowed to a halt (Harry braking hard in response) just as they reached the level of a wide-open floor space that that spread out until it escaped the ceiling and turned into an outdoor terrace, a spread of tiled marble open to the air and sky -

# CHAPTER 89

## TIME PRESSURE, PT 2

Cool blue fires clung to the floor in small masses, surrounding a blazing pool that seemed to burn with a deadlier, hotter blue.

In one narrow circle the marble tiles were scorched and shattered by some explosive spell that only the most prodigious of first-year witches could have cast, with the last of her strength.

On the terrace, *still moving* beneath the open sunlight, stood a great lumpy creature of dull granite-grey. Body like a boulder with small bald head perched on top like a stone, short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. One hand held a tremendous stone club as long and as wide as an adult human, and the other hand held

The Weasley twins screamed.

Harry's Patronus shattered.

The troll snorted and spun around to face them, dropping into the red pool that had spread out beneath its feet, raising its club high.

Then a Weasley cried an incantation and the club was torn from the troll's hand, smashed into its face so hard it drove the troll back for one of its steps, a blow that might have killed a Muggle. The troll gave a bellow of anger, its nose squashed and blood-spattered, and then the nose straightened once more, regenerated. The troll grabbed with both hands for the club, which shot away through the air but only barely dodged the grab.

"Lead it away, keep it off me," said a voice.

The levitated club moved backwards from the troll, from the terrace onto the wide-open floor beneath the ceiling; and the troll made a great prodigious leap that almost brought the club into its hands. Then the troll made another great leap as the club moved to one side; and the broomstick moved forwards and Harry jumped off and ran towards where Hermione Granger was lying in a pool of her own blood with her legs eaten away to the upper thighs.

Harry's hands tore open the healer's kit from his pouch, grabbed one of the self-tightening tourniquets, wrapped them around one ragged tooth-marked stump, his hands briefly slipping in the blood, they didn't tremble, there wasn't any allowance for his hands to tremble. As the tourniquet formed a complete loop it tightened hard and more blood came out, but then the bleeding stopped on that thigh-stump, and Harry turned to the other. Part of his mind was screaming, screaming, screaming and even the part of him picking up the other self-tightening tourniquet heard it, but that also wasn't allowed.

The two Weasley twins were shouting spells, one after another in rapid-fire casting that would have had Harry unconscious in sixty seconds, sometimes the twins shouted two spells simultaneously in perfect coordination, but most of the spells were disrupting in harmless showers of sparks against the troll's skin. As the other tourniquet tightened itself in another pulse of blood, Harry looked up at a "*Diffindo!*" / "*Reducto!*" that made the troll's vulnerable eyes explode in twin showers of vitreous humor, but the troll only bellowed once more, its eyes already reforming.

"*Fire and acid!*" Harry shouted. "*Use fire or acid!*"

"*Fuego!*" / "*Incendio!*" Harry heard, but he wasn't looking, he was reaching for the syringe of glowing orange liquid that was the oxygenating potion, pushing it into Hermione's neck at what Harry hoped was the carotid artery, to keep her brain alive even if her lungs or heart stopped, so long as her brain stayed intact everything



else could be fixed, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, and Harry pushed the plunger of the syringe all the way down, creating a faint glow beneath the pale skin of her neck. Harry then pushed down on her chest, where her heart should be, hard compressions that he hoped was moving the oxygenated blood around to where it could reach her brain, even if her heart might have stopped beating, he hadn't actually thought to check her pulse.

Then Harry stared at the other things in his medical kit, his mind going blank as he tried to figure out what else of what was there, if anything, he could use. The screaming in that distant corner of his mind was getting louder, much louder, now that his hands had stopped their frantic motions. He was suddenly aware of the liquid sensation where blood had soaked through his robes and the knees of his pants.

From behind Harry came the sound of another bellow from the troll, and he heard one of the Weasley twins shout "*Deligitor prodeas!*" and then, "*HELP! Do something!*"

Harry twisted his head back to look, and saw that one of the Weasley twins was somehow now wearing the Sorting Hat on his head, facing off against the troll which held the huge stone club in both its hands, looking somewhat scorched now and with one or two smoking scars across its arms, but still intact.

And then the voice of the Hat bellowed in a voice so loud it seemed to shake the walls,  
 "GRYFFINDOR!"

A pulse of power burned the air, magic feeling almost tangible even to Harry's young senses, the troll jumped back a pace with a snort of surprise. Fred or George, with a strange look on his face, swept the Hat off his head with a motion smooth as a magician's trick, and reached in with one hand and drew forth a hilt whose pommel was a glowing ruby, followed by a wide crossguard of gleaming white metal, and a blade as long as a tall child. As the sword was revealed the air seemed to fill with a silent scream of fury.

Upon the blade was written in golden script, *nihil supernum*.

Then the Weasley twin raised the sword aloft as though the huge blade weighed nothing, and screamed and charged.

Harry's lips opened to say something, some long sentence like, *No, stop, you have no idea how to use a sword* but not even a single syllable left his lips before the sword sliced off the troll's right arm through the elbow, cutting through skin and flesh and bone like jelly; just as the already-swinging arc of the stone club smashed into the charging Weasley twin and sent him flying through the air above the marble floor, over the gap out of which they'd risen on the broomstick, until that Weasley hit the wall on the opposite side and then collapsed into an unmoving heap.

The bright sword vanished down into the opening in the floor, clattering distantly as it dropped.

"Fred!" screamed George Weasley, and then "*VENTUS!*"

An invisible blow caught the troll and hurled it sideways through the air.

"*VENTUS!*"

The troll was hit again, blown to the edge of the floor and the gap leading downwards.

"*VENTUS!*"

But the troll had reached down and grabbed at the floor, its remaining hand cruching through marble to gain a firm hold. The third blow sent the troll's body over the gap; but the hand remained at the edge. And then the troll was pulling itself back up single-handedly, roaring.

George Weasley staggered, almost falling, his hand dropping to his side. "Harry -" the Weasley twin said in a strained voice, "Run -"

The remaining Weasley twin took a step sideways, slumped against the wall, and slid to the ground.

Time was fractured in Harry's mind, the world around him seemed to move slowly, distorted, or perhaps it was his own mind twisting and folding. He should have been moving, doing something, but a strange paralysis seemed to be stopping all his muscles, all his motions. Without any time for words, thoughts came in flashes of concepts: that if Harry ran away the troll would eat the Weasley twins as well as Hermione, that if Bludgers

didn't kill wizards then Fred should still be alive, that the Weasley twins were more powerful spellcasters than him and they hadn't been able to hold back the troll, there was no time to Transfigure anything he didn't already possess, the troll seemed too agile to be lured over the edge of the terrace to fall off the sides of the Hogwarts castle, someone had enchanted the troll against sunlight before using it as a murder weapon and might also have strengthened it in other ways. And then a mental image of Hermione running from the troll, running for sunlight, finally reaching the bright terrace with the troll hot on her heels, only to find that someone else had thought of that possibility, too.

The screaming horror in his mind was drowned out by another emotion.

Harry stood up.

On the other side of the room, the enemy had also risen, the unregenerating stump of one sword-cut arm still bloody.

*intent to kill*

The troll grasped its fallen club in its remaining hand, and gave a huge bellow, smashing the club into the floor and sending marble chips flying.

*think purely of killing*

The troll began to lumber towards where George had fallen, a thin string of drool trailing from the side of its lips.

*grasp at any means to do so*

Harry took five strides forward, and the enemy gave another bellow and turned away from George, its eyes focusing squarely on him.

*censors off, do not flinch*

The third most perfect killing machine in nature bounded towards him in leaping steps.

**KILL**

Harry's left hand already held the Transfigured diamond from his ring, his right hand already held his wand.

*"Wingardium Leviosa."*

Harry's wand directed the tiny jewel into the troll's mouth.

*"Finite Incantatem."*

The troll's head blew off its spine as the rock expanded back into its old form, and Harry stepped aside as the Enemy's body crashed where he'd been standing.

The enemy's head was already beginning to regenerate, the ragged stump of the jaw and spine smoothing over, the mouth completing itself and replacing its teeth.

Harry bent down and picked up the troll's head by its left ear. His wand jammed through the troll's left eye, plunging through the jelly-like material and passing through the wide socket in the bone. Harry visualized a one-millimeter-wide cross-section through the enemy's brain, and Transfigured it into sulfuric acid.

The enemy stopped regenerating.

Harry threw the corpse over the edge of the terrace and turned back to Hermione.

Her eyes were moving, and focused on him.

Harry scrambled down beside her, ignoring the blood soaking more of his already-soaked robes. *You'll be all right*, his brain formed the sentence, but his lips wouldn't move. *You'll be all right, we'll find some magic to fix all this, put you back to normal, just hold on, don't -*

Hermione's lips were moving, just a tiny bit but they were moving.

*"your... fault..."*

Time froze. Harry should have told her not to talk, to save her breath, only he couldn't unblock his lips.

Hermione drew in another breath, and her lips whispered, "Not your fault."

Then she exhaled, and closed her eyes.

Harry stared at her with his mouth half-open, his breath caught in his throat.

"Don't do this," said his voice. He'd only been two minutes late.

Hermione suddenly convulsed, her arms twitching into the air as though reaching up for something, and her eyes flew open again. There was a burst of *something* that was magic and also more, a shout louder than an earthquake and containing a thousand books, a thousand libraries, all spoken in a single cry that was Hermione; too vast to be understood, except that Harry suddenly knew that Hermione had whited out the pain, and was glad not to be dying alone. For a moment it seemed like the outpouring of magic might hold, take root in the castle's stone; but then the outpouring ended and the magic faded, her body stopped moving and all motion halted as Hermione Jean Granger ceased to exist -

No.

Harry stood up from the body, swaying.

No.

There was a burst of flame and Dumbledore was standing there with Fawkes, his eyes filled with horror. "I felt a student die! What -"

The old wizard's eyes saw what lay upon the ground.

"Oh, no," whispered Albus Dumbledore. Fawkes gave a sad, mournful croon.

"Bring her back."

There was silence on the terrace. Fred Weasley had risen up into the air at a gesture from Dumbledore's wand and was floating towards them, surrounded by a reassuring pink glow.

"Harry -" the old wizard began. His voice cracked. "Harry -"

"Have Fawkes cry on her or whatever. Hurry up." The voice that spoke sounded perfectly calm.

"I, I can't, Harry, it's too late, she's dead -"

"I don't want to hear about it. If it was me lying there, you'd pull some kind of amazing rabbit out of your hat and save me, right, because the hero isn't allowed to die before the story's over. Well, she's the hero too, so whatever you were saving for that extra-special occasion, just go ahead and use it now. I promise I'll pay you back."

*"There isn't anything I can do! Her soul has departed, she's passed on!"*

Harry opened his mouth to scream out all his fury, and then closed it again. There wasn't any point in screaming, it wouldn't accomplish anything. The unbearable pressure rising inside him couldn't be let out that way.

Harry turned away from Dumbledore and looked down at where the remains of Hermione Granger were lying in a pool of blood. Part of his mind was hammering at the world around him, trying to make it go away, wake up from the nightmare and find himself back in his Ravenclaw dorm room with the morning sun shining through the curtains. But the blood remained and Harry didn't wake up, and another part of him already knew that this event was real, part of the same flawed world that included Azkaban and the Wizengamot chamber and

No

With a fracturing feeling, as though time was still torn to pieces around him, Harry turned away from Dumbledore and looked down at the remains of Hermione Granger lying in a pool of blood with two tourniquets tied around her thigh-stumps, and decided

No.

*I do not accept this.*

*There isn't any reason to accept it, not when there's magic in the world.*

Harry would learn whatever he had to learn, invent whatever he had to invent, rip the knowledge of Salazar Slytherin from the Dark Lord's mind, discover the secret of Atlantis, open any gates or break any seals necessary, find his way to the root of all magic and reprogram it.

He would rip apart the foundations of reality itself to get Hermione Granger back.



"The crisis is over," the Defense Professor said. "You may dismount, Madam."

Trelawney, who had been sitting behind him on the two-person broomstick that had just blazed through Hogwarts burning directly through all the walls and floors in their way, hastily pulled herself off and then sat down hard on the floor, a pace away from the red-glowing edges of a newly made gap in the wall. The woman was still breathing in gasps, bending over herself as though she were on the verge of vomiting out something larger than she was.

The Defense Professor had felt the boy's horror, through the link that existed between the two of them, the resonance in their magic; and he had realized that the boy had sought the troll and found it. The Defense Professor had tried to send an impulse to retreat, to don the Cloak of Invisibility and flee; but he'd never been able to influence the boy through the resonance, and hadn't succeeded that time either.

He'd felt the boy give himself over fully to the killing intention. That was when the Defense Professor had begun burning through the substance of Hogwarts, trying to reach the battle in time.

He'd felt the boy exterminate his enemy in seconds.

He'd felt the boy's dismay as one of his friends died.

He'd felt the fury the boy had directed at some annoyance who was likely Dumbledore; followed by an unknown resolution whose unyielding hardness even he found adequate. With any luck, the boy had just discarded his foolish little reluctances.

Unseen by anyone, the Defense Professor's lips curved up in a thin smile. Despite its little ups and downs, on the whole this had been a surprisingly good day -

*"HE IS HERE. THE ONE WHO WILL TEAR APART THE VERY STARS IN HEAVEN. HE IS HERE. HE IS THE END OF THE WORLD."*

# CHAPTER 90

## ROLES, PT 1

A simple *Innervate* from the Headmaster had awakened Fred Weasley, followed by a preliminary healing Charm for a broken arm and cracked ribs. Harry's voice had distantly told the Headmaster about the Transfigured acid inside the troll's head (Dumbledore had looked down over the side of the terrace and made a gesture before returning) and then about the Weasley twins' minds having been tampered with, carrying on a separate conversation that Harry remembered but could not process.

Harry still stood over Hermione's body, he hadn't moved from that spot, thinking as fast as he could through the sense of dissociation and fragmented time, was there anything he should be doing *now*, any opportunities that were passing irrevocably. Some way to reduce the amount of magical omnipotence that would be required later. A temporal beacon effect to mark this instant for later time travel, if he someday found a way to travel back further than six hours. There were theories of time travel under General Relativity (which had seemed much less plausible before Harry had run across Time-Turners) and those theories said you couldn't go back to before the time machine was built - a relativistic time machine maintained a continuous pathway through time, it didn't teleport anything. But Harry didn't see anything helpful he could do using spells in his lexicon, Dumbledore wasn't being very cooperative, and in any case this was several minutes after the critical location within Time

"Harry," the Headmaster whispered, laying his hand on Harry's shoulder. He had vanished from where he was standing over the Weasley twins and come into existence beside Harry; George Weasley had discontinuously teleported from where he was sitting to be kneeling next to his brother's side, and Fred was now lying straight with his eyes open and wincing as he breathed. "Harry, you must go from this place."

"Hold on," said Harry's voice. "I'm trying to think if there's anything else I can do."

The old wizard's voice sounded helpless. "Harry - I know you do not believe in souls - but whether Hermione is watching you now, or no, I do not think she would wish for you to be like this."

...no, it was obvious.

Harry leveled his wand at Hermione's body -

"Harry! What are you -"

- and poured *everything* down his arm into his hand -

"*Frigideiro!*"

"- doing?"

"Hypothermia," Harry said distantly, as he staggered. It'd been one of the spells he and Hermione had experimented on, a lifetime ago, so he was able to control it precisely, though it had taken a lot of power to affect that much mass. Hermione's body should now be at almost exactly five degrees Celsius. "People have been revived from cold water after more than thirty minutes without breathing. The cold protects you from brain damage, you see, it slows everything down. There's a saying Muggle doctors have, you're not dead until you're warm and dead - I think they even cool down the patient during some surgeries, if they have to stop someone's heart for a while."

Fred and George started sobbing.

Dumbledore's face was already streaked with tears. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Harry, I'm so sorry, but you have to stop this." The Headmaster took Harry by the shoulders and pulled on him.

Harry allowed himself to be turned away from Hermione's body, walked forward as the Headmaster pushed him away from the blood. The Cooling Charm would buy him time. Hours at least, maybe days if he could manage to keep casting the spell on Hermione or if they stored her body somewhere cold.

Now there was time to think.



Minerva had seen Albus's face and she'd known something was wrong; there had been time for her to wonder what had happened, and even who had died; her mind flashing to Alastor, to Augusta, to Arthur and Molly, all the most likely targets at the start of Voldemort's second rise. She had thought that she had steeled herself, she had thought herself ready for the worst.

Then Albus spoke, and all the steel left her.

*Not Hermione - no -*

Albus gave her a brief space to weep; and then told her that Harry Potter, who had watched Miss Granger die, had seated himself outside the infirmary storeroom where Miss Granger's remains were being kept, refusing to move from the spot, and telling anyone who spoke to him to go away so he could think.

The only thing that had elicited any reaction from the boy was when Fawkes had tried to sing to him; Harry Potter had shrieked at the phoenix not to do that, his feelings were real, he didn't want magic trying to *heal* them like they were a disease. After that Fawkes had refused to sing again.

Albus thought that she might have the best chance of reaching Harry Potter now.

So she had to pull herself together, and clean up her face; there would be time later for private grief, when her surviving children no longer needed her.

Minerva McGonagall pulled together the dislocated pieces of herself, wiped her eyes a final time, and laid her hand on the doorknob of the infirmary section whose back storeroom was now being used, for the second time this century and for the fifth time since the castle of Hogwarts had been raised, as the resting place of a promising young student.

She opened the door.

Harry Potter's eyes gazed at her. The boy was sitting on the floor in front of the door to the back storeroom, and holding his wand in his lap. If those eyes were grieving, if they were empty, if they were even broken, it couldn't be seen from looking at the boy's face. There were no dried tears on those cheeks.

"Why are you here, Professor McGonagall?" Harry Potter said. "I told the Headmaster I'd like to be left alone for a while."

She couldn't think of anything to say. *To help you - you're not all right* - but she didn't know what to say, there was nothing she could imagine saying that would make things better. She hadn't planned ahead before she'd walked into the room, having not been at her best.

"What are you thinking about?" Minerva said. It was the only sentence that came into her mind. Albus had told her that Harry had been saying, over and over, that he was thinking; and she had to get Harry talking, somehow.

Harry stared half at her and half past her, a tension coming into his face, as she held her breath.

It took a while before Harry spoke.

"I'm trying to think if there's anything I should be doing right now," said Harry Potter. "It's hard, though. My mind keeps on imagining ways the past could have gone differently if I'd thought faster, and I can't rule out that there might be a key insight in there somewhere."

"Mr. Potter -" she said falteringly. "Harry, I don't think it's healthy for you to be - thinking like that -"

"I disagree. It's not thinking that gets people killed." The words were spoken in a level monotone, as though reciting lines from a book.

"Harry," she said, hardly even thinking as she said it, "there's nothing you could have done -"

Something flickered in Harry's expression. His eyes seemed to focus on her for the first time.

"Nothing I could have *done*?" Harry's voice rose on the last word. *"Nothing I could have DONE? I've lost track of how many different ways I could've saved her! If I'd asked to have us all given communications mirrors! If I'd insisted on Hermione being taken out of Hogwarts and put in a school that isn't insane! If I'd snuck out immediately instead of trying to argue with normal people! If I'd remembered the Patronus earlier! If I'd thought through possible emergencies and trained myself to think about Patronuses earlier! Even at the very last minute it might not have been too late! I killed the troll and turned to her and she was still ALIVE and I just knelt next to her listening to her last words like an IDIOT instead of casting the Patronus again and calling Dumbledore to send Fawkes! Or if I'd just approached the whole problem from a different angle - if I'd looked for a student with a Time-Turner to send a message back in time before I found out about anything happening to her, instead of ending up with an outcome that can't be altered - I asked the Headmaster to go back and save Hermione and then fake everything, fake the dead body, edit everyone's memories, but Dumbledore said that he tried something like that once and it didn't work and he lost another friend instead. Or if I'd - if I'd only gone with - if, that night -"*

Harry pressed his hands over his face, and when he removed them again, his face was calm and composed once more.

"Anyway," said Harry Potter, now in a monotone again, "I don't want to repeat that mistake, so I'm going to spend until dinnertime thinking if there's anything I should be doing. If I haven't thought of anything by then I'll go to dinner and eat. Now please go away."

She was aware now that tears were sliding down her cheeks, again. "Harry - Harry, you have to believe that this isn't your fault!"

"Of course it's my fault. There's no one else here who could be responsible for anything."

"No! You-Know-Who killed Hermione!" She was hardly aware of what she was saying, that she hadn't screened the room against who might be listening. "Not you! No matter what else you could've done, it's not you who killed her, it was Voldemort! If you can't believe that you'll go mad, Harry!"

"That's not how responsibility works, Professor." Harry's voice was patient, like he was explaining things to a child who was certain not to understand. He wasn't looking at her anymore, just staring off at the wall to her right side. "When you do a fault analysis, there's no point in assigning fault to a part of the system you can't change afterward, it's like stepping off a cliff and blaming gravity. Gravity isn't going to change next time. There's no point in trying to allocate responsibility to people who aren't going to alter their actions. Once you look at it from that perspective, you realize that allocating blame never helps anything unless you blame yourself, because you're the only one whose actions you can change by putting blame there. That's why Dumbledore has his room full of broken wands. He understands that part, at least."

Some distant part of her mind made a note to wait until much later and then speak sharply to the Headmaster about what he was showing to impressionable young children. She might even scream at him this time. She'd been thinking about screaming at him anyway, because of Miss Granger -

"You're *not* responsible," she said, though her voice trembled. "It's the Professors - it's us who are responsible for student safety, not you."

Harry's eyes flicked back to her. "You're responsible?" There was a tightness in the voice. "You want me to hold you responsible, Professor McGonagall?"

She raised her chin and nodded. It would be better, by far, than Harry blaming himself.

The boy pushed himself up from where he was sitting on the floor, and took a step forward. "All right, then," Harry said in a monotone. "I tried to do the sensible thing, when I saw Hermione was missing and that none of the Professors knew. I asked for a seventh-year student to go with me on a broomstick and protect me while we looked for Hermione. I asked for help. I begged for help. And nobody helped me. Because you gave everyone an absolute order to stay in one place or they'd be expelled, no excuses. No matter what else Dumbledore gets wrong, he at least thinks of his students as people, not animals that have to be herded into a pen and kept from wandering out. You knew you weren't any good at military thinking, your first idea was to have us walking through the hallways, you knew some students there were better than you at strategy and tactics, and you still nailed us down in one room without any discretionary judgment. So when something you didn't foresee happened and it would've made perfect sense to send out a seventh-year student on a fast broom to look for Hermione Granger, the students knew you wouldn't understand or forgive. They weren't afraid of the troll, they were afraid of you. The discipline, the conformity, the *cowardice* that you instilled in them delayed me just long enough for Hermione to die. Not that I should've tried asking for help from normal people, of course, and I will change and be less stupid next time. But if I were dumb enough to allocate responsibility to someone who isn't me, that's what I'd say."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"That's what I'd tell you if I thought you could be responsible for anything. But normal people don't choose on the basis of consequences, they just play roles. There's a picture in your head of a stern disciplinarian and you do whatever that picture would do, whether or not it makes any sense. A stern disciplinarian would order the students back to their rooms, even if there was a troll roaming the hallways. A stern disciplinarian would order students not to leave the Hall on pain of expulsion. And the little picture of Professor McGonagall that you have in your head can't learn from experience or change herself, so there isn't any point to this conversation. People like you aren't responsible for anything, people like me are, and when we fail there's no one else to blame."

The boy strode forward to stand directly before her. His hand darted beneath his robes, brought forth the golden sphere that was the Ministry-issued protective shell of his Time Turner. He spoke in a dead, level voice without any emphasis. "This could've saved Hermione, if I'd been able to use it. But you thought it was your role to shut me down and get in my way. Nobody has died in Hogwarts in fifty years, you said that when you locked it, do you remember? I should've asked again after Bellatrix Black got loose from Azkaban, or after Hermione got framed for attempted murder. But I forgot because I was stupid. Please unlock it now before any of my other friends die."

Unable to speak, she brought forth her wand and did so, releasing the time-keyed enchantment she'd laced into the shell's lock.

Harry Potter flipped open the golden shell, looked at the tiny glass hourglass within its circles, nodded, and then snapped the case shut. "Thank you. Now go away." The boy's voice cracked again. "I have to think."



She closed the door behind her, an awful and still mostly-muffled sound escaping her throat -

Albus shimmered into existence beside her, taking on a brief garish hue as the Disillusionment wore off.

She did not jump, quite. "I've told you, stop doing that," Minerva said. Her voice sounded dull in her own ears. "That was private."



Albus flickered his fingers at the door behind her. "I was afraid Mr. Potter might do you some harm." The Headmaster paused, then said quietly, "I am very surprised that you stood there and took that."

"All I had to do was say 'Mr. Potter', and he would have stopped." Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper. "Just that, and he would have stopped. And then he would have had no one to say those awful things to, no one at all."

"I thought Mr. Potter's remarks were entirely unfair and undeserved," Albus said.

"If it had been you, Albus, you would not have threatened to expel anyone leaving the room. Can you honestly tell me otherwise?"

Albus's brows rose. "Your role in this disaster was tiny, your decisions quite sensible at the time, and it is only Harry Potter's perfect hindsight that lets him imagine otherwise. Surely you are wiser than to blame yourself for this, Minerva."

She knew perfectly well that Albus would be placing a picture of Hermione in that awful room of his, that it would occupy a place of honor. Albus would hold *himself* responsible, she was certain, even though he hadn't even been in Hogwarts at the time. But not her.

*So you also don't think it's worth the trouble of holding me responsible...*

She slumped against the nearest wall, trying not to let the tears emerge again; she'd never seen Albus weep save thrice. "You have always believed in your students, as I never have. They would not have been afraid of you. They would have known you would understand."

"Minerva -"

"I am not fit to succeed you as Headmistress. We both know it."

"You are wrong," Albus said quietly. "When the time comes, you will be the forty-fifth Headmistress of Hogwarts and you will do an excellent job of it."

She shook her head. "What now, Albus? If he will not listen to me, then who?"



It was perhaps half an hour later. The boy still guarded the door to where his best friend's body lay, sitting his vigil. He was staring downward, at his wand as it lay in his hands. Sometimes his face screwed up in thought, at other times it relaxed.

Although the door did not open, and there was no sound, the boy looked up. He composed his face. His voice, when he spoke, was dull. "I don't want company."

The door opened.

The Defense Professor of Hogwarts entered into the room and shut the door behind him, taking up careful position in a corner between two walls, as far away from the boy as the room permitted. A sharp sense of catastrophe had risen in the air between the two of them, and hung there unchanging.

"Why are you here?" said the boy.

The man tilted his head slightly. Pale eyes examined the boy as though he were a specimen of life from a distant planet, and correspondingly dangerous.

"I've come to apologize, Mr. Potter," the man said quietly.

"Apologize for what?" the boy said. "Why, what could *you* have done to prevent Hermione's death?"

"I should have thought to check for the presence of yourself, Mr. Longbottom, and Miss Granger, all of whom were obvious next targets," the Defense Professor said without hesitation. "Mr. Hagrid was not mentally equipped to command the student contingent. I should have ignored the Deputy Headmistress's request for

silence, and told her to leave behind Professor Flitwick, who would have been better able to defend the students from any threat, and who could have maintained communication via Patronus."

"Correct." The boy's voice was razor-sharp. "I'd forgotten there was someone else in Hogwarts who could be responsible for things. So why didn't you think of it, Professor? Because I don't believe that *you* were stupid."

There was a pause, and the boy's fingers whitened on his wand.

"You did not think of it either, Mr. Potter, at the time." There was a weariness in the Defense Professor's voice. "I am smarter than you. I think faster than you. I am more experienced than you. But the gap between the two of us is not the same as the gap between us and them. If you can miss something, then so can I." The man's lips twisted. "You see, I deduced at once that the troll was but a distraction from some other matter, and of no great importance in itself. So long as nobody sent the students wandering pointlessly through the halls, or uncaringly dispatched the young Slytherins to those very dungeons where the troll had been spotted."

The boy did not seem to relax. "I suppose that is plausible."

"In any case," said the man, "if there is anyone who can be said to be responsible for Miss Granger's death, it is myself, not you. It is I, not you, who should have -"

"I perceive that you have spoken to Professor McGonagall and that she has given you a script to follow." The boy did not bother keeping the bitterness from his voice. "If you have something to say to me, Professor, say it without the masks."

There was a pause.

"As you wish," the Defense Professor said emotionlessly. The pale eyes stayed keen and sharp. "I do regret that the girl is dead. She was a good student in my Defense class, and could have been an ally to you later. I would wish to console you for your loss, but I cannot see how to go about doing so. Naturally, if I find the ones responsible I shall kill them. You are welcome to join in should circumstances permit."

"How touching," the boy said, his voice cool. "You are not claiming to have liked Hermione, then?"

"Her charms were lost on me, I suspect. I no longer form such bonds easily."

The boy nodded. "Thank you for being honest. Is that all, Professor?"

There was a pause.

"The castle is scarred, now," said the man standing in the corner.

"What?"

"When a certain ancient device in my possession informed me that Miss Granger was on the verge of death, I cast that spell of cursed fire of which I once spoke. I burned through some walls and floors so that my broomstick could take a more direct path." The man still spoke tonelessly. "Hogwarts will not heal such wounds easily, if at all. I suppose it will be necessary to patch over the holes with lesser conjurations. I regret that now, since I was in any case too late."

"Ah," said the boy. He closed his eyes briefly. "You did want to save her. You wanted it so strongly that you made some sort of actual effort. I suppose your mind, if not theirs, would be capable of that."

A brief, dry smile from the man.

"Thank you for that, Professor. But I would like to be left alone now until dinnertime. You of all people will understand. Is that all?"

"Not quite," the man said. A tinge of sardonic dryness now returned to his voice. "You see, based on recent experiences, I am concerned that you may now intend to do something extremely foolish."

"Such as what?" said the boy.

"I am not quite sure. Perhaps you have decided that a universe without Miss Granger is devoid of value, and should be destroyed for the insults it has dealt you."

The boy smiled without any humor. "Your own issues are showing, Professor. I don't really go in for that sort of thing. Did you, at some point?"

"Not particularly. I have no great fondness for the universe, but I do live there."

There was a pause.

"What are you planning, Mr. Potter?" said the man in the corner. "You have come to some significant resolution, though you are trying to hide it from me. What do you now intend?"

The boy shook his head. "I'm still thinking, and would like to be left alone to do it."

"I recall an offer you once made to me, some months ago," said the Defense Professor. "Do you want someone intelligent to talk to? I will understand if you are not pleasant to be around."

The boy shook his head again. "No, thank you."

"Well, then," said the Defense Professor. "What about someone who is powerful and not particularly bound by naive scruples?"

There was a hesitation, and then the boy once more shook his head.

"Someone who is knowledgeable of much secret lore, and magics that some might consider to be unnatural?"

There was a slight narrowing of the boy's eyes, so imperceptible that someone else might not have -

"I see," said the Defense Professor. "Go ahead and ask me about it, then. I give you my word that I will repeat nothing of it to the others."

The boy took a while to speak, and when he did it was in a cracked voice.

"I mean to bring Hermione back. Because there isn't an afterlife, and I'm not about to just let her - just *not be* -"

The boy pressed his hands over his face, and when he withdrew them, he once more seemed as dispassionate as the man standing in the corner.

The Defense Professor's eyes were abstract, and faintly puzzled.

"How?" the man said finally.

"However I have to."

There was another pause.

"Regardless of the risks," the man in the corner said. "Regardless of how dangerous the magic required to accomplish it."

"Yes."

The Defense Professor's eyes were thoughtful. "But what general approach did you have in mind? I presume that turning her corpse into an Inferius is not what you -"

"Would she be able to think?" the boy said. "Would her body still decay?"

"No, and yes."

"Then no."

"What of the Resurrection Stone of Cadmus Peverell, if it could be obtained for you?"

The boy shook his head. "I don't want an illusion of Hermione drawn from my memories. I want her to be able to *live* her *life* - " the boy's voice cracked. "I haven't decided yet on an object-level angle of attack. If I have to brute-force the problem by acquiring enough power and knowledge to just *make it happen*, I will."

Another pause.

"And to go about *that*," the man in the corner said, "you will use your favorite tool, science."

"Of course."

The Defense Professor exhaled, almost like a sigh. "I suppose that makes sense of it."

"Are you willing to help, or not?" the boy said.

"What help do you seek?"

"Magic. Where does it come from?"

"I do not know," said the man.

"And neither does anyone else?"

"Oh, the situation is far worse than that, Mr. Potter. There is hardly a scholar of the esoteric who has not unraveled the nature of magic, and every one of them believes something different."

"Where do new spells come from? I keep reading about someone who invented a spell to do something-or-other but there's no mention of *how*."

A shrug of robed shoulders. "Where do new books come from, Mr. Potter? Those who read many books sometimes become able to write them in turn. How? No one knows."

"There are books on how to write -"

"Reading them will not make you a famous playwright. After all such advice is accounted for, what remains is mystery. The invention of new spells is a similar mystery of purer form." The man's head tilted. "Such endeavors are dangerous. The saying is that one should either not have children, or else wait until after they are grown. There is a reason why so many innovators seem to hail from Gryffindor, rather than Ravenclaw as might be expected."

"And the more powerful sorts of magics?" the boy said.

"A legendary wizard might invent one sacrificial ritual in his life, and pass on the knowledge to his heirs. To try inventing five such would be suicide. That is why wizards of true power are those who have acquired ancient lore."

The boy nodded distantly. "So much for the direct solution, then. It would've been nice to just invent a spell for 'Raise Dead', 'Become God' or 'Summon Terminal'. Do you know anything about Atlantis?"

"Only what any scholar knows," the man said dryly. "If you would like to hear about the top eighteen standard theories - do not glare at me, Mr. Potter. If it were that simple, I would have done it many years earlier."

"I understand. Sorry."

There was a time of silence. The Defense Professor's gaze rested on the boy, the boy stared off seemingly at nothing.

"There's some magics I mean to learn. Spells I could've used earlier today, if I'd thought to study them beforehand." The boy's voice was cold. "Spells I'll need, if this sort of thing goes on happening. Most I expect I can just look up. Some I expect I can't."

The Defense Professor inclined his head. "I shall teach you almost any magic you wish to know, Mr. Potter. I do have some limits, but you may always ask. But what specifically do you seek? You lack the raw power for the Killing Curse and most other spells deemed forbidden -"

"That spell of cursed fire. I don't suppose it's a sacrificial ritual that even a child could use, if he dared?"

The Defense Professor's lips twitched. "It requires the permanent sacrifice of a drop of blood; your body would be lighter by that drop of blood, from that day forward. Not the sort of thing one would wish to do often, Mr. Potter. Strength of will is demanded for the cursed fire not to turn upon you and consume you; the usual practice is to first test one's will in lesser trials. And although it is not a primary element of the ritual, I am afraid that it does require more magic than you shall possess for another few years."

"Pity," the boy said. "It would've been nice to see the look on the enemy's face the next time they tried using a troll."

The Defense Professor inclined his head, his lips twitching again.

"What about Memory Charms? The Weasley twins were acting oddly and the Headmaster said he thinks they've been Obliviated. It seems to be one of the enemy's favorite tricks."

"Rule Eight," said the Defense Professor. "Any technique which is good enough to defeat me once is good enough to learn myself."

The boy smiled humorlessly. "And I once heard about an adult casting Obliviate while she was almost completely drained, so it must not take too much magic to cast. It's not even considered Unforgivable, though I can't imagine why not. If I could've made Mr. Hagrid remember a different set of orders -"

"It is not that straightforward," said the Defense Professor. "You are not powerful enough to use the False Memory Charm, and even a simple Obliviation will stretch the edge of your current stamina. It is a dangerous

art, illegal to use without Ministry authorization, and I would caution you not to use it under circumstances where it would be inconvenient to accidentally erase ten years of someone's life. I wish I could promise you that I would obtain one of those highly guarded tomes from the Department of Mysteries, and pass it to you beneath a disguised cover. But what I must actually tell you is that you will find the standard introductory text in the north-northwest stacks of the main Hogwarts library, filed under M."

"Seriously," the boy said flatly.

"Indeed."

"Thank you for your guidance, Professor."

"Your creativity has become a great deal more practical, Mr. Potter, since I have known you."

"Thank you for the compliment." The boy did not look up from where he was again gazing down at the wand held between his hands. "I would like to go back to thinking now. Please explain to them on my behalf what happens if I am disturbed."



The door to the storeroom clicked open, and Professor Quirrell stepped out. His face had a dead, emotionless look to it; she would have said that it reminded her of Severus, though Severus had never looked quite like that.

Even as the door clicked shut again, Minerva had thrown up a wordless Quieting barrier. The words spilled forth from her rapidly: "How did it go - you were in there for a while - is Harry talking now?"

Professor Quirrell paced swiftly across the room to the far wall near the entrance, looked back at her. The emotionlessness slid off his face, as though he were taking off a mask, leaving behind someone very grim. "I spoke to Mr. Potter as he expected me to speak, and avoided saying things that would annoy him. I do not think it consoled him. I do not think I have the knack."

"Thank you - it is good that he spoke at all -" She hesitated. "What did Mr. Potter say?"

"I am afraid that I promised him not to speak of it. And now... I think that I must visit the Hogwarts library."

"The *library*?"

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said. An uncharacteristic tension had come into his voice. "I intend to strengthen the security upon the Restricted Section with certain precautions of my own devising. The current wards are a joke. And Mr. Potter must be kept out of the Restricted Section *at all costs*."

She stared at the Defense Professor, her heart suddenly in her throat.

Professor Quirrell continued speaking. "You will *not* tell the boy that I have said this much to you. You will confirm to Flitwick and Vector that the boy is to be diverted by the usual evasions if he asks precocious questions about spell creation. And though it is not my own area of expertise, Deputy Headmistress, if there is any way you can imagine to convince the boy to stop sinking further into his grief and madness - any way at all to undo the resolutions he is coming to - then I suggest you resort to it *immediately*."

# CHAPTER 91

## ROLES, PT 2

Shortly after, there was another knock upon the storeroom door.

"If you actually care about my mental health," the boy said without looking up, "you will go away, leave me alone, and wait for me to come down to dinner. This isn't helping."

The door opened, and the one who had waited outside stepped in.

"Seriously?" the boy said flatly.

The door closed and clicked behind Severus Snape.

The Potions Master of Hogwarts wore none of his customary arrogance, or even the dispassionate guise that he ordinarily took in the Headmaster's office; his gaze was strange, as he looked down upon the boy guarding that door; his thoughts unfathomable.

"I also cannot imagine what the Deputy Headmistress is thinking," said the Potions Master of Hogwarts. "Unless I am meant to serve as a warning of where it will lead you, if you decide to take the blame for her death upon yourself."

The boy's lips pressed together. "Fine. Let's just skip ahead to the end of this conversation. You win, Professor Snape. I concede that you were more responsible for Lily Potter's death than I was responsible for Hermione Granger's death, and that my guilt can't stack up to your guilt. And then I ask you to go, and you tell them that it would probably be best to let me alone for a while. Are we done?"

"Almost," the Potions Master said. "I am the one who put the notes under Miss Granger's pillow, telling her where to find the fights in which she intervened."

The boy did not react to this at all. Finally he spoke. "Because you dislike bullying."

"Not that alone." There was a note of pain in the Potions Master's voice that sounded alien to it; it was hard to imagine it being the same acid voice that instructed children not to stir one more time or they'd blow off their wrists. "I should have realized it... very much earlier, I suppose, and yet I did not see it at all, being entirely absorbed in myself. For me to be placed as Head of Slytherin... it means that Albus Dumbledore has entirely lost hope that Slytherin House can be helped. I am certain that Dumbledore must have tried, I cannot imagine that he did not try, when he first took trust of Hogwarts. It must have been a severe blow to him, when after that so much of Slytherin answered to the Dark Lord's call... he would not have placed me in authority over that House, acting as I did, unless he had lost all hope." The Potions Master's shoulders fell, beneath his spotted and stained cloak. "But you and Miss Granger were trying to do something, and the two of you had even managed to bring over Mr. Malfoy and Miss Greengrass, and perhaps those two could have set a different example... I suppose it was foolish for me to believe. The Headmaster does not know of what I have done, and I ask you not to tell him."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Matters have become far too serious not to tell someone." Severus Snape's lips twisted. "I have seen enough disastrous plotting, in my tenure as Head of Slytherin, to know how that sometimes goes. If, in the future, all should come to light - then at least I have told you, and you may say as much."

"Lovely," the boy said. "Thank you for clearing that up. Is that all?"

"Do you intend to declare that your life is now a ruin and that there is nothing left for you but vengeance?"

"No. I still have -" The boy cut himself off.

"Then there is very little advice that I can give you," said Severus Snape.

The boy nodded distantly. "On Hermione's behalf, thank you for helping her with the bullies. She would tell you that it was the right thing to do. And now I would be much obliged if you could tell them to *leave me alone*."

The Potions Master turned to the door, and when his face was unseen, his voice came in a whisper. "I truly am sorry for your loss."

Severus Snape departed.

The boy stared after him, trying to remember, as best as he could at this distance, words which had been spoken some time earlier.

*Your books betrayed you, Potter. They did not tell you the one thing you needed to know. You cannot learn from books what it is like to lose the one you love. That is something you could never know without experiencing it for yourself.*

It had gone something like that, the boy thought, if he was remembering correctly.



Hours had passed now, in the infirmary section with its closed door and a body lying in state behind it.

Harry went on staring at his wand, as it lay in his lap. At the tiny scratches and smudges on the eleven inches of holly, flaws he'd never looked closely enough to notice before. A quick mental calculation said there was no reason to worry since if this was six or seven months' accumulation of damage, then a standard lifetime wouldn't wear away the wand entirely. At the time, he probably would've worried about his own Time-Turner being taken away if he'd just openly yelled out 'Does anyone have a Time-Turner?' into the Great Hall, but it would have been easy enough to precommit to, after lunch, finding someone to send Professor Flitwick a message two hours earlier and then Professor Flitwick could've just gone straight to Hermione, or sent her his raven Patronus, long before the troll was anywhere near her. Or might that alternate Harry have already learned it was too late - heard about Hermione's death after lunch and before he could buy any messages sent backwards in time? Maybe a basic guideline of working with time-travel was to make sure you never risked learning you were too late, if you hadn't yet gone backwards. There was a tiny chemical burn now on the end of his wand, presumably from contacting the acid he'd partially Transfigured the troll's brain into, but the wand seemed robust against losses of small amounts of wood. Really the concept of a 'magic wand' being required just got stranger the more you thought about it. Though if spells were always being invented in some mysterious way, new rituals being carved as new levers upon the unknown machine, it might just be that people just kept inventing rituals that involved wands, just like they invented phrases like 'Wingardium Leviosa'. It really seemed like magic ought to be, in some sense, almost arbitrarily powerful, and it certainly would be convenient if Harry could just bypass whatever conceptual limitation prevented people from inventing spells like 'Just Fix Everything Forever', but somehow nothing was ever that easy where magic was concerned. Harry looked at his mechanical watch again, but it still wasn't time.

He'd attempted to cast the Patronus Charm, meaning to tell his Patronus to go to Hermione Granger. Just in case it was all a lie, a False Memory Charm or one of the who-knew-how-many-ways that wizards could be made to close their eyes and dream. Just in case the real Hermione was alive and being held somewhere, despite his feeling her life as it left her. Just in case there was an afterlife and the True Patronus could reach it.

The spell hadn't worked though, so that particular test had failed to provide any evidence, leaving him with the previous, unfavorable prior.

Time passed, and yet more time. From the outside you would've just seen a boy, sitting, staring at his wand with an abstracted gaze, looking at his watch every two minutes or so.

The door to the infirmary section opened once *again*.

The boy sitting there looked up with a deadly, chilling glare.

Then the boy's face cracked in dismay, and he scrambled to his feet.

"Harry," said the man in the button-down formal shirt and a black vest thrown over it. His voice was hoarse. "Harry, what's happening? The Headmaster of your school - he showed up in those ridiculous robes at my office and told me that Hermione Granger was dead!"

A moment later a woman followed the man into the room; she seemed less confused than the man, less bewildered and more frightened.

"Dad," the boy said thinly. "Mum. Yes, she's dead. They didn't tell you anything else?"

"No! Harry, what's happening?"

There was a pause.

The boy slumped back against the wall. "I c-can't, I can't, I can't do this."

"What?"

"I can't pretend to be a little boy, I j-just don't have the energy right now."

"Harry," the woman said falteringly. "Harry -"

"Dad, you know those fantasy books where the hero has to hide everything from his parents because they, they wouldn't understand, they'd react stupidly and get in the hero's way? It's a plot device, right, so that the hero has to solve everything himself instead of telling his parents. P-please don't be that plot device, Dad, or you either, Mum. Just... just don't play that role. Don't be the parents who won't understand. D-don't yell at me and give me parental demands I can't follow. Because I've wandered into a bloody stupid fantasy novel and now Hermione's - I j-just don't have the energy to deal with it."

Slowly, as though his limbs were only half-animated, the man in the black vest kneeled down to where Harry was standing, so that his eyes were level with his son's. "Harry," the man said. "I need you to tell me everything that has happened, right now."

The boy took a deep breath, swallowed. "They t-tell me the Dark Lord I defeated may still be alive. Like that's not the p-plot of a hundred sodding books, right? So, it could also be that the Headmaster of my school, who's the most powerful wizard in the world, has gone insane. And, and Hermione was framed for an attempted murder just before this, not that anyone would've told her parents about it or anything. The student she was framed for attempted-murdering was the son of Lucius Malfoy, who's the most powerful politician in magical Britain, and used to be the Dark Lord's number two. The Defense Professor position at this school has a curse on it, nobody ever lasts more than a year, they have a saying that the Defense Professor is always a suspect. This year the Defense Professor is secretly a mysterious wizard who opposed the Dark Lord during the last war and may or may not be evil himself. Also the Potions Master has been pining after Lily Potter for years and might be behind this whole thing for some twisted psychological reason." The boy's lips pressed together bitterly. "I think that's most of the bloody stupid plot."

The man, who had listened to all this quietly, stood up. He put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "That's enough, Harry," he said. "I've heard enough. We're leaving this school right now and taking you with us."

The woman was looking at the boy, her face asking a question.

The boy gazed back at her and nodded.

The woman's voice was thin when she spoke. " *They* won't let us, Michael."

"They have no legal right to stop us -"

" *Right?* You're *Muggles*," said the boy. He smiled twistedly. "You have as much standing in the magical British legal system as mice. No wizard is going to care about any arguments you make about *rights*, about *fairness*, they won't even take the time to listen. You don't have any *power*, see, so they don't have to bother. No, Mum,



I'm not smiling like this because I agree with their Muggle policies, I'm smiling because I disagree with your children policies."

"Then," Professor Michael Verres-Evans said firmly, "we shall see what the *real* government has to say about that. I know an MP or three -"

"They'll say, you're crazy, have a nice stay in this asylum. That's assuming the Ministry Obliviators don't get to you first and erase your memories. They do that to Muggles a lot, I hear. I figure the real higher-ups in our government have formed some cozy accomodations of their own. Maybe they get a few healing Charms now and then, if someone important manages to get cancer." The boy gave that twisted smile again. "And that's the situation, Dad, as Mum already knows. They'd never have brought you here or told you anything, if there was a single thing you could do about it."

The man's mouth opened but no words came out, as though he had been reading from a script which described what a concerned parent ought to do in this sort of situation, and this script had suddenly arrived at a blank spot.

"Harry," the woman said falteringly.

The boy looked at her.

"Harry, did something happen to you? You seem... different..."

"Petunia!" the man said, his tongue apparently working once more. "Don't say such things! He's under stress, that's all."

"Well, Mum, you see -" The boy's voice cracked. "Are you sure you want this all at once, Mum?"

The woman nodded, though she didn't speak.

"I've got... you know how that school psychiatrist thought I had anger management problems? Well -" The boy stopped, and swallowed. "I don't know how to explain this to you, Mum. It's something magical instead. Probably something to do with whatever happened on the night my parents died. I have... well, I was calling it a mysterious dark side and I know it sounds like a joke and I *did* check with... with an ancient telepathic magical hat to make sure my scar wasn't *actually* inhabited by the Dark Lord's spirit and it said that there was only one person under its brim and I don't think wizards have actual souls anyway since they can still suffer from brain damage, only -"

"Harry, slow down!" said the man.

"- only, only whatever it is, it's still *real*, there's something inside me, it gave me willpower when things were bad, I could face down anything so long as I was angry, Snape, Dumbledore, the entire Wizengamot, my dark side wasn't afraid of anything but Dementors. And I wasn't stupid, I knew that there might be a price for using my dark side and I kept on looking to see what the price might be. It didn't change my magic, it didn't seem to cause permanent alignment shift, it didn't try to take me away from my friends or anything like that, so I kept on using it whenever I had to and I only figured out too late what the price really was -" The boy's voice had become almost a whisper. "I only figured out today... every time I call on it... it uses up my childhood. I killed the thing that got Hermione. And it wasn't my dark side that did it, it was me. Oh, Mum, Dad, I'm sorry."

There was a long silence filled with the sound of broken masks.

"Harry," the man said, kneeling down again, "I need you to start over from the beginning and explain that much more slowly."

The boy spoke.

The parents listened.

Some time later, the father stood up.

The boy looked up at him, grimacing in bitter anticipation.

"Harry," the man said, "Petunia and I are going to get you out of here as quickly as possible -"

"Don't," the boy said warningly. "I mean it, Dad. The Ministry of Magic isn't something you can stand up to. Pretend they're the tax office or the dean or something else that won't brook any challenge to their dominance.

In magical Britain you're only allowed to remember what the government thinks you should remember, and remembering the existence of magic or that you have a son named Harry is a privilege, not a right. And if they did that I'd crack and turn the Ministry into a giant flaming crater. Mum, you know the score, you absolutely have to stop Dad from trying anything stupid."

"And son -" The man rubbed at his temples. "Maybe I shouldn't say this now... but are you sure that what you're talking about is really a magical dark side, and not something normal for a boy your age?"

"Normal," the boy said with elaborate patience. "Normal how, exactly? I could check again, but I'm reasonably sure there wasn't anything about this in *Childcraft: A Guide For Parents*. My dark side isn't just an emotional state, it *makes me smarter*. In some ways, anyhow. You can't just *pretend* yourself smarter."

The man rubbed at his head again. "Well... there's a certain well-known phenomenon wherein children undergo a biological process which can sometimes make them angry and dark and grim, and this process also significantly increases their intelligence and their height -"

The boy slumped back against the wall. "No, Dad, it's not that I'm turning into a teenager. I checked with my brain and it still thinks that girls are icky. But if that's what you want to pretend, then fine. Maybe I'm better off with you not believing me. I just -" The boy's voice choked. "I just couldn't stand lying about it."

"Adolescence doesn't necessarily work like that, Harry. It may still take a while for you to notice girls. If, in fact, you haven't noticed one alrea-" and the man abruptly stopped.

"I didn't like Hermione in that way," the boy whispered. "Why does everyone keep thinking it has to be about that? It's disrespectful to her, to think someone could only like her in that way."

The man swallowed visibly. "Anyway, son, you keep yourself safe while we work on getting you out of here, is that understood? Don't you go actually thinking that you've turned to the dark side. I know you've had, ah, what I used to call your Ender Wiggin moments -"

"I think we are now *well* past Ender and on to Ender after the buggers kill Valentine."

"Language!" said the woman, and then her hand flew to cover her mouth.

The boy spoke wearily. "Not that kind of bugger, Mum. They're insectoid aliens - never mind."

"Harry, that's exactly what I'm saying you shouldn't think," Professor Verres-Evans said firmly. "You're not to go believing that you're turning evil. You are not to hurt anyone, place yourself in harm's way, or mess around with any sort of black magic whatsoever, while your Mum and I work on extracting you from this situation. Is that clear, son?"

The boy closed his eyes. "That'd be wonderful advice, Dad, if only I were in a comic book."

"Harry -" the man began.

"Police can't do that. Soldiers can't do that. The most powerful wizard in the world couldn't do that, and he tried. It's not fair to the innocent bystanders to play at being Batman if you can't actually protect everyone under that code. And I've just proven that I can't."

Beads of sweat were glistening on Professor Michael Verres-Evans's forehead. "Now you listen to me. No matter what you've read in books, you aren't *supposed* to be protecting anyone! Or involving yourself in anything dangerous! Absolutely anything dangerous whatsoever! Just stay out of the way of *everything*, every bit of craziness going on in this madhouse, while we get you out of here the first instant we possibly can!"

The boy looked searchingly at his father, then his mother. Then he looked at his wristwatch again.

"Excellent point," said the boy.

The boy marched over to the door leading outward, and flung it open.



The door flew open with a crack that caused Minerva to startle where she stood, and before she had time to think, Harry Potter marched out of the room, glaring directly at her.

"You brought my parents *here*," the Boy-Who-Lived said. "To *Hogwarts*. Where You-Know-Who or *someone* is lurking around, targeting my friends. What exactly were you thinking?"

She did not reply that she had been thinking about Harry sitting in front of the door to the storeroom containing Hermione's body, refusing to move.

"Who else knows about this?" Harry Potter demanded. "Did anyone see them with you?"

"The Headmaster brought them here -"

"I want them out of here *immediately* before anyone else notices, especially You-Know-Who, but also including Professor Quirrell or Professor Snape. Please send your Patronus to the Headmaster and tell him that he needs to bring it back at once. Do not mention my parents by name, or as people, in case somebody else is listening."

"Indeed," said Professor Verres-Evans, nodding sternly along with this from where he stood directly behind the boy, Petunia a step behind him. His hand rested firmly on Harry's shoulder. "We'll finish talking to our son at home."

"A moment, please," Minerva said in reflexive politeness. Her first try at casting the Patronus failed, a disadvantage of that Charm under certain circumstances. It wasn't the first time she'd done it so, but she seemed to have lost some of the knack -

Minerva shut the thought down and concentrated.

When the message was sent, she turned back to Professor Verres-Evans. "Sir," she said, "I'm afraid that Mr. Potter must not leave the Hogwarts School -"

By the time Albus finally arrived, there was shouting, the Muggle man having given up on dignity. At least there was shouting on one side of the argument. Minerva's heart wasn't in it. The truth was that she couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth.

When the Professor turned to argue with the Headmaster, Harry Potter, who had remained silent through this, spoke up. "Not here," said Harry. "You can argue with him anywhere but Hogwarts, Dad. Mum, please, please make sure that Dad doesn't try anything that will get him in trouble with the Ministry."

Michael Verres-Evans's face screwed up. He turned, looked at Harry Potter. When his voice came out it was hoarse, accompanied by water in his eyes. "Son - what are you doing?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm doing," Harry Potter said. "You read those comic books long before you gave them to me. I've been through a bunch of crap, matured a bit, and now I'm protecting my relatives. Actually, it's simpler than that, you know what I'm doing because you tried to do the same thing. I'm having my loved ones taken out of Hogwarts immediately, that's what I'm doing. Headmaster, please get them out of here before You-Know-Who discovers their presence and marks them for death."

Michael Verres-Evans began a frantic dash toward Harry, and then all motion stopped with the Muggle man leaning forward in his flight.

"I am sorry," the Headmaster said quietly. "We shall speak more soon. Minerva, I was with the others when you called, they are waiting in your office."

The Headmaster passed forwards like he was gliding, until he stood in the midst of where the man and woman stood frozen; and there was another flash of flame.

Motion resumed.

Minerva looked at Harry.

Words did not come to her.

"Clever move, bringing them here," Harry Potter said. "Probably damaged our relationship permanently. All I wanted was to be bloody left alone until bloody dinnertime. Which," the boy looked at his wristwatch, "it now is *anyway*. I'm going to go say goodbye to Hermione by myself, which I promise will take less than two minutes,

and then after that I'll come out and go eat something like I would have done regardless. Do *not* disturb me for those two bloody minutes or I will snap and try to kill someone, I mean it, Professor."

The boy turned and strode into the small room, opened the rear door to where Hermione Granger's body was being kept, and strode inside before she could think to speak. Through the doorway she saw a flash of a sight she knew no child ought to see -

The door slammed shut.

She started forwards, unthinking.

Halfway to the door, she stopped herself.

Her mind was still slow, and hurting, and the part of her that Harry Potter would have called *the picture of a stern disciplinarian* was lifelessly mouthing words about inappropriate behavior from children. The rest of her didn't think it was a good idea to leave any child, even Harry Potter, alone in a room with the bloody corpse of his best friend. But the act of opening the door, or asserting any sort of authority, did not seem to her wise. There was no right thing to do, and no right thing to say; or if there was any right path, she did not know it.

Very slowly, a minute and a half passed.



When the door opened again, Harry seemed to have changed, as though that minute and a half had passed over the course of lifetimes.

"Seal up the room," Harry said quietly, "and let's go, Professor McGonagall."

She walked over to the storeroom door. She wasn't quite able to stop herself from looking in, and saw the dried blood, the sheet covering the lower half, the upper body waxy and doll-like, and a glimpse of Hermione Granger's closed eyes. Something inside her began its weeping all over again.

She closed the door.

Her fingers moved upon her wand, her mouth spoke words without thought, Charms and wards to seal the room against entry.

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said in a strange voice, as if by rote, "do you have the rock? The rock that the Headmaster gave me? I should Transfigure it into a jewel again, since it did prove useful."

Automatically her eyes went to the ring on Harry's left pinky finger, noting the emptiness of the setting where the jewel should have been. "I shall mention it to the Headmaster," her tongue replied.

"Is that a usual tactic, by the way?" Harry said, voice still odd. "Carrying something large Transfigured into something small to use as a weapon? Or is that a usual exercise for Transfiguration practice?"

Distantly, she shook her head.

"Well, let's go, then."

"I have -" her voice stopped. "I'm afraid I have something else which I must do, now. Will you be all right on your own, and will you promise to go to the Great Hall directly and eat something, Mr. Potter?"

The boy promised (barring exceptional and unforeseen circumstances, a clause with which she did not argue) and then walked out of the room.

What lay ahead of her... would be no easier, certainly, and might well be harder.



## CHAPTER 91

Minerva walked to her office at a swift pace; not slowly, for that would have been a discourtesy. Professor McGonagall opened the door to her office.

"Madam Granger," her voice said, "Mr. Granger, I am so terribly sorry for -"

# CHAPTER 92

## ROLES, PT 3

There was nothing left to do.

There was nothing left to plan.

There was nothing left to think.

Into that emptiness rose the new worst memory -

The Boy-Who-Lived-Unlike-His-Best-Friend trudged the long, echoing corridors toward the Great Hall. With all his energies of thought exhausted, his mind was starting to throw out thoughts like an image of Hermione walking beside him and wordless concepts like *That will never happen again* until another part yelled *No* and shouted it down with determination to bring her back, only that part's voice was getting tired and the other part seemed tireless. Another part of his mind insisted on reviewing what he'd said to Professor McGonagall and Dad and Mum, even though he'd only been trying to get them out of there as quickly as possible and had been running on limited mental energy. As though somehow he could have done better, by an act of his defective will. What would be left of his relationship with his parents now, Harry couldn't guess.

He came finally to a junction where there waited a older boy in green-fringed black robes, silently reading a textbook, on the path that anyone would pick if they wanted to intercept someone going from the healer's chambers to the Great Hall.

Harry was wearing the Cloak of Invisibility, of course, he'd put it on after leaving the office, rendering himself immune to almost all forms of magical detection. There was no point in making it easy for anyone trying to find him and kill him. And Harry was almost set to continue past without bothering to find out what was going on, when he recognized the Slytherin boy's face.

Realization dawned on Harry then. Of course, one of the students who had stayed in school over the Easter holiday would naturally have been -

"You were waiting for me," Harry said out loud, without removing the Cloak.

The Slytherin boy jerked back, hitting his head against the wall, his fifth-year Charms textbook dropping from his hands, before he looked up with wide eyes.

"You're -"

"Invisible. Yes. Say what you mean to say."

Lesath Lestrangle scrambled to his feet, a position of attention, then blurted out, "My lord, did I do the right thing - I thought you would not wish me to step forward before all those others, that they might suspect our connection - I thought, surely if you wished my help you would call on me -"

It was amazing how many different ways there were to kill your best friend by being stupid.

"I -" Lesath hesitated, then said in a small voice, "I was wrong, wasn't I?"

"You acted exactly as you should have, under the circumstances. It is I who was a fool."

"I'm sorry, my lord," whispered Lesath.

"If you *had* come with me, would you have been able to kill the troll?" It wasn't even the correct question, the correct question was whether Harry himself would have considered Lesath as sufficient and flown out sixty seconds earlier, but still...

"I... I'm not sure, my lord... I am not much welcome to duelling practices in Slytherin, I have not learned the gestures to the Killing Curse - should I study those arts to better serve you, my lord?"

"I continue to insist that I am not your lord," Harry said.

"Yes, my lord."

"Although," Harry said, "and this is not any kind of order, just a remark, anyone ought to know how to defend themselves, especially you. I'm sure the Defense Professor would help you with that on general principles, if you asked."

Lesath Lestrange bowed and said, "Yes, my lord, I will follow your orders if I can, my lord."

Harry would have complained about being misunderstood, if he hadn't been understood perfectly.

Lesath left.

Harry stared at the wall.

He'd honestly thought that he'd already figured out all the different ways that he'd been stupid, after spending half a day thinking about it.

Apparently this had just been more overconfidence on his part.

*Do we understand what we did wrong?* his Slytherin side said coldly.

Yes, Harry thought.

*Your ethical qualms don't even make sense. You're not tricking Lesath. You did exactly what Lesath thinks you did. You wouldn't have to make excuses for why Lesath was helping you, you could just say you were calling in the debt from rescuing him from bullies, there were six witnesses to that. Hermione died because you forgot about an extremely valuable resource, and you forgot about Lesath because... why?*

*Because having Lesath Lestrange for a minion seemed sort of Dark-Lordish?* Hufflepuff said in a small mental voice. *I mean... that decision was probably mostly me...*

Harry's Slytherin side didn't answer that in words, just radiated contempt and flashed an image of Hermione's corpse.

*Stop it!* Harry screamed internally.

*Next time, Slytherin said icily, I suggest that we spend more time worrying about what is efficient and effective, and less time worrying about what seems sort of Dark-Lordish.*

*Point made, Harry thought, I will.*

*No, you won't,* said Slytherin. *You'll come up with more rationalisations for your petty qualms. You'll start listening to me after your next friend dies.*

Harry was starting to worry that he was going insane. The conversations he had with the voices in his head weren't usually like this.

The Boy-Who-Lived

*pain*

Harry Verres trudged on alone

*burts*

Harry walked on through the silent corridors.



"How is Mr. Potter doing?" demanded Professor Quirrell. There was a tension about the man, you could not quite call it *concern*, more like an ambusher measuring the time to strike. The Grangers had hardly left with Madam Pomfrey before the Defense Professor had knocked upon the door to her office and then entered

without waiting for her answer, and spoken before she could say a word. Part of Minerva wondered distantly whether Harry Potter had picked up that habit from his Defense Professor, being unaware of others' pain when there was something else on his mind, or if it was only a childish flaw which this man had somehow failed to grow out of.

"Mr. Potter has ceased guarding Miss Granger's body," she said, putting some of the chill she felt into her voice. She felt certain that the Defense Professor was not experiencing as much grief as she was, the man had spoken not a single word of Hermione Granger. For *him* to put demands on her - "I believe he has gone down to dinner."

"I am not asking after the boy's *physical* state! Have you - has he -" Professor Quirrell made a sharp gesture, as though to indicate a concept for which he had no words.

"Not particularly," she said. She was around thirty seconds away from ordering the Defense Professor out of her office.

Professor Quirrell began to pace within the small confines of her office. "Miss Granger was the only one whose worries he truly heeded - with her gone - all checks on the boy's recklessness are removed. I see it now. Who else is there? Mr. Longbottom? Mr. Potter does not pretend that they are peers. Flitwick? His goblin blood would only cry for vengeance. Mr. Malfoy, if he were returned? To what end? Snape? A walking disaster. Dumbledore? Pfah. Events are already set for catastrophe, they must be steered along some course they would not naturally go. Who might Mr. Potter heed, who would not ordinarily speak to him? Cedric Diggory has taught him, but what would Mr. Diggory say in advice? An unknown. Mr. Potter spent long in speech with Remus Lupin. To him I have paid little heed. Would Lupin know the words to speak, the act which must be done, the sacrifice which must be made to change the boy's course?" Professor Quirrell whirled on her. "Did Remus Lupin comfort those in grief or stay those moved to rash deeds, during his time with the Order of the Phoenix?"

"It is not a poor thought," she said slowly. "I believe that Mr. Lupin was often a voice of restraint to James Potter in his Hogwarts days."

"James Potter," said Professor Quirrell, his eyes narrowing. "The boy is not much like James Potter. Are you confident in the success of this plan? No, that is the wrong question, we are not limited to a single plan. Are you certain that this plan will be *enough*, that we need essay no others? Asked in such fashion, the question answers itself. The path leading to disaster must be averted along every possible point of intervention." The Defense Professor had resumed pacing the confines of her office, reaching one wall, turning on his heel, pacing to the other.

"My apologies, Professor," she did not bother keeping the sharpness from her voice, "but I have quite reached my limits for the day. You may go."

"*You* ." Professor Quirrell spun, and she found herself gazing directly into eyes of icy blue. "*You* would be the first one I would think of after Miss Granger, to stay the boy from a folly. Have you already done your utmost? Of course you have not."

How *dare* he suggest that. "If you have nothing more to say, Professor, then you *will* go."

"Has your confederacy deduced who I really am?" The words were spoken with deceptive mildness.

"Yes, in fact. Now -"

Pure magic, pure power crashed into the room like a flash of lightning, like a thunderclap echoing about her ears that deafened her other senses, the papers on her desk blown aside not by any conjured wind but by the sheer raw force of arcane might.

Then the power subsided, leaving only Hermione Granger's death certificates drifting down through the air to the floor.

"I am David Monroe, who fought Voldemort," the man said, still in mild tones. "Heed my words. The boy cannot be allowed to continue in this state of mind. He will become *dangerous* . It is possible that you have



already done everything you can. Yet I find this a very rare event indeed, and more often said than done. I suspect rather that you have only done what you customarily do. I cannot truly comprehend what drives others to break their bounds, since I never had them. People remain surprisingly passive when faced with the prospect of death. Fear of public ridicule or losing one's livelihood is more likely to drive men to extremes and the breaking of their customary habits. On the other side of the war, the Dark Lord had excellent results from the Cruciatus Curse, judiciously used on Marked servants who cannot escape punishment except by success, with no reasonable efforts accepted. Imagine their state of mind within yourself, and ask yourself whether you have truly done *all that you can* to wrench Harry Potter from his course."

"I am a Gryffindor and not much given to being moved by fear," she snapped back. " *You* will exercise courtesy within my office!"

"I find fear an excellent motivation, and indeed it is fear that moves me now. You-Know-Who, for all his horror, still abided by certain boundaries. It is my professional judgment, speaking as a learned wizard almost on par with Dumbledore or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, that the boy could join the ranks of those whose rituals are inscribed upon the tombstones of countries. This is not an idle worry, McGonagall, I have already heard words to produce the gravest apprehensions."

"Are you mad? You think that Mr. Potter could - this is ridiculous. Mr. Potter cannot possibly -"

A wordless image crossed her mind of a patch of glass on a steel ball.

"- Mr. Potter *would* not do such a thing!"

"His deliberate choice is not required. Wizards rarely set out to invoke their own dooms. Mr. Potter may not strike you as malicious. Does he strike you as reckless once he is resolved upon a goal? I say again that I have specific reason for the gravest *possible* concerns!"

"Have you spoken to the Headmaster of this?" she said slowly.

"That would be worse than pointless. Dumbledore cannot reach the boy. At best he is wise enough to know this and make things no worse. I lack the requisite frame of mind. *You* are the one who - but I see that you still look for others to save you." The Defense Professor turned from her, and strode to the door. "I think I shall consult with Severus Snape. The man may be a walking disaster, but he knows the fact, and he may possess a greater understanding of that boy's mood. As for you, madam, imagine yourself at the end of your life, knowing that Britain - but no, Britain is not your true country, is it? Imagine yourself at the end of your life as the darkness eats through the fading walls of Hogwarts, knowing that your students will die with you, remembering this day and realizing there was something else you could have done."

# CHAPTER 93

## ROLES, PT 4

Harry had walked into the Great Hall, looked around only once, grabbed enough calories to sustain himself, walked out, put on his Cloak again and found a small random corner in which to eat. Seeing the students at their tables -

*Feeling revulsion when you look at other humans is not a good sign, Hufflepuff said. It's not reasonable to blame them for having not had your opportunities to learn what you've learned. Inaction in emergencies has nothing to do with people being selfish. Normalcy bias, like that plane crash in Tener-something where a few people ran out and escaped but most people just sat in their seats not moving while their plane was literally on fire. Look at how long you took to really start moving.*

*It serves no useful purpose to hate , said Gryffindor. It's just going to damage your altruism.*

*Try to figure out a training method you could use to prevent this from happening next time, said Ravenclaw.*

*I'll go ahead and register the experimental prediction, said Slytherin, that we'll always observe exactly what would be predicted on the hypothesis that people cannot be saved, cannot be taught, and will never help us with anything important. Also, we need some way of keeping track of all the times I'm right.*

Harry ignored the voices in his head and just ate slices of toast as fast as he could. It wasn't proper nutrition as a general policy, but one-time exceptions wouldn't hurt so long as he made them up the next day.

In mid-bite, the blazing silver silhouette of a phoenix flew in from nowhere and said, in the voice of a tired old man, "Please remove your Cloak, Harry, I have a letter to deliver to you."

Harry coughed for a bit, swallowed some toast which had gone down the wrong way, stood up, took off the Cloak of Invisibility, said aloud "Tell Dumbledore I said fine," and then sat down and continued to eat his toast.

The toast had all gone by the time Albus Dumbledore walked up to Harry's nook, carrying folded sheets of paper in his hand; real paper, with lines, not wizard's parchment.

"Is that -" Harry said.

"From your father, and from your mother," said the old wizard. Wordlessly, Dumbledore handed over the folded sheets, and wordlessly Harry accepted them. The old wizard hesitated, then said quietly, "The Defense Professor has told me to restrain my counsel, and I thought the same thing myself when given time to think. I have always taken too long to learn the virtues of silence. But if I am mistaken, you need only say the word -"

"You're not mistaken," Harry said. He looked down at the folded, lined papers, feeling the sickness in his gut that was how his body indicated a strong pessimistic prediction. His parents wouldn't actually disown him, and there wasn't much they could *do* to him (some part of himself was still afraid in a very visceral way of television privileges being taken away, no matter how little sense that made now). But he had stepped outside the role that parents would expect of children who, in their internal beliefs, were lower on the pecking order. It would be stupid to expect anything except complete indignant fury, all-out righteous rage, when you acted like that to someone who thought they were dominant over you.

"After you read it," the Headmaster said, "I believe that you should come to the Great Hall at once, Harry. There is an announcement which you will wish to hear."

"I'm not interested in funerals -"

"No. Not that. Please, Harry, come as soon as you are done reading, and do so without your Cloak. Will you?"

"Yes."

The old wizard left.

Harry had to force himself to open up the letter. The important thing was keeping your vulnerable friends and relations out of harm's way, it might be a cliché but so far as Harry could tell the logic was valid. Damaged relationships could be repaired later.

The first letter said, in script handwriting that required a careful focus for Harry to read,

*Son,*

*No matter what you've read in books, keeping us out of harm's way is not as important as having adults who can help when you're in trouble. You decided without giving us a word in edgewise that we'd abandon you because of your 'dark side'. The ghost of Shakespeare knows that I've seen things in this last year that were not dreamt of in my philosophy - sometimes I wonder if your Mum isn't just humoring me and the authorities took you away when I started thinking you were a magic-user - so I can't deny that it's possible you've managed to develop some... I'm not quite sure what to call it, but 'dark side' seems premature if we don't know what's happening. Are you sure it's not a burgeoning telepathic talent and you're just picking up on the minds of other wizards around you? Their thoughts might seem evil to a child who grew up in a saner civilization. These are ungrounded speculations, I admit, but you shouldn't jump to conclusions either.*

*The two most important things I have to tell you are this. First, son, I have every confidence in your ability to stay on the Light Side of the Force so long as you choose to, and I have every confidence that you will choose to. If there's some evil spirit whispering horrible suggestions in your ears, just ignore the suggestions. I do feel the need to emphasize that you should exercise special caution to ignore this evil spirit even if it is suggesting what seem like wonderful creative ideas and I hope I do not need to remind you about the Incident with the Science Project which would, I admit, make a deal more sense if you were struggling with demonic possession.*

*The second thing I have to say is that you do not need to fear that Mum or I are going to abandon you because of your 'dark side'. We may not have expected you to gain magical powers or develop an affinity for black magic, but we did expect you to become a teenager. Which, if you think about it from your poor father's perspective, is already a sufficiently worrying prospect regarding a child who, by the age of nine, had been party to the summoning of a total of five fire engines. Children grow up. I won't lie to you and say that you will feel as close to us at 20 as you do now. But your Mum and I will feel just as close to you when we are old and grey and bothering the nursing-home robots. Children always grow up and away from their parents, and the parents always follow them from behind, offering helpful advice. Children grow up, and their personalities change, and they do things that their parents wish they would not do, and they act disrespectfully toward their parents and have them hauled out of their magical schools, and the parents go on loving them anyway. It is Nature's way. Though in the event that you have not yet hit puberty and your teenage years are proportionately worse than this, we reserve the right to reconsider this sentiment.*

*No matter what is happening, remember that we love you and will always love you no matter what. I don't know if our love has any magical power under your rules, but if it does, don't hesitate to call on it.*

*With all of this said... Harry, what you did there is not acceptable. I think you know that. And I also know that it is not the time to lecture you on it. But you must write and tell us what is happening. I can understand very well why you'd want us taken out of your school at once, and I know we can't force you to do anything, but please, Harry, be reasonable and realize how terrified we must be.*

*I would like to tell you that you are absolutely forbidden to mess around with any magic that the adults around you consider the least bit unsafe, but for all I know, the teachers at your school are giving everyone lessons in advanced necromancy every Monday. Please, please exercise as much caution as your situation permits, whatever your situation may be. Despite your very hurried summary we don't have the slightest idea what is happening and I hope that you will write us as much as you can. It is clear that you are, at least in some ways, growing up, and I will try not to act like the children's-book parent who only makes things worse - though I hope you appreciate how hard this is - and your Mum has said a number of frightening things to me about how wizardry stays secret and how I might get you into trouble by making waves. I cannot tell you to avoid anything unsafe, because your school is unsafe and your Headmaster will not let you leave. I can't tell you that you shouldn't take responsibility for anything happening*

*around you, because for all I know there are other children in trouble. But remember that it is not your moral responsibility to protect any adults, their place is to protect you, and every good adult would agree with that. Please write and tell us more as soon as you can.*

*Both of us are desperate to help. If there is anything at all that we can do, please let us know at once. There is nothing which can happen to us which would be worse than learning that something had happened to you.*

*Love,*

*Dad.*

The last page said only,

*You promised me that you wouldn't let magic take you away from me. I didn't raise you to be a boy who would break a promise to his Mum. You must come back safely, because you promised.*

*Love,*

*Mum.*

Slowly, Harry lowered the letters and began to walk towards the Great Hall. His hands were shaking, his whole body was shaking, and it seemed to be taking a very great deal of effort not to cry; which he knew wordlessly that he must not do. He hadn't cried through all of the day. And he wouldn't cry. Crying was the same as admitting defeat. And this wasn't over. So he wouldn't cry.



The food served in the Great Hall that evening was plain that night, toast and butter and jam, water and orange juice, oatmeal and other simple fare, without dessert. Some students had worn simple black robes without their House colors. Others had still worn theirs. It should have been cause for argument, but there was instead a quietness, the sound of people eating without talking. It took two sides to make a debate, and one of the sides, this night, was not much interested in debating.

Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall sat at the Head Table and did not eat. She should have. Perhaps she would in a short while. But she could not force herself to do it now.

For a Gryffindor there was only one path. It had taken Minerva only a short time to remember that, when after the Defense Professor's urgings her mind had stayed empty of clever plots to try. That was not a Gryffindor's way; or perhaps she ought to say only that it was not *her* way, Albus did seem to try his hand at plotting... and yet when she thought back on their history, there were no plots at the moment of crisis, no cleverness and games in the last resort. For Albus Dumbledore, as for her, the rule *in extremis* was to decide what was the right thing to do, and do it no matter the cost to yourself. Even if it meant breaking your bounds, or changing your role, or letting go of your picture of yourself. That was the last resort of Gryffindor.

Through a side entrance of the Great Hall she saw Harry Potter quietly slip in.

It was time.

Professor Minerva McGonagall rose from her chair, straightened the worn point on her hat, walked slowly to the lectern before the Head Table.

The sounds in the Great Hall, already muted, fell away entirely as all students turned to look at her.

"By now you have all heard," she said, her voice not quite steady. *That Hermione Granger is dead.* She didn't say those words aloud, since they had all heard. "Somehow, a troll was infiltrated into the castle Hogwarts without alarm from our ancient wards. Somehow this troll succeeded in injuring a student, without alarm from the wards until the point of her death. Investigations are underway to determine how this has occurred. The Board of Governors is meeting to determine how Hogwarts will respond. In due time justice shall be served.

Meanwhile there is another matter of justice, which must be handled at once. George Weasley, Fred Weasley, please come forward to stand before us all."

The Weasley twins exchanged glances where they sat at the Gryffindor table, and then stood up and walked toward her, slowly, reluctantly; and Minerva realized then that the Weasley twins thought that they were to be expelled.

They honestly thought that she would expel them.

That was what the picture of Professor McGonagall who lived in her head had wrought.

The Weasley twins walked over to the lectern, looking up at her with faces that were frightened, but resolute; and she felt something in her heart break a little further.

"I am not going to expel you," she said, and was saddened further by the surprised look on their faces. "Fred Weasley, George Weasley, turn and face your classmates, let them see you."

Still looking surprised, the Weasley twins did so.

She drew up all the steel in her heart, and said what was right.

"I am ashamed," said Minerva McGonagall, "of the events of this day. I am ashamed that there were only two of you. Ashamed of what I have done to Gryffindor. Of all the Houses, it should have been Gryffindor to help when Hermione Granger was in need, when Harry Potter called for the brave to aid him. It was true, a seventh-year could have held back a mountain troll while searching for Miss Granger. And you should have believed that the Head of House Gryffindor," her voice broke, "would have believed in you. If you disobeyed her to do what was right, in events she had not foreseen. And the reason you did not believe this, is that I have never shown it to you. I did not believe in you. I did not believe in the virtues of Gryffindor itself. I tried to stamp out your defiance, instead of training your courage to wisdom. Whatever the Sorting Hat saw in me that led it to place me in Gryffindor, I have betrayed it. I have offered my resignation to the Headmaster as Deputy Headmistress and as the Head of House Gryffindor."



There were cries of shock and dismay, and not only from the Gryffindor Table, as Harry's heart froze within his chest. Harry needed to run forward, say something, he hadn't meant for *this* to -



Minerva took another breath, and continued. "However, the Headmaster has declined to accept my resignation," she said. "So I will continue to serve, and try to undo what I have wrought. Somehow I must find a way to teach my students how to do what is right. Not what is safe, not what is easy, not what we are told to do. If all I can teach you is to turn in your essays on time, there might as well not be a House Gryffindor. This road will be more difficult for me, and maybe for all of us. But I know now that before I was only taking the easy path."

She stepped down from the lectern, moved down to where the Weasley twins stood.

"Fred Weasley, George Weasley," she said. "The two of you have not always done what is right. The path of wisdom does not lie in flagrant and needless defiance of authority. And yet today you proved to be the last of

our House to survive my mistakes. Because it was the right thing to do, you defied a threat of expulsion and risked your lives to face a mountain troll. For your astounding courage that honors your House to have you, I award each of you two hundred points for Gryffindor."

Again the look of shock on their faces, again the pain like a knife through her heart.

She turned to face the other students.

"I will not award any points to Ravenclaw," she said. "I suspect that Mr. Potter would not want them. If I am wrong, he may correct me and take as many House points as he pleases. But for whatever it is worth, Mr. Potter, I am," her voice faltered, "I am sorry -"



" *Stop!* " Harry screamed, and then, again, "Stop." The word sticking in his throat. "You don't have to, Professor." Something inside him was twisting, threatening to split him open, like a giant's hands wrenching at him to tear him in half. "And, and you shouldn't forget Susan Bones, and Ron Weasley - they also helped, they should get House points too -"

"Miss Bones and the young Weasley?" said Professor McGonagall. "Rubeus said nothing of that - what did they do?"

"Miss Bones tried to stun Mr. Hagrid when he tried to stop me, and Mr. Weasley shot Neville when Neville tried to stop me. They should both get points, and, and so should Neville," Harry hadn't thought to imagine it before, the way Neville must be feeling now, but the instant he'd thought, he knew, "because Neville tried to do something, even if it wasn't the right thing, doing what's right is the *second* lesson, you can start practicing that after you learn to do anything at all -"

"Ten points to Hufflepuff, Miss Bones," Professor McGonagall said, her voice breaking in the middle. "Ten points to Gryffindor, Ron Weasley, your family has done itself exceeding proud, this day. And ten points to Hufflepuff for Neville Longbottom, for standing up to Mr. Potter and doing what he thought was right -"

"*You shouldn't!*" screamed a young voice from the Hufflepuff table, followed by a single choking sound.

Harry looked there, and then quickly looked back at Professor McGonagall and said, as steadily as he could, "Neville's right, actually, you can't award literally zero points for the part where you get the action correct, that sends the wrong message too, but he was halfway there so it could be five points instead."

Professor McGonagall looked, for a moment, like she couldn't think of what to say; but then her eyes went to Neville's place at the table, and she said, "As you wish, Mr. Potter. What is it, Miss Bones?"

Harry looked and saw that Susan Bones had stepped forward, wiping at her own eyes, and the Hufflepuff girl said, "Actually - Professor McGonagall - General Potter didn't see it - but Captain Weasley and I weren't the only ones who tried to get in Mr. Hagrid's way, after he ran out. Before some of the older students stopped us. But we managed to slow Mr. Hagrid down a minute, so General Potter could get away."

"You've got to give them points too," said Ron Weasley from the Gryffindor table. "Or I won't take any."

"Who else?" said Professor McGonagall, her voice a bit unsteady.

Seven other children stood up.

*What was that our Slytherin side was saying about predicting nothing would ever work?* said Hufflepuff.

Something in Harry cracked, so that he had to exert all his force to hold himself together.



When all had been said, and all had been done, Minerva went to where Harry Potter stood. Though it was not her greatest skill she cast a ward about them to blur vision, and muffled sounds with another thought.

"You, you didn't have to -" said Harry Potter. "You shouldn't have said -" He sounded like he was choking. "P-Professor, everything I said to you was hurtful, and hateful, and wrong -"

"I already knew that, Harry," she said. "Even so, I wished to do better." There was a feeling of lightness in her chest, much as one might experience after stepping off a cliff, when your legs no longer had to hold your body upright. She wasn't sure she could do this, she did not know the way; and yet for the first time it seemed possible that Hogwarts wouldn't become a sad ghost of its former self, when she became its Headmistress.

Harry stared at her, then made a odd noise that sounded like it had been forced from his throat, and covered his face in his hands.

So she knelt down, and hugged him. It might go wrong, but it might also go right, and she would not let that uncertainty stop her; it was time she began to learn a Gryffindor's courage, so that she could teach it in turn.

"I had a sister once," she whispered. Just that, and nothing more.



*Just to make sure*, said some part of Harry, while the rest of him sobbed into Professor McGonagall's arms, *this doesn't mean we've accepted Hermione's death, right?*

NO said all the rest of him, every part of his mind in unanimous agreement, warmth and cold and a hidden place of steel. *Never, ever, forever.*



And an ancient wizard to whom that ward meant nothing gazed upon them both, the witch and the weeping young wizard. Albus Dumbledore was smiling with a strange sad look in his eyes, like someone who has taken one more step toward a foreseen destination.



The Defense Professor watched them both, the woman and the crying boy. His eyes were very cold, and very calculating.

He did not think that this would be enough.



It wasn't until the next morning that it was discovered that Hermione Granger's body was missing.



# CHAPTER 94

## ROLES, PT 5

### *The first meeting:*

At 6:07am on April 17th, 1992 the Sun was just rising above the horizon as seen from the castle Hogwarts, filtering in through drawn curtains in the Ravenclaw first-year boys' dorm to provide a gentle light, red-orange for dawn and little-changed by the white fabric covering the windows, not yet waking boys more accustomed to winter's schedule.

In one bed among many, Harry Potter slept the sleep of the just exhausted.

Quietly the door opened.

Quietly a figure walked across the floor.

That figure came to Harry Potter's bed.

The figure laid a hand on the shoulder of the sleeping boy, who started and shrieked.

No others heard.

"Mr. Potter," the small man squeaked, "the Headmaster has requested your presence immediately."

Slowly the boy sat up in bed, his hands momentarily fiddling beneath the covers. He'd expected to feel much worse, waking up this morning. It felt... wrong, that his brain functioned now, that his thoughts still moved, that he wasn't incapacitated with weeping for at least a week. The boy knew that it wouldn't have been an adaptive response, for brains to evolve to do that. His dark side, certainly, would not do that. Even so, it still felt wrong to be alive and lucid, this morning.

But his resolution to revive Hermione Granger felt - sufficient, like he was already doing the right thing, bent on the right path, and she would be brought back, and that was all there was to it; grief would have been giving up. There was nothing left to decide, no ambiguity, no conflict to tear at him, and no need to remember what he'd *seen* -

"I'll get dressed," Harry said.

Professor Flitwick looked rather reluctant, but said in his high voice, "The Headmaster specified you were to be brought to his office directly and without pause, Mr. Potter. I'm sorry."

Less than a minute later - Professor Flitwick had sent him straight to the Headmaster's office through the Hogwarts internal Floo - Harry found himself, still in his pajamas, facing Albus Dumbledore. The Deputy Headmistress was also sitting in another chair, and the Potions Master lurked nearby amid the weird devices, caught in a gaping yawn just as Harry had entered through the fireplace.

"Harry," the Headmaster said without preamble, "before I say what I must say next, I tell you that Hermione Granger did truly die. The wards recorded it and informed me. The very stones spoke that a witch had died. I tested her body where it lay and those were Hermione Granger's true mortal remains, not any doll or likeness. There is no way known to wizardry by which death may be undone. All this being said, Hermione Granger's remains are now missing from the storeroom where they were placed, and where you guarded them. Did you take them, Harry Potter?"

"No," Harry said, narrowing his eyes. A glance showed him that Severus was watching him intently.

Dumbledore's gaze was also keen, though not unfriendly. "Is Hermione Granger's body in your possession?"

"No."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No."

"Do you know who took it?"

"No," Harry said, then hesitated. "Besides the obvious probabilistic speculations which are not based upon any specific knowledge of mine."

The old wizard nodded. "Do you know why it was taken?"

"No. Besides the obvious speculations etcetera."

"What would those be?" Sharp the ancient eyes.

"If the enemy can notice you running off to consult the Weasley twins during class after Hermione was arrested, and find out about that magic map you said was stolen, then the enemy can wonder why I was guarding Hermione Granger's body. My turn. Did you arrange for Hermione's death in hopes of getting the money back from Lucius?"

"*What?*" said Professor McGonagall.

"No," said the old wizard.

"Did you know or suspect that Hermione Granger would die?"

"I did not know. As for suspicions, I placed her in the most strongly defended position I could, against Voldemort. I did not will her death, nor allow it, nor plan to benefit from it, Harry Potter. Now show me your pouch."

"It's in my trunk -" Harry began.

"Severus," said the old wizard, and the Potions Master moved forward. "Check his trunk as well, every compartment."

"My trunk has wards."

Severus Snape grinned mirthlessly and strode into the green flame.

Dumbledore took out his long dark-grey wand and began to wave it close around Harry's hair, looking like a Muggle using a metal-detector. Before he had reached as far as Harry's neck, Dumbledore stopped.

"The gem upon your ring," Dumbledore said. "It is no longer a clear diamond. It is brown, the color of Hermione Granger's eyes, and the color of her hair."

A sudden tension filled the room.

"That's my father's rock," Harry said. "Transfigured the same as before. I just did it to remember Hermione -"

"I must be sure. Take off that ring, Harry, and place it upon my desk."

Slowly, Harry did so, removing the gem and setting the ring off to the other side of the desk.

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the gem and -

A large, undistinguished grey rock jumped into the air from the force of its sudden expansion, hit some invisible barrier in the air above, and then fell with a loud crack upon the Headmaster's desk,

"There's another half-hour of work for me, Transfiguring it again," Harry said evenly.

Dumbledore resumed his examination. Harry had to remove his left shoe, and take off the toe-ring that was his emergency portkey if someone kidnapped him and took him outside the wards of Hogwarts (and didn't put up anti-Apparition, anti-portkey, anti-phoenix, and anti-time-looping wards, which Severus had warned Harry that any inner-circle Death Eater would certainly do). It was verified that the magic radiating from the toe-ring was indeed the magic of a portkey, and not the magic of a Transfiguration. The rest of Harry was deemed clear.

Not long after, the Potions Master returned, bearing Harry's pouch, and several other magical things which had been in Harry's trunk, which the Headmaster also examined, one by one, even to all the items remaining within the healer's kit.

"Can I go now?" Harry said when it was all done, putting as much cold as he could into his voice. He took up his pouch, and began the process of feeding the grey rock into it. The empty ring went back on his finger.

The old wizard breathed out, slipping his wand back into his sleeve. "I *am* sorry," he said. "I had to know. Harry... the Dark Lord has taken Hermione Granger's remains, it seems. I cannot think of anything he would gain thereby, except to send her corpse against you as an Inferius. Severus shall give you certain potions to keep about your person. Be warned now, and be prepared for when you must do what must be done."

"Will the Inferius have Hermione's mind?"

"No -"

"Then it's not her. Can I go? At least to change out of my pyjamas."

"There is other news, but I shall be brief. The wards of Hogwarts record that no foreign creature has entered, and that it was the Defense Professor who killed Hermione Granger."

"Um," Harry said.

*Thought 1: But I saw the troll kill Hermione.*

*Thought 2: Professor Quirrell Memory-Charmed me and set up the scene that Dumbledore saw when he arrived.*

*Thought 3: Professor Quirrell can't do that, his magic can't touch mine. I saw that in Azkaban -*

*Thought 4: Can I trust those memories?*

*Thought 5: There was clearly some sort of debacle at Azkaban, we wouldn't have needed a rocket if Professor Quirrell hadn't fallen unconscious, and why'd he be unconscious if not -*

*Thought 6: Did I ever actually go to Azkaban at all?*

*Thought 7: I clearly practiced controlling Dementors at some point before I scared that Dementor in the Wizengamot. And that was in the newspapers.*

*Thought 8: Am I accurately remembering the newspapers?*

"Um," Harry said again. "That spell seriously ought to be Unforgiveable. You think Professor Quirrell could have Memory-Charmed -"

"No. I went back through time and placed certain instruments to record Hermione's last battle, which I could not quite bear to watch in my own person." The old wizard looked very grim indeed. "Your guess was right, Harry Potter. Voldemort sabotaged everything we gave Hermione to protect her. Her broomstick lay dead in her hands. Her invisibility cloak did not conceal her. The troll walked in the sunlight unharmed; it was no stray creature, but a weapon pure and aimed. And it was indeed the troll who killed her, with strength alone, so that my wards and webs to detect hostile magics went for naught. The Defense Professor never crossed her path."

Harry swallowed, shut his eyes, and thought. "So this was an attempted frame on Professor Quirrell. Somehow. It does seem to be the enemy's *modus operandi*. Troll eats Hermione Granger, check the wards, oh look actually the Defense Professor did it, same as last year... no. No, that can't be right."

"Why not, Mr. Potter?" said the Potions Master. "It seems obvious enough to me -"

"That's the problem."

*The enemy is smart.*

Slowly the fog of sleep was drifting out of Harry's mind, and after a full night's sleep his brain could see the things which hadn't been obvious the day before.

Under standard literary convention... the enemy wasn't supposed to look over what you'd done, sabotage the magic items you'd handed out, and then send out a troll rendered undetectable by some means the heroes couldn't figure out even after the fact, so that you might as well have not defended yourself at all. In a book, the point-of-view usually stayed on the main characters. Having the enemy just bypass all the protagonists' work, as a result of planning and actions taken out of literary sight, would be a *diabolus ex machina*, and dramatically unsatisfying.

But in real life the enemy would think that they were the main character, and they would also be clever, and think things through in advance, even if you didn't see them do it. That was why everything about this felt so disjointed, with parts unexplained and seemingly inexplicable. How had Lucius felt, when Harry had threatened

Dumbledore with breaking Azkaban? How had the Aurors above Azkaban felt, seeing the broomstick rise up on a torch of fire?

*The enemy is smart.*

"The enemy knew perfectly well that you'd turn back time to check what really happened to Hermione, especially since the troll getting into Hogwarts at all tells us that somebody can fool the wards." Harry shut his eyes, thinking harder, trying to put himself into the enemy's shoes. Why would he, or his dark side, have done something like - "We're meant to conclude that the enemy has control of what the wards tell us. But that's actually something the enemy can only do with difficulty, or under special conditions; they're trying to create a false appearance of omnipotence." *Like I would.* "Later, hypothetically, the wards show Professor Sinistra killing someone. We think the wards are just being fooled again, but really, Professor Sinistra was Legilimized and she *did* do it."

"Unless that is precisely what the Dark Lord expects us to think," said Severus Snape, his brow furrowed in concentration. "In which case he does have control of the wards, and Professor Sinistra will be innocent."

"Does the Dark Lord *really* use plots with that many levels of meta -"

"Yes," said Dumbledore and Severus.

Harry nodded distantly. "Then this could be a setup to either make us think the wards are telling the truth when they're lying, or a setup to make us think the wards are lying when they're telling the truth, depending on what level the enemy expects us to reason at. But if the enemy is planning to make us trust the wards - we would have trusted the wards anyway, if we'd been given no reason to distrust them. So there's no need to go to all the work of framing Professor Quirrell in a way that we would realize we were intended to discover, just to trick us into going meta -"

"Not so," said Dumbledore. "If Voldemort has not fully mastered the wards, then the wards had to believe that some Professor's hand was at work. Else they would have cried out at Miss Granger's injury, and not only upon her death."

Harry reached up a hand and rubbed at his brow, just beneath his hair.

*Okay, serious question. If the enemy is that smart, why the heck am I still alive? Is it seriously that hard to poison someone, are there Charms and Potions and bezoars which can cure me of literally anything that could be slipped into my breakfast? Would the wards record it, trace the magic of the murderer?*

*Could my scar contain the fragment of soul that's keeping the Dark Lord anchored to the world, so he doesn't want to kill me? Instead he's trying to drive off all my friends to weaken my spirit so he can take over my body? It'd explain the Parselmouth thing. The Sorting Hat might not be able to detect a lich-phyllactery-thingy. Obvious problem 1, the Dark Lord is supposed to have made his lich-phyllactery-thingy in 1943 by killing whatshername and framing Mr. Hagrid. Obvious problem 2, there's no such thing as souls.*

*Though Dumbledore also thought that my blood was a key ingredient in a ritual to restore the Dark Lord's full strength, which would require keeping me alive until then... now there's a cheery thought.*

"Well..." Harry said. "I'm sure of one thing."

"And that is?"

"Neville needs to be taken out of Hogwarts *now*. He's the obvious next target and no first-year student can survive this level of offense. We're lucky Neville wasn't assassinated yesterday evening, the enemy doesn't have to wait until we're finished mourning to make their next move." *Why didn't the enemy strike while we were distracted?*

Dumbledore exchanged glances with Severus, and then with the suddenly tight expression of Professor McGonagall. "Harry," said the old wizard, "if you send all your friends away yourself, that is just the same as if Voldemort -"

"I will be *fine* I can do without Neville for a couple of extra months it's not like you were planning to make my friends stay here over the summer and that is just plain *not sufficient justification* to let him get killed! Professor McGonagall -"

"I quite agree," said the Scottish witch. She frowned. "I extremely agree. I agree to the point where... I'm having some trouble figuring out how to express this, Albus..."

"To the point where you're going to haul him out of there yourself, regardless of what anyone else says, because it's no excuse to say you were only following orders if Neville gets killed?" Harry said.

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes briefly. "Yes, but surely there ought to be some way to be responsible without threats of unilateral action."

The Headmaster sighed. "No need. Go, Minerva."

"Wait," the Potions Master said, just as Professor McGonagall, moving rather swiftly, was taking a pinch of green dust from the Floo-vase. "We should not call attention to the boy, as the Headmaster called attention to the Weasley twins. It would be wiser, I think, if Mr. Longbottom's grandmother took him from Hogwarts. Let him stay in his Common Room for now; the Dark Lord does not seem able to act so openly."

There was another long exchange of glances among the four, and finally Harry nodded, followed by Professor McGonagall.

"In that case," said Harry, "I'm sure of one other thing."

"And that is?" said Dumbledore.

"I very much need to visit the washroom, and I would also like to change out of these pyjamas."



"By the way," Harry said as he and the Headmaster emerged from Floo into the empty office of the Ravenclaw Head of House. "One last quick question I wanted to ask just you. That sword the Weasley twins pulled out of the Sorting Hat. That was the Sword of Gryffindor, wasn't it?"

The old wizard turned, face neutral. "What makes you think that, Harry?"

"The Sorting Hat yelled *Gryffindor!* just before handing it out, the sword had a ruby pommel and gold letters on the blade, and the Latin script said *Nothing better*. Just a hunch."

"*Nihil supernum*," said the old wizard. "That is not *quite* what it means."

Harry nodded. "Mmhm. What'd you do with it?"

"I retrieved it from where it fell, and placed it in a secure place," the old wizard said. He gave Harry a stern look. "I hope you are not greedy for it yourself, young Ravenclaw."

"Not at all, just want to make sure you're not keeping it permanently from its rightful wielders. So the Weasley twins are the Heir of Gryffindor, then?"

"The Heir of Gryffindor?" Dumbledore said, looking surprised. Then the old wizard smiled, blue eyes twinkling brightly. "Ah, Harry, Salazar Slytherin may have built a Chamber of Secrets into Hogwarts, but Godric Gryffindor was not much given to such extravagances. We have seen only that Godric left his Sword to the defense of Hogwarts, if a worthy student ever faced a foe they could not defeat alone."

"That's not the same as saying no. Don't think I didn't notice that you didn't actually say no."

"I did not live in those years, Harry, and I do not know all that Godric Gryffindor may or may not have done \_."

"Do you in fact assign greater than fifty percent subjective probability that there is something like a Heir of Gryffindor and one or both Weasley twins are it. Yes or no, evasion means yes. You're not going to succeed in distracting me, no matter how much I have to go to the bathroom."

The old wizard sighed. "Yes, Fred and George Weasley are the Heir of Gryffindor. I beg you not to speak of it to them, not yet."

Harry nodded, and turned to go. "I'm surprised," Harry said. "I read a little about Godric Gryffindor's historical life. The Weasley twins are... well, they're awesome in various ways, but they don't seem much like the Godric in the history books."

"Only a man exceedingly proud and vain," Dumbledore said quietly, as he turned back to the Floo roaring up again with green flames, "would believe that his heir should be like himself, rather than like who he wished that he could be."

The Headmaster stepped into green fire, and was gone.



*The second meeting (in a small cubby off the Hufflepuff Common Room):*

Neville Longbottom's face was drawn up in anguish, as he spoke with no one to hear, to the empty air.

"Seriously," the empty air said back to him. "I'm wearing an invisibility cloak with extra anti-detection charms just to walk through the hallways because *I* don't want to be killed. My parents would have me out of Hogwarts in an instant if the Headmaster allowed it. Neville, your getting the heck out of Hogwarts is common sense, it has *nothing to do* with -"

"I betrayed you, General," Neville said, his voice around as hollow as any normal eleven-year-old boy could reasonably manage. "I didn't even do it the Chaotic way. I conformed to authority and tried to make you conform to authority too. What's that you always say, about how in the Chaos Legion, a soldier who can only obey orders is useless?"

"Neville," the empty air said firmly. The pressure of two hands, beneath thin cloth, came firmly to bear on Neville's shoulders; and the voice moved closer to him. "You weren't blindly obeying authority, you were trying to protect me. It's true that in this chaotic world, soldiers who can only follow rules and regulations are worthless. However, soldiers who follow rules for the sake of protecting their friends are -"

"Slightly better than worthless?" Neville said bitterly.

"*Significantly* better than worthless. Neville, you made an error of judgment. It cost me around six seconds. Now it could be that Hermione's injuries were just barely fatal, but even then, I don't think six seconds was actually enough time for the troll to take an extra bite of Hermione. In the counterfactual world where you didn't step in front of me, Hermione still died. Now, I could stand here listing out the first dozen ways that Hermione would be alive if I hadn't been stupid -"

"You? *You* ran right out after her. *I'm* the one who tried to stop you. It's my fault if it's anyone's," Neville said bitterly.

The empty air went silent at this for a while.

"Wow," the empty air finally said. "Wow. That puts a pretty different perspective on things, I have to say. I'm going to remember this the next time I feel an impulse to blame myself for something. Neville, the term in the literature for this is 'egocentric bias', it means that you experience everything about your own life but you don't get to experience everything else that happens in the world. There was way, way more going on than you running in front of me. You're going to spend weeks remembering that thing you did there for six seconds, I can tell, but nobody else is going to bother thinking about it. Other people spend a lot less time thinking about your past mistakes than you do, just because you're not the center of their worlds. I *guarantee* to you that nobody except you has even *considered* blaming Neville Longbottom for what happened to Hermione. Not for a fraction of a second. You are being, if you will pardon the phrase, a silly-dilly. Now shut up and say goodbye."

"I don't want to say goodbye," Neville said. His voice was trembling, but he managed not to cry. "I want to stay here and fight with you against - against whatever's happening."

The empty air moved closer to him, and embraced him in a hug, and Harry Potter's voice whispered, "Tough luck."



*There is an Author's Note at [hpmor dot com](http://hpmor.com) / notes  
containing the fan art update  
(note: I am running out of cameo opportunities for fan artists)  
news about the Center for Applied Rationality ([rationality dot org](http://rationality.org))  
including a Bay Area workshop Jul 20-23 with a few seats still open  
plus future workshops Oct 11-14 (Bay Area) and Nov 1-4 (New York)  
and a way to express interest in a 1-day traveling workshop for your area  
and a project to distribute physical copies of HPMOR 1-17  
to promising locations for talented youth and young adults in science & math  
which needs volunteers in relevant locations to distribute physical copies  
and is requesting testimonials which may aid in these copies being distributed.  
I will be at a MIRI math workshop Jul 8-14, and will need to rest before and after.  
The next updates may occur at some or none, but definitely not all of  
Thu Jul 11 7pm  
Mon Jul 15 7pm  
Wed Jul 17 7pm  
all in Pacific Time .*

# CHAPTER 95

## ROLES, PT 6

*The third meeting*

*(10:31am, April 17th 1992)*

Spring had begun, the late-morning air still crisp with the leavings of winter. Daffodils had bloomed amid the sprouting grass of the forest, the gentle yellow petals with their golden hearts dangling limply from their dead, grayed stems, wounded or killed by one of the sudden frosts that you often saw in April. In the Forbidden Forest there would be stranger lifeforms, centaurs and unicorns at the least, and Harry had heard allegations of werewolves. Though from what Harry had read of real-life werewolves, that did not make the slightest bit of sense.

Harry didn't venture anywhere near the border of the Forbidden Forest, since there was no reason to take the risk. He walked invisibly among the more ordinary life-forms of the permitted woods, wand in hand, a broomstick strapped to his back for easier access, just in case. He was not actually afraid; Harry thought it odd that he didn't feel afraid. The state of constant vigilance, readiness for fight or flight, failed to feel burdensome or even abnormal.

On the edges of the permitted woods Harry walked, his feet never straying near the beaten path where he might be more easily found, never leaving sight of Hogwarts's windows. Harry had set the alarm upon his mechanical watch to tell him when it was lunchtime, since he couldn't actually look at his wrist, being invisible and all that. It raised the question of how his eyeglasses worked while he was wearing the Cloak. For that matter the Law of the Excluded Middle seemed to imply that either the rhodopsin complexes in his retina were absorbing photons and transducing them to neural spikes, or alternatively, those photons were going straight through his body and out the other side, but not both. It really did seem increasingly likely that invisibility cloaks let you see outward while being invisible yourself because, on some fundamental level, that was how the caster had - not *wanted* - but *implicitly believed* - that invisibility should work.

Whereupon you had to wonder whether anyone had tried Confunding or Legilimizing someone into implicitly and matter-of-factly believing that *Fixus Everythingus* ought to be an easy first-year Charm, and then trying to invent it.

Or maybe find a worthy Muggleborn in a country that didn't identify Muggleborn children, and tell them some extensive lies, fake up a surrounding story and corresponding evidence, so that, from the very beginning, they'd have a different idea of what magic could do. Though apparently they'd still have to learn a number of previous Charms before they became capable of inventing their own...

It might not work. Surely there'd been some organically insane wizards who'd truly believed in their own possibility of godhood, and yet had failed to become god. But even the insane had probably believed the ascension spell ought to be some grandiose dramatic ritual and not something you did with a carefully composed twitch of your wand and the incantation *Becomus Goddus*.

Harry was already pretty sure it wouldn't be that easy. But then the question was, *why not?* What pattern had his brain learned? Could the reason be predicted in advance?

A slight fringe of apprehension crept through Harry then, a tinge of worry, as he contemplated this question. The nameless concern sharpened, grew greater -



*Professor Quirrell?*

"Mr. Potter," a soft voice called from behind him.

Harry spun, his hand going to the Time-Turner beneath his cloak; again the principle of being ready to flee upon an instant's notice felt only ordinary.

Slowly, palms empty and turned outward, Professor Quirrell was walking towards him within the forests' outskirts, coming from the general direction of the Hogwarts castle.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said again. "I know that you're here. You know that I know that you're here. I must speak to you."

Still Harry said nothing. Professor Quirrell hadn't actually said what this was about, and Harry's sunlit afternoon walk about the forest edge had produced a mood of silence within him.

Professor Quirrell took a small step to the left, a step forward, another to the right. He tilted his head with a look of calculation, and then he walked almost directly towards where Harry stood, halted a few paces off with the sense of doom enflamed to the height of bearability.

"Are you still resolved upon your course?" Professor Quirrell said. "The same course you spoke of yesterday?"

Again Harry did not reply.

Professor Quirrell sighed. "There is much I have done for you," the man said. "Whatever else you may wonder of me, you cannot deny that. I am calling in some of the debt. Talk to me, Mr. Potter."

*I don't feel like doing this right now,* Harry thought; then: *Oh, right.*



Two hours later, after Harry had spun the Time-Turner once, noted down the exact time and memorized his exact location, spent another hour walking, went inside and told Professor McGonagall that he was currently talking to the Defense Professor in the woods outside Hogwarts (just in case anything happened to him), walked for a further hour, then returned to his original location exactly one hour after he'd left and spun the Time-Turner again -



"What was that?" Professor Quirrell said, blinking. "Did you just -"

"Nothing important," Harry said without pulling back the hood of his invisibility cloak, or taking his hand from his Time-Turner. "Yes, I'm still resolved. To be honest, I'm thinking I shouldn't have said anything."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head. "A sentiment which shall serve you well in life. Is there anything which is liable to change your mind?"

"Professor, if I already *knew* about the existence of an argument which would change my decision -"

"True, for the likes of us. But you would be surprised how often someone knows what they are waiting to hear, yet must wait to hear it said." Professor Quirrell shook his head. "To put this in your terms... there is a true fact, known to me but not to you, of which I would like to convince you, Mr. Potter."

Harry's eyebrows rose, though he realized in the next moment that Professor Quirrell couldn't see it. "That's in my terms, all right. Go ahead."

"The intention you have formed is far more dangerous than you realize."

Replying to this surprising statement did not take much thought on Harry's part. "Define dangerous, and tell me what you think you know and how you think you know it."

"Sometimes," said Professor Quirrell, "telling someone about a danger can cause them to walk directly into it. I have no intention of having that happen this time. Do you expect me to tell you exactly what you must not do? Exactly why I am afraid?" The man shook his head. "If you were wizardborn, Mr. Potter, you would know to take it seriously, when a powerful magus tells you only to beware."

It would have been a lie to say that Harry was not annoyed, but he also wasn't an idiot; so Harry said merely, "Is there anything you *can* tell me?"

Carefully, Professor Quirrell seated himself upon the grass, and took out his wand, his hand assuming a position that Harry recognized. Harry's breath caught.

"This is the last time that I shall be able to do this for you," Professor Quirrell said quietly. Then the man began to speak words that were strange, of no language Harry could recognize, intonation that seemed not quite human, words which seemed to slip from Harry's memory even as he tried to grasp them, exiting from his mind as quickly as they entered.

The spell took effect more slowly, this time. The trees seemed to darken, branches and leaves staining, as though seen through perfect sunglasses that faded and attenuated light without distorting it. The blue bowl of the sky receded, the horizon which Harry's brain falsely assigned a finite distance pulling back as it turned gray, and darker gray. The clouds became translucent, transparent, wisping away to let the darkness shine through.

The forest shaded, faded, abated into blackness.

The great sky river became visible once again, as Harry's eyes adjusted, became able to see the largest object which human eyes could ever behold as more than a point, the surrounding Milky Way.

And the stars, piercingly bright and yet remote, out of a great depth.

Professor Quirrell breathed deeply. Then he raised his wand again (just barely visible, in the starlight without sun or moon) and tapped himself on the head with a sound like an egg cracking.

The Defense Professor also faded away, became likewise invisible.

A tiny disk of grass, illuminated by not much light at all, drifted unoccupied within empty space.

Neither of them spoke for a time. Harry was content to look at the stars, undistracted even by his own body. Whatever Professor Quirrell had called him here to say, it would be said in due time.

In due time, a voice spoke.

"There is no war here," said a soft voice emanating from within the emptiness. "No conflict and battle, no politics and betrayal, no death and no life. That is all for the folly of men. The stars are above such foolishness, untouched by it. Here there is peace, and silence eternal. So I once thought."

Harry turned to look at where the voice originated, and saw only stars.

"So you once thought?" Harry said, when no other words seemed to be forthcoming.

"There is nothing above the folly of men," whispered the voice from the emptiness. "There is nothing beyond the destructive powers of sufficiently intelligent idiocy, not even the stars themselves. I went to a great deal of trouble to make a certain golden plaque last forever. I would not like to see it destroyed by human folly."

Again Harry's eyes reflexively darted toward where the voice should have been, again saw only emptiness. "I think I can reassure you on that score, Professor. Nuclear weapons don't have a fireball extending out for... how far away is Pioneer 11? Somewhere around a billion kilometers, maybe? Muggles talk about nuclear weapons destroying the world, but what they actually mean is lightly warming up some of Earth's surface. The *Sun* is a giant fusion reaction and *it* doesn't vaporize distant space probes. The worst-case scenario for nuclear war wouldn't even come close to destroying the Solar System, not that this is much of a consolation."

"True while we speak of Muggles," said the soft voice amid starlight. "But what do Muggles know of true power? It is not they who frighten me now. It is you."

"Professor," Harry said carefully, "while I have to admit I've rolled a few critical failures in my life, there's a bit of distance between that and missing a saving throw so hard that the Pioneer 11 probe gets caught in the blast radius. There's no realistic way to do that without blowing up the Sun. And before you ask, our Sun is a main-sequence G-type star, it *can't* explode. Any energy input would just increase the volume of the hydrogen plasma, the Sun doesn't have a degenerate core that could be detonated. The Sun doesn't have enough mass to go supernova, even at the end of its lifespan."

"Such amazing things the Muggles have learned," the other voice murmured. "How stars live, how they are preserved from death, how they die. And they never wonder if such knowledge might be dangerous."

"In all frankness, Professor, that particular thought has never occurred to me either."

"You are Muggleborn. I speak not of blood, I speak of how you spent your childhood years. There is a freedom of thought in that, true. But there is also wisdom in the caution of wizardkind. It has been three hundred and twenty-three years since the country of magical Italy was ruined by one man's folly. Such incidents were more common in the years when Hogwarts was raised. Commoner still, in the aftertime of Merlin. Of the time before Merlin, little remains to study."

"There's around thirty orders of magnitude of difference between that and blowing up the Sun," Harry observed, then caught himself. "But that's a pointless quibble, sorry, blowing up a country would also be bad, I agree. In any case, Professor, I don't plan on doing anything like that."

"Your choice is not required, Mr. Potter. If you had read more wizardborn novels and fewer Muggle stories, you would know. In serious literature the wizard whose foolishness threatens to unleash the Shambling Bone-Men will not be deliberately bent on such a goal, that is for children's books. This truly dangerous wizard shall perhaps be bent on some project of which he anticipates great renown, and the certain prospect of losing that renown and living out his life in obscurity will seem to him more vivid than the unknown prospect of destroying his country. Or he shall have promised success to one he cannot bear to disappoint. Perhaps he has children in debt. There is much literary wisdom in those stories. It is born of harsh experience and cities of ash. The most likely prospect for disaster is a powerful wizard who, for whatever reason, cannot bring himself to halt as warning signs appear. Though he may speak much and loudly of caution, he will not be able to bring himself actually to halt. I wonder, Mr. Potter, have you thought of trying anything which Hermione Granger herself would have told you not to do?"

"All *right*, point taken," said Harry. "Professor, I am well aware that if I save Hermione at the price of two other people's lives, I've lost on total points from a utilitarian standpoint. I am *extremely* aware that Hermione would not want me to risk destroying a whole country just to save her. That's just common sense."

"Child who destroys Dementors," said that soft voice, "if it were only one country I feared you might ruin, I would be less concerned. I did not at first credit that your knowledge of Muggle science and Muggle practices would be a source of great power. I now credit it more. I am, in complete sincerity, concerned for the safety of that golden plaque."

"Well, if science fiction has taught me anything," said Harry, "it's taught me that destroying the Solar System is not morally acceptable, especially if you do it before humanity has colonized any other star systems."

"Then will you give up this -"

"No," Harry said without even thinking before he opened his mouth. After a moment, he added, "But I do understand what you're trying to tell me."

Silence. The stars had not shifted, not even as they would have in an Earthly night sky, over time.

A very slight rustle, as of someone shifting their body. Harry realized that he had been standing for a while in the same position, and dropped down to the almost unseeable circle of grass that still stayed beneath him, careful not to touch the edges of the spell.

"Tell me this," said the soft voice. "Why does that girl matter to you so much?"

"Because she is my friend."

"In the English language as it is customarily used, Mr. Potter, the word 'friend' is not associated with a desperate effort to raise the dead. Are you under the impression that she is your true love, or some such?"

"Oh, not you too," Harry said wearily. "Not you of all people, Professor. Fine, we're best friends, but that's *all*, okay? That's enough. Friends don't let friends stay dead."

"Ordinary folk do not do as much, for those they call friends." The voice sounded more distant now, abstracted. "Not even for those they say they love. Their companions die, and they do not go in search of power to resurrect them."

Harry couldn't help himself. He looked over again, despite knowing it would be futile, and saw only more stars. "Let me guess, from this you deduce that... people don't actually care as much about their friends as they pretend."

A brief laugh. "They would scarcely pretend to care *less*."

"They care, Professor, and not just for their true loves. Soldiers throw themselves on grenades to save their friends, mothers run into burning houses to save their children. But if you're a Muggle you don't think there's any such thing as magic to bring someone back to life. And normal wizards don't... *think outside the box* like that. I mean, most wizards aren't searching for power to make *themselves* immortal. Does that prove they don't care about their own lives?"

"As you say, Mr. Potter. Certainly I myself would consider their lives pointless and without a shred of value. Perhaps, somewhere in their hidden hearts, they also believe that my opinion of them is the correct one."

Harry shook his head, and then, in annoyance, cast back the hood of his Cloak, and shook his head again. "That seems like a rather *contrived* view of the world, Professor," said the dim-lit head of a boy, floating unsupported on a circle of dark grass amid stars. "Trying to invent a resurrection spell just isn't something normal people would think of, so you can't deduce anything from their not taking the option."

A moment later, the dim-lit outline of a man sitting on the circle of grass was visible as well.

"If they *truly* cared about their supposed loved ones," the Defense Professor said softly, "they would think of it, would they not?"

"Brains don't work that way. They don't suddenly supercharge when the stakes go up - or when they do, it's within hard limits. I couldn't calculate the thousandth digit of pi if someone's life depended on it."

The dim-lit head inclined. "But there is another possible explanation, Mr. Potter. It is that people play the *role* of friendship. They do just as much as that role requires of them, and no more. The thought occurs to me that perhaps the difference between you and them is not that you care more than they do. Why would you have been born with such unusually strong emotions of friendship, that you alone among wizardkind are driven to resurrect Hermione Granger after her death? No, the most likely difference is not that you care more. It is that, being a more logical creature than they, you alone have thought that playing the role of Friend would require this of you."

Harry stared out at the stars. He would have been lying if he'd claimed not to be shaken. "That... can't be true, Professor. I could name a dozen examples in Muggle novels of people driven to resurrect their dead friends. The authors of those stories clearly understood exactly how I feel about Hermione. Though you wouldn't have read them, I guess... maybe Orpheus and Eurydice? I didn't actually read that one but I know what's in it."

"Such tales are also told among wizardkind. There is the story of the Elric brothers. The tale of Dora Kent, who was protected by her son Saul. There is Ronald Mallett and his doomed challenge to Time. In Italy before its fall, the drama of Precia Testarossa. In Nippon they tell of Akemi Homura and her lost love. What these stories have in common, Mr. Potter, is that they are all *fiction*. Real-life wizards do not attempt the same, even though the notion is clearly *not* beyond their imagination."

"Because they don't think they *can*!" Harry's voice rose.

"Shall we go and tell the good Professor McGonagall about your intention to find a way to resurrect Miss Granger, and see what she thinks of it? Perhaps it has simply never occurred to her to consider that option... Ah, but you hesitate. You already know her answer, Mr. Potter. Do you know why you know it?" You could hear the cold smile in the voice. "A lovely technique, that. Thank you for teaching it to me."

Harry was aware of the tension that had developed in his face, his words came out as though bitten off. "Professor McGonagall has not grown up with the Muggle concept of the increasing power of science, and nobody's ever told her that when a friend's life is at stake is a time when you need to *think very rationally* -"

The Defense Professor's voice was also rising. "The Transfiguration Professor is *reading from a script*, Mr. Potter! That script calls for her to mourn and grieve, that all may know how much she cared. Ordinary people react poorly if you suggest that they go off-script. As you already knew!"

"That's funny, I could have sworn I saw Professor McGonagall going off-script at dinner yesterday. If I saw her go off-script another ten times I might actually try to talk to her about resurrecting Hermione, but right now she's new to that and needs practice. In the end, Professor, what you're trying to explain away by calling love and friendship and everything else a lie is just *human beings not knowing any better*. "

The Defense Professor's voice rose in pitch. "If it were you who had been killed by that troll, it would not even *occur* to Hermione Granger to do as you are doing for her! It would not occur to Draco Malfoy, nor to Neville Longbottom, nor to McGonagall or any of your precious friends! There is not one person in this world who would return to you the care that you are showing her! So *why*? Why do it, Mr. Potter?" There was a strange, wild desperation in that voice. "Why be the only one in the world who goes to such lengths to keep up the pretense, when none of them will ever do the same for you?"

"I believe you are factually mistaken, Professor," Harry returned evenly. "About a number of things, in fact. At the very least, your model of my emotions is flawed. Because you don't understand me the tiniest bit, if you think that it would stop me if everything you said was *true*. Everything in the world has to start somewhere, every event has to happen for a first time. Life on Earth had to start with some little self-replicating molecule in a pool of mud. And if I were the first person in the world, no -"

Harry's hand swept out, to indicate the terribly distant points of light.

"- if I were the first person in the *universe* who ever really cared about someone else, which I'm *not* by the way, then I'd be honored to be that person, and I'd try to do it justice."

There was a long silence.

"You truly do care about that girl," the man's dim outline said softly. "You care about her in the way that none of *them* are capable of caring for their own lives, let alone each other." The Defense Professor's voice had become strange, filled with some indecipherable emotion. "I do not understand it, but I know the lengths you will go to because of it. You will challenge death itself, for her. Nothing will sway you from that."

"I care enough to make an actual effort," Harry said quietly. "Yes, that is correct."

The starlight slowly began to fracture, the world shining through the cracks; slashes through the night showing tree trunks and leaves glowing in the sunlight. Harry raised a hand, blinking hard, as the returning brightness smashed into his dark-adjusted eyes; and his eyes automatically went to the Defense Professor, just in case an attack occurred while he was blinded.

When all the stars had gone and only daylight remained, Professor Quirrell was still sitting on the grass. "Well, Mr. Potter," he said in his normal voice, "if that is so, then I shall give you what help I can, while I can."

"You'll *what*?" Harry said involuntarily.

"My offer as I made it yesterday still stands. Ask and I will answer. Show me the same science books you deemed suitable for Mr. Malfoy, and I shall look them over and tell you what comes to mind. Don't look so surprised, Mr. Potter, I would hardly leave you to your own devices."

Harry stared, tear ducts still watering from the sudden light.

Professor Quirrell looked back at him. Something strange glinted in the pale eyes. "I have done what I can, and now I fear I must take my leave of you. Good -" and the Defense Professor hesitated. "Good day, Mr. Potter."

"Good -" Harry began.

The man sitting on the grass fell over, his head impacting the ground with a light thud. At the same time the sense of doom diminished so sharply that Harry leapt to his feet, his heart suddenly in his throat.

But the figure on the ground slowly pushed back up to a crawling position. Turned to look at Harry, eyes empty, mouth slack. Tried to stand, fell back to the ground.

Harry took a step forward, sheer instinct telling him to offer a hand, although that was incorrect; the apprehension that rose up in him, however faint, spoke of continued danger.

But the fallen figure flinched away from Harry, and then slowly began crawl to away from him, in the general direction of the distant castle.

The boy standing amid the forest gazed after.



*There are no Author's Notes for Ch. 95.*

*Ch. 96 will post on Wed Jul 24th, 2013 at 7 PM Pacific Time.*

# CHAPTER 96

## ROLES, PT 7

*The fourth meeting:*

*(4:38pm, April 17th, 1992)*

The man wearing the worn, warm coat, with three faint scars etched forever into his cheek, observed Harry Potter as closely as he could while the boy looked around politely at the rows of cottages. For someone whose best friend had died yesterday, Harry Potter seemed strangely composed, though not in any way reminiscent of unfeelingness, or normality. *I don't wish to talk about that*, the boy had said, *with you or anyone*. Saying 'wish' and not 'want', as though to emphasize that he was able to use grownup words and make grownup decisions. There had been only one thing Remus Lupin had thought of that might help, after he'd received the owls from Professor McGonagall and that strange man Quirinus Quirrell.

"There's a lot of empty houses," the boy said, glancing around again.

Godric's Hollow had changed, in the decade since Remus Lupin had been a frequent visitor. Many of the old, peaked cottages looked deserted, with green leafy vines growing across their windows and their doors. Britain had contracted noticeably, in the aftermath of the Wizarding War, having lost not only the dead but the fled. Godric's Hollow had been hard-hit. And afterward still more families had moved elsewhere, to Hogsmeade or magical London, the deserted houses too uncomfortable a reminder.

Others had remained. Godric's Hollow was older than Hogwarts, older than Godric Gryffindor whose name it had taken, and there were families which would reside here until the end of the world and its magic.

The Potters had been one such family, and would be again, if the last Potter so chose.

Remus Lupin tried to explain all that, simplifying it as best he could for the young boy. The Ravenclaw nodded thoughtfully and said nothing, as though he had understood it all without need of questions. Perhaps that was so; the child of James Potter and Lily Evans, the Head Boy and Head Girl of Hogwarts, would hardly be stupid. The child had certainly seemed highly intelligent, for the little time that they had spoken in January, though at that time Remus had done most of the talking.

(There was also that business with the Wizengamot which Remus had heard rumors about, but Remus didn't believe a single word of that, any more than he'd believed it about James betrothing his son to Molly's youngest.)

"There's the monument," Remus said, pointing ahead of them.



Harry walked beside Mr. Lupin toward the black marble obelisk, thinking silently. It seemed to Harry that this adventure was essentially misguided; he had no use for grief counseling, that was not Harry's chosen path. So far as Harry was concerned, the five stages of grief were Rage, Remorse, Resolve, Research, and Resurrection. (Not that the usual 'five stages of grief' had any experimental evidence whatsoever that Harry

had ever heard about.) But Mr. Lupin had seemed too sincere to refuse; and visiting James and Lily's home was something Harry felt he ought not to turn down. So Harry walked, feeling oddly detached; walking silently through a play whose script he was not interested in reading.

Harry had been told that he wasn't to wear the Cloak of Invisibility for this journey, so that Mr. Lupin could keep track of him.

Harry was morally certain that Dumbledore, or both Dumbledore and Mad-Eye Moody, were following them invisibly to see if anyone tried for the bait. There was no way Harry would have been let out of Hogwarts with only Remus Lupin for a guard. Harry didn't expect anything to happen, though. He'd seen nothing to contradict the hypothesis that all the danger centered on Hogwarts and only Hogwarts.

As the two of them walked closer toward the center of town, the marble obelisk transformed into -

Harry drew in a breath. He'd been expecting a heroic pose of James Potter with wand leveled against Lord Voldemort, and Lily Potter with arms outstretched in front of the crib.

Instead there was a man with untidy hair and glasses, and a woman with her hair let down and a baby in her arms, and that was all.

"It looks very... normal," Harry said, feeling an odd catch in his throat.

"Madam Longbottom and Professor Dumbledore put their foot down hard," said Mr. Lupin, who was looking more at Harry than at the monument. "They said that the Potters should be remembered as they had lived, not as they had died."

Harry looked at the statue, thinking. Very strange, to see himself as a baby of stone, with no scar upon his forehead. It was a glimpse at an alternate universe, one where Harry James Potter (no Evans-Verres to his name) became an intelligent but ordinary wizarding scholar, maybe Sorted into Gryffindor like his parents. A Harry Potter who grew up a proper young wizard, knowing little of science for all that his mother was Muggleborn. Ultimately changing... not much. James and Lily wouldn't have raised their son with what Professor Quirrell would have called *ambition* and what Professor Verres-Evans would have called *the common endeavor*. His birth parents would have loved him very much, and that would not have been much help to anyone in the world except Harry. If someone had undone their death -

"You were their friend," Harry said, turning to look at Lupin. "For a long time, since you were children."

Mr. Lupin nodded silently.

Professor Quirrell's voice resounded in Harry's approximate memory: *The most likely difference is not that you care more. Rather it is that, being a more logical creature than they, only you are aware that the role of Friend ought to require this of you...*

"When Lily and James died," Harry said, "did you think at all of whether there might be some magical way to get them back? Like Orpheus and Eurydice? Or the, what was it, Elrin brothers?"

"There is no magic which can undo death," Mr. Lupin said quietly. "There are some mysteries which wizardry cannot touch."

"Did you do a mental check of what you thought you knew, how you thought you knew it, and how high the probability was of that conclusion?"

"What?" said Mr. Lupin. "Could you repeat that, Harry?"

"I'm saying, did you think about it anyway?"

Mr. Lupin shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Because it was already done, and over," Remus Lupin said gently. "Because wherever James and Lily are now, they would wish me to act for the sake of the living, not the dead."

Harry nodded silently. He'd been pretty sure of the answer to that question before he'd asked. He'd already read that script. But he'd asked anyway, just in case Mr. Lupin had spent a week obsessing about it, because Harry could have been wrong.



The soft voice of the Defense Professor seemed to speak in Harry's mind. *Surely, if Lupin truly cared, he would not need special instruction for something as simple as thinking for five minutes before giving up...*

*Yes, he would,* Harry answered the mental voice. *Human beings wouldn't suddenly obtain a skill like that just because they cared. I learned about it because I'd read library books, produced by a huge scientific edifice -*

And that other part of Harry said, in that soft voice, *But there is also another hypothesis, Mr. Potter, and it fits the data in a much less complicated way.*

*No it doesn't! How would people even know what to pretend, if nobody had ever cared?*

*They don't know. That is what you observe.*

The two of them walked onward toward a certain house, past a long row of occupied wizard cottages and other cottages overgrown with vines.

Coming finally to the house with half its top blown off, and green leaves growing over into the inside; behind a shoulder-high wild-growing hedge lining the sidewalk, and a narrow metal gate (Mr. Hagrid had probably stepped right over it, being unable to fit through). The gap in the roof was like a giant mouth had taken a circular bite from the house, leaving spines of wood, what had maybe been support beams, sticking out. To the right side a single chimney still stood upright, uneaten by the giant bite, but leaning dangerously without its former support. Windows were shattered. Where there should have been a front door were only splinters of wood.

To this place Lord Voldemort had come, *silently, making less noise than the dead leaves slithering along the pavement...*

Remus Lupin put a hand upon Harry's shoulder. "Touch the gate," Mr. Lupin urged.

Harry reached out a hand and did so.

Like a fast-growing flower a sign burst from the tangled weeds in the ground behind the gate, a wooden sign with golden letters, and it said:

On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981,  
Lily and James Potter lost their lives.  
They were survived by their son, Harry Potter,  
the only wizard ever to withstand the Killing Curse,  
the Boy-Who-Lived, who broke You-Know-Who's power.  
This house has been left in its ruined state,  
as a monument to the Potters,  
as a reminder of their sacrifice.

In a blank space below the golden letters were written other messages, dozens of them, magical ink that rose to the surface and gleamed brightly enough to be read before fading and giving way to other messages.

So my Gideon is avenged.  
Thank you, Harry Potter. Fare well wherever you are.  
We will always be in the Potters' debt.  
Oh James, oh Lily, I am sorry.  
I hope you're alive, Harry Potter.  
There is always a price.  
I wish our last words had been kinder, James. I'm sorry.  
There is always a dawn after the night.  
Rest well, Lily.

Bless you, Boy-Who-Lived. You were our miracle.

"I guess -" Harry said. "I guess that's what people do - instead of trying to make it better -" Harry stopped. The thought seemed unworthy of this place. He looked up, and saw Remus Lupin gazing at him with a look so gentle that Harry wrenched his eyes away to the blasted and broken roof.

*You were our miracle.* Harry had always heard the word 'miracle' in the context of how, in the natural universe, there was no such thing. And yet looking at the ruined house, he suddenly knew exactly what the word meant, the note of grace all unexplained, the blessing inexplicable. The Dark Lord had almost won, and then in one night all the darkness and terror had ended, salvation without justification, a sudden dawn from out of the darkness and even now nobody knew *why* -

If Lily Potter had lived beyond her confrontation with Lord Voldemort, she would have felt that way when she saw her baby alive, afterward.

"Let's go," whispered the baby boy, ten years later.

They went.

The graveyard's entrance was guarded by a lockless gate of the sort that kept out animals, with a place to stand while you moved the door from one side of the standing-place to the other. Remus took out his wand (Harry was already holding his) and there was a brief blur as they stepped through.

Some of the stones rising up from the ground looked as old as the wall in Oxford that his father had said was around a thousand years old.

*Hallie Fleming*, said the first stone that Harry saw, in a carving almost invisibly faded with the erosion of time. *Vienna Wood*, said another.

It had been a long time since Harry had visited a graveyard. His mind had still been childlike the last time he'd come to one, long before he'd seen within Death's shadow. Coming here now was... strange, and sad, and puzzling, and *this has been happening for so long, why haven't wizards tried to stop it, why aren't they putting all their strength into that like Muggles do with medical research, only more so, wizards have more reason to hope...*

"The Dumbledores lived in Godric's Hollow too?" Harry said, as they walked past a pair of relatively new stones saying *Kendra Dumbledore* and *Ariana Dumbledore*.

"For a long, long time," Mr. Lupin said.

They walked further into the graveyard, far toward the end, past many deaths that had been mourned.

Then Mr. Lupin pointed at a linked double headstone, of marble still white and unaged.

"Are there going to be messages there?" Harry said. He didn't want to deal any more with the way that other people dealt with death.

Mr. Lupin shook his head.

They walked toward the linked white stones.

And stood before -

"What is this?" Harry whispered. "Who... *who wrote this?* "

JAMES POTTER

BORN 27 MARCH 1960

DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

"Wrote what?" said Mr. Lupin, puzzled.

LILY POTTER

BORN 30 JANUARY 1960

DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

" *This!* " Harry cried. "The *inscription!* " There were tears welling up in Harry's eyes, at the brightness out of place and unexplained, the touch of grace where no grace should have been, the mysterious blessing, tears welling up at

THE LAST ENEMY THAT SHALL BE DESTROYED IS DEATH

"That?" Mr. Lupin said. "That's the... motto, I suppose you could call it, of the Potters. Though I don't think it was ever something as formal as that. Just a saying handed down from long, long ago..."

"This - that -" Harry scrambled down to kneel beside the grave, touched the inscription with a trembling hand. " *How?* Things like that can't just be, be *genetic* -"

Then Harry saw what tears had blurred, the faint carving of a line, within a circle, within a triangle.  
The symbol of the Deathly Hallows.

And Harry understood.

"They tried," Harry whispered.

*The three Peverell brothers.*

*Had they lost someone precious to them, was that where it had begun?*

"With all their lives, they tried, and they made progress -"

*The Cloak of Invisibility, that could defeat the Dementors' sight.*

"- but their research wasn't finished -"

*Hiding from Death's shadow is not defeating Death itself. The Resurrection Stone couldn't really bring anyone back. The Elder Wand couldn't protect you from old age.*

"- so they passed on the mission to their children, and their children's children."

*Generation after generation.*

*Until it came to me.*

Could Time echo like that, rhyming, between this far into the future, and that far in the past? It *couldn't* be coincidence, could it? Not this message, not in this place.

*My family.*

*You really were, my mother and my father.*

"It doesn't mean resurrecting the dead, Harry," Mr. Lupin said. "It means accepting death, and so being beyond death, mastering it."

"Did James tell you that?" Harry said, his voice strange.

"No," said Mr. Lupin, "but -"

"Good."

Harry rose up slowly from where he had been kneeling, feeling as though he were pushing up a sun upon his shoulders, raising the dawn above the horizon.

*Of course other wizards have tried. I am not unique. I was never alone. These feelings in my heart, they're not so special, not in the wizard world or the Muggle one.*

"Harry, your wand!" There was a sudden excitement in Mr. Lupin's voice, and when Harry raised his wand to look at it closely, he saw that it was gleaming ever so faintly with a silver light, welling out of the wood.

"Cast the Patronus Charm!" urged Mr. Lupin. "Try casting it again, Harry!"

*Oh, right. So far as Mr. Lupin knows, I can't -*

Harry smiled, and even laughed a little. "I'd better not," Harry said. "If I tried to cast the spell in this state of mind, it'd probably kill me."

"What?" said Mr. Lupin. "The Patronus Charm doesn't do that!"

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres raised his left hand, still laughing, and wiped away some more tears.

"You know, Mr. Lupin," Harry said, "it really takes a *baroque* interpretation to think that somebody would be walking around, pondering how death is just something we all have to accept, and communicate their state of mind by saying, 'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.' Maybe someone else thought it sounded poetic and picked up the phrase and tried to interpret it differently, but whoever said it first didn't like death much." Sometimes it puzzled Harry how most people didn't seem to even *notice* when they were twisting something around to the 180-degree opposite of its first obvious reading. It couldn't be a raw brainpower thing, people could see the obvious reading of most other English sentences. "Also 'shall be destroyed' refers to a change of future state, so it can't be about the way things are now."

Remus Lupin was staring at him with wide eyes. "You certainly are James and Lily's child," the man said, sounding rather shocked.

"Yes, I am," Harry said. But that wasn't enough, he had to do something more, so Harry raised his wand in the air and said, his voice as steady as he could make it, "I am Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, the son of Lily and James, of the house of Potter, and I accept my family's quest. Death is my enemy, and I will defeat it."

*Thrayen beyn Peverlas soona abnd thrih beera toal thissoom Dath bey yewoonen.*

"What?" Harry said aloud. The words had popped up into his stream of consciousness as though from his own thoughts, unexplained.

"What was that?" said Remus Lupin at the same time.

Harry turned, scanning the graveyard, but he didn't see anything. Beside him, Mr. Lupin was doing the same.

Neither of them noticed the tall stone worn as though from a thousand years of age, upon it a line within a circle within a triangle glowing ever so faintly silver, like the light which had shone from Harry's wand, invisible at that distance beneath the still-bright Sun.



*Some time later:*

"Thank you again, Mr. Lupin," Harry said, the tall, faintly scarred man was about to depart once more. "Though I really wish you hadn't -"

"Professor Dumbledore said that I was to portkey us back to Hogwarts if anything unusual happened, whether or not it seemed like an attack," Mr. Lupin said firmly. "Which is eminently sensible."

Harry nodded. And then, having carefully saved this question for last, "Do you have any idea of what the words meant?"

"If I did, I wouldn't tell you," Mr. Lupin said, looking rather severe. "Certainly not without Professor Dumbledore's permission. I can understand your eagerness, but you should not go trying to uncover any ancestral secrets of the Potters until you are an adult. That means after you've passed your NEWTs, Harry, or at least your OWLs. And I still think you've picked up entirely the wrong idea of what your family motto is meant to say!"

Harry nodded, sighing internally, and bid Mr. Lupin farewell.



Harry went back through Hogwarts, to the Ravenclaw Tower, feeling strange, and strengthened. He would not have expected any of that, but it had been all to the good.

He was passing through the Ravenclaw common room, on the way to his dorm.

That was when the shining creature came to him, gleaming soft white beneath the candlefires of the Ravenclaw common room, as it slithered out from nowhere, the silver snake.



## CHAPTER 96

*Bregen béon Pefearles suna and þrie hira tól þissum Déað béo genwunen.*

Three shall be Peverell's sons and three their devices by which Death shall be defeated.

- Spoken in the presence of the three Peverell brothers,  
in a small tavern on the outskirts of what would later be called Godric's Hollow.



*I do not have Ch. 97-98 written yet.*

*I do hope to write and post them shortly.*

*My attempt to avoid frantic clickery is as follows:*

*I will post the next chapter on some **Wednesday** at 7PM Pacific .*

*I will post an **Author's Note** giving notice of that upcoming update,*

*On the **Saturday** before that Wednesday, at 5PM Pacific .*

*If there is no such note, then there will be no update,  
hence no need for frantic clicking on Wednesday.*

*My host institution,*

*the Machine Intelligence Research Institute,  
is currently conducting its summer fundraiser,  
the \$200,000 Summer Matching Challenge.*

*We are currently at \$36,585.*

*All donations will be matched dollar-for-dollar until August 15th.*

*Visit the Challenge page at *intelligence dot org slash donate* to help.*