

There's No Place Like Home? Escape From Oz (To Oz)

Book 1

Scene – In the hospital wing, after Harry has defeated Quirrell, on the morning of the end-of-year feast.

After a good night's sleep, Harry felt nearly back to normal.

“Harry?” Harry looked up from his bed to see Hermione peeking in the door.

“Hi, Hermione!” he smiled, glad to have another visit from his friend. “Where’s Ron?”

“He’s still at breakfast,” she responded, coming in and sitting down on the bed beside him. “But I wanted to come back this morning to see how you were doing.”

“I’m fine,” he replied cheerfully. “Really, I am,” he protested when she gave him a skeptical look.

“But how are you feeling about what happened?” she persisted.

Harry’s smile slipped a bit. “OK, I guess. I mean, Quirrell did die, but Dumbledore explained that it wasn’t really my fault, it was Voldemort’s doing. But I guess what really bothers me is, well ...” He trailed off and looked up at Hermione anxiously. “Do you think you’ll come back next year?”

Hermione was caught off guard at the direction his thoughts had taken. “I ... well, I was planning to. Why wouldn’t I?” A panicked look flashed across her face. “You’re coming back, aren’t you?”

“Where else would I go?” he shrugged. “My aunt and uncle certainly don’t want me. But you ... I mean, you could always go back home to your parents.”

“But I like being a witch,” Hermione argued. “And I’ve learned so much about magic, but there’s ever so much more to learn. And ...” she looked down at her hands and blushed. “I have friends here.” After a short pause she looked back up at the first close friend she’d ever had and repeated her original question. “But why wouldn’t we want to come back?”

Harry leaned back against his pillow and looked out the window. “This isn’t quite what I thought it would be,” he confessed. “I mean, how many times did one of us nearly die this year? Me when Quirrell hexed my broom, you with the troll, well both of us really that time. Then both of us

again in the ForbiddenForest, and that's not even counting what just happened. This is a dangerous place!"

"But that was because of Quirrell, and he's gone now," Hermione pointed out. "Next year won't be like this."

"But Voldemort isn't gone for good," Harry countered. "Dumbledore as much as said he'll try again. And it worries me that you and Ron'll get caught up in it again."

Hermione moved closer and put her hand on his shoulder. "Harry ..."

"And that's not the only thing," Harry continued. "I guess maybe I was expecting more out of this world. You know, that it would be a better place. But it's not. Just look at the way Malfoy and that lot treat you. Not to mention Snape."

"And you're disillusioned," Hermione commiserated. Harry shrugged again, then after a few seconds nodded. The two of them sat in silence for several moments before Hermione took a deep breath and began again.

"There's prejudice everywhere, though," she reasoned. "I had just as many kids making fun of me in my old school as I do here." Harry nodded. The same was true for him. "And this is who we are. We belong here. It is more dangerous than back home but ... I guess we'll just have to deal with that. We came out of it all right this year."

"I suppose," Harry conceded. "And Hermione?" She looked up at him. "Thanks for all your help this year. I couldn't have made it through without you."

Hermione caught him by surprise when she threw her arms around him again, which meant that he didn't see the tears in her eyes. "You're welcome, Harry," she sniffed.

Harry, not at all comfortable with this physical contact, squirmed a little and she released him and stood up, somewhat flustered herself from her display of emotion. "See you at the feast tonight," she blurted out. She waved quickly and left, as the school nurse came into view.

"I want to go to the feast," he told Madame Pomfrey as she straightened his many candy boxes. "I can, can't I?"

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Book 2

Scene – The day after the feast celebrating Harry's slaying of the basilisk and rescue of Ginny.

Just before noon Harry made his way down to the Gryffindor common room. It was relatively empty, as most students were still in their beds recuperating from the all-night celebration in the Great Hall. But he was still too wound up to sleep any more, and as he suspected, Hermione was there, reading one of her schoolbooks, trying to catch up on the material she'd missed while being

petrified.

“Hi, Hermione,” Harry greeted her as he settled down onto the sofa next to her. He took a peek over her shoulder at the Charms book and grinned. “You do remember that McGonagall announced that exams were canceled, right?”

“Harry ...” Hermione began in exasperation before looking up to see him shying away and raising his hands in surrender.

“I know, I know,” he admitted placatingly. “You want to learn everything you can whether we’re going to be tested on it or not.”

“Well of course,” she retorted with a huff. “The things we’re supposed to learn this year are necessary groundwork for our future education.”

“But hadn’t you already read all the way to the end of every one of your books?” he teased.

A look of chagrin crossed her face as she avoided looking him in the eye. “Well, yes, I suppose I did.” Harry reached over and patted her on the arm affectionately and the corners of her mouth turned up as she was unable to repress a smile.

“It must have nearly driven you mad to miss so much class this term,” he consoled her. “A month in the Hospital Wing at the beginning and now again at the end.” Hermione nodded in agreement.

“How did you and Ron ever get by in your classes without me for all that time?” she wondered, teasing him back.

“Not well at all,” he admitted with a smile. It felt so good to have her back and be able to engage in the friendly banter that they’d grown accustomed to. “And we sure could have used your help figuring out about the Chamber. It wasn’t until yesterday that I found that torn out page about the basilisk in your hand.”

“It stayed in my hand all that time?” Hermione asked in amazement. “Oh, if only I’d been more careful that day, we could have put a stop to this weeks ago!” she began to berate herself.

Harry took hold of her arm again to stop her from blaming herself, and thought of a way to distract her. “I don’t see how much more you could have done than you did,” he pointed out. “I mean, just think of it. Hermione Granger tearing a page out of a library book! That has to be the supreme sacrifice!”

“Oh, stop it,” Hermione protested as her face colored. But she quickly recovered, and cocked her head imperiously. “Sometimes drastic actions are required in an emergency.” At that comeback, both of them chuckled and Hermione put her arm around Harry’s shoulders and leaned her head against him.

“I missed you,” Harry said softly as the mood turned serious. “Ron and me both, that is,” he quickly amended. “We missed you.”

“Thank you,” she responded with a contented smile. “I’d say I missed you too, but from my point of view no time passed, so when I woke up it was like I’d just seen you a few hours before.” Harry nodded, having experienced the same thing on occasion, only on a much smaller scale.

“This reminds me of the end of last year,” he commented thoughtfully. “Only that time it was you and Ron bringing *me* up to speed on what *I’d* missed.” After a moment he looked over at her and grinned. “I think this is where I ask you how you’re doing, you say ‘fine’, and then I ask how you’re *really* feeling.” Hermione smiled back and shook her head in mock annoyance.

“Seriously, I’m feeling just fine physically,” she revealed as she sat back a bit and turned to face him. “You’d think I’d be stiff from being locked in one position for nearly a month, but a potion Madame Pomfrey gave me took care of that. Mentally ... well, it’s still a bit overwhelming, but I’ll adjust.” She hesitated, and then made a request. “I think it’ll help if you and Ron stay close and help me through any awkward situations. Harry nodded immediately and assured her they’d do whatever was necessary to help her with the transition.

Now it was Hermione’s turn to frown thoughtfully. “Do you remember what else we talked about that day?” she queried. Harry nodded.

“About how dangerous this place is, and how ... *disillusioned* is the way I think you put it ... how disillusioned I was about the magical world,” he recounted. Hermione nodded solemnly.

“And I assured you that things would be better this year, but instead they were worse, weren’t they?” she mused.

“Somehow I went from being a hero to a villain,” Harry noted bitterly. “And once again both of us nearly died.” He shrugged and let out a big sigh. “It’s really not safe around here, but even putting aside the danger, I’m bothered by the attitudes.”

Hermione began a rebuttal but Harry waved her off. “You should have seen how differently everyone responded when it was Penelope, and then Ginny who were attacked,” he informed her. “Remember, up till then it had been ‘only’ muggleborns. Even Ron was shaking his head yesterday and saying, ‘but Ginny’s a pureblood!’ Like that made such a big difference. They had just announced that they were closing the school and sending the students home when Ron and I went down into the Chamber.” He shook his head, his consternation clearly showing. “I’m not sure I can stand to be in a world where someone like you is considered to be of less account because you supposedly have inferior blood.”

Hermione leaned in again and hugged him. “It means a lot to me to hear you say that,” she whispered, before pulling away. “And I understand what you’re saying,” she continued. “If it doesn’t get any better by the time we graduate, maybe we *should* leave. With that kind of prejudice being as common as it seems to be, am I even going to be able to get a decent job?” She thought a bit more before adding. “I wonder if it’s the same all over the world. I think I’ll look into that. Perhaps another country might not have the same prejudices.”

Harry nodded and then settled back into the sofa, his concerns dealt with for the moment.

Gradually, the conversation turned to what had been going on at Hogwarts, and Harry began to fill Hermione in on the things that she'd missed.

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Book 3

Scene – Harry and Hermione have gone back in time and rescued Buckbeak. They've watched their other selves go into the Whomping Willow and have an hour's time to kill.

Now that they had nothing to do but wait, Harry sat back and reviewed in his mind the extraordinary sequence of events they'd just experienced. Hermione settled down next to him, ever the supportive friend, watching him anxiously out of the corner of her eye to make sure he was coping all right with the time travel experience.

Finally he let out a loud sigh. "It's not going to work out, is it?" he asked morosely.

"Sure it is," she replied encouragingly. "All we have to do is wait until Sirius is in the tower, and fly Buckbeak up and get him out. We've already managed the tricky part."

"No, sorry, that's not what I meant," Harry clarified. "I was talking about what's going to happen after. Now that Pettigrew's escaped, Sirius will still be a wanted criminal, on the run for his life. You heard what Fudge was saying."

"That's true," Hermione agreed. But ..."

"You heard what Sirius said to me in the tunnel, right?" Harry reminded her. "About coming to live with him?"

"Oh, Harry," Hermione commiserated, scooting closer and wrapping her arm around him. "I'm so sorry. With everything that happened I wasn't really thinking about that. And you were so looking forward to it. But he'll probably have to flee the country now."

Harry nodded glumly. After a moment he spoke up again, in angry, heated tones. "I can't believe how eager Snape was to do away with him. I mean, it was clear that they hated each other, but he had no intention of believing anything we said. And Fudge was the same way. All he cared about was how it would make him look good to have solved the problem. It didn't matter if there was a possibility that he could be innocent. Sirius never had a trial in the first place, and Fudge wants to have him Kissed without one now. What is *wrong* with this world!"

He punctuated his exclamation by smashing his fist into the ground, causing Buckbeak to look up from where he was grubbing for insects to see what the fuss was all about. Hermione tightened her grip on Harry's shoulder.

"It seems that we have a conversation like this every year," she commented in a low, calming voice. "And here we are again with the same problem. There are lots of good people in the wizarding world, and plenty of positive things about it, but there are also some intolerable aspects

as well.” She sighed. “Perhaps we need to give some real consideration to whether we should continue to be a part of it once we finish Hogwarts.

“Do you think Sirius might be willing to leave?” Harry wondered. “If so, at least I could still have him in my life.”

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. “Considering he’s been unjustly imprisoned for twelve years, I’d say there’s a good chance. Maybe ... I don’t know ... start over somewhere else. Make a new life. It’s something we could consider.”

Harry leaned back a little and looked at her. “We?”

Hermione nodded firmly, her eyes not letting go of his. “Yes, we. This is something that affects me at least as much as it does you. And I have no intention of losing you from my life.”

Harry dropped his gaze to his lap, glad to hear that she thought so highly of their friendship after the strain it had been under for part of the year, but not being comfortable with such a direct display of emotion.

“Well,” he said at last. “Before we can start making plans like that, first we have to get him out of here.”

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Book 4

Scene – Shortly after Harry’s birthday.

Harry had received two letters from Sirius since he had been back at Privet Drive. Both had been delivered, not by owls (as was usual with wizards), but by large, brightly colored tropical birds ... they put him in mind of palm trees and white sand, and he hoped that wherever Sirius was ... he was enjoying himself.

Dear Hermione,

I got the cake you sent. It was brilliant! Also thanks for the box of snacks. They’ve been a great help in keeping me from starving. Dudley’s still on his diet, so I’m still not getting much to eat either. Ron, Hagrid, and Snuffles sent cakes, too, so I’m going to have enough to last me for a while.

Thought you might be interested in this – when I get letters from Snuffles they’re delivered by these large, colorful tropical birds. The last one was red and green with a patch of blue on its head. They make me think of sandy beaches and palm trees. I hope that means that he’s someplace warm.

Hope to see you at the World Cup.

Harry

Dear Harry,

You're welcome for the cake and snacks. It was no trouble at all. I get so angry whenever I think of the way your relatives treat you! But I'm glad you're getting enough to eat this summer, even if it means your friends have to send you food.

I think the bird you described is a parrot, probably from South America or the South Pacific. I'll check into it further if you'd like. I enjoyed the image you brought to mind regarding sandy beaches and palm trees, which describes the South Pacific perfectly. It sounds to me like a wonderful place to visit someday.

I'm leaving for the Weasley's next week. Mrs. Weasley plans to write to your uncle asking if you can come on the weekend before the match. I tried to explain to her about postage stamps, but I'm not sure if she understood completely. I hope her letter makes it to your house. If not, Ron is determined to 'rescue' you again.

See you soon!

Love from,

Hermione

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Scene – The end of the school year; everyone is getting ready to leave Hogwarts. Viktor has just said goodbye to Hermione, and then to Harry, after which Ron asked him for his autograph.

Hermione turned away, smiling at the horseless carriages that were now trundling toward them up the drive, as Krum, looking surprised but gratified, signed a fragment of parchment for Ron.

Harry nudged up against Hermione. “Anything you want to tell me?” he prompted with a grin.

“Oh ... well, Viktor asked me again about visiting him this summer,” she revealed with a touch of embarrassment.

“So, are you going?” Harry asked quietly, keeping an eye on Ron, who he suspected would not be pleased with the answer.

“No ... no, I turned him down,” Hermione informed him, turning to put her back to their other friend in order to keep this information private. “I do want to keep in touch with him, but just as

friends.” She looked up, directly into Harry’s eyes, and smiled. “After all, I can’t go off to Bulgaria with him, because you and I are going to Australia after we leave Hogwarts,” she teased. Harry’s head shot back abruptly.

“Australia?” The one word response was all he could manage.

“Yes, it seems the best choice,” Hermione replied crisply, taking his arm and beginning to walk toward the carriages. “It’s about as far away from here as you can get, but it’s still English-speaking. And it has those lovely South Pacific islands nearby.” She paused a moment to let this sink in. “And things certainly don’t seem to be getting any better around here,” she added with an ominous tone.

“Hermione,” Harry blurted out, once he’d managed to process what she’d said. “You don’t have to do this. If you’d rather be with Viktor ...”

“No, Harry,” she interrupted him with another sharp look. “You’re my best friend. I’d rather be with you.” Before either of them had a chance to follow up on that sentiment Ron caught up with them.

“What are you two talking about,” he inquired quickly.

“Australia,” Hermione answered without missing a beat. But Harry caught a flash of amusement in her eyes directed his way.

“Really?” their red-haired companion mused. “Hmm. They don’t have much of a quidditch team. Got trounced in the first round last summer.”

Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes, while Harry grinned and slapped his single-minded friend on the back. “Good to know,” he responded. “Now let’s get on the train before all the compartments are taken.”

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Scene – Leaving Platform 9 ¾ at King’s Cross Station

Hermione hung back for a moment, gathering her courage. She had tried to give Harry a hint about her feelings, but he hadn’t picked up on it. She resolved that she would make one more attempt to try to communicate her interest, and if Harry didn’t respond to this, it might well be that he wanted to remain just friends.

“Bye, Harry!” said Hermione, and she did something she had never done before, and kissed him on the cheek.

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Book 5

Scene – The last day of the school year. Harry has been avoiding Hermione ever since she was released from the hospital wing, but she finds him sitting alone in the common room early in the morning, before they leave for the train.

“Harry ...” Hermione made the greeting sound slightly threatening as she moved toward him, ready to block any attempt by him to slip away. Recognizing this, Harry settled back down on the sofa with a sigh and allowed her to join him. There was a moment of silence as each of them pondered how to open the long overdue conversation.

“Look, I’m sorry ...” / “Harry, I’m sorry ...” they began simultaneously. After flashing each other awkward smiles, Harry motioned to Hermione to continue.

“Harry, I’m sorry I wasn’t more help,” Hermione blurted out. “I’m sorry I was so stupid. It was my fault ...”

“What!” Harry interrupted in disbelief. “What are you talking about! What was your fault? How were you stupid? It was all my fault!”

“No, it wasn’t. You were amazing, getting us out of the Hall of Prophecies and holding off those Death Eaters,” Hermione argued in a rush, releasing a week’s worth of self-recrimination. “I can’t believe I was so foolish as to ignore Dolohov after I silenced him. I should have followed up with a stunning hex immediately. Then I would have been with you later and Sirius might not ...” By now tears were flowing down her face. Harry refused to let her continue.

“No! That’s crazy!” he nearly shouted. “You were brilliant that night! It was all my fault. If I had listened to you we would never have been there. Instead I nearly got you killed and Sirius ... Sirius is gone! And it’s my fault!”

“That’s not true,” she shot back. “Once Kreacher told you Sirius had gone you had no choice. And you didn’t drag us along, so don’t try that one either. You tried to get us to stay behind and we all insisted on coming with you.” Harry just sat there shaking his head, which only made Hermione more insistent. “Voldemort tricked you – there was no way you could know that it wasn’t real, just like your vision about Mr. Weasley. You checked on Headquarters just like I suggested. But if I had been with you in the Death Chamber ...”

“No, Hermione,” he shook his head sadly. “You didn’t see her. First she beat Tonks, then S... Sirius, then Shackbolt. No one could stop her. It wouldn’t have mattered if you were there.” Then he moved closer and put an arm around his distraught friend and she buried her head in his chest. “There’s no way you can blame yourself.”

“Then you shouldn’t either.” Even though muffled by his shirt, her voice had its unmistakable, characteristic tone that tolerated no argument. So he made no response for several minutes, while they recovered from their emotional outbursts.

“He’s still gone, though,” Harry noted with a dead tone of finality.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. This time he accepted her condolences.

After another period of silence she sat up. “We should go away for a while.”

“What?” he asked, not following her.

“We should go off somewhere, maybe leave the country. Get away from here, where you aren’t constantly reminded of everything. Perhaps go to Australia like we talked about.”

“Hermione, you can’t just leave like that!” he protested. “What about your parents? Won’t they want you to come home?”

“They can come with us,” she replied. “They’ve been talking about doing something like that for years. And this is the perfect time as far as our studies are concerned, now that we’ve taken our OWLs. We could take a year off and then come back, or ... or we could even try another school. Harry, after everything they put you through this year ...”

Harry was finding her argument more compelling by the second. Right now he hated the wizarding world, at least the British part of it, with a passion, and wanted nothing better than to leave it all behind. He began to nod excitedly, but then his face dropped and he slumped back into the sofa.

“I can’t.” He looked up at her glumly, as she began to try to reason with him, and shook his head. “You go ahead if you want to. It’d probably be best if you did. But there’s ... something ... look I don’t want to talk about it now.”

Hermione was devastated. Not only had he rejected her offer, and all that it implied about their relationship, but now it seemed like he didn’t even want her around him.

“You ... you want me to go away?” Her voice broke as tears began to form in her eyes again.

“No, no, I didn’t mean it that way,” he tried to reassure her, reaching out his hand to her arm. “I meant it would be safer for you. You almost died, Hermione! Several times now you’ve almost died here. I couldn’t ... I don’t want you to die.”

Hermione took his hand and squeezed it between hers. “I’m not going to leave you Harry,” she vowed fiercely. But to her consternation, Harry only shook his head.

“Why? What is it you’re not telling me?” she demanded.

“I can’t ...” He leaned back and ran his other hand through his hair in agitation. “I just don’t think I can talk about it right now. Maybe ... maybe later this summer after I’ve had time to think about ... things.” With that he withdrew his hand from hers, gave her an apologetic half smile, and turned to stare into the fireplace.

Hermione sat, quietly regarding her best friend, pondering the enigma that was Harry Potter. They’d grown so close the previous year, but this year he’d begun to distance himself from her, even as she’d tried to be as supportive as she could. Although he still relied on her for some

things, their relationship hadn't really progressed at all. In fact, he'd often been snappish and irritable, albeit not entirely without justification given what he'd gone through. But he hadn't really allowed her to comfort him like she'd wished she could. And then there had been the fling with Cho.

Perhaps it was time to give up the fantasy that she'd been building up in her mind all these years and consider other options.

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Book 6

Scene – Immediately following the final scene in the book, after Dumbledore's funeral.

"Harry, I need to talk with you – privately."

Harry looked over at Hermione questioningly, wondering what she had to say to him that couldn't be said in front of Ron. He noticed Ron scowl briefly, but Hermione shot him a stern look that made him relent. From his reaction, Harry suspected that it was something they had discussed before they came over, and Hermione had made her intentions clear.

"Right then," Ron mumbled. "See you back in the common room."

As soon as Ron had gone, Hermione turned to Harry and began to wring her hands. "Harry, I need to apologize to you for not believing you about Malfoy. You were right and I was wrong. And ..."

"Don't worry about it, Hermione," Harry tried to soothe her. "That's over and done with now."

"No, please let me finish," she pleaded. "I feel so guilty, like it's partly my fault that Dumbledore died. If I'd worked with you instead of *against* you we might have been able to stop Malfoy from letting those Death Eaters in and ..." By now she'd worked herself into quite a state, and Harry stepped forward and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Don't beat yourself up like this, Hermione, please!" he told her. "Trust me, I've done enough of that for both of us." Hermione managed a small fleeting smile at that comment. "It wouldn't have helped. Dumbledore knew exactly what Malfoy was up to and refused to do anything about it. He said Snape was taking care of it, and we know how effective *that* was. And at the top of the tower, it seemed like Dumbledore almost wanted to confront Malfoy, so he could ... I don't know ... turn him back to the right side or something."

Hermione nodded hesitantly, and Harry gave her upper arms a squeeze before releasing her. Resting his hand on her back, he inclined his head in the direction of the lake so that they could have a bit more privacy for this discussion.

"O – Okay," she agreed with a sigh, wiping away the tears that had sprung up again in her eyes. She stayed close to him as they began to walk away from the milling crowd, as though trying to give him a physical confirmation of her support. "But I still want to make it clear that I'm sorry

for the way I behaved this year, and assure you that I'm behind you one hundred percent now." Harry found himself breathing a sigh of relief, as the fact that the two of them had not got on well the past year had bothered him greatly. "I know we weren't as close this year and I don't want that to happen again," Hermione pledged fervently.

To this Harry expressed his own regret that things became so unpleasant between them. Hermione in turn admitted to getting so caught up in her pursuit of Ron that she had allowed herself to be distracted from what was important. "I just wanted it to be a normal year for once," she explained sadly.

"I can understand that," Harry revealed as they reached the shoreline and stopped. He turned to her and continued. "It was the same with me and Ginny. Part of what made me so happy was that I felt normal for once." He paused and looked out over the lake for a moment, pondering his recently concluded relationship. "I'm somewhat concerned now about how everything happened so fast. Especially what she said when I broke up with her."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Wait! You broke up?"

"Yeah, just now," Harry elaborated. "But what I'm trying to say is that I think she was taking it a lot more seriously than I was. I mean, it's not like I've fallen madly in love with her – we were only dating a few weeks. Then she mentioned never giving up on me, you know, like she's been waiting for me all her life, while I've been out fighting Voldemort and saving the Wizarding world." He snorted in disgust and kicked at the rocks along the shore of the lake. "As if I'd give two knuts for the Wizarding world. They can all go hang as far as I'm concerned."

He lifted his face back up to hers. "But I just don't want to deal with all of that now. I have a job to do." Hermione opened her mouth to correct him, to assert that *they* had a job to do, but Harry cut her off.

"So what about you?" he asked. "Are you with Ron now?"

"No!" Hermione blurted out, caught somewhat off balance. "I mean, well, no. Nothing really ever came of that. I certainly made it clear that I was interested in starting something with him, but I ended up getting humiliated. Then, even after he broke up with Lavender he never said or did anything. As far as I'm concerned, that means there's nothing happening. It's up to him if he wants to start something, but I'm not going to just jump at the opportunity. I have no intention of making a fool out of myself again."

"But you two were hugging just now," Harry pointed out.

Hermione shook her head with a touch of exasperation. "Harry, it's a funeral! He was comforting me. If you hadn't been talking to Ginny you'd have done the same thing, I'm sure. Besides, most of the time he was holding me I was talking about you, what you were probably going through and what I needed to say."

Harry smiled. He could easily picture that conversation in his mind. He suspected that a good

portion of the conversations Hermione had with Ron involved her worrying about himself and Ron attempting to reassure her that he would be all right.

“Well, it sounds as though we’re thinking along the same lines, then,” Harry decided. “We need to focus on this mission for the foreseeable future.”

“So, where to now?” Hermione wondered as they began to walk back up to the castle.

Harry thought for several seconds. Talking about his plans with Hermione always seemed to help him think more clearly. “There’s not really much that I can do while I’m underage,” he admitted. “So I might as well stay at my aunt and uncle’s until my birthday. And despite what you said earlier, there’s really no reason for you and Ron to come there too. There’s no place for you to stay – my room’s certainly not big enough for two people, let alone three.” Unknown to the other, each of them flushed inwardly at the thought of sharing a bedroom. “I think it would be best for Ron to go home and help get ready for the wedding, and for you to see to your mum and dad.”

Hermione considered this briefly, then nodded. She had an idea of what she needed to do about her parents, and it would take some time and effort. “I suppose that’s the best way to go about it,” she finally agreed.

As they approached the castle she stopped, and took hold of his arm, forcing him to look her in the eye. “Just as long as you understand that I’m not letting you do this alone. I am with you. All the way,” she stated firmly. “Ron, too,” she added hastily, as it suddenly struck her that she might be getting too personal. “Together, wherever it takes us.”

Harry smiled, filled with affection for his tenacious friend. This was the Hermione Granger he remembered. He had no doubt that he could count on her to stand by him once again through whatever they encountered, just as she had done in the past. Even if he might wish it otherwise, he knew he would need her. “Now *that* sounds like my Hermione,” he responded playfully, causing Hermione to blush with pleasure. “And I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

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Book 7

Scene – At the Burrow, while Harry, Hermione, and Ron are discussing their plans.

“I’ve also modified my parents’ memories so that they’re really convinced they’re called Wendell and Monica Wilkins, and that their life’s ambition is to move to Australia, which they have now done.

Harry’s head snapped up, recalling a long ago conversation. “Australia?” he repeated. Hermione nodded, seeing the recognition in his face.

“Assuming we survive, we can find Mum and Dad and lift the enchantment. If not – well, I think I’ve cast a good enough charm to keep them safe and happy without us. You see, I’ve made it so

that they don't even know they've got a daughter."

Hermione's eyes were swimming with tears again. Ron made a move to get back off the bed but this time Harry was there first, and put his arm around her. Ron was miffed, but Harry didn't care. Ron could put his *charming* of Hermione on hold for a while.

"So afterwards, we ...?" Harry began. But Hermione's knowing look told him he didn't need to elaborate further about their schemes to leave the country.

"Yes. Just like we planned," she confirmed.

Ron, still annoyed, was looking back and forth between them. "What are you two going on about?"

Harry ignored him. "Hermione, I ... I'm sorry. I didn't ..."

"Didn't think I was serious about it?" She pushed his arm away, and he could see from her expression that she was hurt. He stopped to think for a moment before he responded, not wanting to make things worse.

"No, I never doubted that you meant it," he assured her, wrapping his arm around her again. To his relief, she didn't resist. "Just like I did. I suppose I'm just surprised that you went ahead and acted on it already."

"You mean you two already talked about sending her parents away?" Ron wanted to know.

"Something like that," Hermione replied. Thinking quickly, she changed the subject. **"Ron, show Harry what you've done."**

-oooOOOooo-

Scene – Harry and Hermione are alone in the tent in the Forest of Dean, after their escape at Godric's Hollow, but before they are visited by Snape's patronus.

"Here you go," Hermione announced as she handed Harry half of the sandwich she'd just made. "It's not much, but ..." She shrugged and Harry nodded in understanding.

"It's fine, Hermione," he assured her. "You're amazing, you know, the way you can turn a few scraps of meat and a bit of bread into a meal." Hermione smiled at the compliment, and sat down next to him. "And at least it lasts longer now that You Know Who isn't eating everything in sight."

Hermione smacked him lightly on the shoulder for making the bad pun, as her smile dissolved into a grimace. It had been weeks since Ron had left them, but it was only in the last few days that she'd got over the hurt and anger enough to be able to joke a little about their former friend.

Harry's grin dropped immediately. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I know how much you miss him."

“No, don’t apologize,” Hermione insisted. “He’s the one who walked out on us. We just have to accept it and move on, and that includes not shying away from talking about him if we want to. He made his choice, and I’ve made mine.”

Harry reached across the table and took hold of her hand squeezing it briefly. “And I really appreciate that. I don’t know what I’d do without you. I know it must have been a hard choice for you to make and ...”

Hermione cut him off, giving his hand a return squeeze as she spoke. “No, Harry. That was actually the only true thing he said that day. ‘I choose you’. I’ll always choose you.”

Harry knew Hermione well enough by now that he could sense a hug coming. This time he rose to his feet and met her half way, embracing her as tightly as she did him. After holding the hug longer than they ever had any previous hug between them, Harry finally leaned back and cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“So ... does that mean things are over between you two?” he wondered.

Hermione sighed and relaxed her grip, but didn’t let go, instead turning so that her head was resting against his chest. “Honestly, it never really started,” she replied with a small shrug. “But after him abandoning us there’s certainly no chance of anything happening now.”

Harry nodded his understanding of her declaration, and joked, “Yeah, I imagine walking out in a snit is probably *not* one of the twelve failsafe ways to charm witches.” Hermione lifted her head and gave him a puzzled look, so Harry explained about Ron’s use of the guidebook to romance her. Since he hadn’t brought his own copy along, though, he was unable to fulfill her demand to let her read it to determine just how many of its strategies Ron had employed.

Hermione shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Well, that explains a lot. I wondered how he’d managed to become so considerate.” She sighed again – she really didn’t want to talk about her abortive romance with the other boy in her life, so changed the subject. “So what about you?” she challenged. “How are you getting along without Ginny? I’ve noticed how you’re always looking at the map for her dot.”

Harry turned away from her and stared out the doorway of the tent into the dark, snowy woods outside. “To some extent it’s just a way to kill time, watching the dots and wondering what she’s doing – what everyone there’s doing actually,” he explained. “I don’t just look at hers. But even more I think it’s a way I’m trying to stay connected to the outside world.” He turned back to look at Hermione, his eyes locking with hers. “But it’s not working.”

He moved in close and took both of her hands in his. “Right now my only reality is you, this tent, and the snow.” Her eyes shining, Hermione wrapped her arms around him and buried her head in his chest once again.

And once again, Harry backed off from any potential revelation of deeper feelings with another attempt at humor. “And I am so sick of snow!” he declared fervently. Is there snow in Australia? I

never want to see snow again!”

Hermione laughed and looked back up into his smiling eyes. “The northern part has a tropical climate, so if we went there we could avoid snow for as long as you wanted,” she informed him. “And don’t forget all those lovely tropical islands nearby. Lots and lots of sun.” A sly gleam entered her eye. “Wait until you see what I look like with a tan.”

Harry shot her a curious look. “Just how much of a tan are we talking about?”

“Well, you may not be aware, but on many of those South Pacific islands it’s customary for the women to go about without a top,” she teased.

Harry’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline and his eyes practically jumped out of his head, as Hermione cocked her head and shot him a ‘so, what do you think about that!’ smirk. But before he could manage a verbal response she burst into near hysterical laughter.

“You should see the look on your face,” she gasped, while leaning against the table to try to catch her breath. Harry soon joined in with her laughter and opened his arms. She gladly accepted and they hugged again, still chuckling against each other.

“Thank you so much, Hermione,” Harry murmured after he finally regained his composure. “That was great, and just what I needed to help keep me going. You have no idea how much it means to me, just having you be here with me.”

This time there was no attempt to block his feelings, and as the two of them gazed into each other’s eyes, they were both aware that there had been a breach in the wall. A window of opportunity had opened, and given time and enough courage on both their parts, they would begin to explore a new dimension to their friendship.

Alas, it was time that the beleaguered pair would not have, as even then a sword had been planted in a pool of icy water, and a shimmering patronus was being sent to lure Harry to its location.

-oooOOOooo-

Scene – Harry has just buried Dobby in the garden at Shell Cottage.

HERE LIES DOBBY, A FREE ELF

Harry felt a small, unsteady hand touch his shoulder, but did not flinch. He would know that touch anywhere. He looked up to see that Hermione had returned to his side.

“I told everyone that I needed to talk to you alone,” she explained in a voice that was almost too soft for him to hear. “Ron started to object but Fleur could somehow sense that I needed to be with you. She shot a look at Bill and he stepped in and agreed that I should come back out, so Ron backed off. Bill only said not to go outside the wards.”

Harry put an arm around her shoulders and she leaned into him, grateful for the support, as they

began to walk away from the cottage toward the sea, out of the line of sight of the windows.

When they'd reached what was evidently Hermione's destination, at the top of the cliffs, she turned to him, her eyes glistening in the moonlight. Without warning, she reached her arms around his neck, pulled his head down to hers, and kissed him tenderly but firmly on the lips.

Harry was caught by surprise, but oddly enough, he wasn't at all shocked. However, he still needed to ask. "What was that for?"

"For being so caring," she whispered. "For being the most noble person I know. That was a wonderful thing you did, Harry Potter."

"If I'd known that the way to get a kiss from you was to be nice to house elves I'd have done it sooner," he teased.

She smiled and matched his joking tone. "Well, you must know, that's always been my weak spot." She turned around and leaned her head back against his chest, while he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close and lending her warmth while they looked out at the crashing waves below. For a time neither of them spoke, both knowing that there were much more serious matters to discuss, but reluctant to broach those topics.

"Do you think we'll make it out of this alive?" Harry finally asked. But for once, Hermione had no immediate answer. "I was so scared back at Malfoy Manor," he admitted. "Scared that I was going to lose you. Every time you screamed it went right through me like a knife."

"I know," Hermione acknowledged. "I knew that was why she was doing it, too. Hurting me to get to you. I tried so hard to resist. I tried to concentrate on how important it was that you escape somehow, and hoped that I could buy you some time to do something miraculous." She turned around to face him, but made sure she stayed within his arms. "Please don't blame yourself. I know that's what you're doing. It was really only a matter of time before we got caught."

Harry didn't want to get into an argument with her, especially in the condition she was in. For God's sake, the girl had just undergone the *Cruciatus* curse a dozen or more times! Instead he pulled her even more tightly to himself. "That's always been my greatest fear," he choked out. "That they'd get you and torture, or k..kill you. Or Ron. Or any of the others," he added.

"I know," she repeated, as soothingly as she could.

"I don't think I can do this anymore," he moaned into the top of her head, where it rested just below his chin. "Today just opened my eyes, and it was only the beginning. Let's just go away. Leave now. The price is just too high. Today it was Dobby. Last year it was Dumbledore. The year before, Sirius. Next time ..."

Hermione wanted more than anything to agree with him, to leave this nightmare behind. But she knew it would only be postponing the inevitable. "We can't," she sighed. "He'd come after us; you know he would. He won't stop until he kills you or you kill him."

Harry's shoulders slumped. He'd known that his suggestion was an impossible one. "More people will die, you know," he pointed out. It was a fatalistic attitude, but unfortunately also quite realistic. "And I'm afraid you're going to be one of them."

"I have the same fear about you," Hermione replied, her tears soaking into his shirt.

"I think you're right," he responded with a quiet resignation that terrified her. "I have a feeling that's the way this is going to turn out. I only hope I can take him with me."

Hermione was unable to answer, her muffled sobs her only response. Harry could offer no words of hope, but simply held her tight as he stared out into the darkness that closed in all around them, pondering which path to pursue, even though all seemed to ultimately lead to the same destination.

At length, Hermione had cried herself out, and Harry turned them toward the cottage, his arm once more wrapped around her shoulders for support. Nearly dead on her feet from exhaustion, his closest friend clung to him as he gently guided her back to the comfort and warmth of the Weasley dwelling.

"Come on," he urged her softly, but firmly. "I need to talk to Griphook about a vault, and Ollivander about a certain wand."

-oooOOOooo-

Scene – At the end of the penultimate chapter, after the final battle. Harry has just finished talking to Dumbledore's portrait.

"That wand's more trouble than it's worth," said Harry. "And quite honestly," he turned away from the painted portraits, thinking now only of the four-poster bed lying for him in Gryffindor Tower, and wondering whether Kreacher might bring him a sandwich there, "I've had enough trouble for a lifetime."

"Where to now?" Ron asked as they descended the curving stairs from the Headmasters Office.

"Gryffindor Tower for me," Harry sighed. "I'm exhausted. I don't think I'm up to dealing with ... well, everything."

Ron hesitated and Hermione spoke up promptly. "That's all right Ron, you should be with your family. Go ahead. I'll stay with Harry." Ron appeared to want to dispute this idea, but Hermione had the look on her face that he knew so well. She'd made up her mind and wasn't about to change it. With a shrug, he headed down toward the Great Hall.

"What do you want to do?" Hermione asked Harry as they maneuvered past another collapsed wall on their way up to the tower. Unobtrusively, her hand found his, and they slipped into the comfortable familiarity of the days and nights alone in the tent.

"I'm thinking a sandwich, if I can get hold of Kreacher, and then bed," Harry replied wearily.

“Mind if I join you?” she responded. Harry turned to her and cocked an eyebrow.

“In bed?”

Hermione merely smiled and rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. “I was referring to the sandwich.” Harry noted that she hadn’t denied the other possibility. Once again they were confronting the opening in the wall they had approached, but shied away from before, and what each one didn’t say was as important as what they did say.

But now both of them, independently, resolved that this time it would be different. The cloud that had hung over them for years, dominating their lives and constraining their choices, had dissipated. They would take that next step, and explore the possibilities of this new territory.

Once inside the familiar common room they instinctively moved to the sofa in front of the fireplace where they had spent so many evenings together over the years. Harry collapsed into the comfortable cushions and Hermione joined him, leaning her head against his shoulder. Without comment, he stretched out his arm and pulled her close.

“What next?” Hermione prompted.

Harry sighed. “It was a madhouse down there, and I doubt it’s going to let up any time soon. Probably only going to get worse. Everybody wanting a piece of me.”

Hermione nodded as she picked up a sandwich. Kreacher had responded immediately, served them respectfully, and then discretely disappeared. “It’s going to drive you crazy,” she observed.

“An absolute nightmare,” he agreed. There was a pause as he devoured half a sandwich. “I’m thinking ...” he pulled back and looked at her directly, “that this might be a good time to get away.”

“Australia?” she asked hopefully.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Find your parents and sort them out. Spend some time with them. I’m sure they’ll be thrilled to learn that they have a daughter again.”

Green eyes locked with brown, each pair searching for confirmation in the other of the unspoken supposition that hung in the air.

“Are we bringing anyone else with us?” She decided it was time to lay it right out on the table

Harry looked away. “So it’s you and Ron, then?”

“No, not in the way you’re suggesting,” she responded quickly. “We’re not together. I told you months ago that wasn’t going to happen.”

“But ... that kiss,” he pointed out, in obvious reference to the steamy kiss Hermione and Ron had engaged in during the battle.

Hermione twisted her hands together nervously in her lap, worried that her impulsive action would derail this opportunity. “I can’t believe I did that,” she groaned. “Everything was going crazy and my emotions were sky high, and then out of the blue he said that about the house elves.”

Harry snorted. “Your weak spot, as I recall.” He turned back to face her again and smiled, melting the lump of ice that had gripped her insides.

“It was so embarrassing!” she moaned, her face bright red. “I’d intended it to be just a little peck of gratitude, but then he picked me up right there in front of everyone and wouldn’t break it off.”

Harry reached over and clasped her hands, halting their nervous writhing. “I understand,” he assured her. She responded with a large sigh of relief.

“What about Ginny?” she inquired in turn.

Now it was Harry’s turn to sigh. “No, not really,” he revealed. “Things seem different now. For all that I thought about her while we were out in the tent, I don’t really have that much desire to see her now. I walked right by her after it was over. I found myself wanting to be with you instead.” Without thinking about it he stretched out his arm again and she didn’t hesitate to snuggle up against him once more, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. “As soon as he was dead you were the one I looked for first. It’s just ... you’re my whole world right now.”

Warmth flooded through Hermione’s body at that revelation, and she barely refrained from squealing in happiness. Neither of them had actually said the words yet, but they were headed in the right direction. Then her practical side asserted itself.

“How are we going to tell them?”

Harry swallowed hard, and decided to take the next step. “We can say we fell in love during the time we were alone together,” he suggested, holding his breath.

Hermione found her own breathing greatly restricted. “Would it be true?” she whispered.

“Partly,” he revealed in a quiet voice. “I fell in love with you long ago, but I only realized it at Christmas, that night at Godric’s Hollow.”

“I’ve been in love with you for a long time, too,” Hermione admitted in turn, as her heart soared. “I knew for sure at Bill and Fleur’s wedding. When the ministry official announced they were bonded for life I thought about it and realized if I wanted to be bonded for life it would be with you.”

Harry looked up at her and grinned. “I remember that. You turned and looked at me and I didn’t know what to make of it.” Hermione smiled at him fondly.

“But I was never sure if you loved me in a romantic sense or as a best friend,” she concluded. “So I never acted on it.” Harry nodded in agreement, as he had been in the same bind.

“Harry,” Hermione whispered in a low voice. “I think it would be appropriate for you to kiss me now.”

Harry awoke slowly to the sensation of a bushy head of hair in his face, and a warm, soft body in his arms. He soon worked out that he was holding Hermione, who had wrapped herself around him, using his chest for a pillow. As his mind cleared, he recalled that he’d decided to take a kip in the Gryffindor dorms, and she’d declared that she would join him (fully clothed, of course). Her array of charms that had hidden them from all pursuers for those long months in the tent had no trouble affording them the privacy they desired now.

Feeling amazingly well rested, he couldn’t resist tightening his arms around her, as though to confirm that she was real and not a dream. Her answering sigh was so characteristic, and familiar to him, that it prompted instant recognition.

“Hey,” she whispered, without relinquishing her dream-come-true position in his arms. “Sleep well?”

“Yeah,” he acknowledged. “How long was I out?”

“Only two hours,” came the response, after she consulted the clock beside whichever fifth year’s bed this was.

“Wish I’d had the nerve to suggest this while we were in the tent,” he confessed. “In addition to the obvious benefits, it would also have been a lot warmer.”

She chuckled. “I was just thinking the same thing. There was a point where I thought we might, that one night. But the next day Ron was back, and you closed yourself off from me again.”

“Yeah, about that,” he revealed. “I never told you what happened when Ron tried to destroy the horcrux. It actually taunted him by showing him a vision of you and me kissing, and basically telling him we didn’t need him. It really shook me up to discover that was his greatest fear. Once I finally convinced him to ignore it and stab the locket, I didn’t know what to say about it. I finally told him I only loved you like a sister, because anything else would have crushed him, and I didn’t want him to leave again.”

Hermione sighed. “And of course after that you had to make certain to act that way. Probably to convince yourself as much as him.”

“You know me too well,” he teased. Hermione nodded her head vigorously, which caused him to smile and give her another squeeze.

“We are going to have to face that now,” she pointed out. “From both of them.”

“I know,” he agreed. “But you know, I’ve been sacrificing my happiness for other people all my life, and I’m done with it! I think I deserve to have things go *my* way for once.”

This was finally enough to entice Hermione to move from her delightful spot, although not very far. Unwrapping her body from his legs and torso, she positioned herself up directly above him, and then proceeded to kiss him thoroughly.

Once she’d managed to drive every conscious thought from his mind, she released him, raised up her head, and smiled. “I agree.”

“Huh?” came the less than eloquent response.

For the first time in his life, Harry heard Hermione Granger giggle with delight.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get through it,” she assured him. “We’ll put up with whatever grief anyone wants to lay on us and ignore any guilty feelings that arise.”

“Sounds good,” Harry managed. “How long before we can leave?”

Hermione considered that briefly. “We’ll stay for the funerals. Probably three or four days at most. Do you think you can wait that long?”

Harry found it hard to focus with all the wonderful sensations from the contact she was making up and down his body contending for his attention, not to mention his desire to kiss her again. Then another enticing thought entered his mind.

“It depends,” he smirked. “Tell me again about those topless beaches we’re going to visit.”

Hermione’s unrestrained laughter filled the room, and Harry immediately decided that it was a sound he wanted to hear as often as possible for the rest of his life.

-oooOOOooo-

The loss of the ‘Savior of the Wizarding World’ would have been a political nightmare for the magical government of Britain, and they immediately and steadfastly denied that such a thing had occurred. The official story was that he had settled in a remote part of Scotland (or perhaps Wales) and preferred to live a quiet, private life. These wishes, the Ministry of Magic declared, should be honored as this was the least they could do to repay the debt the wizarding world owed him. The fact that no one ever caught sight of him or his muggleborn companion in public was ruthlessly suppressed; to the extent that to even suggest such a thing in print was made a fineable offense.

The truth of the matter was that, except for the weddings of the Weasley children and a few other close friends such as Neville and Luna, Harry and Hermione never set foot in Britain again. The only person who regularly had contact with them was Teddy Lupin, who once he was old enough would be invited to spend a month visiting them in Australia every summer. But other than that, despite many entreaties from their friends to come back and visit some time, the two of them kept

to their vow to have nothing to do with the deeply flawed society of the homeland that had been so inhospitable to them all their lives. And they were perfectly content to keep it that way.

-oooOOOooo-

7 Years Later

Hermione tied the knot on her pareo as she stepped out onto the beach in the bright morning sun. It was a bright aqua print which rested low on her hips, tied on one side to reveal a shapely leg. At the moment, it was also the only article of clothing she was wearing, so quite a bit more of her was revealed as well. It was obvious to any observer that years of living in a tropical climate had given her a deep, all over tan and lightened her hair several shades to a honey blonde. She'd also let her bushy hair grow out, and it now flowed down her back in a riotous mass of untamed curls.

The chance of her actually being observed was nil, since she and Harry were the only two people on this small uncharted island in the Coral Sea, just off the northeast coast of Australia. After a good deal of searching he had purchased the entire island with his inheritance from Sirius. This naturally led to its christening as Black Island, and it was now hidden with a full complement of charms and wards. While their primary residence was in a wizarding town in the northern part of Queensland, where it never snowed, (her parents had settled in Brisbane, an easy apparation jump away) they spent as much time as they could manage at their secret island getaway.

In light of their isolated status, her current outfit was not out of the ordinary. For one thing, the two of them were nearly always barefoot. As far as clothing went, a pareo was the mainstay of Hermione's island wardrobe, accessorized, depending on the occasion, with matching swimwear. For her beach activities the pareo gave way to one of her collection of bikini bottoms for swimming, and she added a small top (not much more than a colorful scarf) which she tied around her breasts for support when she went running. The tops also completed the outfit for meals and during the evenings when a bit more coverage was appropriate.

Harry dressed similarly, spending most of the day in what could best be described as something of a loincloth, grudgingly adding the male version of a pareo when necessary. (Hermione insisted that they 'dress' for dinner.) He never wore a shirt on the island, much to her delight, as over the years his skinny frame had filled out nicely.

The young couple had not rushed into anything, but allowed their relationship to deepen gradually, finally marrying two years after coming to Australia. After a slightly awkward beginning, Hermione's relationship with her parents was now stronger than it had ever been while she was at Hogwarts, and they had fully welcomed Harry into the family as if he were their own son. And in Australia they found a place that had mostly rejected the pretensions and class structure of their parent country, in their magical sector as well as the regular society.

It had taken some time for them to settle down, as Hermione helped Harry enjoy the things he'd missed out on during his life, and they found that they shared an enthusiasm for traveling and exploring new things. Now the pair spent part of their time working for the Australian Ministry of Magic with new spell development, and also taught part time at the Australian Academy of the

Magical Arts. In both endeavors their skills blended together to make them an ideal team, with Hermione developing a spell and Harry fine tuning it, or with Hermione instructing students on theory while Harry had a knack for demonstrating the nuts and bolts of spell casting. As far as Hermione was concerned, it was everything she could have wished for, as she combined both her love of learning and her desire to share her knowledge with others, and was able to engage in both of these pursuits with her dearest friend at her side.

As she set out along the soft white sand in search of her husband she took in the expanse of impossibly blue sky, turquoise ocean, and green palm trees of their island paradise and reflected on her nearly perfect life, which was about to enter an exciting new phase. She glanced down at herself with her customary critical gaze. Her hips were full and shapely, which was fine since Harry liked them that way. Her stomach had only a slight bulge, which she ran her hand over now in anticipation. Her arms and legs were nicely toned from her daily exercise routine and her breasts – well, they were adequate, although she wouldn't mind if they were a little larger, a self-conscious attitude left over from her years of sharing a room with Lavender Brown. The smile that had been on her face since she'd left the beach hut grew as the thought crossed her mind that if Harry had any fantasies about her with larger breasts they were about to come true over the next year.

Harry had left about an hour earlier for his regular morning run and swim. Normally she would have accompanied him, but on this, as well as several other mornings for the past week, she hadn't been feeling well, and told him she'd catch up with him later. Now she was eager to find him, not only because their morning routine always culminated with making love on the beach, but because the spell she'd just performed on herself had given her some exciting news to share with him.

Hermione quickened her pace as she spotted Harry emerging from the water some distance down the beach wearing diving fins and a brief swimsuit that even after five years of marriage sent her hormones into action. Their island had a nice, relatively undisturbed coral reef that they both loved to explore, and also provided fresh fish for dinner on occasion. While a bubblehead charm was far superior to a snorkel, the fins were quicker and less painful than transfiguring their feet.

When he saw her he waved and quickly doffed his gear, using an *Aguamenti* charm to rinse it with fresh water. He finished just as she arrived, and jumped to his feet to greet her with a broad smile and a hug. Then he stepped back and the smile took on a lascivious glint as he looked her over appreciatively. Her pulse quickened and her nipples tightened in response to the lusty look in his eyes, and this in turn generated an even more noticeable physical reaction from him.

Without saying a word, but with a wicked gleam in her eye, Hermione untied the knot in her pareo and slid the long colorful piece of fabric away from her body, revealing her lack of undergarments. Enjoying the affect this was having on her husband, she turned and bent over to spread the cloth out on the sand, deliberately taking her time. Usually he was unable to contain himself when she presented him with this view, and this time was no exception. Suddenly his arms were around her and his warm body enveloped hers as they tumbled to her makeshift beach blanket, his swimsuit having been swiftly discarded as well.

“You know that drives me crazy,” he accused her.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” she teased. He needed no further encouragement.

Some time later, with both of them fully satiated, he lay on his back with her curled up in his arms. “You know,” she commented, trying to keep her voice even. “We’re going to have to take a break from this eventually.”

“Why?” he blurted out in surprise. In response, she took his hand and rested it on her abdomen.

“Because we’re going to have a baby.”

The effect was exactly what she’d hoped for. He sat up instantly and took her into his arms, nearly crushing her with the intensity of his embrace, and the tears of joy in his eyes matched her own.

“Hermione, I love you!”

-oooOOOooo-

12 Years Later (19 Years Total)

“G’day, luv.” Harry greeted his wife with a kiss and a hug, and then released her to repeat the process with the children who were clamoring for their turn. Once he’d worked his way up to the oldest, he noted the nervous look on her face that he’d seen so often in her mother, that suggested that she had something important to tell him.

“What’s up, Rosie,” he inquired, smiling at the small huff of annoyance she gave off whenever he anticipated her like that.

“I got a letter today,” she announced hesitantly, holding up a piece of parchment that immediately awakened old memories. And there at the top, in flowing emerald green letters:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL
of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

“Unbelievable,” he mused. “After all these years ...”

“That’s the first thing I thought,” Hermione agreed. “My second thought was that they had some nerve, ‘accepting’ her when we hadn’t even applied. Just presuming that of course she’d be attending.”

“Well, to be fair, the process is automatic to some extent,” Harry conceded. “I remember Hagrid telling me my name had been on the rolls since the day I was born. It wouldn’t surprise me if it was the same way for Rose.”

“D...Dad?” his eleven-year-old daughter stammered. “Do I have to go?”

Harry wrapped his arms around her in a comforting embrace. “Sweetheart, you don’t have to do anything. Your mum and I want whatever’s best for you.” Looking up at Hermione he asked,

“What do you think?”

Hermione frowned and bit her lower lip thoughtfully. “Well, you know Neville’s teaching there now ...”

“There’s another note here,” Rose broke in. “Besides the books and supplies list. It’s addressed to you.” The family quickly gathered around as Hermione unsealed the smaller parchment and began to read while Harry looked over her shoulder.

Dear Harry and Hermione,

Goodness, it’s been a long time! I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw that your daughter was on the list of potential first years. Boy, that sure brings back some memories. Bursting into your compartment on the Hogwarts Express with a bossy little girl demanding, “Has anyone seen a toad?” Ah, good times those were.

So, to get to the point – are you guys ready to come home yet? I reckon this would be a good opportunity. If you want to teach I’m sure Minerva would find a spot here for you in the blink of an eye. Or if you wanted to do anything else, really. You’re still a legend around here, you know.

Frankly, we could really use you. Things haven’t changed much since you left. The House rivalries are as bad as ever. Students still hexing each other whenever they think they can get away with it. Purebloods still acting like they own the place, and muggleborns coming in scared out of their wits. No trolls, giant three-headed dogs, or demented defense professors, though. But seriously, with you and Hermione here exerting your influence, maybe we could change some attitudes. At least give it some thought.

Yours,

Neville

“Huh,” Harry scoffed. “There’s no way we’re sending our kids back there! That exactly describes the place we wanted to get away from.”

“But Harry,” Hermione chided with a smile in her voice and a gleam in her eye. “What happened to the boy with the ‘saving people thing’? Aren’t you ready to go save the wizarding world again?”

Harry knew that she was being facetious, but answered anyway, for his children’s sake as well as for his and Hermione’s. “First of all, it’s not the wizarding world that has the problem, just their small corner of it. But more importantly, I’m not willing to put our family into a stressful situation that might even be dangerous for them just to try to ‘save’ a society that has no desire to change. Are you?” Hermione shook her head vigorously as she moved closer and wrapped her arm around his waist.

“And as far as I’m concerned, home is where the people I love are,” Harry declared as he and

Hermione reached out and gathered the children in for a group hug. “And that’s right here.”

“Does that answer your question?” This query was directed at Hermione as well as Rose.

“So, that means I can stay here and enroll at AAMA?” Rose responded for confirmation purposes.

“No worries, sweetheart,” Harry assured her. “We’re not going anywhere. We’re here to stay.”

Hermione kept one arm wrapped around Harry and gave her daughter a hug with the other. “So you just go to AAMA and learn to be the best witch you can be,” she declared proudly, “and your father and I will support you all the way.”

“Thanks Mum and Dad,” Rose sniffed. “I love you.”

Harry and Hermione shared a satisfied smile. “We love you too.”

The two of them stood back and watched while their eldest daughter turned to her siblings and an excited discussion broke out about what it would be like for her at the magical academy. Their arms reflexively wrapped around each other’s waists again and drew them together as they exchanged another look of pure love and contentment. Leaving their old lives behind and making a new one together in this place had been the best decision they’d ever made.

There was truly no place like home.

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