

The Day the Magic Died

“Harry?”

Harry looked up from his spot in the tent entrance where he was keeping watch, as Hermione approached him holding an ancient looking book with a cracked cover. He recognized it as one of the books they had brought with them from Grimmauld Place. Despite the fact that his spirits were as low as they'd ever been since the beginning of their quest, he forced an expression of interest onto his face. Ever since the disaster at Godric's Hollow that had broken his wand and nearly cost them their lives, Hermione had redoubled her research efforts, spending nearly all her time poring over the piles of texts she'd crammed into her bottomless bag.

“I found something I want you to take a look at,” she informed him with a mixture of eagerness and anxiety. After settling herself down at his side, she opened the aged tome to the page she had marked. “It's a procedure for creating a null magic field,” she explained.

As she informed him of the details of her discovery, Harry realized the reason for her excitement and his mood made an abrupt about face, brightening immensely. The field, once created, would remove the magic from an object placed within it. If they were able to produce it, and it worked, they might be able to destroy the Horcrux in the locket! It could be one of the breaks they'd been hoping for.

“What do you think?” she asked tentatively.

“It sounds perfect to me,” he responded enthusiastically. Then, noticing her hesitation, he frowned. “What's the problem?”

“It's just that ... well, the description makes it sound like something horrible and forbidden - even worse than darkest spell or unforgivable,” she revealed. “And there are some pretty gruesome spells and rituals in this book.”

“At this point I'm ready to try almost anything,” Harry countered. “We already have a price on our heads. What else can they do to us?”

Hermione considered this and finally agreed. The procedure called for some tricky rune work but she thought she could manage it. After some discussion Harry fetched her a small cardboard box, then sat back and watched his brilliant friend do her magic. Her eyes darted back and forth from the box to the book propped up beside her, murmuring incantations, her wand weaving intricate patterns as the once ordinary box was transformed into a magical disposal device. Finally she leaned back and let out a long breath.

“Okay, it's ready,” she announced. “Do you have the locket?” Harry slipped the chain from around his neck and gave her a questioning look.

She nodded. “Go ahead. Just put it in.”

Both of the teens held their breaths as he dropped the cursed necklace into the enchanted receptacle and stepped back. Immediately it began to glow, the green gems of the ornate letter S sparkling like little miniature lights flickering and dying. Suddenly, when the last one winked out, a long shriek burst forth, then quickly faded into nothingness.

The room was still for several moments as the two of them stared at the ruined locket, then at each other. A second later Harry had his arms full and a head of bushy hair in his face when Hermione assaulted him with the most enthusiastic hug he'd had in months. Both of the happy, emotionally exhausted youths clung to each other, prolonging the intimate contact for several long, satisfying minutes.

“You did it,” Harry whispered into her ear, punctuating his congratulations with an extra squeeze. Hermione shook her head slightly where it still nestled against his chest.

“ We did it,” she corrected. “We're a team, you and I.”

“That we are,” he agreed contentedly. Despite the fact that there were still three more Horcruxes to go, with this brilliant witch by his side he felt like anything was possible. Right now she was the one good thing in his otherwise miserable life.

After confirming that the Horcrux was indeed gone – upending the box and slipping the now tarnished, misshapen piece of metal around their necks generated none of the dark feelings of despair they'd come to associate with the evil presence formerly housed within it – the two decided to celebrate and splurge for dinner, leaving the tent and locating a small diner in the nearest town. While they ate they discussed their next move, reviewing their list of potential objects and locations.

“What should we do with the box?” Harry asked. “Save it for the next one?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, it would be dangerous to carry around,” she pointed out. “What if a wand or one of our other magical devices accidentally got into it? I can always make another one when we need it.”

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Not everyone was thrilled by Hermione's discovery. A week later a bizarre series of events that included a patronus and the Sword of Gryffindor in

an icy pool resulted in the pair being reunited with their prodigal friend. Harry and Hermione had just retrieved it and was being dried and warmed by Hermione when Ron emerged from the woods.

He was not exactly welcomed with open arms. Within seconds he'd been stunned and bound by an extremely irate witch, who added a few kicks to his ribs for good measure before Harry managed to pull her away. It took some persuasion to prevent her from just leaving him like that out in the snow, but eventually Harry managed to drag his erstwhile friend back to the tent and revive him. Things did not substantially improve even then, and the tall redhead remained in the doghouse for some time. It was several days before Hermione would even consent to be in the same room with him, and weeks before she was willing to talk to the boy who'd walked out of their lives and abandoned them so abruptly.

So Ron's disapproval, when Harry eventually reported how they'd rid themselves of the burdensome piece of jewelry, didn't exactly carry a lot of weight. But that didn't stop him from expressing it.

"Well, of course it's considered dark," he declared as if explaining the most elementary concept. "You're destroying magic itself. You just don't do that." He shook his head as though he were dealing with crazy people. "I can't believe anyone would even think of creating a spell like that. I mean there's magical things and non-magical things. Enchanting something ordinary and making it magical, sure, but going the other way? That's just so wrong!"

This point of view did nothing to speed his return to Hermione's good graces. The stalemate only began to thaw after they were captured and managed to escape, with Dobby's assistance. This brush with death and her own torture by BellatrixLestrange caused Hermione to reevaluate her priorities and decide life was too tenuous to carry a grudge, at least that one. But the issue had still not been put to rest.

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The three of them had just finished another escapade that defied credibility, breaking into BellatrixLestrange'sGringotts vault with the aid of polyjuice potion and a rogue goblin, snatching Hufflepuff's Cup despite setting off several alarms and security charms, then stealing a dragon and escaping by riding it out of the bank before jumping off its back into a lake.

"Harry James Potter!" Hermione sputtered as she threw her soaked and trembling body onto the grass at the edge of the lake. "That is it! I've had it!"

"What?" Harry gasped, dropping to his knees next to her in a panic, fearing that she had reached her limit and was going to abandon him. This thought was somewhat alleviated when she threw her arms around his neck and pulled him tightly against herself.

"I've ridden a hippogriff for you. I've ridden a thestral for you. And now I've ridden a bloody dragon for you! No more! Do you hear me?"

After a moment of perplexed silence while he processed her rant, Harry began to chuckle despite his best efforts. Neither of them released each other however; instead Hermione squeezed him even harder as his chuckles grew into full-scale laughter.

"I'm serious!" she protested, fighting to keep from joining in his mirth and ultimately losing. "Promise me you won't get me into any more crazy situations where we have to ride anything beyond a broom," she sniffed against his chest.

"I'll do the best I can," he pledged, brushing a wet strand of hair off her forehead as she looked up at him pleadingly. She managed a smile and nodded, then climbed to her feet.

"All right then, let's get rid of this thing and be on our way," she declared. "Ron, hand me your backpack."

Ron watched in stunned horror as Hermione emptied the contents and tossed them to Harry to repack into another bag, after which she settled down and began the enchantment process.

By the time Ron gained his voice she was nearly finished. "Have you completely lost your minds!" he shouted. But Harry merely moved to restrain him as Hermione dropped the Horcrux into the bag and nodded with satisfaction as it too was stripped of all its magical properties, culminating with another loud shriek.

"Do you have any idea of how dangerous that could be?" Ron sputtered, shaking his head in disbelief. "Don't touch it!" he continued as Hermione reached for the pack to dump out the now quite ordinary golden cup. "What if somebody accidentally stuck a hand into that thing? It would turn them into a squib!"

Hermione paused, then nodded, conceding that he did have a point about that. A quick *Incendio* reduced the enchanted pack to ash, and a gust of air from her wand scattered it into nothingness. But Ron's statement made Harry think. *Could this be a possible way to defeat Voldemort?*

When he voiced this idea Ron looked at him like he was insane, but Hermione's face grew thoughtful, as she pondered the possibility.

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Hermione hurried along with Harry and Luna, headed toward RavenclawTower, struggling to stay under the invisibility cloak with them. Through another incredible sequence of events involving Aberforth Dumbledore and a secret passage from his bar into the Room of Requirement they were back in Hogwarts. There, at an impromptu gathering of the DA, Luna had suggested the lost diadem of Ravenclaw as a possible Horcrux, and Cho Chang had offered to show them what it looked like, as a copy of it resided on a statue in their common room. At that point Ginny had stepped in and vetoed the pretty Chinese girl as a guide, nominating Luna in her place.

Hermione shook her head in annoyance at the pettiness of the youngest Weasley. She had sensed Harry's irritation at Ginny's antics as well, but he'd not called her on it, having considerably more urgent matters on his mind. Hermione quickly determined to accompany Harry and Luna, while

Ron decided to pursue another idea.

Upon reaching their destination, the bookworm in her was fascinated by the Q&A security system for the Ravenclaw common room, but she stifled the urge to inquire further and passed on into the bright, airy, circular room. At Harry's instruction she remained under the cloak to keep watch as Harry and Luna approached the statue. This precaution paid off almost immediately when Alexis Carrow snuck up behind them. Hermione's nonverbal stunning spell eliminated that threat before the ugly Death Eater could even raise her wand. Harry shot Hermione a quick nod of gratitude and returned to his task.

"This looks familiar," Harry mused as he studied the tiara-like circlet. "I've seen it somewhere before but I don't remember where. It was here at Hogwarts, though."

"Perhaps you should try to recall what you were doing when you saw it," Luna suggested helpfully. "I find that to be useful when I'm looking for things I've lost."

Harry knew that most of Luna's lost possessions were due to her housemate's stealing and hiding them, but refrained from pointing that out. Then his head snapped up.

"Hiding!" he exclaimed. "That's it! I saw it while I was hiding my Potions book last year."

One more obstacle emerged before they could continue their quest, when Amycus Carrow came looking for his sister. This time Luna did the honors, commenting blithely that it was her first time stunning someone, and it was noisier than she thought it would be. At that point Professor McGonagall stepped in and, after warmly greeting Harry and Hermione, and learning that Voldemort was on his way to Hogwarts, transfigured the two unconscious Death Eaters into rats and locked them in a cage. Then she hurried off to sound the alarm and mobilize the castle defenses.

Leaving the spacey blonde Ravenclaw behind, the frantic Gryffindor duo hastened back to the Room of Requirement, moving in perfect synchronization under the cloak due to their many hours of traveling in that fashion. As they passed through the corridors it occurred to Hermione that if she'd read about this sequence of events in a book she'd have scoffed at its implausibility. On the other hand, she suspected that she hadn't seen the last of these unlikely coincidences today.

Back at the Room of Requirement they learned that more former members of the DA had arrived, along with a good portion of the remaining Order of the Phoenix. The only one still in the room, however, was Ginny, who'd been commanded by her mother to stay behind while the rest of them went to aid in the defense of the castle. The younger girl's eyes lit up when the pair arrived.

"Where's Ron?" Harry inquired urgently.

Ginny hesitated, then revealed that her brother had gone off to attempt to enter the Chamber of Secrets, reasoning that the object they were seeking might be hidden there.

"How's he going to get in?" Harry wondered.

"He thinks he can imitate the hissing noise you made when you opened it last time," the redhead revealed. Hermione groaned and rolled her eyes, but Harry turned to her with a shrug.

"Who knows? It might work," he suggested. Hermione sighed and shook her head.

"No, it won't," she explained. "I know he's just trying to help, but Parseltongue isn't just a matter of making hissing sounds. It's a magical ability. When you do it you're actually thinking the words and don't even realize you're not speaking normally, right?"

Harry nodded, but decided it didn't matter. They already knew where the Horcrux was and how to destroy it; Ron would catch up with them eventually. When he instructed Ginny to wait out in the corridor she was initially delighted to leave the room, but then a look of suspicion crossed her face.

"What are you lot going to be doing in here?" she demanded.

Under other circumstances Harry might have relented and allowed her to stay, especially with the cute pout she gave him, but after her childish display earlier with Cho he'd had enough of her immature behavior. Following one last plea, she crossed her arms over her chest and sulked away, and Harry quickly summoned the Room of Hidden Things.

Inside, Harry asked Hermione to enchant a box while he fetched the diadem. Near the entrance she found a box of empty sherry bottles, dumped them out, and began inscribing the runes. While intently focusing on her work she was surprised by another unwelcome voice.

"Well, well, if it isn't the mudblood again." Hermione grimaced and turned to find Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle aiming their wands at her.

Meanwhile, Harry had located the diadem in the same location where he'd hidden the Half Blood Prince's potions book. Just as he reached for it, he hesitated. What if it was booby-trapped? He headed back to consult with Hermione, but then heard Malfoy announce his presence. Donning the cloak once more, he crept forward to learn what was going on. Taking in the entire scene, he decided not to wait to see what his Slytherin enemy had in mind.

A silent banishing charm hurled half a dozen empty bottles into the back of Malfoy's head, knocking him out. When Crabbe and Goyle whirled at the crash, two quick disarming spells took care of them. By the time he'd caught their wands Hermione had all three of her attackers stunned and bound.

After sharing a quick hug for reassurance, they promptly returned to their task. "Is it ready yet?" Harry asked.

“Almost. Did you find it?” Hermione returned.

“Yeah, but it occurred to me that it might have a trap on it,” he responded. “I know I moved it before, but I don’t remember if I actually touched it. And Snape might have been in here since then.”

“Good thinking,” she acknowledged. After a bit of thought she suggested he stand at least ten feet away and levitate the diadem from its position while she covered him from a distance. To their relief, nothing happened, but they didn’t breathe easy until the ancient artifact had dropped into the enchanted box and been deactivated. They’d actually begun to enjoy hearing the loud shriek that accompanied the soul fragment’s destruction.

A blasting hex demolished the empty box, and the two of them returned to the corridor to rejoin Ginny. Just then Ron returned, a dejected expression on his face. Harry tried to buck up his spirits by telling him it had been a good idea, and that if he were Riddle he’d certainly have hidden one in the Chamber. He then informed Ron of his and Hermione’s success without going into the details in front of Ginny. Ron, realizing that they’d used the null magic field again, had an uncomfortable expression on his face, but didn’t say anything. When Harry and Hermione dropped to the floor and leaned against the wall he joined them.

“What next?” he asked. Harry closed his eyes, suddenly realizing how tired he was, and wondering how long it had been since they’d had a break. It had been before sunrise when they’d left Shell Cottage. Could it possibly still be the same day?

“First, we rest a few minutes,” Hermione declared, shooting a look of concern at Harry. “Then, we need to find the snake.”

At that point Ginny broke in to advise them that You Know Who was in the ForbiddenForest and had loudly announced that they had until midnight to surrender Harry. This information was met by a matching set of groans.

Without opening his eyes, Harry let out a big sigh and asked a question. “Do you think it would be worth it to defeat Voldemort if it cost you your magic?”

Based on Ron’s earlier comments, neither Harry nor Hermione were overly surprised at his and his sister’s answer, but were somewhat taken aback at how strong their negative reaction was.

“I’d rather be dead!” Ron declared, shaking his head that Harry would even ask. Next the black-haired wizard turned to his former girlfriend and inquired if she could ever see herself with a muggle or a squib. The look of revulsion on her face gave a more eloquent answer than any verbal response she could have given.

Harry now understood. Ron and Ginny, like any other witch or wizard who’d been raised magical, were incapable of even contemplating life in the absence of magic. Magic defined their existence, their very identity. And while it might be possible for squibs to be a part of the magical world, they would either become consumed with bitterness at the constant reminder of what was denied to them by their lack of magical ability, like Filch, or exist only on the margins of the society, overlooked and ignored, like Mrs. Figg. Neither of these was an option for someone with the visibility of the Boy Who Lived. The public would simply not accept it.

Hermione remained silent, dismayed at the absolute certainty of Ron and Ginny’s positions. These were her best friends! Perhaps she had been naïve, or unwilling to accept the evidence of her nearly seven years in the wizarding world. But now she fully realized that this was the common mindset of wizards and witches. Anything nonmagical is inferior to magical. The pureblood supremacists took this view to its extreme – anything derived from the nonmagical remains inferior to its counterpart of magical origin. Enlightened purebloods like the Weasleys didn’t hold a person’s background against them, likewise any object. Muggleborn witches or wizards were perfectly acceptable, and they also didn’t mind enchanting muggle items, such as the infamous flying Ford Anglia.

She was pulled from her pondering when she caught a wince from Harry out of the corner of her eye. She’d long since learned to recognize that particular reaction on his part. He was once more tapping into his scar connection with the dark lord. Finally he opened his eyes.

“Shrieking Shack.”

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Harry and Hermione stared at each other in silent horror. After watching helplessly while Voldemort killed Shape in the Shrieking Shack, for no reason other than to attain mastery over the Elder Wand, and the subsequent transfer of the dying potions master’s memories to Harry, Hermione had followed her friend up to the headmaster’s office, knowing he’d want to view them immediately.

They had begun with some seemingly pointless memories showing that Snape had once been friends with Harry’s mother, which caused both teens to wonder why, if the man had been so close to Lily, he’d treated her son so wretchedly. These were followed by several other scenes illustrating the level to which the Death Eater turned spy had been a part of Dumbledore’s plans, and entrusted with assisting Harry with his quest at the ‘appropriate’ time. But it was the final revelation that had the two Gryffindors petrified in their dismay.

Harry was himself a Horcrux.

Harry was the first to regain his mobility, slumping into a chair, nearly overcome with a sense of betrayal. Dumbledore had played him, manipulated him for six years, possibly even more, used him like a disposable tool to be discarded upon completion of its task.

Suddenly a burst of outrage from his female companion broke him out of his despondent musings. Hermione was pacing furiously back and forth, unleashing a stream of invective even more vehement than that which had greeted Ron’s return in the Forest of Dean. Harry fully expected her to *Incendio* Dumbledore’s portrait into ash at any moment. As he rose to his feet she suddenly whirled and threw herself at him, bursting into tears as their arms wrapped around each other in desperation.

“No!” she sobbed into his chest. “It can’t be! It just can’t! There must be some other way!”

Harry, who had been in the process of resigning himself to the fact that he would shortly have to die, wondering whether he had the courage to just walk up and let Voldemort kill him, now allowed his mind to consider the possibility of an alternative. *Was there some other way?*

His earlier contemplation about using the spell Hermione had discovered now returned, and connected with this new revelation, forming into a alternate plan.

“Hermione, can you enchant one of those boxes big enough for a person?”

Hermione’s eyes widened in realization of what he was proposing. Initially, she was appalled at the suggestion of subjecting her best friend to this curse that the wizarding world evidently regarded as beyond unforgivable.

“No! Harry, you can’t possibly be suggesting ... you can’t expect me to ...” she stammered, shaking her head in consternation.

“Hermione,” Harry interrupted. “What other choice do we have? Is it worse to lose my magic ... or die?” At this both of them immediately recalled Ron’s response to the question Harry had posed earlier. Hermione once more buried her head in Harry’s chest with a sob.

“Oh Harry, I don’t want to lose you,” she moaned. “It would just ... I don’t know if I could bear it. I care more for you than anyone else in the world.”

Harry was temporarily at a loss for words. He knew, of course, that she had strong feelings for him, considering everything they’d been through together, particularly for the past year, but ... Now that he thought about it in those terms, she *had* obliterated her own parents and sent them away, and had chosen to stay with him when Ron left them.

He swallowed hard and leaned his head against hers. “I reckon the same goes for me,” he whispered. “You’re the most important person in my life. But this is something I have to do.”

They remained locked in their embrace as long as they dared, then reluctantly broke apart. “Where do you think we should do it?” Hermione asked as she wiped her eyes.

Harry knew they needed a large space, completely private, where there was no possibility of encountering another wizard or witch. A magic free zone. Then it came to him.

“We can use the Dursleys’ shed,” he decided, taking her hand and urging her from the office. “Where’s the quickest place we can apparate from?”

Weighing accessibility with the need for security and concealment – given Ron and Ginny’s earlier reaction they knew they had to keep this plan entirely to themselves – Hermione concluded that returning to the Shrieking Shack was their best option. As they covered themselves in the cloak once more and hurried back out of the castle toward the tunnel (avoiding the Great Hall – Harry had no desire to know if any of his friends had been killed) they heard Voldemort announce a one-hour cease-fire. This was their time limit; the clock was now ticking.

While they crawled through the dark tunnel an expanded plan began to form in Harry’s mind. Perhaps he could almost literally kill two birds with one stone. When they appeared together in the back garden of the darkened an deserted house at number 4 Privet Drive, he led Hermione to the tool shed, looked around, and asked in a low voice, “Can you make a portkey?”

“That’s illegal,” Hermione reminded him. Harry merely stared at her until she looked away sheepishly. “Right, it’s not like we aren’t already the most wanted witch and wizard in the country,” she conceded. “Yes, I think I can. Why?”

Hermione shook her head in dismay as Harry laid out his idea. Before the hour was up he would go into the forest with a portkey, confront Voldemort, and transport the dark lord to the shed. With both of them magicless, Harry felt he’d have the advantage, particularly in the dark tool shed. Not completely accepting his scheme just yet, she wondered how he’d kill their enemy.

“There are plenty of garden tools in there, and I know how to use them,” Harry grinned.

Hermione rolled her eyes, inwardly glad that they were able to joke about the deadly situation he faced, then settled down and began to inscribe the runes into the walls of the small shed. The portkey would lose its magic as soon as it crossed the boundary of the null field, but that would result in at most a fall of a few feet. Harry was confident that the element of surprise would enable him to regain his feet more quickly than his opponent.

While completing her task Hermione was also dissecting Harry’s proposal, working out how to address what to her mind was a glaring weakness. But before that, there was a more immediate concern. She held her breath as Harry first removed the mokeskin pouch from around his neck and handed it to her, then opened the door of the enchanted structure and walked in.

Watching through the window, she nearly screamed as he dropped to his knees and reached up to clutch at his forehead. She choked back another outburst when his scar began to glow bright red before fading as the telltale shriek of the displaced soul fragment echoed off the walls of the narrow enclosure. She finally recovered her composure when he shook his head as if to clear his mind, and stood up again. She clasped her hands together tightly when he turned to her and smiled to let her know he was okay, and as soon as he emerged she wrapped him up in another desperate hug.

“It made me dizzy for a minute, but other than that I feel fine,” he assured her. “I’m sure it worked. I can’t feel any connection with him anymore. Let’s see.” He picked up the wand he’d been using and, as he suspected, nothing happened when he tried a spell.

“I’m going out to the forest with you,” she declared firmly when he handed the wand back to her.

"What!?" Harry sputtered. She cut him off before he could voice his strenuous objection.

"No, listen to me," she insisted. "You have no magic now. What if something goes wrong? How are you going to get both Riddle and Nagini into the shed? If I'm there, I can take care of Nagini and you only have to worry about him." What she left unsaid was that if Voldemort didn't fall into their trap, and instead killed Harry on the spot, she would do everything within her power to take out first the snake, and then the now mortal dark lord.

Harry could see that his closest friend was barely holding it together, and that he had no chance of convincing her to stay behind. Reluctantly, he agreed but only after she promised that she would stay under the invisibility cloak.

Glancing around, he located an empty soft drink can and a dirty towel that in previous summers he'd used to clean his hands after doing his chores. Hermione successfully cast the portkey charm on the can, setting its destination as the center of the tool shed, and carefully wrapped it in the towel.

"Are you ready?" she asked nervously. She was becoming more pale by the minute, contemplating the upcoming finale to their long, arduous task.

"Just a second," he replied, reaching into his moleskin pouch and pulling out the two halves of his broken holly and phoenix feather wand. "Put this back together again." Hermione started to protest that it wouldn't work any better than it had the last time she'd tried, and that even if it did he couldn't use it, but then she realized what he was thinking. She quickly cast the charm that resealed the two fragments and handed the wand back to Harry.

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They arrived back at the Shrieking Shack with fifteen minutes to spare and headed back through the tunnel. But before they exited the Whomping Willow Harry put his hand on Hermione's shoulder and stopped her. "Erm," he began haltingly. "If I ... you know, if I don't see you again, I just wanted you to know ... how much I appreciate everything you've done for me over the years. I ... well, thank you."

Hermione was too choked up to reply; she could only wrap her arms around him in one last frantic embrace. Had they not been pressed for time this hug could have gone on indefinitely, but Harry soon pulled away. As they headed into the Forbidden Forest, however, Hermione continued to weep softly, her arm wrapped tightly around him, her body clinging to his.

Harry made an effort to ease the tension. "It's too bad you didn't find some ritual or other we could have used to defeat him. Maybe one requiring two virgins to have sex or something like that."

Hermione's head shot up and she stared at him for a second, then pulled back and hit him lightly on the arm. "Oh honestly, Harry. That's so ... so ..." She shook her head and grabbed his hand, tugging him forward again, muttering, "Boys!" Harry managed a small grin, inwardly congratulating himself on at least temporarily breaking the depressing mood.

As they moved deeper into the forest, Harry fingered his old wand, which reminded him of the other contents of his moleskin pouch. He reached inside and withdrew the snitch he'd received from Dumbledore on his birthday, holding it up to Hermione.

"I wonder what this was all about, then," he commented. Hermione frowned, shaking her head.

"I have no idea, probably another one of Dumbledore's convoluted plots," she sniffed, somewhat bitterly. "And likely it's no more useful than anything else he told you or left you." She was understandably not feeling very charitable toward their former headmaster at the moment. "Do you want me to keep it for you?"

Harry shrugged. If he kept it with him, whatever it was supposed to be would be deactivated when he re-entered the null magic field with Voldemort. He, too, had had enough of Dumbledore's machinations. "Nah," he decided. "This way we'll just be rid of it."

Five minutes before the hour was up they saw that they were approaching the clearing where Voldemort had gathered his Death Eaters. This was it. They stopped behind a tree just outside of the range of the light of a small fire burning in the center of the makeshift encampment. Harry stepped out from under the cloak and Hermione stealthily moved around to the other side of the clearing, behind their enemies.

"I'm here," he announced loudly, stepping out from behind the tree into the firelight. Two dozen wands were instantly covering him as he walked forward holding his own wand in both hands high over his head in a sign of surrender. Voldemort raised a hand to restrain his followers as he stared at his hated nemesis. From the look in his eyes Harry could tell that he recognized the wand that had defeated him in each of their two most recent encounters.

When he had closed the distance so that only a few paces separated him from the dark lord, Harry halted and abruptly snapped his wand, the loud crack ringing out in the silent clearing. He dropped to his knees, tossing the two pieces in front of him and bowed in subjugation to his foe, crossing his arms on his chest.

Hermione held her breath, fervently hoping Harry's plan would work, but preparing to act if it did not. If Voldemort began the incantation for a killing curse, she would snap off a disarming spell, followed by an attempt to break through the charmed cage surrounding Nagini. If Harry managed to activate his portkey and escape, she would try to disapparate to safety. If not ... well she had no intention of leaving him to die alone.

Voldemort's pride, which the whole scheme was dependent on, came through. Instead of killing his opponent on the spot, he had to take the opportunity, like villains everywhere, to gloat over his conquest. Striding forward, he kicked his prostrate victim, once, then again. Raising his hands in triumph, he stepped onto Harry's unmoving body and began to proclaim his victory.

But Harry had already reached inside his shirt for the towel holding the portkey, prepared to activate it. As soon as Voldemort's foot came to rest on his shoulder, he darted his other hand up and grabbed hold of an ankle while touching a finger to the can.

With a flash of light the two sworn enemies disappeared! Hermione choked back a cry of relief and focused her attention on the giant snake. Pandemonium enveloped the Death Eaters remaining in the clearing, and for a moment she was afraid of losing sight of her target. But none of them came near her, and she adjusted her position to keep her quarry in view.

Meanwhile, in the quiet darkness of Little Whinging another flash of light signaled the arrival of two figures inside the forgotten shed at the back of the Dursleys' former residence. Had anyone noticed, one of the pair would have been familiar to the residents of the community, but the other visage would have haunted their nightmares for years to come.

Inside the tool shed, Harry immediately sprang to his feet, breaking away from his disoriented companion, and groped for one of the shovels hanging on the wall. Fortunately, he was familiar enough with this structure and its contents that he could literally navigate through it with his eyes closed. Catching hold of a long spade, he brought it crashing down onto the bald head of the being he despised more than any other. Voldemort collapsed, and began to shake violently. Harry dropped the shovel and reached for a pruning shears, opening it up to use one of the sharp blades. But before he could approach the convulsing creature lying on the floor, Voldemort's form began to disintegrate!

Back in the Forbidden Forest the magical cage around Nagini suddenly vanished as the magic sustaining it was drained from her master's body. Without a moment's hesitation, Hermione struck with the most powerful cutting curse she knew.

In the chaos no one noticed the flash of light, or the severed head and bloody coils of the dark lord's familiar fall to the ground, but Hermione managed to hear the telltale shriek as the final Horcrux dissipated. Emboldened by her success, she took the opportunity to send another volley of curses at the band of killers, taking particular satisfaction at the deep gash that opened across the neck of Bellatrix Lestrange and began spewing blood. It was fitting payback for her torture at the hands of the demented witch at Malfoy Manor.

Not wanting to press her luck further, the brilliant Gryffindor slipped away, hurrying through the thick woods as best as she could under the concealing cloak. To her surprise, she found herself stumbling into the centaur herd. As soon as she revealed herself they greeted her much more warmly than they had on their last encounter, recognizing that she had just struck a blow against the foul wizards that had invaded their territory. When she gasped to her surprised hosts that Harry had destroyed Voldemort, and his followers were in disarray, they promptly went on the offensive, picking off Death Eaters as they fled the scene.

For her part, Hermione hastened to continue her journey back to the castle to announce the victory. Along the way, she needed to figure out exactly what she was going to tell everyone.

-oooOOOooo-

Several Months Later

A green-eyed young man with messy black hair stopped in the tavern on his way home from work to relax for a bit with some of his neighbors. The telltale scar, once his distinguishing feature, had completely faded. He lived in the village of Godric's Hollow now, working as a laborer/handyman/gardener.

It was satisfying work, but he missed his friends, particularly the bossy young witch who had been his constant companion, never leaving his side for all those long, lonely months of the year gone by. He didn't miss the wizarding world so much, though, and hadn't made any effort to find out what was happening there. He reckoned he'd done his part. Now it was time to move on and adjust to his new life without magic.

The door opened again and a young woman stepped into the tavern and began to look around. As no one recognized her initially, more and more faces turned her way – they didn't get many strangers visiting this particular establishment. Harry finally glanced up and promptly fell silent in the middle of his conversation. It was Hermione. The two of them stood and stared at each other for several seconds before she broke and ran into his arms.

Harry didn't even hear the teasing from his mates as he wrapped her up in a tight embrace, burying his head in the bushy hair he remembered so fondly. He took several deep breaths before leaning back to regard her questioningly.

"How did you find me?" he wondered.

"Because I know you, Harry Potter," she whispered. "Better than anyone else. Of course you'd come here." Harry smiled in acknowledgement of her assertion and led her over to a table as she clung to his arm, unwilling to let go so soon after she'd found him.

Hermione took his hand in both of hers as she leaned forward to share her tale. Upon returning to the castle she'd told everyone that Harry and Voldemort had disappeared together, but insisted that she was certain that the dark lord had been defeated because the Dark Marks on all the Death Eaters had disappeared. Once the authorities had verified this through examination of the numerous captives brought in by the centaurs, the celebration had begun, much like the one sixteen years earlier.

She hadn't known what to say about his loss of magic after witnessing Ginny and Ron's reaction, so she kept quiet about that aspect, allowing everyone to conclude that the two lifelong adversaries had destroyed each other in their final confrontation. The Ministry of Magic eventually awarded Harry Potter a posthumous Order of Merlin, First Class, which she and Ron had accepted on his behalf. (The two of them, as well as Neville and others who led the resistance had received medals of their own, in her case an Order of Merlin, Second Class.) She had finally confided in Tonks, who had been seriously injured in the battle but recovered, and the two of them agreed that it was best to keep it quiet. The public would have their hero untarnished, and Harry would be spared the burden of the overwhelming attention he so despised. Harry quickly assured her that he was fine with that decision.

Once things had settled down and she'd finally been able to get away she determined to look for him. She'd felt in her heart that he was still alive, and if so, she had no intention of losing him from her life. A quick visit to Privet Drive, examining the tool shed that seemed to have been destroyed one night by vandals, convinced her that she was on the right track. After some thought, and recalling how strongly he'd felt about going to Godric's

Hollow during their hunt for the Horcruxes, she'd decided to begin her search here.

Harry scooted his chair closer and wrapped an arm around her, and she rested her head on his shoulder contentedly. In answer to his first question she informed him sadly that many of their friends had been injured in the battle, and a few killed, most notably Remus Lupin and Percy Weasley. After clearing up a few more details she prompted him to tell his story.

He revealed how Voldemort's body had disappeared, and she agreed with his conclusion that it was because this most recent incarnation was entirely a magical construct from the ritual Harry had been forced to participate in after the final task of the Tri Wizard tournament. He explained that he had decided to burn down the shed in case any wizards showed up at Privet Drive looking for him, and then had to figure out what to do next. Somehow in devising their plan they'd neglected to consider the 'after' part. Both of them smiled grimly and shook their heads – things had been rather rushed at the time.

He didn't want to hang around in that location, since there was a good possibility that any remaining Death Eaters would be looking for him to take revenge, and he had no means of defending himself. He'd had no way to contact anyone in the wizarding world without revealing his situation, and couldn't figure out any way to get a message to her. Her parents' phone had been disconnected and the post office had no forwarding address.

He finally decided to come to Godric's Hollow as it was the place that felt most like home. Hermione had to blink back tears when he told her that he visited his parents' graves at least once a week. She couldn't resist hugging him again when he revealed that another reason for settling here was that he guessed that it might be one of the places she checked if she decided to come looking for him.

Without magic, and not having even finished primary school, he was limited in his choice of occupations, but decided that the one skill he'd developed from his time with the Dursleys had been as a handyman. It was much more enjoyable now because he was getting paid, and the people he worked for appreciated his work, and the workload was actually easier than it had been at his aunt's house.

Harry recognized the look in Hermione's eyes that betrayed her rekindled displeasure with his relatives and decided to change the subject.

"Oh one more thing," he grinned, fishing a small token from his pocket. "Recognize this?" He opened his hand to reveal a black stone bearing the familiar emblem that had frustrated her for so many months in the tent.

"Is that ...?" Hermione gasped.

"Yep," Harry confirmed. "What's left of the Resurrection Stone. I broke open the snitch with a hammer and this was inside. No magic in it anymore, of course. Same for the Elder Wand, since Voldemort was holding it when we appeared in the shed. I have it, too, back in my room. I assume you still have the cloak?" Hermione nodded, still staring at the legendary artifact that she'd never fully believed in the existence of. "So I guess we've finally managed to reunite the Deathly Hallows after all this time, just not in the way anyone expected. Probably just as well."

Hermione handed back the stone and their eyes met. It was time to broach the topic they'd avoided thus far. Harry leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"Okay, now that you've found me and satisfied yourself that I'm doing alright, what are you going to do?" he asked. "You know I can't return with you. What's next for you?"

Hermione studied him for a moment, her dark brown eyes boring into his emerald green ones. "Exactly what part of 'I care more for you than anyone else in the world' wasn't clear?" she demanded. "I'm staying here with you, of course. That is, after I take you to meet my parents." She refrained from mentioning that they were still in Australia. They could work out that little detail later.

Harry's eyes widened. He'd certainly not been expecting that! "But ... what about your future? You're the most brilliant witch of our generation."

Hermione leaned forward and took his hand in hers again. "And your mother was the most brilliant witch in her generation," she countered. "Where did she live? Oh, yes – right here in Godric's Hollow." A self-satisfied smile crept onto her face as he shook his head, unable to counter her logic.

"But what will you do? How will you support yourself?" he protested.

"Well, it's funny that you should mention that," she smirked. "Someone seems to have made me the sole beneficiary of their estate. I wonder when that happened?" Harry looked down sheepishly and admitted that he'd revised his will while they were staying at Shell Cottage.

Hermione then confirmed that the Ministry had executed his will and that she'd taken possession of his vaults. She'd settled the claims from Gringotts and paid for the damages from their adventure at the wizarding bank using the money he'd inherited from Sirius, and then got back into the goblins' good graces by turning over all of the goblin made treasures in the Black family vault.

"So I, or more accurately ~~we~~," she emphasized with a significant look, "still have your Potter inheritance. But even leaving that aside, I feel that I have several career options I could pursue, regardless of where I live."

Before Harry could react to that information, a loud clearing of some throats got their attention. Harry's mates from the bar had come over to join them, asking to be introduced to his lady friend.

"Oh, erm ... this is my friend ... no, make that my closest friend, Hermione," he stammered as they rose to their feet. "She's the most important person in my life and ... I guess she's going to be staying for a while." Hermione beamed at him and snuggled into his side as he introduced everyone else.

And a look of understanding passed between the two teens, acknowledging that their 'close friendship' was on its way to something much, much more.

