

The Road Not Taken

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellowwood ...

“Mum?”

“Yes dear?” Hermione smiled down at her son as they returned home from the station.

“Why don’t you and Uncle Harry talk to each other?”

“Why ... why whatever gave you that idea?” Hermione protested while she tried to come up with an explanation. Her son was far too observant. “We talk to each other whenever we see each other.”

“Only to say hello and goodbye,” Hugo countered. “And this time you didn’t even say that much. Uncle Harry and Dad always talk to each other like they’re old friends, but he and you don’t. I thought you used to be good friends with him.”

“We were ... I mean we are ... that is ...” Hermione paused to collect her thoughts. “That sort of thing happens as you grow older. I guess we don’t have that much interaction with each other any more. Your father and Uncle Harry still spend time together but ... well, you’re right, Harry and I don’t.” She forced a smile at her inquisitive son and ruffled his hair. “When we were students we had so much more in common and we were together all the time. Now we really only see each other at family get togethers and then it’s rather hectic with the children and all. On those occasions I end up visiting with your Aunt Ginny and Uncle Harry is with your father. I suppose your interests change when you get married and have a family.”

Hugo evidently accepted that explanation and his attention soon turned elsewhere. But Hermione found herself dwelling on the conversation and what she not been willing to reveal to her son. For while it was true that she and Harry were no longer close, it was not because they had gradually grown apart. It all went back to one conversation, and she let her mind drift back to that fateful day. She could remember it as if it had been only yesterday.

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“Hermione, can I talk to you?” It was one of those rare occasions when the Burrow was relatively calm. Ron and Ginny had gone in to help George sort things out in the joke shop, but Harry had begged off and Hermione had never been that interested in pranks anyway, and had elected to remain behind as well. Now Hermione looked up from the book she was reading to see Harry standing anxiously before her.

“Of course, Harry. What do you want to talk about?” Hermione responded, somewhat worried by the way he was behaving. Her concern only grew as he took her hand and pulled her to her feet, then led her out of the house. As much as she craved an immediate explanation, she kept silent as they walked out past the garden, accepting his need to communicate what was on his mind on his own terms. Finally, they entered the woods at the edge of the Weasley property and he paused and gestured to her to make herself comfortable.

She quickly scourgified a fallen log and sat down, although her unease at his agitation prevented her from being all that comfortable. Harry remained on his feet, pacing back and forth and running his hand through his hair several times before stopping and turning to face her.

“Hermione, I need to leave,” he blurted out.

“What? Leave?” she shot back in surprise. “What do you mean, exactly, by leave?” she tried to clarify, forcing herself to remain calm.

“I can’t take it any more. I have to get out of here. I want to get away and go to a place where no one knows me.”

“Why?” Hermione reached up to take hold of his hand, urging him to sit beside her and collect himself, and hopefully explain better. At the same time she fought a rising sense of panic within herself. To tell the truth, this was not a complete surprise. As she always had, she had been keeping a close eye on Harry during the month since Voldemort’s defeat, and had been concerned with what she saw. Rather than being able to relax and enjoy his new life now that the nemesis that had plagued him for so many years was finally gone, Harry was under as much or more pressure than ever. She’d wished that there were something she could do to relieve it, but had been unable to come up with anything. The unfortunate part of the problem was that the Weasleys, despite their best intentions, were contributing to the anxiety Harry felt. Just being at the Burrow and watching them try to cope with Fred’s death, and watching Arthur and Percy’s struggles at the Ministry, kept the pain of the losses all too fresh. Perhaps if he had not lost some of the people who had been closest to him ...

“I just can’t handle it,” Harry moaned. “Everyone wants a piece of me. And they all expect me to be celebrating and partying but all I can see is Remus’ and Tonks’ bodies lying there, and Fred. All I can think of is how horrible it must be for George, and for little Teddy. I feel like I failed them because I didn’t stop him quickly enough ...” Hermione started to object but Harry cut her off, knowing exactly what she was going to say.

“I know, you’re going to tell me that their deaths weren’t my fault and I can’t blame myself, and you’re right of course. But I need time – I need time to sit quietly and sort it out, and have you talk to me and help me work through it. But I can’t get that. I felt overwhelmed with everyone’s expectations before, but I thought that would end if I won. But it hasn’t. If anything people have even more expectations than ever. They’re

trying to make me into some kind of god. And I can't take it anymore, Hermione, I just can't."

Harry buried his head in his hands and Hermione moved closer to wrap her arm around him, drawing him into her side and leaning her head against his shoulder. He had essentially confirmed everything she had been worried about. But she couldn't let him just leave. Besides the fact that she wasn't at all certain that he could find happiness elsewhere, *she* couldn't bear to lose him. He had been the most important person in her life for so long, and her nearly constant companion, especially this past year when it was just the three of them, and for a time just two. Her life would be so empty without him; she didn't want to think about what it would be like.

"Harry, there must be something else you can do," she pleaded. "I agree that things are crazy right now, but they'll settle down eventually."

"Will they?" he challenged, looking up at her. "Do you honestly believe that things will change any time soon?" Hermione stared back into those pain-filled green eyes. As much as she wanted to assure him that it was so, she couldn't. She let her eyes fall and shook her head sadly.

"We could go on a trip," she offered. "You and me and Ron and Ginny. We could go off by ourselves for a while."

He shook his head, and she realized before he responded that he was right. "It wouldn't help. Is there anywhere the four of us could go in the magical world that we could truly get away? Where we wouldn't be recognized and badgered constantly? And besides, being with them would just remind me of everything I'm trying to get away from."

Hermione felt tears beginning to fill her eyes, and tried to will them away. She knew what the solution he was about to offer was going to be.

"I need to disappear into the muggle world."

Silence filled the calm air of the woods as these words settled heavily between them. Hermione found herself fidgeting anxiously with the hem of her robes with one hand, while the other clutched tightly to Harry's.

"So, you've decided for sure, then?" she queried in a near whisper.

"Almost," he answered. She looked up again, the obvious question in her eyes.

"Will you come with me?"

Hermione's eyes went wide, and her heart, which had been pounding with the anticipation of what she had expected to hear, suddenly lurched to a halt.

"Me?" It came out in a half squeak, half gasp.

"I need you. If I have you with me I know I can work through this. You're the one I've always relied on to help me figure things out. We can go anywhere in the world you want to – you can pick. As long as we're together we'll be all right. We – you and me – we can face anything. I know we can because we have."

But Hermione was shaking her head even before he finished, and she saw his face fall even as he was still making his case. "Harry, I... we ... what about Ginny?" she countered desperately, still trying to wrap her mind around what he was asking and sort out her objections.

"Ginny doesn't know me like you do. And she wouldn't be able to do what I'm suggesting – leave the magical world and live like muggles. You and I can do that easily. And she ... well, I'm not sure that she's not part of the problem. She's always seen me as a hero, and I think she still has a hard time thinking of me as 'just Harry'. On one level, she understands that I don't like all the fame, but deep down I'm not sure that she accepts it." He looked into her eyes again, and it was a struggle to force herself not to look away from the yearning she saw there. "You do. You understand me," he finished.

"Harry, we just can't," Hermione cried. "You're involved with Ginny now, and I've finally started a relationship with Ron. We can't simply break everything off and go away together. It would destroy everything we have with that family. We can't just give this all up now that we've finally ... we finally have some hope for a future here," she finished pleadingly.

Harry looked as desperate as Hermione had ever seen him, and she felt her heart being torn in two. "Hermione, please? You're the one who has always been there for me. You've never let me down. I need you. Please?"

"Harry ..." Tears were flowing freely down Hermione's face as she struggled with the choice he had laid out before her. The one path was safe and peaceful, with a bright future seemingly laid out before her. The other was dark and uncertain, offering no clue of how it would turn out. It was a challenge similar to ones she had accepted unhesitatingly in the past, just because Harry had needed her. But not this time. She just couldn't bring herself to take that leap of faith one more time.

"I'm sorry."

Harry rose to his feet as Hermione broke down, sobbing into her hands. Taking a deep breath, he walked a little way further into the woods, his spirit crushed, and stood there, waiting for ... for something that never came. Some time later Hermione pulled herself together and rose to her feet, looking out to where he still stared off into the forest. She considered going to him, but decided against it. There was nothing more to say. Quietly she made her way back to the house, and eventually he returned as well.

The pressure on Harry never let up. Hermione tried to alleviate it somewhat by suggesting her vacation idea to the Weasleys, but Mrs. Weasley shot it down, declaring that the family needed to stick together now. And Harry steadily grew moodier, and withdrew into himself, eventually refusing all invitations. But after that day in the woods he never sought Hermione out for comfort or for help in working through his feelings again, and they never again sat down and talked, just the two of them. And the thing she most feared – losing his companionship – happened anyway.

Finally the other people around him recognized that things weren't right, and weren't getting any better. Hermione hit on the inspiration that he might go and stay with Andromeda Tonks and Teddy for a while, knowing that the demands of a newborn baby would keep him busy and allow

to feel like he was doing something to help make up for the loss of Remus and Tonks. She sold the idea to the Weasleys, and together they persuaded Harry to give it a try. When he moved out of the Burrow she decided that it would be a good time for her to go to Australia to retrieve her parents. When they returned she moved back into their house. She saw Harry occasionally, but only that.

Ginny managed to maintain a relationship with Harry, albeit a long-distance one as she returned for her last year at Hogwarts, and eventually they began to date seriously. Finally, several years after the final battle, Ginny and Harry were married, as were Hermione and Ron. And although they were all the Best Man or Maid of Honor for each other, and the couples occasionally spent time together, Harry and Hermione never regained the closeness that they had once enjoyed. As the years went by, and children and careers occupied their time, they got to the point where they exchanged polite greetings and pleasantries. Now today it had finally come to this. On such a major occasion where they were each sending a child off on their first trip to Hogwarts, they had been in each other's company and never said a word to each other.

As Hermione reflected on the choice she had made, and where it had brought her to, the tears came once more, and she cried herself to sleep.

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Hermione woke with a start and sat up abruptly. *What had that been all about?* She frantically darted her eyes around the room, and saw only the familiar furnishings of the Burrow. Heaving a sigh of relief, she let herself sink back into her bed and pondered the dream she had just had. It had been so realistic! But even as she considered it, there were things that weren't quite right. It started, of course, in dreamlike fashion, with clouds of steam blurring their vision as they approached the Hogwarts Express, giving the setting a surreal quality that should have been an immediate tip-off that the scene wasn't real. And then there were the names of the children. Hugo? Why would she ever name a child Hugo? Rose, on the other hand, was a lovely name, and James and Lily were obvious choices for Harry's children. But Albus Severus? Never in a thousand years would Harry inflict a name like that on a child, even if one of them didn't belong to the potions professor that he still hated, despite the grudging assistance he had rendered at the last. And why wasn't Draco in prison where he belonged? Finally, the idea that she would encounter Harry on Platform Nine and Three Quarters and not give him a hug, much less not even speak to him, was ludicrous.

Wasn't it?

Hermione's thoughts were inevitably drawn to the encounter in the woods that afternoon. Harry had been distraught. Could the scenario in her dream actually take place? Would he feel so rejected by her refusal to accompany him that he would pull away from her to that extent? Even given her disdain for anything related to divination, could she risk it?

On the other hand, could she risk her friendships with Ron and Ginny by running away with Harry? She had put a lot of effort into pursuing a romantic relationship with Ron, and it was finally starting to take hold. She had no idea where it might lead, and in fact often doubted if she and Ron were truly compatible, but at least she had something. And what exactly was Harry proposing? She had long since given up any thought that he might be romantically interested in her, and their time spent living together in the tent had been entirely platonic. Well, mostly at least. There had been a few times when she had thought she sensed a spark of something more, most noticeably at Christmas time. But each time something had interrupted it, usually another emergency that threatened their lives, and such things as exploring their feelings for each other were pushed aside.

But ... Hermione finally came to a stark realization. She could live without Ron. She could not live without Harry.

She had made that choice once already, when Ron left them in the woods. He had accused her of 'choosing Harry'. She had insisted to herself at the time that it wasn't that she had chosen Harry over Ron, it was that she had chosen to be faithful to the mission, to honor her promise to assist him. It was easier to rationalize it that way than to confront the question of whether she really would have chosen Harry over Ron, given the straightforward choice. But now she was faced with exactly such a decision, stripped away from all the other complications. And she had chosen to remain with Ron. In fact, she wanted both – Harry as her best friend and Ron as whatever might come of the fledgling romance. But now ... having realized the possible long term consequences of her decision she knew what it had to be.

Hermione decided that she would never be able to go back to sleep now – her mind wouldn't stop churning, probing, creating and analyzing different scenarios, questioning ... She had to talk to Harry again before she could even think of calming down enough to fall asleep. But it was the middle of the night. There was no way ... unless ... Would Harry really be sleeping now? Hermione knew him better than that.

Silently she pushed aside the sheets and rose from the bed in the room she was sharing with Ginny. It was a hot summer night and she was sleeping in just her knickers and a light tank top. After some thought she decided it would be easiest and quietest to just tie a wrap skirt around her waist. With a silent flick of her wand the top sheet was transfigured into just what she needed, and she slipped out of the room and down the stairs.

She had guessed correctly. Harry hadn't been able to sleep either, and was doing what he always did when he needed to get away and think. She found him out past the paddock, flying on Ron's broom. She stood in the shadows cast by the moonlight and watched him for a while, climbing, diving, and soaring through the air like it was second nature. Which it was, of course. She found herself wishing that she could feel that way about flying. Perhaps ...

Hermione shook off that thought as Harry noticed her standing there and dove in her direction, pulling up in front of her in a perfect landing. He was also dressed for the warm summer night, shirtless and wearing only a pair of pajama bottoms. For a moment they both stood there regarding each other, and she felt her pulse quicken. It seemed to her that he looked at her in a way that he never had during all the months they spent together living in the tent. His eyes dropped to the bumps that had formed in her thin tank top. The night air was apparently cooler than she had thought – or possibly her body was reacting to the way he was looking at her. As calmly as she could manage, she folded her arms across her chest and he glanced away, chagrined.

She resolved the awkward situation by pulling him into a hug. For his part he submitted to it because this was Hermione and that's what Hermione did, but he didn't hug her back, and she could tell that he was already starting to distance himself from her. But she wasn't going to permit that now.

"Can't sleep?" she asked knowingly as she dropped down and sat on the grass, crossing her legs and smoothing her skirt.

Harry shrugged and joined her. "Only a few hours, and then I wake up," he acknowledged. "I can't get everything out of my mind."

"I couldn't sleep either," she replied. "I've thought more about what you asked me." Now she had his full attention, and he sat up straighter and his eyes widened. She reached out and took both of his hands into hers and her heart fluttered again as she forced a calmness into her voice that she definitely did not feel.

"Harry, you've been the most important person in my life for years, and ... I decided I don't want to lose what we have. But what exactly is that Harry? I love you, and I know you love me. But just what does that mean? Is it just as very good friends? Brother and sister? Or could it be more? If I'm going to go away with you I need to know just where we stand and what I might expect."

"Really?" he burst out. "You're changing your mind?" She nodded. "Oh Hermione!" Before she could react Harry had pulled her into his arms and was hugging her as if his life depended on it. And Hermione decided that the night was much warmer than it had been a minute ago.

Eventually Harry relaxed his grip and Hermione moved herself back away from him and folded her hands in her lap while she regained her breath. Then she looked directly into his eyes and waited, letting him know that she still expected an answer to her question.

"OK," he began as he nervously ran his fingers through his hair. "The thing is, I've always told myself the same thing that I told Ron when he asked last winter – I love you like a sister. But it's more that I decided that was the way it was and didn't really want to consider any other possibility. I mean, I've known for years that we were closer than normal friends, and had something that was so much more than what a boyfriend and girlfriend have. To use a word like 'fancy' to describe how I feel about you seems so ..."

"Inadequate?" Hermione suggested.

"Yeah," Harry grinned, accepting that of course she would be able to read his thoughts so well. Then he became serious again. "So ... for now all I know is that I want to be with you," he explained, "and at this time I consider you my closest friend. But I'm not ruling out the possibility that it could be more." He looked up at her again, trying to ascertain if this was sufficient. "As long as, well ..."

"As long as we both agree that no matter what we decide – if we give the romance thing a try and it doesn't work out – we'll never stop being best friends," Hermione concluded.

Harry nodded enthusiastically, a relieved smile on his face, and they both rose to their feet and embraced, both of them initiating the hug simultaneously this time. Hermione shivered, but not from any sense of being cold, as Harry's hands softly caressed her back, and she let her own hands run across his bare shoulders. Feeling bold, she allowed the thought that had arisen earlier to surface again.

"Take me flying with you."

"Really? You want to fly with me?" Harry asked in amazement. Hermione smiled and nodded.

"Do you want me in front or behind?" she inquired. She couldn't decide if she preferred to have his arms around her or if she wanted to wrap herself around him, so she left the choice to him.

He called the broom to hover before them and looked back and forth from it to her, forcing his eyes not to linger on her chest, which was once more advertising the fact that all she had on was a light tank top.

"Uh, behind, I guess," he decided. "Then I can see and steer better ..." He stopped as she swung her leg over the broom and her wrap skirt parted, exposing her up to her thigh. "On second thought, if I sit behind you we can both see and I can make sure you don't fall, and I can still steer pretty well," he stammered.

Hermione grinned – she had a pretty good idea what had changed his mind, and she had decided that she liked the idea of having his arms around her while they were up in the air.

Flying with Harry was so different than flying on her own, or on a Hippogriff, or on a Thestral. With his strong arms enveloping her shoulders, and his warm chest pressing against the bare skin of her upper back, and knowing that he was totally in control, she felt completely at ease – content was the best way to describe it, she decided. She leaned back and closed her eyes, savoring the sensation.

When she did this Harry happened to glance over her shoulder and almost lost control of the broom at the sight before him. He immediately decided that loose tank tops were his favorite article of women's clothing. Well, that and wrap skirts, he amended to himself, as his eyes continued down to take in her bare leg, as the wind whipped around her long skirt. He shifted his hips back slightly so as not to reveal to Hermione his body's newfound appreciation of her shapely figure. Meanwhile Hermione smiled to herself, amazed that she was affecting him this way.

Eventually he brought them to a halt high above the Burrow, where they could just make out the moonlit village of Ottery St. Catchpole in the distance, alongside the winding Otter River.

Hermione snuggled into Harry's arms and asked, "Are you sure you want to give this up?"

"I've missed this, I admit," Harry responded. "But I just went a whole year without being on a broom, so I know I don't need it. I suppose this is going to have to be my 'one last flight' before we go. I have to admit, it turned out to be a memorable one," he teased as he gave her a squeeze.

When he had brought them down for a landing, and Harry had helped her dismount, he didn't let go of her hand. The mixture of the elation he felt that she had changed her mind, the overwhelming affection for her that welled up in him, combined with her suggestion about changing the nature of their relationship and the sensual feeling of flying with her, his arms wrapped around her with her bare skin pressed against his, had created an irresistible impulse. To her shock, he pulled her into a kiss. And it was then that Hermione knew.

She had kissed two other boys in her life, but neither of them had been like this. Kissing Harry sent a surge of emotion through her that had her gasping as he broke away after only a few seconds, uncertain if he had overstepped his bounds. She immediately let him know that he had not by pulling him back for an encore. This was just ... so right. This was where she belonged. They would take their time moving this relationship

forward, letting their love develop and not rushing it, but she now knew how it would end. They would be together forever.

They left the Burrow before sunrise. With the aid of some well placed silencing charms so as not to awaken the other occupants of the house, they packed everything into another bottomless handbag that Hermione enchanted. Just before they went away they wrote letters to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, and Ginny, thanking the family for all they had done for them, and apologizing to Ron and Ginny for the way things had turned out, and trying to explain why Harry had to leave, and why Hermione had to go with him. But they both knew that it would be quite some time before either of them would be able to accept what they had written.

The disappearance of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger caused an uproar in wizarding Britain that rivaled any scandal that had occurred in their lifetimes. It got nearly as much attention as the defeat of Voldemort itself. Rita Skeeter had a field day speculating in her articles in *The Daily Prophet* on what had occurred between the two of them and for how long they had been keeping their relationship a secret. Eventually Fleur and Molly Weasley paid her a visit and the sensationalistic tone of her writing greatly diminished.

For the first week, Harry and Hermione camped out in a forest in the lake country north of London while they put their affairs in order before setting out for Australia. One of the first things the Ministry had done after the final battle was negotiate a settlement between Gringotts and Harry for the damage his raid on the Lestrange vault had done, and even more so for the insult the goblins had suffered. As a consequence the bank was happy to have him clear out his vault and disappear, feeling well rid of him. They even agreed to furnish whatever legal documents he required and to respond to any inquires by stating only that Mr. Potter had closed his account. In return, he turned over to them all of the artifacts in the Black family vault, including several goblin-made items that they had coveted for years.

And then they left the country, and despite years of searching by the Ministry and by their friends and acquaintances, they were never found. However, up in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall smiled as the enchanted scroll noted the birth four years later of James Potter, followed in two years by that of Lily Potter, and another two years after that of Rose Potter. But she kept their whereabouts to herself. She had always thought that these two students, of whom she had become more fond than any in recent times, belonged together. And if they had found happiness with each other she would not intrude on it. They would come back when they were ready.

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Fifteen Years Later

Jimmy Evans nervously entered Kings Cross station along with his parents and sisters. If any passersby had thought about it, the boy with the curly black hair scarcely resembled the deeply tanned, bleached blonde, straight-haired adults with him. Since they were still masquerading as muggles, and Jimmy as a muggleborn first year, they stopped to say goodbye before he went through the barrier at Platform Nine And Three Quarters.

While they were there, they watched the other families arrive and pass through, including Ron and Lavender and their children. (They were aware that Ginny had delayed having a family because of her professional quidditch career.) They refrained from revealing their identities just yet, not wanting to cause a commotion here at the station. They also noted two muggle families who were clearly confused about the whole process. Naturally, they stepped forward and offered their help, and Jimmy met two of his new classmates, a boy and a girl. Harry and Hermione hoped that this would give him a good start on making friends.

"Now, remember, the Headmistress knows what's been going on, and despite how stern she looks you can always go to her with any problems that may arise," Hermione told her son as she gave him a hug. "Also, the Gryffindor Head of House, Professor Longbottom, is a really good man and will always be there for you."

"He can probably tell you quite a few stories about us too," Harry chipped in. "Ask him sometime about the time your mum petrified him in our first year." This earned him a sharp poke in the ribs and a glare from his wife, and giggles from his son and daughters. Hermione knew though, that he was helping Jimmy out by breaking the tension, and she secretly shot him a smile while feigning affront from his revelation.

"And you know that Teddy Lupin is a prefect now, so he will be able to help you out as well," Hermione concluded. Once they had settled down from their travels and started a family, Harry and Hermione took care to keep tabs on Harry's godson. They had surreptitiously made contact with him when he was six, and the boy had been delighted to have secret friends. The son of the marauder Remus and the fun-loving Tonks had been more than able and willing to keep his knowledge of them to himself, regarding it as a giant prank on the wizarding world. He was in fact eagerly looking forward to the pandemonium that was about to be unleashed, and had vowed to help their son through it.

"When they announce your real name at the sorting, you're going to get quite a lot of attention," Harry instructed him in a more serious tone, as the time drew near for his boy to leave. "Be sure to take the time to see how people react to you before they know who you are. That's the best way to find friends."

"Dad?" Jimmy asked quietly, so that his sisters couldn't hear him. "What if I'm in Slytherin?"

Harry crouched down so that he was face to face with his son, and two pairs of green eyes locked together. "James Evans Potter," he said quietly. "You are brave enough to be in Gryffindor, intelligent enough to be in Ravenclaw, loyal enough to be in Hufflepuff, and ambitious enough to be in Slytherin. Your mother and I know that wherever you get sorted you will make us proud of you. Any one of the houses would be lucky to have you."

"But I want to be in Gryffindor like you and Mum."

"Like I said, it doesn't matter to us Jimmy. But if it matters that much to you, the Sorting Hat takes your choice into account."

"Really?"

"It did for both me and your mum," Harry revealed. It considered putting me in Slytherin and her in Ravenclaw, but we both told it we wanted to be in Gryffindor." He grinned at his son to lighten the mood and winked. "Personally, I think she wanted to be in Gryffindor in order to get close to me." That earned him a light smack on the back of the head from his wife, who was closely following the conversation.

"I was sorted before you were, you prat," Hermione pointed out as she crouched down beside them, while Harry made a face and rubbed the back of his head. This action earned him a weak chuckle from his son. "But your father's right, James," Hermione continued. "You'll be a credit to whatever house you're in, but if you really want Gryffindor, you'll probably get it."

A look of relief filled Jimmy's face and he reached out and wrapped his arms around Harry's neck. Then Hermione held her arms out so that he could repeat the hug with her, and she kissed him on the cheek. They all straightened up and the boy took the luggage cart with a determined look on his face, and with one more wave goodbye pushed it through the magical barrier between platforms nine and ten.

Harry and Hermione's arms instinctively wrapped around each other's waists as their other hands concluded their farewell waves, then sought out each of their daughters, Harry grabbing hold of Lily while Hermione hugged Rose.

"Bye Jimmy!" Rose called out. "Be sure to write!" Lily added.

"He'll be all right," murmured Hermione.

"I know," agreed Harry. "And so will we."

And the family turned and made their way out of the station to return home and prepare for the next phase of their lives. For they had decided that it was time to rejoin the wizarding world, and it would be quite an eventful year, to say the least. As they walked along Hermione reflected on how the scene at the platform just now compared to her long ago dream, and the choice she had made. She knew that she was satisfied with the road she had taken and was very happy with the life it had led to. And as long as she had Harry by her side, the road ahead looked bright indeed. All was well.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-