

## Just a Dream

Scene – During the horcrux hunt in Deathly Hallows. It's December 26, two days after Harry and Hermione's visit to Godric's Hollow and the encounter with Nagini where they escaped, but Harry's wand was broken. Hermione took over the watch at midnight, and Harry fell asleep, only to suffer through disturbing dreams.

-000-

Harry found himself in a room containing a table with seven bottles. Hermione was with him, pointing at one of the bottles. He immediately recognized it as the potions puzzle from his first year, when they were going after the Stone. Hermione was saying something, and he strained to hear it.

"But Harry, what if You-Know-Who's with him?"

"Well, I was lucky once, wasn't I?" he replied, pointing at his scar. "I might get lucky again."

Hermione's lip trembled, and she suddenly dashed at Harry and threw her arms around him.

"Hermione!"

"Harry – you're a great wizard, you know."

"I'm not as good as you, Hermione."

"Me!" she scoffed. "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery and ... and love."

"Love?"

"Yes, love," she repeated, and she pulled him closer and kissed him on the cheek. "Oh Harry, be careful!"

Harry stirred in the bed, not quite waking, but realizing he had been dreaming. *That's not the way it happened.* Before he could form another thought he drifted off again.

Now he was in a hospital, looking down at a bed. As the scene sharpened, he realized that it was Hermione, lying petrified in the Hogwarts infirmary, her eyes open but unseeing. He leaned in

close and took her hand, but it was stone cold and unfeeling.

“Please come back soon, Hermione,” he whispered to her. “I miss you.”

*That never happened either* a voice in his head reminded him. *No, it didn't*, Harry found himself thinking. *But it should have*. The hospital wing faded out and Harry rolled onto his side, trying to get comfortable.

Scenes from his past continued to flash through his mind, all of them distorted in some way.

Hermione running toward him in the Great Hall screaming, “You solved it!” before throwing herself into his arms, the embrace seeming to last forever.

Hermione pulling him up against her body in order to throw the time turner around both of their necks, and him pulling her tight to his chest as the world spun around them. The two of them holding hands as they crept through the forest, spying on their past selves. Hermione snuggling up behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her head in his back, muttering, “Oh no ... I don't like this ... oh, I really don't like this ...” Standing side by side, their arms around each others' waists, as they watched Sirius and Buckbeak fly away from the top of the West Tower.

And it occurred to the slumbering teen that all this contact with Hermione was very pleasant.

The scene changed again. A vision of Hermione, much different this time, walking toward him in robes of periwinkle blue, looking prettier than he'd ever seen her. Somewhere music started and she moved into his arms, and they danced around the Great Hall.

“You look absolutely beautiful tonight,” he whispered. In response, her face lit up in the brightest smile he'd ever seen, a smile he wished he could see more often. But then her smile faded, along with the dance floor and the Great Hall, and they were now in Gryffindor Tower. She was facing away from him, screaming at Ron, her hair breaking free from its elegant bun. But when their argument ended, instead of storming up the staircase to her room, she turned to Harry, tears streaking her face, and he took her into his arms, whispering words of comfort.

*I didn't do any of that*, Harry told himself. *I didn't dance with her, I didn't tell her how beautiful she looked, and I didn't comfort her*.

Another voice answered, in reproach. *Why not?*

Before his lethargic brain could formulate a rebuttal another scene coalesced in his mind, and he felt his heartbeat accelerate with the terror of the memory. A purple streak of light flashed and Hermione collapsed to the floor of the Department of Mysteries.

“HERMIONE!”

Harry dropped to his knees beside her, ignoring everything else that was happening in the room, and cradled her head in his arms. “Don't be dead, please don't be dead! Oh God, please don't let

her be dead!” Neville moved into his field of vision and put his hand on Hermione’s wrist, feeling for a pulse. He looked up at Harry with his eyes wide and shook his head.

“NO! She can’t be dead! Hermione, no! Don’t leave me, Hermione! You can’t leave me yet. I never got a chance to tell you ...”

The scene blurred and the voice in his head asked, *Tell her what?*

Harry shook his head but could not dispel the blackness. *Tell her ... how much I care for her. How much I need her. How much I ...*

*But she didn’t die that night, and you still never told her. When she got out of the hospital she wanted to talk to you and you refused. You wouldn’t even stay in the same room with her. She nearly died for you and you wouldn’t give her the time of day, much less act like you appreciated her. You’ve had all the time in the world since then to tell her what she means to you. Now she’s been crying herself to sleep for weeks but do you care?*

The image of Hermione’s lifeless body lying on the cold floor of a darkened room reappeared in his mind. From behind it the head of an enormous serpent rose, preparing to consume its prey.

“NOOOOOO!!!!!”

Harry threw off the blanket and bolted into an upright position, gasping for breath. Despite the cold night air his body was damp with sweat as his eyes darted around the tent, trying to work out where he was. As the distinction between dream and reality became clearer, he moaned and fell back onto the bed.

What had he been thinking? How could he have been so unfeeling toward his most loyal friend? The girl who had given up everything for him, and whose knowledge and skill were the only things keeping him alive right now.

The girl who was the most important person in his life, bar none.

“Harry?”

Hermione emerged from the darkness and sat down on the bed beside him. Harry sat up again and looked at her. She was in her pajamas, but had been keeping watch in the entrance to the tent. Her cheeks were pink from the cold and she shivered slightly as she rubbed her arms to warm them up. But her face held only concern – concern for his well-being. She must have heard him moaning in his sleep and come over to make sure he was all right.

She tentatively reached out to stroke his forehead, a comforting gesture she’d used so often when trying to calm him down after one of his nightmares.

“Hermione!” Harry intercepted her hand with his and diverted it to his chest, where he held it against his pounding heart. Then without warning, he wrapped his arms around her and drew her tightly into his body, ignoring her squeak of surprise.

“I thought I’d lost you!” he whispered fervently. “I dreamed that you were dead.”

“Oh no,” she breathed into his chest, returning the hug just as tightly. “I’m still here. I’ll always be here for you.” They remained locked in the embrace, each holding on for dear life, trying by the strength of their grip to banish the horrors that they’d been through. Eventually, uncounted moments later, he pulled back and looked down into her glistening brown eyes.

“I know,” he murmured. “That’s what I’ve finally realized. “I need you. I need you so much. You’re the most important person in the world to me and if I lost you I couldn’t bear it. I can’t do this without you.”

“Harry,” she gasped as her eyes widened. “What ... just what are you saying?”

“I’m so sorry, Hermione,” he went on, taking her hands into his. “You’ve done so much for me and I’ve treated you like rubbish. You’ve given up everything.” He waved his arm around the small tent, indicating the meager possessions that had been their entire existence for the past months. She began to object but he shook his head.

“I need to tell you this now, before it’s too late. Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve tried to help me in everything I did. You’ve always been there for me. But I never really appreciated what that meant. And I didn’t always let you know how grateful I was. How much your friendship meant to me. I didn’t understand how I felt about the things you did – about you. I understand now. You’re my world.”

“But ...” Hermione began again.

“You chose to stay with me,” Harry ran his hands up her arms to her shoulders, causing her to shiver again. Gently but firmly, he pulled her back against himself. “And only now do I see that you’ve always chosen me. And I want you to know, that if I could choose anyone in the world to be here with me right now, it would be you.”

“Oh Harry ...” Hermione moaned, but was too choked up to for anything more. Her heart was pounding and she was unable to swallow the lump in her throat.

“You’ve been crying and I’ve been ignoring you,” he admitted. “I made you think I was upset with you about my wand, but I’m not. I never want to make you cry again.” Tears were running down her cheeks now, but they both knew these were a different kind of tears. He reached up with his thumb and tenderly wiped them away. “I promise to try to be there for you from now on. I care about you so much.”

“Do you mean,” she managed finally. “More ... more than just as friends? I thought ... you saw me like a sister.”

He smiled. “Let’s find out.” He lowered his face to hers and kissed her, and within seconds they both knew that they were much, much more than just friends. Time ceased to exist around them as they hungrily devoured these new sensations.

They came back to their senses to find her sitting on his lap, wrapped in each other's arms, her head resting comfortably against his chest. "Now I'm afraid that I'm going to wake up and this will only have been a dream," she sighed.

Harry chuckled and shook his head. "It can't be. My dreams are never this pleasant."

"I'm sorry," she replied soothingly, reaching up to stroke his scar. Then she smiled. "Perhaps we can change that." He smiled back and hugged her again.

Hermione took a deep breath and asked the question that had to be addressed. "What ... what about Ginny? I thought you loved her?" Both of them now tensed up, waiting to see how this topic would be resolved.

"No." He shook his head firmly. "I never said that. I had feelings for her, and I enjoyed our time together, but I never thought I was in love with her."

"You keep looking for her on the map," she pointed out.

Harry shrugged. "It's a way to stay connected to the rest of the world. I looked for Ron's dot first. I won't deny that I missed her, what we had together. But she's part of the past. Really, what I felt with her was just a stronger version of what I felt like with Cho." He pulled Hermione tight against his body again. "And nothing like this."

They held that position for several moments before Harry relaxed his hold. "Speaking of Ron ..."

Hermione shook her head firmly. "He left me ... us. I thought there was something there, but not any more. If he truly cared about me he wouldn't have walked out. Or made me choose between you. That hurt me terribly."

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Don't be," she insisted. "I made my choice and it was the right one. I'm happy with it. Especially now," she added with a sparkle in her eyes. That led to a snogging session even more passionate than the first.

This time both were breathing heavily when they broke apart. Hermione's hands were under Harry's shirt and his had wandered quite a bit as well. Their eyes locked and Harry gasped, "I think we need to stop before ..."

Hermione shook her head, not taking her eyes off his. "Wait." Slowly she moved her hand to the top button of her pajamas. "I want to do this." Harry shuddered, both from the passion in her low voice and from anticipation of what was about to happen.

When half the buttons were undone she paused, the inside curves of her breasts now clearly visible. Although he tried not to stare, his desire to touch her was nearly overwhelming. Tentatively, her eyes seeking his approval, she reached up and took his hand, placing it on the bare skin of her chest, directly over her heart, which he could feel was beating as rapidly as his own.

Harry swallowed hard and nodded, and Hermione resumed guiding his hand inside her top. She closed her eyes and stopped breathing for a moment, only to give a loud gasp when his fingertips finally made contact with their target.

“Ohhh!” she breathed once his hand covered her breast completely. “I ... that’s good for now, don’t you think,” she suggested breathlessly. “One step at a time. There’s no need to rush.” Harry nodded again, somewhat in a daze; right now anything she said was brilliant. He started to pull away but she held his hand in place. “No, not yet. Oh, that feels so nice.”

“It sure does!” he agreed wholeheartedly, as his fingers began to explore the different textures of the warm flesh, eliciting a moan of pleasure from her lips. She moved her hands back inside his shirt as well, undertaking some explorations of her own.

While they were both well satisfied with this exciting new stage in their relationship they eventually were reminded of how tired they were, and agreed that they had to get some sleep. Harry insisted that Hermione go first, but as she regretfully began to rise from the bed he caught her hand. “Stay here,” he suggested. “I can hold you and keep watch at the same time.” She readily agreed, and pulled back the blankets, quickly slipping beneath.

Harry sat up and positioned her so her head was on his lap, and began running his hand through her hair. Hermione gave a loud sigh of contentment, then shot him an impish smile and moved his other hand back inside her pajama top, which was still unbuttoned, to what she had by now decided was her very favorite place for his hand. She soon discovered how amazingly comforting this position was, and was asleep in no time.

For his part, Harry had come to the exact same conclusion regarding delightful hand positions, and as he leaned back and regarded the brown haired witch sleeping in his lap he could scarcely believe what had just happened. As he continued to sort through her wild mass of hair, spreading it out over the top blanket in a giant halo around her head, he found himself struggling to breathe as the enormity of what they’d just said and done sank in. But overlaying this sudden attack of jitters was the overwhelming sense of how amazingly right this felt.

The pink glow of dawn was beginning to fill the tent when Hermione opened her eyes. For a few moments she wondered if she’d only dreamed what had happened the night before, but as soon as she moved she felt Harry’s hands still holding her intimately. She had rolled onto her side during the night, and the hand that had been in her hair was now lightly stroking her back. The other was still firmly in place, however, and when he realized she was awake he gave her a gentle squeeze. She responded by pulling his head down for a kiss.

She shot him a bright smile as she broke away, but she was startled by the intensity of the expression in his strikingly green eyes. While she recognized this look, she had never had it directed at her before, and it took her breath away.

“I love you, Hermione,” he choked out. A touch of alarm flashed across his face as tears filled her eyes in response.

“Oh Harry!” she sniffed. “You have no idea how much I’ve longed to hear that from you. I love you too, so much!”

It didn’t take long for them to work out a new arrangement in the tent. They decided that they now only needed one bed, and chose to use Hermione’s since it wasn’t a bunk bed. One of them would stay awake while the other slept, either in the other’s lap or snuggled up against them. This turned out to be comfortable, warmer, and even kept the nightmares at bay. And there was lots and lots of touching.

Harry had never had any physical affection in his life while growing up, and now he couldn’t get enough of it. Hermione was all too happy to supply as much as he wanted. She was well known for her enthusiastic hugs, and she and Harry had already been holding hands at times during their travels, but as these new feelings took hold they were in nearly constant contact whenever they were together.

Despite the fact that the apparent hopelessness of their situation hadn’t changed, their mood brightened considerably, and there were smiles on their faces more often than not. With a new spirit of optimism, they reassessed their strategy. They vowed to be completely open with their thoughts, try to look at things positively, and focus on what they needed to happen to be successful.

“Okay, we know that we need the sword to destroy the horcruxes, and Dumbledore wanted us to have it,” Hermione reasoned. “So we need to assume that he would figure out a way to get it to us, besides just leaving it to you in his will.”

“Right,” Harry replied. “He must have been the one that made the fake sword, so no one would know we have the real one. He seems to have been several steps ahead in his planning. Somehow the sword will turn up, and we just have to be ready when it does.”

Hermione agreed and added, “As for the horcruxes, they must be in obvious places or we’d have no chance of finding them. For example, instead of being in one of hundreds of identical safe deposit boxes in one of thousands of possible banks, it would be in a bank we know about, like Gringotts. Probably in a vault belonging to Riddle himself or a prominent Death Eater.”

“And I still think one must be at Hogwarts,” Harry reminded her. Hermione nodded and he continued. “But he also gave us some other things, and we have to assume that they’re important too. I’m talking about the snitch and the book.” Hermione hesitated, then nodded again. She’d wanted to conclude that the book had been a waste of time, but couldn’t fault his logic.

“The snitch says it will open at the close, so I’m guessing that it’s something we’ll need later,” Harry suggested. “That make sense?”

“I agree,” Hermione responded. “But with regard to the book, the only story that seems like it could be applicable to our situation is the *Tale of the Three Brothers* . It mentions an unbeatable wand, a stone that will bring people back to life, and a perfect invisibility cloak. But I don’t see what the connection is.”

“Well, for the sake of argument let’s assume that the invisibility cloak refers to my cloak,” Harry suggested. Hermione shrugged, then nodded. “And the wand ... that’s it!” Harry jumped to his feet and began pacing back and forth while Hermione’s brow furrowed in confusion. “That’s what he’s after. An unbeatable wand. He must think the story’s true and is looking for it. That explains his obsession with wandmakers.”

“But Harry, there’s no such thing as an unbeatable wand,” Hermione objected. “It’s just a story. It can’t possibly be true.”

“Hermione, one thing I’ve learned since I’ve been in the wizarding world is that a lot of things I thought weren’t possible really are,” Harry argued. “Before last year, you would never have believed that something like a horcrux was possible, right?” Hermione scowled, but forced herself to consider the alternative. Perhaps the way to approach this was to assume the end result, then reason backward. She took a deep breath.

“All right, let’s suppose that the story is about three magical items that actually exist,” she decided. “But the description of how they came to be could be fanciful.” Harry nodded eagerly and she continued. “So, there exists an invisibility cloak that, while it may not be perfect, is far superior to other invisibility cloaks. I agree that this seems to describe your cloak, which really is unlike any other invisibility cloak I’ve ever read about. It’s hard to imagine how you came by it, or I should say, how your family came to own it, but let’s just accept that and move on.”

“And by the same logic there could be a wand that is more powerful than ordinary wands, and it somehow passes from wizard to wizard through conquest,” Harry added, picking up the line of reasoning. “Vold ... er, Riddle’s frustrated that my wand can beat his, so he wants to get his hands on it.” Hermione conceded that this conclusion fit with information they had available. Although she wasn’t happy with the way Harry had obtained this knowledge (still being nervous about his frequent visions of Voldemort’s activities) it would be foolish not to use it.

“If that’s the case, are we supposed to stop him from getting it or get it so we can use it ourselves,” she wondered. “If it’s the former, we can accomplish our goal merely by making sure it’s destroyed or lost forever. Although for planning purposes, it doesn’t matter since we need to find it either way.”

“Do we have any other clues that you can think of?” Harry asked.

“Just this symbol that Dumbledore or someone drew at the beginning of the story,” Hermione answered, paging through *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* so she could show it to him.

“Well, going with what we said, let’s assume it was Dumbledore and that it means something,” Harry reasoned as he bent over her shoulder to look. “Hey! That’s Grindelwald’s mark!”



“What!” Hermione exclaimed. “Where did you hear that?”

“From Krum, at Bill and Fleur’s wedding,” Harry answered in a rush, grabbing the book from her to examine it more closely. “Luna’s dad was wearing it and it really ticked Krum off. They almost got into a duel over it.”

“What? Where was I when this was going on?” Hermione demanded. Harry shot her a look and she suddenly blushed. “Oh. Right.”

“Grindelwald ...” Harry mused while Hermione recovered her composure. “How does he fit in? Wait! What if he had the unbeatable wand? Maybe that’s what made him so powerful.”

“But Harry, Dumbledore defeated him ...” Hermione started to argue before suddenly trailing off, going pale at the implication of what she was saying.

“So then Dumbledore had it!” Harry concluded triumphantly. “And to keep it from Riddle, we need to go to Hogwarts and get it from his tomb before he figures it out.”

“Harry, that’s such an unlikely series of suppositions,” Hermione complained.

“That’s the only way any of this will work,” he insisted. “This whole task is impossible unless we’re incredibly lucky and get the benefit of amazing coincidences. If Dumbledore expected us to accomplish something, then it must be possible for us to accomplish or there’d be no point. If we need to find an unbeatable wand, it must be someplace where we can actually find it.”

Hermione was shaking her head; Harry’s logic was making it hurt. He tried another tack.

“Hermione, if we decide that the task is impossible we might as well give up. If we’re not willing to give up that means that we think it’s possible.”

Hermione stopped shaking her head and gazed at him with unabashed admiration. “Have I told you yet today that I love you?”

Ron Weasley was having a bad day. He’d been having a lot of bad days, actually, but this one was shaping up to be another. Little did he know that it was going to get worse – quite likely the worst day of his entire life.

He’d been popping all over England for the past week, ever since he’d heard Harry’s voice coming out of the deluminator he’d received from Dumbledore. They must have been talking about him because he distinctly heard, “Speaking of Ron ...”

But he’d never been able to track them down. Hermione’s protective charms were just too good. So every day he apparated to another spot, but without success. Now, finally, his luck seemed to be changing. He’d spotted a glowing, silver-white doe and followed it and there, in the distance,

beside a pool of icy water, were his best friends. Whom he had deserted. He watched them while biding his time, trying to decide the best moment to approach them.

Harry had immediately wanted to follow the doe patronus, but Hermione wasn't certain that it was safe. So Harry had summoned his stag patronus, which had promptly gone up to the doe and started nuzzling her nose. And then the pair got even friendlier, causing the two teens to turn their backs, blushing furiously. But at least now Hermione was convinced that it was on their side. Once Harry's stag faded, the doe returned to her task, which they discovered was to lead them to Gryffindor's sword. Unfortunately it lay at the bottom of an icy pool, and wouldn't respond to Hermione's summoning charm. After a quick discussion, Harry began stripping off his clothing.

A hundred yards away, Ron's blood began to boil at the sight of Harry getting undressed – right in front of Hermione! And she wasn't turning her back! He refused to admit that she appeared to be enjoying the show, or that she was casting admiring glances at his nearly naked body. Or that she leaned up and gave him a little kiss before he jumped into the icy pool. It certainly would not have improved his mood if he'd known that she whispered, "I'll be sure to warm you up properly when we get back to the tent," into his ear.

Harry soon resurfaced with the sword, and Hermione quickly cast drying and warming charms on him as he replaced his clothing – although not before causing Ron to look away again when she hugged him first. Shaking his head in dismay, the redhead began to creep closer.

He saw Harry place the locket horcrux on a flat rock, then offer the sword to Hermione, who shook her head, indicating that Harry should do the honors. But he insisted, and she finally took the blade and raised it over her head. A hiss from Harry that must have been a Parseltongue command caused the locket to open.

But Hermione hesitated, and an apparition emerged from the Slytherin heirloom, which resolved itself into two figures. After a moment Ron recognized who they were – Harry and Ginny, and they were kissing, and taunting Hermione. Now he was close enough to hear what they were saying.

"You ugly bookworm! Did you really think he would want you when he could have me? He's only using you!"

"Don't listen to it!" Harry shouted to Hermione, who was frozen in place, tears welling up in her eyes. "It's lying! Stab it!"

"You're not good enough for him! You'll never be good enough for him. He's just paying attention to you because no one else is around. As soon as this is over he'll be mine again!"

"No, that's not true!" Harry yelled, moving to her side. "Hermione, I love you!" She raised her teary eyes to his and they met, his desperate gaze conveying all his feeling for her. Stepping behind her he wrapped his arms around her, and taking the sword together they raised it up, then swiftly plunged it into the horcrux. The apparition promptly winked out and Hermione collapsed into Harry's arms, weeping softly.

Ron could only stare in silent horror as Harry tenderly comforted her, smothering her tear-streaked face with kisses and whispering promises of undying love. Then it got even worse.

*This has to be a dream. This has to be a dream* , he kept repeating to himself. *I'm going to wake up and I'll be back in my bed. This isn't the way it's supposed to be.*

Right there, before his eyes, Harry had dropped to his knee and taken Hermione's hand in his, and it was all too obvious what he was doing.

"Hermione, everything the locket was saying was rubbish, and I want to prove it to you. I love you. I can't imagine my life without you in it. I want to be with you forever. As soon as this is over, will you marry me?"

As Hermione flung herself into Harry's arms, Ron's mouth dropped open in horror. The thing that he had most feared had happened. And he had no one to blame but himself. He'd walked out and left them alone together, and this was the result. Harry and Hermione had fallen in love with each other. They would go on to defeat the dark lord without him, because together they were the perfect team. They no longer needed him for anything.

Ron rose to his feet and slowly backed away, and when he reached the edge of the clearing he apparated back home.

His nightmare had become a reality.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-