

I Need You The New Professor

I Need You

*We used to laugh,
We used to cry.
We used to bow our heads then wonder why.
But now you're gone,
I guess I'll carry on
And make the best of what you left me.*

America, 1971

Chapter 1, The New Professor

Harry Potter swept down the ancient corridor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, his robes billowing out dramatically behind him as he made his way to the Headmistress's office. The young Hogwarts Defense Against the Dark Arts professor reflected with wry amusement on the irony that this effect was the one useful thing he'd ever learned from Severus Snape. Not to say that the hated potions master had actually taught him this skill, just as he'd never actually taught anything else during his so-called teaching career. But Harry had learned it just the same, and the fact that he'd picked it up from a man he hated didn't stop him from using it. For one thing, he thought it was really cool! And for another, it intimidated the hell out of the students.

Of course, he wasn't intimidating anyone at the moment, since it was summer and there were no students in the castle. Not that he needed this showy display to intimidate them in any case. After all, he was Harry Potter! The Boy Who Lived! The Chosen One! The Hero of the Wizarding World! Not to mention one of the most powerful wizards of his time.

Unfortunately there was a price for all this intimidation and respect.

Harry Potter was a lonely wizard.

He really had no close friends, and a rather limited social life. He did attend the occasional obligatory social function, his escort for these occasions coming from a rotating group of female

former DA members. The four of them were more than willing to accompany him on these occasions as a favor to him. But virtually everyone he encountered was awed by him, acquaintance or no, male or female. It had been that way pretty much the entire time he'd been in the wizarding world. Any women he might be interested in shied away from his reputation. And the women who pursued him for his fame were precisely the ones he had no interest in.

There were only a handful of exceptions to this behavior, among the females he'd met in this life, who had treated him more or less normally. But none of them were available for any sort of romantic relationship. One of them was fifty years his senior, his colleague and mentor, Headmistress McGonagall. One was a casualty of the war. Another was happily married, with a young daughter. And the last, or more accurately, the first ... well, he hadn't seen her for ten years, ever since she'd left school after their second year.

Hermione Granger had been his constant companion for his first two years of magical schooling, but her parents had withdrawn her from Hogwarts that summer. He couldn't blame them at all, since she'd been nearly killed by a basilisk that had been roaming the halls of the castle that year, and had lain petrified in the infirmary for weeks before being revived at the end of the term. She'd continued her education abroad, at the Salem Witches' Institute. She and Harry had exchanged letters for a year or so after she'd left, but that had gradually fallen by the wayside. Occasionally he wondered what had become of her, and how his life might have gone differently if she'd stayed at Hogwarts.

He put those thoughts out of his mind as he reached McGonagall's office. She'd called him there to introduce him to the newly hired Muggle Studies professor. He wasn't certain, but he suspected that it would be a younger wizard, or more likely a witch, as his former head of house was always trying to get him to make more friends. To that end, she'd 'persuaded' him to show this new professor around the castle and help him or her settle in.

Entering the office, and deliberately avoiding looking at a certain portrait of a former headmaster, he gave a quick nod to his other colleague who was also present, Filius Flitwick. Then he turned his attention to the young woman talking with McGonagall. He estimated that she was indeed about his age, and immediately took note of her long and quite curly brown hair. Then she turned around to face him and he stopped breathing. No, it couldn't be!

"Hello, Harry," she greeted him, her brown eyes reflecting both eagerness and nervousness, promptly stirring up in his mind old memories of times when he'd seen that exact same combination of emotions on her face. "Remember me?"

"Hermione?" he managed to gasp. Her worried smile turned genuine at those words, and she nodded her head happily. Harry finally got his feet to move and took a step forward, but then grinned and held his arms out. Hermione needed no further prompting, and threw herself into them.

"It's really you!" he declared in amazement, relishing her enthusiastic hug as the ten years since the last one they'd shared seemed to disappear. "I can't believe you're here!" Feeling her nod again against his shoulder, he lowered his voice to a whisper. "I've missed you so much!"

It quickly occurred to him that, as familiar as this hug was, it was also quite different than the last one he remembered. That had been between a twelve and thirteen year old boy and girl; now they were a man and woman in their early twenties. But before he could analyze that information any further, she pulled back and looked at him again. This time the smile on her face was one of delight and surprise. “Really?” she asked.

Before Harry could do any more than nod in affirmation, McGonagall cleared her throat. Apparently she’d been trying to make a more formal introduction but had given up, since neither of the two young professors had heard a word she’d said. Upon finally getting their attention, she gave them a warm smile. “I’m quite certain that the two of you have a lot of catching up to do. I expect we’ll see you in the Great Hall at dinner?”

Realizing that this question was in fact both an instruction and a dismissal, Harry grinned and agreed, leading Hermione from the office and down the revolving staircase. When the door had closed behind them, Flitwick turned to McGonagall and smirked.

“Why Minerva, I do believe that you have an ulterior motive here, beyond merely filling a vacant staff position,” the diminutive professor teased with a twinkle in his eye.

“I assure you, my old friend, that Miss Granger is quite well qualified for her role,” the normally stern headmistress shot back with a smug expression. Flitwick nodded, recognizing what his long time friend was trying to accomplish. Mr. Potter certainly deserved to have more happiness in his life.

As the two reunited friends emerged from the bottom of the stairs, Harry turned to Hermione and shook his head as though to make certain he wasn’t dreaming. “This is so amazing,” he proclaimed in a tone of wonder.

A faint blush blossomed on Hermione’s cheeks. “I was worried that you had forgotten me,” she admitted shyly.

“Not bloody likely!” Harry shot back. “You were the only one here who treated me as just Harry, without all the other baggage.” Hermione nodded in understanding.

Harry smiled again and offered her his arm, which she happily accepted. “Now, I believe I’m supposed to welcome you to Hogwarts and show you around the castle,” he informed her as they set off down the corridor. “I don’t suppose you happen to remember where the library is, do you?” he teased.

Hermione laughed. “As a matter of fact, I believe I do. And I also remember where the hospital wing is, having spent so much time there, what with all the times you managed to injure yourself,” she joked back.

Harry grinned. “I was one of Madame Pomfrey’s most loyal patients, I suppose. We should stop by and see her and Madame Pince later. I’m sure they’ll both remember you.”

As they waited for one of the staircases to swing into place, Harry returned to the subject of her absence. “Things just weren’t the same after you left,” he declared. Hermione shook her head and shot him a skeptical glance. “No really,” he insisted, “there were so many times when I had something I would have wanted to share with you, or needed your help with.” Hermione remained silent, listening attentively as they descended the stairs.

Harry sighed. “Especially fourth year. I really could have used a friend that year.” He paused, then added. “The next year too, for that matter. And all the years after that, really.”

“Oh honestly, it couldn’t have been that bad,” Hermione objected, as her face flushed from the unexpected assertion. “After all, you did win the tournament without any help from me. And Ron was still here, after all.” She was cut off by a dark look from Harry.

“No one believed me when I said I didn’t put my name in the Goblet of Fire – including Ron!” he informed her tersely. “Even the ones who supported me thought I was clever to have got past the age line. If you’d been there ...”

“I’d certainly have believed you,” Hermione acknowledged as she added her other hand to the one holding his arm and gave a reassuring squeeze. “Anyone who really knew you should have known how much you disliked all the attention.”

“Exactly,” Harry confirmed. “That’s what I thought. You’d have stepped up and supported me no matter what. And would have helped me in any way you could.” Hermione nodded vigorously. “In fact,” Harry added with a thoughtful glance at her. “You probably would have been willing to help me out with the Yule Ball, too. You could have been my partner.”

Hermione’s eyes widened at the implication. “Do you mean ... you think we would have fancied each other by then?” she asked hesitantly.

Harry stopped and turned to her. He hadn’t meant it that way, but now that he thought about it, she was certainly not an unattractive woman. But on the other hand, he’d had his eye on a certain Ravenclaw at the time. He smiled at his companion and shook his head gently.

“Sorry, that’s not what I meant, although I suppose it’s possible,” he acknowledged quickly. “I was thinking we could have gone as friends. That’s what I ended up doing, asking a girl who was a friend – or at least that’s what I thought.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked, trying to recover from the potential embarrassment of her assumption. “Who did you go with?”

“Ginny Weasley,” Harry replied with a slight grimace.

“Oh. And she had that crush on you,” Hermione noted. “I don’t suppose she got over it, especially after you rescued her from the Chamber.” She paused, then nodded. “Let me guess. You asked her as a friend, but she didn’t consider it that way. For her it would have been her dream come true, her knight in shining armor come to carry her away into the sunset, her handsome prince ...” she

broke off and smirked as Harry's grimace turned into a full blown scowl. "So, what happened?" she asked as she took his arm again and continued along the next corridor.

"She decided that we were officially together, and would be for the rest of our lives," Harry groaned. Even though we never went on another date, she persisted like that for the next two years. I later learned that she threatened to hex any other girl I showed interest in. Finally, at the end of sixth year I told her, "We are not together, we have never been together, and we never *will* be together!"

Hermione shook her head. If she'd stayed at Hogwarts, she thought, perhaps she could have coached Ginny on how she should go about getting to know Harry as a person and not just as the hero from the stories about the Boy Who Lived.

"So, enough about my problems," Harry prompted. "Tell me about what you've been up to."

"Well, you know I went to Salem," Hermione replied, "and I graduated from there five years ago."

"Number one in your class, I presume?" Harry interjected. He grinned as Hermione's cheeks turned pink.

"Well, yes, actually," she admitted with a modest smile. "Mind you, it wasn't quite as ... *exciting* ... as Hogwarts," she added.

"No trolls, three headed dogs, basilisks trying to kill you every year, you mean?" Harry joked back as her smile grew.

"Exactly," she agreed. "Rather boring, I'm sure, compared to what was happening to you back here."

The two friends continued in this manner, both amazed at how easily they resumed the familiar, comfortable connection they'd once enjoyed. Harry asked Hermione how she'd got along with her classmates, and she related how her two years of friendship with him and Ron had taught her not to come across as such a bossy know-it-all, so that she'd done better on that score. She also admitted that she'd benefited initially when it got around that she was a close friend of the Boy Who Lived. Harry assured her that he didn't mind, and was happy that his fame had proven of use to her in becoming accepted at her new school.

After finishing Salem, she'd fulfilled a promise she'd made to her parents, to attend a muggle university. Accordingly, they'd returned to England (her parents had taken a year's leave of absence during what would have been Harry's seventh year, when things had become so dangerous for muggleborns and their families in Britain, and joined her in the United States) where she'd studied for a year in order to pass her GSCE exams. That had led to her studying for the past four years at King's College in London, where she'd just recently received her degree in History. Her honors thesis, she informed him with a twinkle in her eye, had been on the history of witchcraft in Britain and the public's changing attitude toward it over time.

“So, that brings us up to now,” she concluded, turning to face Harry again. “I’d always intended to come back into the wizarding world. I contacted McGonagall when I was finishing up and she seemed pretty enthusiastic about bringing me to Hogwarts. She wants me to completely overhaul the Muggle Studies curriculum.” Seeing Harry’s approving nod, she added shyly. “Knowing you were teaching here was a big factor as well. I was hoping we could pick up our friendship again.”

Harry chuckled. “Well, I’d say there don’t seem to be any difficulties with that part of the plan! But I must say that Minerva is certainly the devious one. I’ve been urging her for years to do exactly that,” he revealed. “Muggle Studies here has been a joke for generations, and I argued that it was critical for wizards to be more knowledgeable about the rest of the world if we’re ever going to move forward as a society. But she never even hinted that she was bringing *you* here to teach it!”

By this time they had reached Harry’s destination, the staff room. This, he explained, was actually the entrance to the living quarters for all of the professors. It had a large table surrounded by high backed but comfortably padded wooden chairs, used for staff meetings, and at the opposite end was an enchanted doorway. It was similar to the one used to get into Diagon Alley from the Leaky Cauldron, in that it required a series of wand taps to activate, but you also needed to include the name of the professor whose rooms you wished to access.

“Harry Potter.” A door appeared and Harry stepped through. He immediately placed his palm on a smooth metal square embedded in the wall next to the door and stated, “Hermione Granger, full access,” then beckoned Hermione to follow.

The new professor stepped through the doorway and looked around. “Full access?” she inquired.

“That means you can come into my rooms whenever you like,” Harry answered. “Each professor sets it however they wish. Full access means you can get into any room. It’s also possible, for example to only grant access to the sitting room.”

Hermione thought about this for a moment, then raised an eyebrow. “How many other professors have you granted full access to?”

Harry shrugged and looked away, his face reddening. “Erm, none, actually. Everyone else only has partial access. It’s just that ... well, I expect we’ll get back to being pretty close friends.”

Hermione smiled and gave him a quick hug, then pulled away and resumed her inspection. Harry explained some of the details of how the rooms worked. They were the equivalent of a large suite in a luxury hotel, and could be furnished however the individual professor desired. A kitchen and dining area were included. Although most of the faculty took their meals in the Great Hall, they had the option of dining in their rooms. They could either cook for themselves, or be served whatever they wanted by the house elves – the equivalent of full room service.

There was a floo for communication and/or transportation throughout the castle, and a doorway from the office area of the suite directly into the classroom where the professor taught. All in all, it was a very convenient setup.

Harry called one of the house elves named Winky and introduced her to Hermione, explaining that she would help Hermione furnish her own quarters. Then he demonstrated the floo by contacting McGonagall. The headmistress was unable to completely hide her amusement that the two of them were in Harry's quarters rather than Hermione's or the staff room, causing Harry to protest that he only wanted to show Hermione a sample layout and how everything worked.

Soon they returned to the staff room, where Hermione turned back to the master doorway and tapped it with her wand to summon the entrance to her own quarters. "Hermione Granger." As soon as she stepped through she turned to smile at Harry as she touched the access panel on the other side. "Harry Potter, full access." Harry grinned back and joined her. She wondered if they had to go through the staff room in order to visit each other, but Harry assured her that once access had been granted they could use the doorway of their own room to move directly to any other quarters they wished.

They spent the rest of the afternoon arranging Hermione's rooms. Winky and a cadre of house elves would listen to Hermione describe what she wanted for a particular space, then bring in samples of furniture for her to choose from. Initially, Harry took charge of the kitchen and dining area while Hermione handled her bedroom, then they both worked on the office and sitting room. Harry teased her that there were only four walls, so there was a limit to how many bookcases she could have. By the end of the day, however, she was reasonably satisfied with the way everything looked.

At dinner in the Great Hall Hermione renewed acquaintances with Madames Pomfrey and Pince and with the professors she had taken classes from – Sprout and Sinestra – as well as meeting some she hadn't, such as Babbling and Vector, who taught Ancient Runes and Arithmency. And of course there was an emotional reunion with Hagrid, who Harry had told her had taught Care of Magical Creatures for several years before resuming his original job as groundskeeper.

Everyone made her feel extremely welcome, and all insisted that she address them by their first names (which she knew would take quite a bit of getting used to, especially for McGonagall and Flitwick). She soon discovered, however, that they all exhibited an inordinate amount of respect toward Harry. In fact, they seemed to be almost in awe of him. Only McGonagall called him Harry, the rest all referred to him as either Mr. Potter or Professor Potter. One comment that particularly struck her was when Poppy Pomfrey, when informing Hermione of how good it was to have her join the staff, exclaimed that she 'couldn't remember the last time before this evening that she'd seen Mr. Potter smile'.

They found themselves back in Harry's quarters after dinner, and Hermione prompted him to explain to her what was going on. Harry sighed, and after pouring some drinks and handing one to her, settled down next to her on the sofa.

"How well did you keep up with what happened here, with Voldemort?" he asked.

"As well as I could," she replied. "I know you defeated him." Harry nodded and shifted himself so he could look her in the eye.

“It wasn’t just that I beat him, it was that I made it look easy,” he revealed. Hermione’s eyes went wide, but she didn’t shy away, as he was afraid she might. Instead, she leaned closer and took hold of his hand.

“Did you really? Well, that’s ... that’s wonderful, isn’t it?” she stammered. But a look of comprehension flickered in her eyes.

Harry shrugged. “There are a lot of things that no one knows about ... well, almost no one. But the bottom line is that pretty much everyone looks at me almost like a deity of some sort.” Hermione only squeezed his hand and nodded, silently urging him on. Harry leaned back and closed his eyes.

“How often did you ever hear anyone call Dumbledore by his first name?” he queried. Hermione shook her head, indicating that she was aware of how uncommon that was. “The amount of respect everyone had for him was extraordinary,” he continued. “It’s sort of like that, only worse.” He turned back to look at her again. “Dumbledore was more than sixty years old when he defeated Grindelwald. I wasn’t even twenty when I killed Voldemort for the final time.”

Hermione was beginning to put the pieces together. She could imagine the reaction of the wizarding population. Some worshiped him, some feared him, some resented him. Nearly all would envy him. And some of the witches, she realized after a moment’s more thought, likely quite a few of them, would pursue him. Her one-time (and hopefully now again) best friend had been practically forced into a life of isolation, which was the absolute last thing he’d wanted. She moved even closer, taking his hand in both of hers and laying her head against his shoulder.

“Tell me all about it,” she whispered gently.

“It’s a long story,” he warned her.

“That’s OK,” she reassured him. “We’ve got all summer.”

I Need You

Escaped Prisoners, Dementors, and a Time Turner

Chapter 2, Escaped Prisoners, Dementors and a Time Turner

Hermione made herself comfortable, leaning up against Harry's side with her head on his shoulder, and waited patiently for him to begin his story as he took a deep breath and closed his eyes, recalling his younger days.

"I'm sorry I stopped writing to you," he apologized. There were just so many things I couldn't tell you because I had to keep them secret. It was too hard to keep things straight, what I could tell you and what I couldn't. Especially as time went on."

"That's all right," Hermione reassured him. "I could tell there must be things you were leaving out, and guessed that it must be something like that. And I let it slide too, as I got busy with my new school. I suppose it's surprising that we kept on as long as we did."

"Do you remember the things I wrote you about third year?" he asked. Feeling Hermione's head nod, he elaborated. "About Sirius Black and the dementors? How my broom got destroyed during that quidditch match, and I got a new Firebolt for Christmas? And how I learned the Patronus charm to drive them away?"

"Yes, I remember that I was so impressed. That was an advanced spell for a third year!" Hermione responded with admiration. "And if you remember, I promptly wrote you back and warned you against using that broom until you had someone check it out," she chided.

Harry chuckled. "Well, McGonagall had already confiscated it by the time I got that letter back from you. I wasn't very happy about it, but I did get it back in time for the next match, so it worked out all right. Both Ron and Oliver Wood were pretty steamed. But I have to admit that she and you were both right, in a sense. It turned out that Sirius did send me the broom."

Hermione sat up and stared at him. "I don't think you ever mentioned that!" she declared. "You did say at the end that he turned out to be innocent, but you didn't explain how you came to that conclusion. What happened?" Harry motioned to her to calm down, so she settled herself back into her previous position to hear his explanation.

"It all started when we first arrived at the castle, when McGonagall called me into her office," he

told her ...

-oooOOOooo-

“Potter! I want to see you!” a voice called.

Harry and Ron turned around, surprised. Professor McGonagall was calling over the heads of the crowd. Harry fought his way over to her with a feeling of foreboding: McGonagall had a way of making him feel he must have done something wrong.

“There’s no need to look so worried – I just want a word in my office,” she told them. “Move along there, Weasley.”

Once in McGonagall’s office, after he was checked over by Madame Pomfrey to make certain there were no aftereffects from his exposure to the dementors on the train, McGonagall motioned Harry to sit down.

“Mr. Potter, I can’t tell you how sorry I am about Miss Granger’s removal from Hogwarts,” she began. “And I’m certain that it will affect you more than anyone.” Harry shrugged uncomfortably and managed a nod. He was indeed greatly saddened by his friend’s absence, more so because he felt that to some extent it was his fault. But his Head of House hadn’t brought him to her office merely to commiserate.

“Because of this, and because of the unique nature of your situation, I’ve decided that it will be necessary for me to take a more direct interest in your education,” she informed him.

Harry’s eyes widened. “What ... erm, why?”

McGonagall leaned forward. “It appeared to me that Miss Granger was largely responsible for the level of your academic achievement for the past two years.” Harry nodded slowly. He certainly couldn’t argue with that. Without Hermione’s help, and, he was embarrassed to admit, her ‘encouragement’ (one might uncharitably call it ‘nagging’), he suspected he would have been lucky to pass his first two years.

“Mr. Potter,” the stern teacher sighed. “Because of who you are and what lies ahead for you, it is imperative that you master your magical studies. You are perfectly aware of the things that you have faced during your first two years, and there is no reason to believe that it will get any easier for you. Quite simply, you are and will continue to be a target for the dark lord and his followers.”

Harry swallowed hard and nodded. He’d reluctantly come to that same conclusion himself.

“Without Miss Granger here to motivate you, and with no obvious replacement for her among your friends and acquaintances, I see no other alternative. You will need to change your course schedule to include two important courses that Miss Granger signed up for but you did not, and you will need to dramatically increase the time you spend on your studies.”

Harry paled. It sounded like she was saying he would have to learn as much as Hermione had. But

she was a genius! It would take him more hours than there were in the day to match her achievements.

“I have dropped Divination from your schedule,” McGonagall said, scowling as she spoke the course name, “and added Arithmency and Ancient Runes. You will have study sessions with me every day. And you will need to use this.” She pulled out a long chain on which a small hourglass was suspended.

Harry leaned forward, his curiosity piqued. “What’s that?” he wondered.

“A time turner.”

-oooOOOooo-

“What!” Hermione gasped. “She gave you a time turner! Do you have any idea how rare those are? Not to mention extremely restricted!” Harry rolled his eyes.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do,” he pointed out. “Seeing as how I used one for five years and had to study everything about them in order to use it safely.”

“Oh. Of course you did,” she replied apologetically. Harry smiled at her and gave her hand a squeeze.

“Actually, she originally got it for you,” he revealed. As he expected, her eyes went wide. “That’s how she’d planned for you to take all the classes you’d signed up for. She had a contact in the Department of Mysteries who evidently owed her a favor or something. He got it for her without anyone knowing about it. When you didn’t come back to Hogwarts, she realized that I would need it in order to manage the increased course load she decided I needed to take.”

Hermione could only shake her head in disbelief as Harry continued. “She set up a private study classroom that only I had a key for. It had a desk and a cot, so I could nap when I needed to. There were also snacks available every day. With that and my invisibility cloak, things worked out pretty well.”

“I can see how that would be the case,” she muttered, still in somewhat of a daze.

“Yeah, it really came in handy,” Harry agreed with a grin. “For more than just studying.”

Hermione’s head jerked up and her eyes narrowed. “Harry James Potter, tell me you did *not* use such an extraordinarily rare and powerful magical device for pranking!”

Harry’s eyes widened comically and he gave an exaggerated ‘Who, me!’ pantomime. Hermione sighed and leaned her head against the back of the sofa. Turning to him with a look of resignation, she sighed. “What did you do?”

“Well, there was this one day in Hogsmeade ...” he reminisced fondly. With a glance to the side he stretched his arm out across the back of the sofa in her direction. After one final half-hearted

glare she accepted the invitation and snuggled against his side again. He told her about not being allowed to go to the village since his uncle hadn't signed his permission slip, and how Fred and George had given him the Marauder's Map.

He had to interrupt his tale to show her the enchanted parchment so she could ooh and aah over the impressive magic that had gone into its creation. Then he continued by relating how he'd sneaked out during each of the Hogsmeade trips that year (she glared at him again), encountered Malfoy during one of them near the Shrieking Shack, and thrown mud at him when he started insulting Ron. Unfortunately, the invisibility cloak had slipped, giving Malfoy a glimpse of his head, and he'd needed to hightail it back to the castle.

There, he'd gone back an hour and spent it in the library, making sure to ask Madame Pince's assistance several times while researching dementors and the patronus charm. When Snape had accosted him, he'd had an iron-clad alibi, even being so fortunate as to have Pince go off on Snape for shouting in the library.

After she'd sighed once more and half-heartedly scolded him, Hermione wanted a closer look at the Map.

Who are Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs?" she asked.

"The creators of the Map, who just happened to be my dad and his friends," Harry answered proudly. "My dad was Prongs and Sirius was Padfoot. Remus Lupin, who was the DADA professor that year, was Moony." He paused slightly and scowled. "And Peter Pettigrew was Wormtail."

"How did they get such unusual nicknames?" was her inevitable follow-up question.

Harry's demeanor grew more somber. "Remus was a werewolf," he revealed, as Hermione's eyes widened again. "The other three decided to become animagi in order to help him out during his transformations. Sirius was a big black dog, Pettigrew was a rat, and my dad was a stag." Hermione nodded silently. The names now made sense, fitting their animal forms.

"Did you ever try to become an animagus?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"No, I never got around to it," Harry admitted. "Would you like to try it together?"

Hermione brightened and agreed, and they spent the next few minutes speculating on what they'd become. Harry thought he might like to be some sort of bird, like an eagle or falcon, but Hermione imagined him as a lion. She rejected the idea of becoming an owl herself as too stereotypical, causing Harry to claim that she would also make a good lioness.

Eventually Hermione got Harry back on track with his story. "It all came to a head at the end of the year. It was the last day of exams, and Ron had a weird thing happen during his Divination exam. Trelawny went into a trance and made a prediction about the dark lord's servant breaking free and rejoining his master."

Hermione scoffed. She'd never had any use for the subject of Divination. But Harry insisted that this was a real prophecy, one of two that the batty professor had made in her life.

"After that we got a note from Hagrid saying that they had lost Buckbeak's case and he was going to be executed," he continued, "and we decided to go out to see him, show our support." Hermione nodded – she already knew the gist of that story, how the hippogriff had attacked Malfoy and been condemned to death. "But first we checked the Map to make sure the coast was clear. And we saw another name in Hagrid's hut – Peter Pettigrew."

Hermione gasped and Harry nodded slowly. "Well, I never thought it was *that* Peter Pettigrew; I reckoned it might be a relative or something. But when we got down there, under the cloak of course, Hagrid was by himself. Hagrid was all shook up so we didn't ask about where Pettigrew went. He even dropped his milk jug while he was pouring us some tea. That's when we found Scabbers! Turned out he'd been hiding there for months, ever since Sirius Black broke into our dorm one night."

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she processed this information. "You don't mean ... Scabbers was Pettigrew!" Harry nodded again.

"We didn't figure it out until later, when Sirius attacked him. That is, when this big black dog that we later found out was Sirius attacked Ron, who was holding Scabbers while we went back to the castle. We'd decided that there wasn't anything else we could do for Hagrid. We talked about trying to help Buckbeak escape, but Hagrid told us there wasn't time. At that point I decided I'd use the time turner to come back and free him. I could do it as long as I didn't actually see him executed."

Hermione thought for a moment and then agreed that that idea seemed plausible.

"Well, that plan was thrown off when Sirius – transformed into a dog – showed up and grabbed Ron with his teeth," Harry went on. "He dragged him to the Whomping Willow. I followed, but couldn't get close. Once they got there, the Willow bashed Ron, knocking him unconscious while Sirius dodged out of the way. I saw him touch a knot on the tree trunk and disappear into a crack in the tree. It took me a while to figure out what he'd done but I managed to follow him. Inside the tree was a long tunnel that led to the Shrieking Shack."

"The Shrieking Shack!" Hermione exclaimed. "Why would there be a tunnel from Hogwarts to that haunted house?"

Harry related the story about Remus and how he used the rundown structure for his transformations as a student. Then he described how he confronted Sirius Black inside the house and heard the true story of his parents' betrayal. How the fugitive had convinced him that it was Pettigrew who was the Secret Keeper and traitor.

"Then, after we got it all sorted out, we went back down the tunnel to Hogwarts with Ron still knocked out and Pettigrew tied up," Harry concluded. "We figured that would be enough proof to get Sirius cleared. But before we made it to the castle we were swarmed over by dementors."

“Oh no!” Hermione moaned. “Let me guess – in the confusion Pettigrew transformed and escaped.” Harry acknowledged her with a rueful nod.

“Sirius tried to draw them away, but they caught him. I tried to conjure a patronus, but they’d caught me by surprise and I couldn’t produce a strong enough one,” he revealed. “So I used my time turner.”

“Ahhh.” Hermione now realized how everything was coming together. “You went back an hour, freed Buckbeak, hid somewhere – in the Forbidden Forest I’ll bet (Harry confirmed this by inclining his head approvingly) – and then waited. Since you were ready for the dementors this time, you cast a solid patronus and drove them away and recaptured Pettigrew.” She stopped and smiled, quite pleased with herself.

“Not quite,” Harry corrected. “That was what I was hoping to do but it didn’t all work out that way. I got Buckbeak just as you said, and convinced him to leave as soon as I freed him. He’d spotted Macnair arriving and was pretty uneasy, like he could sense what was going to happen, so it wasn’t too hard. Then I waited.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped noticeably, and Hermione pulled herself more snugly against his side, silently urging him to continue. “You see, time turners are tricky,” he explained. “You can’t change anything you personally witnessed. You can change something you suspect happened, as long as you don’t know for sure, but if you saw it, it’s pretty much fixed. Because if you went back and changed it, then you couldn’t have seen it happen in the first place.” Hermione nodded that she understood. She knew many people would struggle with this concept, but her logical mind grasped it without difficulty.

“That’s why I wanted to leave Hagrid’s hut before Buckbeak’s execution took place,” Harry noted. “Since I didn’t know for sure it happened, there was the possibility that someone – in other words, my future self – had rescued him at the last minute. Which is exactly what happened.” Hermione indicated that she was still following along perfectly.

“But when Pettigrew escaped, there was just too much happening at once,” Harry pointed out somewhat dejectedly. “I couldn’t try to recapture him until he was out of sight of my original self, but by then the dementors had already caught Sirius. I couldn’t risk wasting time trying to capture him before casting my patronus to drive the dementors away from Sirius. By the time I did that Pettigrew was long gone.”

Hermione opened her mouth to offer a suggestion, but quickly closed it. There was nothing that could be done about it now, nine years later. But Harry already knew what she was going to say. “Yeah, I know, I could have used the time turner and gone back again, so there were three of me there at the same time,” he conceded. “But I didn’t think of that until the next day and by then it was too late.”

“So what did happen?” Hermione prompted after a few seconds.

“Sirius went back down the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack to get outside of the Hogwarts wards,

then escaped from there. After that I took Ron to the Infirmary, then went to see Remus and Dumbledore and told them the whole story.”

At this point Harry fell silent, and the two friends sat together, Hermione snuggled up against Harry’s side, offering quiet comfort while he mused over what might have been.

For her part, Hermione was very pleased that he’d opened up to her, and that their close friendship had been restored so quickly. More than restored, actually, since they’d not been this physically close before. But that made it even better.

Harry found himself, unknowingly, thinking the same thing. This closeness, this opportunity to really open himself up to another person, trusting them completely, had been largely absent from his life. He closed his eyes and reveled in the feeling. And it certainly wasn’t escaping his notice that this was an attractive woman he had his arm around. That was something else to think about.

All in all, his life had certainly changed to a remarkable extent in just one day!

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I Need You The Triwizard Tournament

Chapter 3, The Triwizard Tournament

Harry woke to some unfamiliar sensations – a pressure against his side, a mass of brown hair in his face, and a stiff neck and a few cramps in his arms and legs. Eventually he worked out that he and Hermione had fallen asleep on the sofa, and stayed that way all night!

“Good morning,” he greeted her as he felt her begin to stir as well. Hermione’s eyes blinked a few times as she processed the same information he had, then she rolled her head and neck, trying to work out a kink of her own.

“Good morning,” she returned, then added, “Sleep well?”

“Well, I’m going to be sore and stiff for a while, but as far as the sleeping is concerned I have to say it went pretty well,” he decided as he checked the time. “I think we slept for nearly eight hours.” Hermione considered this, then nodded her head in agreement.

A small smile crept onto her face. “That was the first time I’ve spent the night with a guy,” she revealed. “Not exactly the way I imagined it though.” Harry’s head snapped up, but then he grinned as he realized she was joking.

“First time spending the night or first time sleeping?” he challenged. Hermione shot him a slightly offended look, causing his face to flush as he quickly backpedaled. “Er ... I guess that’s none of my business.”

She shrugged it off. “First time all the way round.” She eyed him expectantly.

“Oh, right,” he stammered as he realized she was looking for some reciprocity. “First time for me, too.”

“Well,” she concluded. “Next time let’s lie down first. It’ll probably be more comfortable that way.” Harry’s eyes went wide before he saw the sly smile on her face, and they both laughed heartily.

He groaned as he pulled himself to his feet, then offered her a hand up. After agreeing to meet in the Great Hall for breakfast in half an hour, she disappeared through the magical doorway into her own room. Harry stared after her for a few moments, trying to decide if they had been completely

joking about the 'next time' comment. The idea certainly had some appeal to it.

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The two friends spent that day touring the castle and grounds. Hermione wanted to see how the tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow was accessed, and check out the inside of the Shrieking Shack. Harry also showed her the new campus landmark that had been added since she'd been a student – the white marble tomb of Albus Dumbledore sitting on the shore of the lake.

She noticed that he didn't treat it with the reverence one might expect and wondered what had happened to generate his apparent resentment toward the generally revered former headmaster. She didn't ask about it just then, expecting that it would eventually come out as he continued his tales of his life after she'd left Britain.

While they were down by the lake, Harry asked if she was aware that there was a colony of merpeople in the lake. She shook her head.

"How did you find that out?" she wondered.

Harry stared out toward the middle of the dark surface. "It was for the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. We had to rescue someone from the bottom of the lake where they were being held hostage by the merpeople." He shook his head. "I'll tell you about it tonight."

Back inside the castle Hermione spent some time sizing up the Muggle Studies classroom, then they went to the library. She found herself more and more dismayed at the enormity of her task given the scarcity of resources. Virtually all the muggle artifacts in the classroom were decades out of date, and the books in the library were even more so. And what they did have was not very accurate in the first place. She went to Madame Pince and inquired about updating the collection.

"Well, I don't know," the librarian balked. "We can order a few books, but I don't have the budget to make wholesale revisions in our holdings. Surely the muggles haven't changed that much in the past fifty years or so, have they?" Hermione bit back a retort that would have likely severely damaged the relationship she was trying to establish with the uptight librarian.

At this point Harry stepped up. "It's my understanding that this is exactly what the headmistress expected to happen when she hired Hermione," he declared. "Perhaps you should speak to her about authorizing the necessary expenditures." Madame Pince immediately shrank back.

"Yes, Professor Potter," she stammered. "I'm sure you're correct." She turned nervously to Hermione. "Why don't you give me a list and I'll see what I can do." Hermione thanked her and led Harry out the door.

Once in the corridor she turned to him and raised a challenging eyebrow. "Yes, Professor Potter," she mimicked. "Anything you say Professor Potter." Harry rolled his eyes and shook his head. Then she smiled and leaned up and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thank you. I appreciate all the help you can give me."

That night when Hermione came to his room to hear the next episode of his life, she was wearing a dressing gown. Harry stared thoughtfully at her for a moment, trying to work out all the possible implications of her attire. He noticed that she was wearing pajama bottoms under her dressing gown, and decided to go along with whatever she was planning. Accordingly, he briefly excused himself and changed into a tee shirt and a pair of pajama pants of his own, and rejoined her.

“OK,” he began as they made themselves comfortable on his sofa. “I think the last letter I wrote you was at the beginning of fourth year, right?” Hermione nodded in affirmation. “So I already told you about what happened at the Quidditch World Cup. In fact, that was what prompted that letter,” he recalled. “While we were wandering around the campsite I saw a group of witches with a banner saying *Salem Witches Institute*. It reminded me that I hadn’t written to you all summer.”

He paused, trying to remember the details of what he’d written. “So I told you about the Death Eater riot, and the Dark Mark being cast, and how when we got back to Hogwarts we were told about the Triwizard Tournament. At that point everything was fine. Then it all fell apart the night – ironically, it was Halloween again – that the champions were selected. They did it by having students put their names into the Goblet of Fire. Then that evening at dinner the Goblet made the selection by shooting out sparks and the name came flying out.” He shook his head. “After Cedric Diggory, Viktor Krum, and Fleur Delacour were selected and everyone thought it was settled, suddenly my name came out. Things really got crazy after that.”

Hermione moved closer and took his hand. She had a feeling this was going to be the pattern each evening they got together like this. “Do you know how that happened?”

“Yeah, a Death Eater named Barty Crouch, Jr. was impersonating our Defense professor that year, who was supposed to be Mad Eye Moody,” Harry revealed grimly. “He entered my name under a fictitious school, and then managed to confound the Cup into selecting four names. Since I was the only entrant from that school, I was certain to be selected. Then I was summoned into a back room with the other champions and the heads of their schools and told it was a binding magical contract and I had no choice but to compete or I’d lose my magic.”

“How is that possible?!” Hermione protested. “They would have needed your real signature at the least. And we know that magic is intent based.”

“Well, the man in charge of the whole thing was Barty Crouch, Sr.” Harry explained. “He was the one who made the ruling, and we found out later that his son had him under the *Imperius* curse. No one questioned it at the time, and I certainly didn’t know any better.” He gave a sarcastic laugh. “That guy, the fake Moody I mean, really had a lot of nerve. He basically told us right then and there how he’d done it. I still remember him saying, ‘Maybe someone’s hoping Potter is going to die.’”

Hermione shook her head in dismay. “Why?” she wondered. “And why you?”

“Why, because I’m Harry Potter, of course,” he retorted with more than a touch of sarcasm. She

responded with a sharp elbow to his ribs, eliciting an apologetic wince. “OK, seriously, it was all a plot by Voldemort to capture me and use me in a ceremony to bring him back to life. That happened at the end of the Third Task. Crouch, Jr. secretly did stuff all year to make sure I’d win, and he turned the Championship Cup trophy into a portkey. But that all came later. And why me specifically was because he’d been obsessed with me since before I was born, because of a prophecy. But I didn’t find out about that until the end of the next year”

“OK, we can hold off on that part,” Hermione allowed. “What happened next?”

“Like I said yesterday, no one believed that I hadn’t somehow figured out a way to enter my name,” he sighed. “Not Ron, not Fred and George, no one. They were all celebrating like it was a big Gryffindor victory and congratulating me. Finally I gave up trying to convince anyone and went to bed.”

By now Hermione was snuggled up against his side again, and he had his arm across her shoulders. She gave his arm a squeeze of support and empathy.

“Then, the next morning ...”

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Harry dressed and went down into the common room, to smatters of applause from the few Gryffindors present. The prospect of going down into the Great Hall and enduring more of the same was not a pleasant one. But before he could make up his mind whether to go though with it, Colin Creevy came running up to him.

“McGonagall wants to see you in her office,” he blurted out, just managing to overcome his hero worship long enough to deliver the message. Harry nodded and climbed out of the portrait hole and made his way down to see his Head of House.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter,” the Assistant Headmistress greeted him, peering at him over her spectacles. “Help yourself to some cakes.” Harry thanked her and picked up two of the pastries, appreciative of the fact that he would be able to avoid the Great Hall until at least lunchtime.

“We find ourselves in yet another difficulty,” she informed him unnecessarily. “The rules of the Tournament are quite specific in that you may not receive any assistance from any Hogwarts staff member. “I’m afraid we will need to discontinue your private instruction.”

Harry nodded glumly. Just when he’d thought things couldn’t get any worse ...

“There is nothing however, that says that you may not receive assistance from a non-staff member,” she continued, a small smirk playing out across her face. “Say, for instance, an employee?” She clapped her hands sharply, and a second later a familiar figure popped into the room.

“Dobby?” Harry blurted out in surprise.

“It is Dobby, Sir, it is!” squealed the small elf as he bounced in excitement.

“Dobby, what are you doing here?” Harry wondered.

“Dobby has come to work at Hogwarts, Sir!” came the eager reply. “But Mistress McGonagall tells Dobby another plan.” Harry turned a questioning look at the aforementioned professor.

“I thought you might wish to hire Dobby yourself,” McGonagall revealed. “Then he couldn’t possibly be considered a member of Hogwarts staff. But he could still work here, and any information he happens to hear ...” She let the implication hover. Harry quickly worked out what she was suggesting. Anyone who wanted to pass information to him merely needed to mention it in the presence of the house elf.

“And Dobby has the perfect place for Harry Potter Sir to practice his magic spells,” the enthusiastic elf announced happily. “It is known by us as the Come and Go Room, sir, or else as the Room of Requirement.”

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“The Room of Requirement?” Hermione asked, her interest aroused by this unfamiliar location. “What’s that?”

“It’s simply brilliant,” Harry assured her, then launched into a description of the magically alterable space. “I’ll show it to you tomorrow,” he promised after he’d finished. “You could use it for your Muggle Studies class. If you can imagine a particular muggle scene or event it can recreate it.”

“So anyway, what with the invisibility cloak, the time turner, Dobby, and the Room, I spent a lot of time alone, away from the other students for the next few months,” he told her. “I decided the most important thing was to train as hard as I could. And when I found out what the First Task was going to be ...” He paused and shook his head, with a slight sense of disbelief, even all these years later. “Dragons. We had to go up against dragons!”

Now it was Hermione’s turn to shake her head in disbelief, as Harry described how Hagrid had surreptitiously shown him the dragons to be used in the task (probably at McGonagall’s suggestion, he reckoned) and then how the fake Moody had pulled him aside after he’d tipped off Cedric, and indirectly suggested that he make use of his flying skills to meet the challenge.

He’d been surprised that Moody had intervened so directly and mentioned it to McGonagall. And the next time the one-eyed ex-Auror had a suggestion for him, he’d passed it through Dobby. In hindsight, he wondered if he should have been more suspicious, but Hermione reassured him that with all the stress he was under there was no way he could have been expected to worry about the intentions of his benefactors.

Hermione listened with admiration as he related how he’d lured the Hungarian Horntail off her nest with his dives and feints, until finally he’d been able to swoop down and grab the egg.

Hermione noted approvingly that he'd not even needed to cast a spell on the dragon, neither harming it nor damaging its eggs as Krum had. She was incensed, however, at the biased scoring by the Durmstrang headmaster that nevertheless gave the Bulgarian champion the same point total, putting them into a tie for first.

Harry gave her arm a squeeze to show his appreciation for her indignation on his behalf. Then he noted with a touch of resentment how all his housemates and many other Hogwarts students had quickly changed their opinions of him and proclaimed their support, now that he'd proven himself and was in the lead, most notably Ron. He'd gone along with the celebration in Gryffindor Tower, but some annoyance lingered, as he'd wished they'd shown more faith in him when he'd really needed it.

"If I'd been there I'd have given them a piece of my mind!" Hermione declared hotly. "Especially Ron. He should have known you better than that!" Harry shrugged, but smiled, envisioning how she might have berated their other friend for his attitude.

"OK, enough about that," she decided. "Tell me more about the Yule Ball."

Harry grimaced, but complied. "Well, once I found out from McGonagall that I had to attend, *with* a partner, I first decided that I wanted to ask Cho Chang."

"Who was she?" Hermione queried.

"A Ravenclaw a year ahead of us," Harry answered, then quickly continued before she could ask the obvious follow-up. "She was a quidditch player, their seeker." His face reddened slightly. "I'd noticed her the year before when we played them." Hermione caught his embarrassment and grinned.

"Oh, so not only were you consorting with an opposing player," she teased, "but an older woman to boot." Harry shot her a dirty look but it quickly dissolved into a self-effacing grin. "So, what happened?" she prompted.

"I waited too long to get up the nerve to ask her," he recalled. "So she already had a date – Cedric Diggory, in fact. When I got back to the common room feeling pretty dejected, Ginny walked over, to console me I guess, and I thought, hey, she's a girl, I can ask her."

"I hope you didn't say that to her!" Hermione interrupted in a disapproving tone. Harry rolled his eyes.

"No, of course not," he protested. "Who do you think I am, Ron?"

Hermione giggled. "That does sound more like something he would do," she acknowledged.

"Anyway," Harry continued. "Ginny blushed like crazy, then stuttered and stammered for a while. I tried to calm her down by saying I figured we could just go as friends, but she still had sort of a dazed look when she finally managed to say yes." He scowled at the memory.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione wondered why that scene should have been so upsetting.

“I found out later that Neville had already asked her,” he revealed. “She told him she’d think about it, and I suspect she was waiting until she heard I had a date. It might not even have been a coincidence that she was waiting right there when I came back from asking Cho.” He shook his head. “So Neville was miffed at me for quite a while after that.”

Hermione commiserated with him, understanding how unfair that would seem to him. And then there was Ron, whose relationship with Harry had still been shaky even though he’d admitted after the first task that he’d been in the wrong. Now he was the big brother, suspicious of Harry’s intentions toward his baby sister even though Harry assured him that they were just going as friends.

“As for the Ball itself, it was pretty uncomfortable and I was glad when it finally ended,” Harry concluded. “Ginny was so excited I thought she might pass out at times, especially when we had to do the first dance. But then I’d glance at Ron and see him glaring at me. Awkward doesn’t begin to describe it. At the end I just said goodnight to Ginny at the foot of the stairs – I realize now that she was probably pretty disappointed.”

Hermione sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she consoled him. “It sounds like you were going to be in trouble no matter what you did.”

“Oh, it got even worse after the Second Task,” Harry informed her.

He then went on to the next part of his fourth year tale, telling her how the clue in the egg (which Cedric had tipped him off about) revealed that they needed to retrieve something precious to them from the bottom of the lake. How Dobby had procured him some gillyweed to enable him to breathe under water after overhearing McGonagall and the fake Moody talking about it. How he’d reached the mermaid village first to find four girls tied to a statue – Ginny, Cho, Fleur’s sister Gabrielle, and the girl Krum had taken to the Yule Ball. And how he’d waited for the other champions to show up to rescue their hostages, not wanting any of them to be left behind, and had finally brought up both Ginny and Gabrielle.

“That’s my noble Harry Potter,” Hermione teased after he’d explained that he’d taken seriously the part of the clue that said that after an hour the hostage would be lost. Both of them noticed the possessive ‘my’ that she’d used, but neither of them decided to comment on it. Each, however, decided the implication was not unpleasant.

“And Ginny was considered the person most precious to you,” Hermione pointed out. “That must have had her over the moon!”

“Yeah, except she was none too happy when Fleur kissed me,” Harry revealed. Hermione leaned back and shot a look up at him, raising an eyebrow. “No, no, not like that!” Harry corrected quickly. “On the cheeks. You know, the way the French do. She was grateful to me for saving her sister.”

“But I bet you enjoyed it nevertheless,” Hermione persisted playfully when she noticed how flustered he was.

Harry groaned, but nodded sheepishly. “Well, she *was* wearing only a wet swimsuit at the time,” he protested. “And I told you she was part Veela, right? So yeah, I was a bit gobsmacked.” Hermione smiled and conceded his point, and settled her head back against his shoulder.

“But it’s understandable why Ginny would have been upset,” she pointed out.

“Ginny never did get along with Fleur,” Harry commented. “She still doesn’t. Even after Fleur married her brother.”

“What!” Hermione gasped. “Ron married a Veela!”

“No, no!” Harry broke in at once. “Not Ron. Her oldest brother, Bill. They actually met during the tournament, on the morning of the Third Task.”

“Oh.” Hermione took a deep breath as she settled back down. “I see.” She thought for a moment. “So there was never really any reason for Ginny to be jealous?” she asked with a touch of skepticism.

Harry shook his head. “It never occurred to me then that there could be any possibility of me getting together with Fleur,” he explained. “She was completely out of my league. Remember, I was only fourteen and she was seventeen at the time. And the first time she met me she referred to me as ‘zisleetle boy’”, he added with a wry chuckle. “So no, there wasn’t.” He then grinned at another thought. “Although Ron did embarrass himself by asking her to the Yule Ball. But he ran away without even waiting for her to turn him down. He always had trouble resisting her Veela allure. He’s learned to keep his distance now, whenever he runs into her at some family gathering.”

Hermione smiled as she tried to visualize that scene, then persevered with her question. “But it occurred to you later?”

Harry shook his head gently. “Not until after she and Bill were already engaged, so no, not really. It was more of a ‘what if’ sort of thought, as I got to know her better. She’s one of my best friends now, although I don’t see her that often. She was amazing during the war – really held it together when everything seemed to be falling apart.” He fell silent for a moment. “But that’s getting ahead of the story.”

“Yes, let’s get back to the tournament,” Hermione suggested. “Why don’t you move on to the Third Task.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed. “Not much else happened in between. I kept studying and training, using the time turner to get an extra four hours or more a day. Ginny was a problem. She started hanging around me all the time. People kept teasing me about having a girlfriend, and I kept explaining we were still just friends. But she would put on this ‘of course, that’s just what we’re telling

everyone' expression and making it look like we really were together. I even learned later that she was coming right out and saying it when I was out of earshot." He sighed, and shot Hermione a thoughtful look.

"You know, that could have been you," he observed.

Hermione was taken by surprise, and could only manage to stammer, "Wh ... what?"

"Well, like I said before, you would have believed me from the beginning. So we probably would have spent a lot of time together, with you helping me out with everything, right?" Hermione nodded her firm agreement. "And I probably would have asked you to the Ball instead of Ginny. So you would probably have been my hostage for the Second Task, too. I mean, the clue said, 'We've taken what you'll sorely miss.' That would surely have described you!"

Hermione could only nod. She really couldn't fault his logic; it certainly seemed plausible. "So it would have been me everyone teased you about being together with instead of Ginny," she concluded. Harry nodded. Suddenly both of the young professors thought the room felt warmer, but neither one of them mentioned it. "I expect I would have handled it better," she asserted. "And since everyone would have been accustomed to me being around you all the time, your denials would have been more plausible."

Harry almost countered that he might not have wanted to deny it in her case, but decided not to go there right then, and kept quiet. After a few moments he spoke up again.

"The Third Task is actually the really bad part of the story," he cautioned. Hermione responded by snuggling up closer and taking his hand into hers.

"Go ahead," she encouraged. "I'm not going anywhere."

She sat spellbound as Harry solemnly related how the four champions had entered the maze needing to fight their way past magical obstacles both animate and inanimate. Added in, however, was the unexpected interference of the fake Moody, who *Imperiused* the Durmstrang champion, Krum, to attack and disable the other two contestants, leaving Harry a clear shot to the winner's cup at the center of the maze. Harry had foiled this plan to some extent by rescuing his fellow Hogwarts' competitor, Cedric Diggory, resulting in a tie between the two of them for the title.

But the cup had been a portkey.

Hermione listened in mounting horror as Harry continued in a far-off, subdued voice as he relived once again the terror of that night. Arriving at a mysterious graveyard. The incapacitating pain in his scar. The abrupt, horribly off-handed murder of Cedric. Being tied to the headstone of Voldemort's father, whose bones were used in a dark ritual along with Pettigrew's hand and Harry's blood to restore the dark lord once more to bodily form. And being forced to watch everything, absolutely helpless.

"That was the worst part of the whole thing," he explained in a grim tone of quiet fury. "Being so

powerless to do anything about it, and knowing I was about to die. Being caught completely by surprise, even though I knew from the beginning that someone had gone to all this trouble for a reason. I became caught up in completing the damn tournament when I should have been focused on making sure whatever they were trying to do didn't come off."

He closed his eyes and grimaced, internally berating himself even all these years later. "I wasn't wearing my time turner – I'd decided there would be no way I could use it in the maze. If I'd had it I could have escaped easily as soon as my hands were free!"

He opened his eyes again and turned to Hermione's grief-stricken face. "After that I vowed that I'd never take it off again. And I didn't, not until after the war was over."

He leaned his head back and resumed his story. "He called all his old Death Eaters back and when they showed up he went into a long speech about how he'd survived and finally returned. Then he decided to make a big show of killing me. First he *Crucioed* me a couple of times, and tried to *Imperio* me, but it didn't work."

Hermione's breath caught in her throat. At only fourteen, Harry had survived multiple *Cruciatus* curses from the most powerful wizard in the world, and even thrown off his *Imperius* ! How powerful was her best friend?

Harry ignored her and continued, and the tale grew even more astonishing. "He freed me, gave me back my wand, and I tried to fight back. But our wands connected and locked up! He was as surprised as I was. Dumbledore told me afterward that it was because our wands were brothers – they both had phoenix feather cores from Fawkes. That became important again later on when we faced each other the next time."

By now Hermione's jaw was permanently agape, and she could only nod, dumbfounded. "A weird thing happened then," Harry observed (as if the preceding story *hadn't* been weird?). "My wand somehow established dominance over his and forced it to play back some of its previous spells. I saw ghosts, or something, of the people he killed. Including Cedric and ... my parents."

Tears began to well up in Hermione's eyes, but she paid them no heed. She pressed herself even more tightly against his side, coming close to climbing onto his lap, and was squeezing his arm so hard she might be cutting off his blood circulation.

Harry wrapped up his incredible story with his return to Hogwarts with Cedric's body and the portkey, and the confusion that ensued, including his brief capture and interrogation by the fake Moody before the imposter was stopped by Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape. He ended on a bitter note as he described how Fudge had a dementor perform a Kiss on Crouch, Jr. before anyone else heard his testimony, then refused to believe that Voldemort was back, and stormed out of the hospital wing after tossing the one thousand Galleon prize on his bedside table.

By now both the young wizard and witch's emotions were thoroughly spent. Hermione took a long look at the utterly drained expression on Harry's face and finalized a plan she'd formulated earlier in the evening. She stood and extended a hand to him, and pulled him to his feet, ignoring his

puzzled expression. Then she pulled out her wand and performed a quick transfiguration, enlarging and flattening the sofa, and adding two pillows a pair of sheets, and a blanket.

Satisfied with her work, she removed her dressing gown, revealing a tank top and pajama bottoms, laid it over a chair, and slipped beneath the sheets. Turning back the blanket, she looked up at him in clear invitation. Without giving it a second's thought, he gratefully accepted.

That night was a turning point in Harry Potter's life. For beneath the drama and the remarkable deeds of courage and cunning, Hermione Granger had caught an underlying theme. The events of that year had sent him down the path of isolation. As he began to rely more and more only on himself, he increasingly grew more aloof, shutting out his fellow students, and marginalizing his friendships. And now, he'd become the inevitable product of that process, the most famous wizard in the world, who everyone knew, but at the same time no one *really* knew.

She was firmly resolved to change that.

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I Need You

Dumbledore's Army and the Mysterious Door

Chapter 4, Dumbledore's Army and the Mysterious Door

For the second morning in a row, Harry woke with a warm witch in his arms and his face buried in a head of soft, curly hair. He didn't know how many different positions they'd adopted during the night, but at the moment he was on his back and Hermione was using his shoulder for a pillow, her arm draped across his chest. He had to agree with her assertion of the previous day that this was a much more comfortable position than falling asleep sitting up. *I could get used to this*, he found himself musing.

That thought made him tighten his arms around her for an instant, assuming she was still asleep. But that proved not to be the case, as she responded immediately with a squeeze of her own.

"Good morning," she greeted him cheerfully, turning her face up to give him a satisfied smile.

"Good morning to you, too," he returned. "Have you been awake long?"

She shrugged and snuggled her head into his shoulder again. "For a little while," she admitted. "This feels so nice that I didn't want to move until I had to."

"Well, then I suppose we should do this again sometime," he joked. He glanced down and noticed her smile grow larger.

"Perhaps," she replied, playing along. "Will telling me about the rest of your years be as emotionally exhausting as last night's was?"

He thought a moment. "Pretty much, yeah," he allowed, smiling broadly.

"Then I suppose we'll have to do this a few more times," she declared impishly, grinning up at him as she pushed herself up off the transfigured bed. Both of them decided to leave it at that, still avoiding mentioning their growing physical attraction, at least for the time being.

As Hermione retrieved her dressing gown and her wand, Harry thought back to the tale he'd told the previous night. There were a few points he'd left out that would pop up in later years that he decided to clear up. While she restored the sofa to its original state he went into his kitchenette and poured them some juice.

“There were a couple other things I forgot to mention last night,” he called out as he gestured her to join him at the table. “One of them was about him using my blood in the ritual. He did it because he wanted to negate my mum’s blood protection. You remember what happened with Quirrell in first year when he tried to touch me.” Hermione nodded as she pulled out a chair and sat down. “Well, it worked, because he could touch me without any effect afterwards,” he continued. “But it may have backfired because it linked us somehow. Dumbledore thought it gave me some protection from him.

Hermione sipped her juice and pondered the significance of this revelation. “I was never sure if it meant anything,” Harry confessed. “But Dumbledore acted like it was a big deal. Of course, he never said anything to me about it at the time. He had a bad habit of that, keeping important stuff from me until ... well, let’s not go into that now,” he shrugged with annoyance.

“The other thing was about the reporter who’d been causing so much trouble all year with her stories,” he revealed.

“Oh, who was that?” Hermione asked, putting aside her thoughts on Harry’s disenchantment with the old headmaster.

“Rita Skeeter,” he replied with a slight scowl. “Probably the nastiest writer you’d ever meet. She consistently distorted things and put the worst possible slant on everything she reported on. But she also kept coming up with stuff it didn’t seem that she could possibly have known about.” Hermione nodded as he paused to make them some toast.

“Well, it turned out she was an animagus,” he informed her. “And unregistered, to boot. Her form was a beetle.”

“I see,” Hermione murmured. “That would have made it easy for her to sneak up on people without being noticed.”

“Exactly,” Harry agreed. “But she tried it one too many times. Dobby actually caught her the night of the Third Task. He didn’t tell me about it until the next day, but somehow he managed to impress on her that she should, as he put it, ‘stop being so mean to the great Harry Potter.’ I think he kept her in a glass jar for a few weeks and threatened to use her to start a bug collection.” He grinned as he set out some jam and marmalade, and joined her at the table. “He finally took her to McGonagall and she worked out some sort of ‘arrangement’ with her.”

Hermione gasped, then put her hand to her mouth and snickered at the thought of the hyperactive little house elf that she remembered from her second year. “Whatever happened to Dobby?” she wondered. The mood in the room chilled as Harry went still.

“He didn’t make it,” he finally responded in a low voice. Hermione reached out and covered his hand with hers, rubbing her thumb over the back of it. “He was killed during the war.”

“I’m sorry,” she replied and he nodded, acknowledging her condolences.

“I’ll take you to show you his grave sometime,” he promised. “But that’s another story.” They sat and ate together in silence for a while.

“You know, I sent you a letter of congratulations at the end of the year after I read that you’d won the tournament,” Hermione told him. “I didn’t hear anything back from you so I wondered if you even got it.”

“Really?” Harry responded, surprised for a moment. Then he smiled. “Thanks. No, I didn’t get it. I didn’t get much mail at all that summer. I was pretty isolated that summer and my mail was restricted. I suppose it got filtered out because your name wasn’t recognized by whoever was sorting it out. I’m sorry.”

Hermione smiled back, glad that she’d managed to change the subject. “That’s OK.” She gestured at the empty goblets and plates on the table. “We should get going. Thanks for breakfast.”

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Hermione was eager to see the Room of Requirement. After a quick explanation from Harry of how it was summoned, she experimented with creating muggle environments, as the two of them discussed how best to utilize this resource. She started with her own home, and he showed her Number 4 Privet Drive. They agreed that the kitchens were the most obvious rooms that would differ from those in the wizarding world. Her parents’ dental practice, as well as a regular doctor’s office, were also at the top of the list, given the vast difference between medical care in their original world and their adopted one.

They also debated what was the best way to introduce the significant ways in which the contrast between magic and technology permeated relations between the two societies. While electronic equipment did not work at Hogwarts, Harry pledged to help her charm whatever devices she wished to illustrate in her classes. They spent the afternoon discarding nearly the entire inventory of the Muggle Studies classroom, and made lists of new items to be purchased to restock their holdings.

As they worked, Harry began to bring her up to date on some of the students from their class, beginning, naturally, with the third member of their original trio. “Ron plays quidditch for the Chudley Cannons, which you may remember was the team he was so fanatical about,” he reported. “He’s their reserve keeper. He’s married to Lavender Brown.”

“Oh my, I never would have guessed that,” Hermione responded in surprise. “I have trouble picturing them together.”

“Well, Ron was always attracted to the more, erm, busty women,” Harry explained. “After you left, Lavender sorta ... well, developed.” Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head at this news. “And they already have two kids,” he added with a grin.

“Let’s see, Neville is married to Hannah Abbott, and Seamus and Parvati are together,” he continued. “They’ll probably get married one of these years. Seamus plans to open a bar as soon as

he saves up enough money. One of the ones they considered is the Hogs Head Tavern in Hogsmeade. It's owned by Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, but I don't think he's ready to sell yet. He and Seamus got to know each other during the war, when they were both involved in the resistance here at Hogwarts. Oh yeah, Neville is really talented at Herbology, and we'll probably try to get him to join the staff here when Sprout retires."

"What about Dean Thomas?" Hermione inquired.

Harry paused a moment, and Hermione immediately recognized the look on his face and knew what was coming. "He didn't survive the war," he replied quietly. "Not a lot of muggleborns did."

Now Hermione hesitated before her next query. "And Melissa Roper and Elizabeth Rivers?" (1)

Harry shook his head. "I'm not sure. Melissa left Hogwarts after fourth year and Elizabeth after sixth. Melissa's family was one of the ones who believed Dumbledore about Voldemort being back. Lots of students didn't come back after sixth year. I know it was a close call for Parvati and Padma. For a while it looked like Lavender would be the only Gryffindor girl in our year to finish Hogwarts." Hermione shook her head sadly.

"Back to the Weasleys, Ginny is still single and also plays quidditch, for the Holyhead Harpies. She's a chaser." Harry hesitated almost imperceptibly before continuing. "Percy works at the Ministry of Magic. Bill married Fleur and they have a daughter. And Charlie still works at the dragon preserve in Romania. Remember how we smuggled Norbert out of the castle in first year?"

Hermione smiled and nodded, wondering at the change of subject. She almost asked about Fred and George before she realized why Harry had omitted them. Not wanting to bring up any more painful memories she let it go.

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That night, in what had seemingly already become their normal practice, Hermione came to Harry's room in her pajamas and dressing gown. This time, her hair was also wet; the afternoon of clearing out shelves and cupboards had been dusty work, so she had showered and washed her hair. Harry noted that it was relatively straight when it was wet.

"Yes, it curls up as it dries," Hermione confirmed. "While I was at Salem I found a potion that I can put on it to control the amount of curl. If I use a lot, I can even make it almost straight, with just a bit of a wave. I can show you what that looks like if you want."

"No, I like it curly," Harry told her as he beckoned her to join him on the sofa. "It seems strange to think of you with straight hair. I remember how bushy it was back when you first started, but the way you wear it now looks good." Hermione beamed at him happily. She felt the same way, but it was nice to hear that he thought so too.

"So, fifth year, then?" she prompted.

Harry sighed. "That year was by far the worst year I ever spent at Hogwarts. It started with a miserable summer, and got worse. Lots worse. And it ended ..." he shook his head glumly, "... in a total disaster."

She took hold of his arm yet again and hugged herself to him. "Weren't there *any* bright spots?"

Harry sighed and thought briefly. "Yeah, I guess. Two, actually. That was the year I found out I liked teaching and was actually pretty good at it. And ..." His face reddened. "That year was the first time I kissed a girl," he admitted with a shy grin.

"Oh? Ginny?" Hermione guessed. Harry shook his head vigorously.

"No, Cho ... Cho Chang," he corrected. "But it didn't turn out well."

Hermione looked like she really wanted to pursue that line of questioning, but refrained. After all, this was the second time he'd mentioned romantic feelings for Cho. McGonagall had said Harry was single and wasn't seeing anyone, but she wondered if there were still some feelings there. Controlling her urge for the moment, she suggested, "Well, then tell me about the teaching part."

Harry shook his head. "I need to lead into it, since it came about as a result of a series of events, none of which were good."

He began by telling her about his isolation at the Dursleys, with no one to talk to and no information about what was happening in the wizarding world. About how he grew more and more frustrated, and angry with Sirius and the Weasleys for seemingly keeping him in the dark, on Dumbledore's orders as he later learned. And about how he'd reached his breaking point when he and Dudley were attacked by two dementors on their way back from the park one evening.

"What! Dementors!" Hermione exclaimed. "At your aunt and uncle's house?" Harry nodded grimly.

"I found out later that they were sent by a witch in the Ministry named Umbridge," he spat out disgustedly. "They'd spent the whole summer going off on me, and Dumbledore too, for claiming that Voldemort had returned. Fudge absolutely wouldn't hear of it. Umbridge was his lackey – think of a toad and you have a good picture of her. She decided that she had to shut me up."

Hermione could only shake her head in disbelief as he related the fiasco involving the series of owls he'd received after casting his patronus to drive off the dementors, ending with his being escorted by broom to Grimmauld Place, Sirius's ancestral home and the headquarters of Dumbledore's anti-Voldemort resistance group called the Order of the Phoenix. Then he went on to describe his trial on charges of underaged magic, and Dumbledore's successful defense of him.

"As you can imagine, I wasn't in a very good mood for pretty much the entire summer. I was mad at the world and everyone in it, and my attitude reflected that. Even after I got to Sirius's house, I was pretty short with everyone." He shot her a rueful grin. "You might even say I was downright surly. And it didn't improve when Ron was sent the Prefect's badge."

“Ron! Are you kidding me?” Hermione moaned. “I don’t believe it. How could they *not* have given it to you?”

Harry shook his head. “Dumbledore actually told me at the end of the year – he thought I already had enough things on my mind.”

“But that ...” Hermione sat up and threw up her hands in disgust. “That would have been exactly the sort of support you needed, to show he had confidence in you. By passing you over he just made it look like the *Prophet’s* stories might have had some substance to them.”

Harry shrugged and put his arm around her shoulder again, pulling her back down against himself. “Yeah, but that was the way he was. Probably yet another test of my *character* or something.”

Hermione snorted in disgust. After taking a few seconds to settle down, she asked, “So who was the girls’ prefect for Gryffindor?”

“Lavender,” Harry replied.

“Lavender?” Hermione thought for a moment, then decided she didn’t have any strong feelings on which of her other four dorm mates deserved the honor. “So is that how she and Ron got together?”

“Well, not that year, but it might have had something to do with it eventually,” Harry allowed with a shrug. “So anyway, I started off the year with a pretty bad attitude, and it only got worse when we heard who the new Defense professor would be. It was Umbridge.”

Hermione had finally started to become accustomed to Harry’s little bombshells of bad news, so managed to hold back another exclamation of dismay. She did offer a sympathetic groan and grimace. However, when Harry told her that the toad-like witch had tortured him during detention with a blood quill, which carved letters into the back of his hand, she exploded again.

“That ... that foul piece of vermin!” she snarled. “How could she possibly get away with that?”

“Well, she didn’t completely,” Harry explained. “McGonagall noticed my hand during our next tutoring session, and she had words with Umbridge. I’m not sure what she threatened her with, but she never used it again. She still had it out for me, though, and managed to find another way to make me miserable.” He went on to describe the events of the Gryffindor-Slytherin quidditch match, where Draco Malfoy’s postgame taunting ended with Fred, George, and himself receiving a ‘lifetime’ ban from quidditch (which actually only lasted for the rest of the year).

He sighed. “That was probably the most depressed I’ve ever been at Hogwarts. I really went into a funk. I felt so isolated. Ron was busy with prefect stuff and quidditch – he was our new keeper that year, and was pretty shaky at first, so he practiced a lot. Ginny had been hanging around with me, but she took my place as seeker, so it was especially bad during the times they had quidditch practice. I hung around with Fred and George sometimes, but they were busy getting their new business off the ground – oh, I forgot to tell you, I gave them my Triwizard prize of a thousand

Galleons and told them to use it to start up their joke shop.”

Hermione smiled and shook her head. Only Harry would do something like that, and not think it was important enough to mention. Then she had another thought.

“When did Ron find time to do his homework?” she wondered. “As I recall, he wasn’t the most dedicated student.”

“He didn’t. He usually copied mine,” Harry shrugged. Anticipating her disapproval, he added, “Yeah, I know it didn’t help him in the long run but at the time I didn’t really care.”

“But wouldn’t it have caught up with him on his OWLs?” she persisted. Harry nodded.

“Yeah, it did. He barely scraped by with Acceptables or worse. Not a single O or E.” He grinned at her. “I bet if you’d been here you would have driven us crazy making up study schedules. He would have griped constantly, but he would probably have done a lot better. As it turned out, he lost his prefect badge after that year and they gave it to Neville. By that time I didn’t want it,” he added quickly, seeing her mouth open in preparation for another objection. “I had other things I needed to do. But that’s the next year’s story.”

“So anyway,” he continued, “by then Umbridge had been made High Inquisitor. It was a new title created by the Ministry that basically let her poke her nose into everything, evaluate professors, and make all kinds of rules. She called them Educational Decrees. Her position supposedly gave her the authority to overrule McGonagall and kick us off the quidditch team. But that was the last straw for McGonagall, and she came up with a way we could fight back ...”

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“Mr. Potter, please stay after class,” the Transfiguration professor informed him as he was packing up his books. Ron gave him a quick nod and indicated that he’d see him back in the common room. Once they were alone, she cast a privacy charm on the door and windows of the classroom, causing Harry to raise an eyebrow in surprise. This was evidently pretty serious.

“I suspect that you are as frustrated with the current state of affairs as I am, possibly even more so,” she began. “I have a proposition for you that I believe will address several of our problems.” Harry gave a tentative nod and waited. The stern professor permitted herself a small conspiratorial smile and he realized what she was saying. She had come up with something that would allow them some measure of revenge on their detestable nemesis from the Ministry.

“I would like you to consider leading a study group for Defense Against the Dark Arts,” she revealed. Harry’s mouth dropped open in shock, but he forced himself to swallow his initial protest and think through the implications. Umbridge was a terrible teacher; her students weren’t allowed to perform any spells and were likely to do badly on the practical portion of their exams. This would be a way to strike directly at her by showing her up as an incompetent instructor while at the same time undermining her authority. But ...

“Do you really think I can teach?” he asked doubtfully.

“Yes, I do,” she assured him. “In the actual casting of defensive spells I am certain that you are the top student in your class, due to your extensive study last year for the tournament. I can provide you with the spells that you should cover, taken from the required list for OWLs and NEWTs, so you can prepare in advance.” She paused and gave him a long, meaningful look.

“This will not only give you something constructive to do with your time, but will benefit your classmates as well as counteracting the Ministry’s propaganda by putting you in a more positive light, thereby creating a more favorable impression of you among your peers. And last, but not least, we can show up that horrid woman for the fraud that she is by demonstrating how well students can succeed in a proper learning environment.”

Harry had not missed her disapproving allusion to the moping around he’d been doing for the past few weeks, feeling sorry for himself. She was offering him an alternative way to retaliate against the injustice he’d been subjected to.

“OK, I’ll do it,” he declared.

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“That’s wonderful!” Hermione beamed at him. “What a great idea. So that’s how you got your start as a teacher. But it must have been tricky, since you needed to keep it a secret, and yet spread the word around,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but McGonagall took care of most of that,” he told her. “She got together with Sprout and Flitwick, and they began with the prefects from those houses. They actually got all six of the fifth year prefects to buy into it, and they approached the other students. It was mostly Gryffindors at first, focusing on fifth and seventh years because of OWLs and NEWTs, although there were a few sixth years, like Katie Bell and Cho Chang, and some fourth years like Ginny, Colin Creevy, and Luna Lovegood, who just came along because they wanted to be a part of it.”

“Who’s Luna Lovegood?” Hermione inquired, having recognized all the other names. Once again Harry’s face adopted the now familiar pained expression before he answered.

“She was a rather unique individual, to say the least,” he responded after a short pause. “She was a friend of Ginny’s who I met on the Hogwarts Express that year. She just had a different way of looking at the world, which led to her being ostracized and picked on by the other students. But she never let it get to her; always had something cheerful to say.” He grinned. “Even if it was so completely off the wall that no one had a clue what she was talking about.”

“So anyway, they screened the students who were invited to join the group, and McGonagall arranged for us to meet during the next Hogsmeade weekend. She reserved us an upper room at the Hogs Head tavern. (2) She chose that location because most students avoided it, since it had a pretty seedy reputation.” Hermione nodded at that reasoning.

“However, some of the students brought friends along, and I couldn’t be sure they were all necessarily trustworthy. So before I started I made them all take a secrecy oath that McGonagall had written out. That caused a bit of an uproar. At that point Cho stepped up and made quite a strong statement supporting me, which calmed things down.” Harry cocked his head in thought for a brief instant. “I smiled at her to show my thanks, but of course, that got Ginny miffed. The look she shot at Cho ...” he shook his head in disgust. “The two of them were at each other like that all year.” Hermione nodded knowingly. Harry clearly fancied the Chinese girl, but Ginny had already ‘claimed’ him. There was bound to be friction between the two witches vying for his affection.

“Then Fred and George declared that they would take the oath, and anyone who didn’t was daft and ought to have their heads examined,” Harry continued. “That pretty much forced everyone to take it or leave. Then I explained what we had in mind, and most of them were happy with it. One or two had questions, which was understandable, and I answered them. Someone said we should have a name for the group, so the last thing we did that day was come up with possible names. Some of them were pretty funny. Like the Anti-Umbridge League, or my favorite, the Ministry of Magic are Morons Group. Finally Cho came up with the DA, for Defense Association, which got general agreement. But Ginny got in the last word by changing it to Dumbledore’s Army, and we all got a chuckle out of that – except for Cho. But mostly we called it the DA.”

He shrugged. “And that’s the way it started. We met once or twice every week in the Room of Requirement. I showed them how to do a spell, corrected what they were doing wrong, and when everybody had it down, moved on to another one. By the end of the year I even had some of them casting a Patronus,” he finished with a touch of pride.

Hermione wondered at what sort of teacher he was, in terms of his teaching style and classroom manner. Harry responded honestly that he felt he needed to establish his authority and so didn’t act like a fellow student. He remained somewhat aloof, but tried let them know he was there to help them when they needed it. He didn’t tolerate much joking or goofing around, keeping everyone on task. Essentially, he tried to pattern himself after McGonagall initially, though his goal was to become more like Flitwick once he’d established his authority. Although he was reluctant to boast, McGonagall would later confirm that he was an extremely effective teacher.

“OK, now tell me about the kiss,” Hermione prompted with a sly grin after they’d finished with the DA and his introduction to teaching.

Harry groaned, but complied. He told her how Dobby had decorated the Room of Requirement with mistletoe and Christmas ornaments for the last DA meeting before the holidays, and without going into the details, related how Cho had waited after everyone had left and maneuvered him under the mistletoe, while tearing up from thoughts of Cedric. He left the rest to her imagination. Hermione pouted and tried to get him to elaborate, but he resisted.

“So that’s the whole story?” she protested.

Harry shook his head. “Well, except for after I got back to the common room.”

Hermione immediately perked up and smiled at him expectantly, so he knew he had no choice but

to continue.

“Ron and Ginny were waiting up for me. Ron asked what had kept me, since it was about a half an hour later.” Hermione smirked knowingly but Harry refused to satisfy her curiosity. “Ginny just glared at me. I was in something of a daze and just shrugged, since I wasn’t sure if I wanted to tell them. Ron next asked what Cho had wanted – he still hadn’t figured it out – and at that point Ginny couldn’t keep quiet any more. ‘Did you kiss?’ she hissed at me.”

Hermione nodded. She could already see where this was headed, and it wasn’t going to be pleasant. “I don’t imagine she took it very well,” she commented wryly.

Harry shook his head. “That’s an understatement. Ron practically fell out of his chair. First he was jealous and griped how lucky I was to get such a hot girl, but then when he saw how mad Ginny was he backtracked a bit. Then he started to accuse me of cheating on Ginny, but then realized that he didn’t want me kissing her either! So he settled for just being grumpy with me. But Ginny really let me have it. She went on and on about how Cho was just a slag who was only after my fame, or was just looking for a replacement for Cedric, or several other things that were even less complimentary. I pretty much tuned her out after a while. Finally I couldn’t take it any more and shouted that it was my life and stalked off to bed.”

Hermione shook her head. “That’s too bad. She turned something that should have been special – your first kiss – into an unpleasant memory.” Harry nodded his agreement.

After sitting in silence for a while, Hermione prompted him to move on to the disastrous ending of the year.

“Well, again, there was a series of events that lead up to it,” Harry explained. “But it started with me getting a vision during my History of Magic OWL exam, which was the last one of the year.”

“A vision?” Hermione asked in surprise.

“Yeah,” Harry responded. “See, I’d been getting these visions, mostly as dreams, all year long of a corridor in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry of Magic. It turns out that Voldemort was sending them to me, but I didn’t realize that right away. We had a connection through my scar,” he informed her, tapping his forehead.

Hermione glanced up at the spot in question and tipped her head back in surprise. “Hey! I didn’t really pay it any mind before, but your scar’s almost gone! I can hardly see it now.”

Harry smiled broadly. “Hermione, I love you.”

Hermione’s eyes widened even more, not comprehending what had prompted that declaration.

“My scar has always been the first thing everyone looks at,” he explained. “It’s practically my whole identity to people. Harry Potter? – check the scar – yep, you’re Harry Potter. But you’ve been here for three days now and we’ve spent pretty much ever minute together, and this is the

first time you've even noticed it! You have no idea how much I appreciate that!" He pulled her tightly against his side in a grateful hug.

It took Hermione a few seconds to regain her composure. "I ... well, you're welcome," she finally managed. "And you'll never have to worry about me. You'll always be my friend Harry, not the Boy Who Lived." She returned his hug with one of her own.

"Where was I?" Harry asked after their impromptu cuddle ended.

"Visions from Voldemort," Hermione reminded him.

"Right," he agreed. "They'd been happening all year long, but I didn't realize that's what they were. They started as dreams of a long corridor and an urge to see what was behind the door at the end. It turned out that the corridor was in the Department of Mysteries and the door led to the Hall of Prophecies." With great effort, Hermione managed to hold her tongue and not ask why the dark lord was doing this, trusting that Harry would tell her eventually.

"On the last night before Christmas break we discovered that the dreams were real," he went on. "That night I dreamed I was a giant snake, and was sneaking up on someone who was sitting there. Then I bit him." Hermione's face wrinkled up in revulsion, and Harry nodded.

"Yeah, it was disgusting, and I was really shook up about it for the next few days. But what made it really scary was that it was Mr. Weasley that I bit, and it turned out to be actually happening at the time. The guys in the dorm woke me up and I was moaning that Ron's dad had been attacked. They got McGonagall and she took me to see Dumbledore. He checked and Mr. Weasley really was in the Department of Mysteries and was lying there bleeding to death. He sent someone to find him and they got him to St. Mungo's just in time.

"Oh my!" Hermione gasped. "That's just ..."

"Unbelievable," Harry finished for her. "Yeah. Like I said, I was shook up, since I first thought I'd somehow been the one to attack him, that I'd been possessed in some way. Anyway, Dumbledore sent me and all the Weasleys to stay at Sirius's house over Christmas break. And the next semester he had me start Occlumency lessons with Snape to keep Voldemort out of my mind."

Hermione nodded knowingly. "I see. That makes sense." Harry managed a brief grin – of course she would have read about the obscure mind art.

"Except that it didn't work," Harry countered. "For one thing, it was Snape teaching it, which meant that he didn't teach me anything at all – just shouted 'Clear your mind!' and then blasted his way in. I'm still convinced that what he did left it more open than it would have been otherwise. But even if he'd wanted me to learn it right, it wouldn't have mattered. See, because of my scar, Voldemort had a direct connection into my head. He wasn't reading my thoughts like in Legilimency, he was able to get directly into my mind. Of course, it went both ways. I frequently saw into his mind, too, especially when he was feeling strong emotions."

“That couldn’t have been too pleasant!” Hermione observed with alarm.

“Absolutely,” Harry agreed. “And it wasn’t always intentional on his part. I actually got information he wouldn’t have wanted me to know, on occasion. Like with Mr. Weasley, for example.”

“How?” she wanted to know. “I mean, what was so special about your scar?”

Harry hesitated, then said in a low, solemn voice, “It had a piece of his soul in it.”

“What!” Hermione cried out. She pulled away to look at him, and he dropped his arm from her shoulder. Immediately she sensed his anxiety that she was repulsed by the thought, and she promptly threw her arms around him and buried her head into his chest to alleviate it. “Oh Harry, I’m so sorry! That must have been just awful for you.” Harry nodded, relieved at her acceptance, and concern for him.

“But the connection was broken when you killed him, right?” she surmised. “That’s why your scar has faded now.”

“Something like that,” Harry replied. “But all that happened later. The point right now is, when I got the vision at the end of the year during exams, I was convinced it was real, just like the one about Mr. Weasley was. But this time it was about Sirius, and he was being tortured by Voldemort. And they were in the Hall of Prophecies in the Department of Mysteries.”

“The same one you’d been having dreams about all year,” Hermione clarified. Harry nodded and continued.

“It seemed so real, and when I came to I was screaming. After telling the examiner I was OK, I ran out of the Great Hall, where the exams were held. Then I tried to figure out what to do. There was almost no one I could go to. Dumbledore had been forced out by Umbridge and Fudge – Umbridge had been named Headmistress, although the castle wouldn’t let her into Dumbledore’s office. And Hagrid and McGonagall were gone – they’d sent Aurors to arrest him the day before and she’d tried to stop them. He escaped but she got hit by a bunch of stunners and was taken to St. Mungo’s.”

Hermione listened in wide-eyed silence; only her tightened grip on him indicated her dismay at these revelations. But Harry disentangled himself from her and sat up, then rose to his feet, staring out the window at the Hogwarts grounds, as he relived the experience, still clearly etched into his mind, even seven years later.

“I was just so certain it was real!” he insisted, his hands clenching into tight fists at his sides. “It never occurred to me that it could have been a fake vision. I didn’t even know that was possible. If only they’d told me!”

Hermione leaned forward and reached out a hand to clasp one of his, squeezing gently in a show of support. He relaxed slightly and unclenched his fist, allowing her to stroke the back of his hand as

a bit of his tension eased. He turned to her and continued.

“So, I figured I needed to get to London as quickly as I could. But how? All the floos in the castle were being monitored; I’d get caught before I even made it to London. Umbridge had confiscated my Firebolt, but even with that, it would take hours to fly there.” He began to pace back and forth as he went through his reasoning.

“I knew the Ministry would be busy at that time of day, and yet the vision showed the two of them alone, so they must have been in a deserted part of the building. I’d have to sneak up on them if I had any chance of rescuing Sirius. So I’d need my invisibility cloak. And I needed more time.”

“The time turner,” Hermione realized aloud. Harry nodded in confirmation.

“Once I worked that out I ran up to my room, which was empty since everyone else was still in the exam,” he told her. “I put on the cloak and then went back four hours, figuring that would be enough to get me there with time to spare. Then I went out to the quidditch locker room and borrowed a broom, the fastest one I could find, which was Katie Bell’s. It was a bit tricky to fly the broom and stay under the cloak, but I managed. The next problem was to work out how to get there.” He paused and stared out the window again.

“Hedwig helped me out with that,” he revealed. “She flew up along side of me as soon as I got out of Hogwarts. She knew I was there even though I was under the cloak, even though she couldn’t see me. The two of us flew to London together.” He took a deep breath and sighed, a response that Hermione had come to identify as his remembering yet another fallen comrade. She wondered when and how he had lost Hedwig, but knew better than to interrupt him to ask.

“During that time I had a chance to think about what I was going to do,” he explained. “I knew I should get help, and it occurred to me that it could be a trap – Sirius might have been captured somehow and was being used to get to me. That wasn’t going to stop me, of course, but I knew I had to be extra careful. As soon as I got to the Ministry I sent off Hedwig with a message to Remus. Then I checked to make sure the cloak was still in place, hid the broom, and went in through the visitor’s entrance, which is disguised as an old telephone box. At that point I checked my watch. It was still a half hour *before* I’d had the vision.”

He turned back to face her. “Do you know anything about the Department of Mysteries?” Hermione shook her head, and Harry explained. “Well, it’s on level nine, down at the bottom. Almost no one ever goes in there, only the Unspeakables, so it made sense that it seemed empty in my vision. But when I got there it was completely deserted, so someone must have done something to clear it out. It was eerie, believe me.”

He turned away again, and in a low, far-off voice, continued. “Once I got off the lift, there was a single corridor leading to a plain black door. It was the same one I’d been dreaming about for months. That led to a large, circular room, all in black, with about a dozen black doors. There was nothing to tell them apart. And as soon as the door closed, the room spun around so there was no way to even tell which one you’d just come through. It took me forever to figure out. I kept trying the same doors over and over again.”

“You should have just marked each door you tried,” Hermione blurted out. Harry shot a wry look at her. “Sorry,” she said sheepishly.

“No, you’re absolutely right,” he admitted. “That would have saved me a lot of time.” He grinned at her. “See, I told you I needed you with me. Probably just as well you weren’t though,” he mused. “I’d have really freaked out if you’d been killed, or injured, once the fighting started.” Hermione appeared torn, acknowledging his concern, but wishing she’d been able to help him.

“Anyway, after I finally found the right one – it turns out that you just ask the room for the door you want, by the way – I went through a room that was filled with time turners,” he informed her. “I didn’t stop to look at them because by this point I was behind schedule, but I grabbed a small one and took it with me. See, I had a plan where I could use one in a fight, jumping back in time whenever things got dangerous. The one I had turned back an hour minimum, and I wanted one that could go back a shorter amount of time.”

Harry paused and took a breath. “Then, through the next door, was the Hall of Prophecies ...”

-oooOOOooo-

Harry whispered a silencing spell on his feet as he slipped through the door into a room filled with towering shelves containing rows of dusty glass orbs. He checked his watch again – according to when he’d had the vision, Voldemort should be torturing Sirius right now. Yet there was not a sound to be heard, nor any sign of movement anywhere in the cavernous space. Perhaps the dark lord also had a silencing spell in place.

Recalling that he’d ‘seen’ them in row 97, he crept quietly past the numbered aisles, working his way up from the 50’s through the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s. Just as he reached the mid-90’s he heard voices.

“How long will we have to wait here?” a man grumbled impatiently.

“If he floos here, it could be within the next half hour,” another replied condescendingly. “If he flies, three hours or more. Just stay ready.” Harry shuddered as he recognized the arrogant drawl of Lucius Malfoy, and realized that these must be Death Eaters. As he cleared the last aisle, he peered down the row and spotted a dozen shadowy, hooded dark figures.

“Just remember, we do not reveal ourselves until after he picks up the prophecy,” Malfoy hissed. “And no spells are to be cast until we have safely secured it from him. Are we all clear on that?” He stared in particular at one of the masked figures until it nodded, albeit reluctantly. “And furthermore, he is not to be killed or even seriously injured – that is a pleasure the Dark Lord reserves for himself alone.”

Harry ducked back and retreated a few rows to think. They were obviously setting a trap for him. The smart thing to do would seem to be to leave immediately and get the hell out of there. But he could not be certain that they hadn’t moved Sirius somewhere else. And he was curious about the prophecy they mentioned. What was so important about it that they’d gone to all this trouble?

Furthermore, Remus and the Order should be on their way. If Harry failed to alert them they could stumble into this trap. And he doubted that these Death Eaters would have any reluctance to use lethal curses on them. On the other hand, they were under orders not to harm *him* – so he had an advantage. That, combined with his cloak, and his time turner ...

A plan began to take shape in his head. He took out his newly acquired time turner and examined it. If he used his original one right now he'd be sent back to sometime during his flight here – that wouldn't do at all. He made his way back near the door, went down the first aisle, and briefly exposed his foot from under the cloak. Then he checked his watch and inverted his smaller time turner once.

He found himself back in the circular room. Swallowing his urge to offer advice to his other self, he waited motionless and in silence while the previous him tried several doors, including one that seemed to lead to a large amphitheater, before locating the correct one. With all the stealth he could manage, he followed through the door when it opened, and once more past the collection of time turners. He waited several minutes for the other him to clear the next door, then slipped through it and stepped aside into the first row, opposite of where he'd activated the time turner, and waited. After several long minutes passed he spotted the disembodied foot emerge and checked his watch again. Ten minutes. Good.

Now that there was once more only one of him present, he removed the cloak entirely and tucked it away inside his robes. Stepping out into the main aisle he gathered his courage and called out. "Sirius! Are you here?" As he expected, there was no answer. Slowly, taking his time to closely examine the row numbers, he repeated his previous trek past the shelves of globes – prophecies, he now realized, marveling at how many of them there were. Once he reached Row 97 he paused, and made a show of looking around in puzzlement. Once more he called out. "Sirius?"

Keeping one hand on his wand and the other on the time turner, he shrugged and made his way cautiously down the row, peering ahead and behind in evident confusion, searching for his captive godfather. At the other end he turned and retraced his steps, glancing at the dusty glass spheres and stopping to examine a few more closely. Then he spotted it.

S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D
Dark Lord
and (?) Harry Potter

After looking around once more, he took a deep breath and lifted the glowing sphere off the shelf. But nothing happened. Somewhat disappointed, he began to brush off some of the dust.

And then, from right behind him, a drawling voice said, "Very good, Potter. Now turn around, nice and slowly, and give that to me."

Harry stiffened, but resisted the urge to whirl to confront this apparent new arrival to the scene. He had a problem – three things to hold but only two hands. He drew the prophecy against his chest with one hand, covering his other hand which was inside his robes, holding the time turner between his thumb and forefinger while the other three fingers grasped his wand. He wanted to

flee immediately, but needed more information.

“Where’s Sirius?” he demanded as he turned around, his voice choking slightly with emotion. Fighting back his nerves he quickly added, more loudly, “I know you have him here somewhere!” By now more black shapes had emerged as disillusionment charms were cancelled, blocking both ends of the aisle and trapping him between them.

“I know you have him somewhere,” a high-pitched voice mocked, and the other Death Eaters laughed at his audacity and ignorance.

“Let him go if you want this,” he insisted, clutching the prophecy more securely. By now he was pretty sure that Sirius’s capture had been an illusion, and Malfoy’s next words confirmed it.

“It’s time you learned the difference between life and dreams, Potter,” he chided condescendingly. “Now give me the prophecy or we stop asking nicely and start using curses.”

Pretending to consider the offer, Harry raised up the grimy sphere to regard it more closely, while surreptitiously giving the smaller time turner inside his robes one twist.

He found himself back at the entry door again, further down the first aisle, as the time travel device returned him to a spot near his location of ten minutes previous. He quickly drew out his invisibility cloak and put it on before his previous self could turn around and catch a glimpse of him. Intellectually, he knew he wouldn’t, since he hadn’t, but moved with haste anyway. Now what to do?

He’d confirmed that his vision must have been a fake, but he had an urge to get some revenge on Voldemort and his Death Eaters for putting him through all this agony. And there was still the matter of the Order, who he’d hoped would be arriving soon. If they could manage to capture some of these evil wizards in the act, and expose them for what they really were, especially Malfoy ...

He stole quietly back to the area where the confrontation would occur, this time positioning himself down the side of the aisle opposite where he’d found the prophecy, a safe distance behind where the Death Eaters would appear. Then came the hardest part – waiting out the next ten minutes.

After what seemed like it must be more than that length of time, the Death Eaters appeared, between him and the former him. Although he couldn’t see what was going on, he could hear it all, his demands and Malfoy’s patronizing responses. He knew the exact moment when his previous self activated the time turner, from the uproar he’d left behind. Shouts of ‘Where’d he go?’, ‘He must have apparated!’, ‘How could he, the boy’s only fifteen!’, and ‘Well he must have done something!’ mixed in with general exclamations of disbelief. It was a perfect cover for him to cast some spells. He removed the cloak again, to maintain the ruse that he’d apparated to his new position.

“*Stupefy ! Stupefy ! Stupefy !*” he cast as quickly as he could. In the chaos, it took them several

seconds to locate him, and just before one of them cast the first spell in his direction he activated the time turner again.

This led to a half hour game of cat and mouse, which actually consumed less than three minutes of real time. It resulted in little more than frustration on both sides. For the Death Eaters, Potter would seem to apparate a short distance away, fire a few spells at them, then repeat the process. For Harry, he was making no progress, since each time he stunned a few, their comrades would just revive them.

It didn't take long to realize that the few spells he knew that were intended to be used against a human opponent – *Stupefy* , *Expelliarmus* , *Petrificus Totalus* , *Impedimentia* , and *Incarcarus* – were relatively benign, doing no lasting damage. He grimly resolved to learn more disabling spells, that would put an opponent out of action on a more permanent basis, or at least for a longer term. The reductor curse turned out to be useful for blowing up the shelves holding the prophecies, which injured some of his pursuers with flying debris. But he had no idea what effect, if any, it would have on a person, and he was reluctant to waste time and energy finding out.

On his last time around, he tried using the disarming spell followed with a summoning spell to get hold of their wands and break them. This met with some success, but there were just too many of them, and they were starting to figure out what he was doing. When a stunner flashed by his head, missing him by inches, he knew it was time to abandon this strategy. With his final turn of the miniature hour glass, he waited by the door rather than move closer to his foes.

When his penultimate self disappeared following the near miss of the stunning spell, he shouted out, “You’ll never get it from me!”, and bolted through the door. On the other side he paused to seal the access with a *Colloportus* , then took a second to consider his next move. It occurred to him that he should cover his theft of the additional time turner, as well as deny anyone else the opportunity to use his unique method of combat, so he destroyed the entire supply of time travel devices with a few well placed *Reductos* . Then he ran back into the circular black room and, once it stopped spinning, raced out again through another door that he hoped would provide him a place to hide until the Order arrived.

This time he found himself in the amphitheater with the stone benches. Down at the bottom was an ancient looking stone archway, with a tattered veil that fluttered slightly. Harry hurried down to the bottom and crouched behind the dais that supported the archway, out of sight of the doorway above.

With his invisibility cloak back over him he was certain he could stay undiscovered for at least ten minutes. Then, if they did get too close he could use his time turner to hop around the large open space, taking cover behind whichever bench he appeared at. In addition, there were multiple doors around the top of the room, giving him more options for escape. It wasn't a perfect plan, but it was the best he had at the moment.

While he waited, he enlarged a pocket in his robes so that the prophecy could fit inside, securing it and freeing up his hand so he could more easily use his wand and the time turner simultaneously. If he could hold out long enough, and the Death Eaters continued their frantic searching, the Order

could take them by surprise, rather than the other way around. And he knew that there were at least two or three Aurors in the Order; this could turn out extremely well for their side if some of these Death Eaters could be exposed and captured.

Sooner than he would have liked, one of the doors above opened and a group of Death Eaters burst through. After glancing uneasily at each other and the archway at the bottom, they began searching. "Check under every bench," a shrieking female voice called out from a different doorway. "He must be in one of these rooms!" Slowly but inexorably, the searchers began to make their way down toward his position. Harry tensed himself and got a firm grip on his wand and the time turner.

Suddenly, shouts came from outside the original entrance, and it blasted open. But these new arrivals were not wearing black cloaks and masks! The Order had arrived!

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione breathed a loud sigh of relief. The story had her on the edge of her seat with worry, even though she knew that Harry must have survived it. Her sigh abruptly broke off when Harry turned to face her with a look of anguish in his eyes.

"What happened?" she blurted out with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"Sirius was killed," he responded in a dull monotone. Hermione leapt to her feet and wrapped him in a consoling hug as he slumped against her. "Saving him was the reason I went there in the first place, and he ended up dying anyway," he moaned.

"I sat there and watched while he taunted his opponent, acting like the whole thing was a great lark," Harry continued morosely. "Then Bellatrix Lestrange killed him right before my eyes." He turned in Hermione's arms and stared out the window again.

"I tried to use the time turner to go back and save him, but it was no use," he revealed. "I'd seen him die, so I couldn't change it. Every time I tried to cast a spell, or throw something at her, or shove into her to knock her aim off, I was struck rigid. I couldn't move or do anything that might reveal my presence as long as my original self was still there. I could go through the doors into other rooms, and attack any Death Eaters I found there, but I was helpless in that room. After three or four tries I gave up."

Hermione tightened her arms around him again, trying to show as much support as she could. Harry shrugged and turned back to her. "Dumbledore had arrived during the battle and pretty much taken control, but not soon enough," he informed her bitterly. "Bellatrix somehow escaped and ran out the door after she killed Sirius. So the last time I used the time turner, I left the room and went up to the Atrium to head her off. I was going to make her pay!"

He turned away from her again and was silent for several long seconds. "I hid myself right across from the lifts and waited. Oh, how I wanted her to suffer! As soon as the grills opened and she ran out, I cursed her... with the *Cruciatus* curse."

Hermione's eyes widened but she didn't hesitate. She immediately realized that Harry needed to know that she didn't think less of him for using an Unforgiveable Curse. She moved up next to him and laced her fingers into his and gave his hand a squeeze of understanding. He turned back to her with gratitude and relief in his eyes. She hugged him again for good measure.

"It didn't work," he informed her. "She taunted me then, telling me I didn't have it in me to use that curse. You have to really *enjoy* causing pain for it to work properly. I've never even attempted one since, no matter how angry I got during a battle. I learned another lesson at that point – you only get one surprise shot in fight. You have to make it count."

Hermione nodded solemnly. Several times now during this story Harry had described something as a learning experience. It was the teacher side of him showing itself.

His tale wasn't finished yet. "She had the upper hand on me after that, and it was all I could do to dodge her curses, much less get one of my own off," he recalled. "If she hadn't been worried about hitting the prophecy, I never would have survived. Then Voldemort arrived and I knew I was dead, but right after that Dumbledore showed up. He immobilized Bellatrix without even batting an eye and then took on Voldemort. The two of them had the most amazing duel I've ever seen. But when Voldemort was about to lose he changed tactics. He took possession of me."

Hermione gasped, not at all expecting *that* development!

"It was the most incredible pain I've ever experienced, including the Cruciatus curse he hit me with the year before," Harry continued. "I truly wanted to die. I decided that death would be a relief at that point. And then I'd get to see Sirius, and my Mum and Dad."

Tears formed in Hermione's eyes at the thought of Harry wishing for death. She couldn't imagine being in a situation where dying was her preferred alternative, and hoped neither of them would ever be in that position again.

"Suddenly, he was gone," Harry revealed. "Dumbledore later explained that he couldn't tolerate thoughts of love, and when I started thinking about my loved ones that drove him out. And all of a sudden it was all over. Aurors came pouring into the room, Voldemort took Bellatrix and disappeared, even Fudge showed up and had to admit that Dumbledore and I had been right all along. It was a pretty hollow victory, though."

Hermione was about to suggest that they call it a night when Harry interrupted. "That's not the end yet," he told her. "Dumbledore made a portkey and sent me back to his office. While I was waiting there I remembered that I still had the prophecy in my pocket. I pulled it out and decided to hear what it had to say, since it had caused so much trouble. So I broke it open."

Hermione swallowed hard. She had a bad feeling about this – it was almost certainly not going to be anything good. She was right, as Harry confirmed when he recited the fateful words.

*"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ...
Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ..."*

*And the Dark Lord will mark him as equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ...
And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...
The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ...*

“Oh no!” Hermione cried as all the implications sunk in. “So that’s ... that was the reason for everything that happened to you. And ... and those initials, those were Dumbledore’s, right?” Harry nodded.

“The S.P.T. on the Prophecy was Professor Trelawny, who taught Divination here. You’re lucky that you never had to take her class. You would have hated it,” he assured her.

“But he knew!” she protested furiously. “Dumbledore knew all along and never told you!”

Harry shook his head. “Nope. I was furious – screamed at him for half an hour when he got back. Trashed his office pretty good, too.”

“Justifiably so, I should say,” she huffed indignantly. This elicited a small smile from Harry.

Hermione stared at him for several moments, waiting to see if there was anything else. When Harry didn’t respond, she once again transfigured the sofa into a bed. This time she pushed him in first, then crawled in behind him, snuggling up and wrapping her arms around him.

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As he allowed himself to relax and be enveloped in the softness of the young witch pressed up behind him, Harry marveled at how close, how connected he’d become to her in only three days since she’d re-entered his life. He’d never admitted that he’d used the *Cruciatus* against Bellatrix to anyone – not Luna, not Fleur, not even McGonagall. Never before in his life had he been so comfortable with another person, felt such acceptance, been shown so much ... love.

Love? That did seem an apt description of what was growing between them; what had first begun all those years ago and was returning now, stronger than ever. But was it platonic love, sibling love, or romantic love? Well, he never had a sister, but he was fairly certain that the emotion welling up in him right now wasn’t something one felt towards his sister. Harry rolled to his back so that Hermione was now snuggling against his side, and put his arm around her. Whatever it was, it sure felt nice.

That night Hermione look longer than usual to get to sleep. Her heart had stopped when Harry said ‘I love you’. Neither of them could deny that they were growing more attracted to each other but so far both had been ignoring it. With a sigh, she closed her eyes and resolved that tomorrow she was going bring the issue out into the open.

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I Need You

Pensieves and Plots - The Enemy Comes to Hogwarts

Chapter 5, Pensieves and Plots – The Enemy Comes to Hogwarts

When Harry opened his eyes the next morning, he discovered that this time he was spooned up behind Hermione with his arms wrapped around her, rather than the other way around. He was relieved to discover that neither his hands nor any other part of his body was doing anything that would get him into trouble. He tried to shift himself to ensure no problems of that sort would arise, without waking her, but she turned toward him as soon as he moved.

“How are you feeling this morning?” she asked gently.

“Good. Real good, actually,” he informed her. “You’re a very good listener. It helped to get some of that off my mind. I actually fell asleep pretty quickly and slept all night. I just now woke up.” Not wanting to dampen the mood he decided to change the subject. “And I was relieved to see that I hadn’t accidentally done anything inappropriate with my hands,” he joked, giving her waist a small squeeze with those appendages to illustrate their innocuous positioning.

Hermione looked away and bit her lower lip for a few seconds, then lifted her gaze to his with a challenging look in her eyes. “And what if I told you that it wouldn’t be inappropriate?”

Harry met her gaze. “Then I wouldn’t want it to be accidental.”

Hermione nodded, impressed with the maturity in his answer. She pulled away and sat up, folding her legs beneath her, while he scooted back and propped himself up on his elbows for the discussion that both knew it was time for.

“We seem to be moving in that direction,” Hermione began. “And I have to say that I find the idea appealing. But I have some thoughts I want to share with you on the subject. I haven’t really dated anyone seriously, so this is all new to me,” she admitted. “At Salem most of the dating was in groups rather than one on one. We’d all go out together; some would pair up and some wouldn’t. When I got back here and went to University I went out a few times, but was generally too busy trying catch up in my studies to spend much time on it. Plus, I knew I was going to come back into the wizarding world so there wasn’t any point in starting anything with a muggle guy.” She peeked up at him shyly and added, “And besides that, there was this boy I got to know when I was younger and every other guy I met suffered by comparison.”

Naturally, Harry blushed as soon as he realized that she was referring to him. But Hermione continued without a pause. “I did pay attention, though, and there were quite a lot of girls who were ... rather casual about intimacy, shall we say. They seemed to think nothing about meeting a guy at a bar and then spending the night with him. That’s not what I want; I think it should be with someone special.” Her implication was obvious.

Harry knew that now it was his turn to be equally forthright. “You’ve gotten some idea of what my life is like now,” he noted. “But you may not realize yet just how bad it is. I have almost no one I can talk to – I mean really share things with – and trust that they’ll keep my confidences. And as for dating?” He snorted mirthlessly, then continued. “But, to be honest, right now I need a friend more than I need a lover.”

Hermione’s face fell, and Harry felt a pang of regret, but he needed her to understand the situation fully before he could risk going down that path.

“You could have both,” she suggested softly. Harry nodded, somewhat glad to see that she wasn’t backing down.

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t want to risk the possibility of not ending up with either,” he countered.

“So where does that leave us now?” she wondered. Harry thought for several seconds, then grinned.

“How would you like to accompany me to a ball at the Ministry next week?” he asked.

Hermione’s response included a *very* enthusiastic hug.

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Over breakfast Hermione asked about the ball, and Harry explained that it was one of several social events that he felt obligated to attend each year, this one coming on the anniversary of his final victory over Voldemort. She then wondered who he usually took to these affairs and he divulged his rotation system with young witches who’d been in the DA, and accompanied him as a favor – Katie Bell, Susan Bones, Padma Patil, and Tracey Davis.

“Not Cho Chang?” Hermione wondered. Harry shook his head with a grimace.

“She was actually my date to the first one, but I quickly found out that she was expecting more out of it than I intended,” he informed her. “She was still hoping we’d become romantically involved.”

“You never did say how things turned out with her during your fifth year,” Hermione reminded him.

Harry shook his head again. “It didn’t work out,” he revealed. “I asked her out on two Hogsmeade weekends, the first one being on Valentine’s Day. Actually, on that one she hinted about it until I figured it out. But both times she got sick on that Saturday morning right before we were supposed

to go.” Hermione’s eyebrows rose in suspicion and Harry nodded.

“I found out later that each time Ginny had slipped her one of Fred and George’s products that made you violently ill – they intended them for students who wanted to skive off class,” he explained. “After the second time Cho got gun-shy; she figured that the twins were in on it too – they weren’t really – and no one wanted to go up against them, so she backed off. She still gave me longing looks during DA meetings, but whenever I approached her she said she was sorry, but she had other plans.”

Hermione declared that she had no idea that Ginny could be so devious, but Harry assured her that this was perfectly in character for the youngest Weasley. Then Hermione realized something else.

“One girl from each house,” she observed. “Is there some significance there?” Harry shook his head.

“That’s somewhat of a coincidence,” he asserted. “There were more than that at the beginning, and I did try to have all four houses represented, but not specifically one each. But Hannah Abbott started dating Neville, and Daphne Greengrass’s father had ideas about making it a more ‘permanent’ arrangement. He contacted me with an offer for a betrothal contract.” Hermione gave an involuntary gasp. Harry shot her a wry grin. “I politely declined, and never asked her again. She was mortified, and apologized profusely, but there really was no other option.”

“It seems there would be more Gryffindors.” Hermione couldn’t help herself, and persisted with more questions about her ‘competition’. She was trying to recall what these girls looked like at twelve or thirteen, and then extrapolate to how attractive they might be at the present time. Naturally, she’d known Katie the best, and was aware that the former Gryffindor chaser was good-looking and athletic. Padma, of course, was Parvati’s twin, and like her sister was considered one of the prettiest girls in their year. She didn’t know Susan Bones very well, except she thought she remembered that the Hufflepuff had been one of the first girls in their year to start developing a figure. She recalled even less about Tracey Davis, save for the fact that she was a Slytherin.

Harry shrugged. “Katie’s really the only girl in the year ahead of us that I got to know well. In our year there were only Lavender and Parvati at the end, and I already told you Lavender is with Ron and Parvati is with Seamus. Ginny made certain I never got close to any other girls in her year or lower.”

“And Ginny wouldn’t have been an option.” It was half question/half declaration. Harry only scowled and shook his head. Hermione would have liked to hear more explanation of the current state of his relationship with not only her, but the rest of the Weasley family, but refrained from pressing the issue. She then decided to drop the line of questioning altogether, but resolved to learn as much about these other four girls as she could.

When they finished eating and began discussing their plans for the day, Harry had an inspiration, and realized that he could accomplish several useful things with one trip. “I think it’s time we paid a visit to Diagon Alley,” he decided.

It was an eye-opening experience for Hermione. She knew that the populace of the wizarding world made a fuss over Harry whenever he went out in public while he was a student, but it was nothing compared to the way they treated him now. The reaction she witnessed as they made their way up the street from the Leaky Cauldron could best be described as total awe. She could feel how uncomfortable it made him, and she drew closer to him to show her support. Finally, one little girl gathered her courage and dashed forward for an autograph. Behind her, all her friends gasped and giggled, and Hermione realized that an entire generation of young witches had hopeless crushes on her best friend.

It brought back unpleasant memories of the beginning of her own second year and Gilderoy Lockhart. Of course, the adulation for Harry was perfectly justifiable, in contrast to that fraud! She stood back while Harry smiled reluctantly at his young admirer while he signed a slip of parchment. He also told her he looked forward to having her in his class when she came to Hogwarts, eliciting a furious blush.

When he finished, the girl scurried off to the group she'd been with and hid behind her mother, who Hermione now noticed was giving Harry an entirely different sort of look, indicating rather blatant interest of a more intimate nature. She instinctively took his arm, somewhat possessively, while they broke away from the small crowd that had formed, and entered a brightly decorated shop with the letters WWW over the door. She was caught by surprise, however, at the gasps that came from the onlookers at this simple gesture. As he held the door open for her, Harry teased that she'd probably just made the front page of the Daily Prophet. And it dawned on her that he probably wasn't kidding!

Harry had filled her in on the details behind Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, which had been the lifelong dream of the Weasley twins, Fred and George. They'd made him a minority partner in the joke shop in return for his giving them the necessary start-up capital, and after they'd died in the war their wills had left him with fifty percent ownership. Lee Jordan, Angelina Johnson, and Alicia Spinnet had received one percent each, with the rest going to the Weasley family. So Harry effectively had a controlling interest, although he left the day to day operation of the business to Lee and his two former quidditch teammates. He'd confided to Hermione that he was gradually transferring his shares to them over time, since they were the ones doing all the work.

Once inside the store, Hermione promptly decided that 'joke shop' was a gross misnomer. 'Prank emporium' might be more accurate. Bright colors abounded, with a large section at the front of the store devoted to photographs of spectacular fireworks available for purchase. Farther back the shelves were stocked with an assortment of goods that wiggled, bounced, popped, and shrieked for attention from the browsing customers, each crying out, 'Me! Buy me!' Along every wall boxes were piled to the ceiling, all stamped with the WWW logo. Another section of products masqueraded as something other than what they were – trick wands, deceptive clothing, joke quills, etc.

A cluster of customers parted before them, their conversations coming to a quick halt before murmurs and whispers sprang up in their place. 'Look, it's Harry Potter!' 'He's here!' 'No way!

Are you sure?' 'Who's with him?' 'Dunno.' Finally a trio of familiar faces emerged and Harry reintroduced Hermione to Lee, Angelina, and Alicia.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed that the customers made a show of going back to their shopping, yet each kept an eye and ear on Harry and Hermione. And Harry had spoken loudly enough so that everyone now was aware of her name, that she was an old friend of his, and that she was the new Muggle Studies professor at Hogwarts. She decided that it was a rather clever way to disseminate some useful information.

The two girls greeted her with hugs, taking a moment to look her over as they all noted how much they'd grown and matured since they'd last seen each other. Harry then went off with Lee and Angelina while Alicia showed Hermione around the shop. One item that caught her eye on a display near the counter was a box identified as *Patented Daydream Charms*, which were labeled as not being for sale to under-sixteens, presumably due to the potential 'adult content' of the daydreams.

"This must be extraordinary magic!" Hermione declared as she examined the fine print.

"Go ahead and try it for a few seconds," urged Alicia. "Just use the Preview setting." She took the pendant out of the box, made an adjustment and handed it to Hermione, who shot a quick look around the store, sat down behind the counter and slipped it around her neck.

Immediately she was transported to a deserted tropical beach, with bright sun, sand, palm trees, and gently breaking waves. She was wearing a bright blue string bikini and next to her, holding her hand and gazing at out at the water along with her, was Harry, similarly attired in a dark blue pair of swim trunks. As the dream unfolded, they turned to each other and embraced, with passion in their eyes. Then Harry reached behind her and untied the knot in her bikini top, while leaning in to kiss her ...

Suddenly the vision terminated, and Hermione found herself back in the joke shop, breathing heavily, her pulse racing.

"Oh my!" was all she could manage initially. Alicia grinned.

"Which one did you get?" she inquired. "The pirate ship, the jungle, or the deserted beach?"

"The beach!" she gasped. Then, making an effort to pull herself together, she asked, "How did you ever get Harry to agree to let you use him in these things?"

Alicia's eyes sparkled, and she leaned in closer and lowered her voice. "We don't. It's a generic setting. The customer's own imagination fills in the rest."

Hermione blushed bright red as she realized what she'd just revealed, but Alicia waved her off. "Don't worry about it," she explained. "More than half the witches we sell this to end up with Harry in their daydream, according to our surveys." She laughed. "If we could guarantee he'd be in all of them, we could double or triple the price!"

Somewhat relieved, Hermione continued her tour of the premises, ending up in a back room that was obviously a workshop. There she found Harry discussing a new product under development with Lee and Angelina. He looked up when she entered and took a few moments to explain that the twins had left plenty of ideas in their notebooks, but the trick was to make them work. Hermione looked at the page they were poring over, then sat down to study it.

“We’re getting the effect we want,” Lee explained. “But we can’t control the timing. Sometimes it lasts for only a few seconds, but sometimes it stays for hours.” Hermione nodded, concentrating on a specific spell string. The level of sophistication here, combined with the daydream charm she’d just experienced, was forcing her to reevaluate her opinion of the redheaded pranksters.

“What if you add a control rune, right here?” she suggested, pointing to a line of characters. Lee looked over her shoulder and scratched his head, muttering that it might work. Then he sidled up next to Harry.

“Do we have money in the budget to hire a consultant?” he whispered loudly. “And is she available?” Harry just smiled and reached out to give Hermione’s shoulder an affectionate squeeze.

“How’s Katie doing?” he asked Angelina, seeing that Hermione wasn’t going to be able to pry herself from the journal just yet.

“Great. Puddlemere is definitely in the playoffs, so she won’t be back for at least another week,” she replied, then frowned at him. “So stop putting it off and get yourself another date for the ball,” she chided.

“I already did,” he informed her with a satisfied grin. “I’m going with Hermione.”

Three heads shot up immediately and turned to the witch in question, who’d just finished her examination of the notebook of tricks and jokes, as she rose and joined Harry at his side with a shy smile. Each of them in turn teased her about whether she knew what she was getting herself into, and commenting that she’d need her Gryffindor bravery to survive the ordeal. Alicia added a knowing look that caused Hermione’s cheeks to turn pink.

After letting them have their fun for a minute, Harry announced that it was time for them to leave. Rather than battle his way back through the crowd outside that had likely grown even larger since they’d entered the store, he led Hermione to the adjoining office. There he explained that the larger businesses in Diagon Alley had a private floo connection to Gringotts, and with a flash of green fire they found themselves in the lobby of the goblin bank.

Instead of getting in line for a teller, Harry approached one of the desks and asked to meet with Fleur Weasley. The goblin there looked up at him and scowled, then assumed a more neutral expression when he realized who it was. He gestured to a nearby door, and Harry led Hermione into what turned out to be a small conference room.

A minute later the most beautiful woman Hermione had ever seen swept into the room.

“Arry, what brings you ’ere today?” the lovely blonde beamed at him as she embraced him and kissed him on each cheek. Hermione stiffened slightly, but managed to restrain herself, realizing that this was the French Triwizard champion that she’d read about, but more importantly who was one of Harry’s close friends. But even this subtle reaction caught the other witch’s eye, and she turned toward her expectantly.

Harry quickly introduced Hermione as an old friend and new Hogwarts professor, but Hermione could see the speculative look in Fleur’s sparkling blue eyes as she regarded the two of them. Harry either didn’t notice or chose to ignore it, and continued by asking the French witch about her family.

“We are all well, but my leetle Victoire misses her godfazzer,” she informed him with a smile.

“I was just there for her birthday,” Harry protested, but with a guilty expression on his face.

“Mon cheri, zat was three months ago,” she chided, laughing lightly as he winced and hung his head in surrender.

“So it was,” he acknowledged. “Well, it’s been busy since school ended, but I’ll try to get over there sometime one of these weeks. Tell her to pick a nice sunny day and we’ll go to the beach and find all the prettiest shells there.” Then he cocked his head back and regarded her questioningly. “As I recall, the last time I talked to her she told me she wanted a baby brother or sister,” he declared.

This time it was Fleur’s turn to be caught off balance. “Per’aps some day, but not just yet,” she responded with a blush. “But speaking of sisters, you know zat Gabrielle turned seventeen zis year. She wants to know when she can have her turn wiz you.” Harry groaned and shook his head in mock dismay. “You know zat Veela always get zere man,” Fleur teased.

“Well, then how did *you* end up with a loser like Bill?” Harry shot back with a smirk.

“Loser, huh?” a new voice sounded from behind them, causing Hermione to jump and turn in surprise. But Harry didn’t react, and she realized that he’d already known the older man was there, and the last taunt had been for his benefit as well. “I can still show a young upstart like you a thing or two, I’ll have you know.”

Hermione tried to keep from staring at their new companion. He was a ruggedly handsome man with the typical Weasley red hair, stylishly long and tied into a ponytail. He was also in what she supposed was the wizarding equivalent of a wheelchair – something like a sedan chair floating on a flying carpet. His legs, she noted, ended just above his knees.

“Ah, but ’Arry, when I met you, you were just a leetle boy,” Fleur sighed. She moved up next to her husband and wrapped her arms around his neck. “So zere was nozzing to keep me from falling in love wiz my Bill.” Hermione marveled at the light-hearted, almost flirty teasing that went back and forth between them, in what was an obviously well-practiced routine. It ended, finally, with them all sharing a companionable chuckle.

Harry next introduced Hermione to Bill, who regarded her thoughtfully, commenting that her name sounded familiar. She explained that she'd been good friends with Harry and Ron their first two years at Hogwarts, and the redhead grinned and now recalled that he'd heard about how brilliant she was. Harry added that she'd been the one to figure out that Slytherin's monster was a basilisk, and its mode of travel, which helped him to find the Chamber of Secrets and know what he was up against. Bill immediately turned serious, and declared that the Weasley family was in her debt, for her part in saving Ginny's life.

Harry promptly lightened the mood by joking that this was good because he had a favor to ask – he'd invited Hermione to accompany him to the Ministry's Victory Ball and was hoping Fleur might be willing to take her shopping to help her pick out something to wear. Hermione shot him a look of surprise. Planning ahead was supposed to be her thing, not his, but she hadn't even considered that aspect of the event. Of course it would require wizarding formal wear, and Fleur's assistance would be valuable indeed.

Fleur and Bill also reacted with surprise. "An old friend, you said?" the French witch queried accusingly. "Zat was quite devious of you, 'Arry Potter." For his part, Bill asked, just as Lee and Angelina had, if Hermione knew what she was getting into.

Hermione hesitated only briefly, then squared her shoulders and gave a firm nod. "I'm getting a pretty good idea," she asserted. "And I think it'll be worth it." Harry took her hand and gave it an appreciative squeeze, smiling at her warmly.

Fleur didn't miss any of this, and her gaze reflected her evaluation of this new player on the scene, and her potential as a partner for her good friend. Evidently, Hermione passed, because the blonde woman broke into a broad grin. "Despite your intelligence, you must 'ave been een Gryffindor," she decided. Hermione nodded with a shy smile of her own, and Fleur continued approvingly. "A Ravenclaw would 'ave taken much longer to zink about it."

Everyone had a good laugh from that cogent analysis and Fleur pulled Hermione aside to discuss their proposed shopping expedition. She suggested that they go to Paris as it offered two advantages – they had better fashions there than in London (her French heritage would never permit her to even consider otherwise, but Hermione agreed with her) and they would be less conspicuous (the English press would be all over them if they were spotted). Hermione unhesitatingly concurred.

After agreeing on a time and place for the women to meet on Saturday, the two professors took their leave. Instead of exiting through the main doors, Harry guided Hermione to a private passageway that Gringotts maintained for their preferred customers. They emerged in an uncrowded section of Diagon Alley and quickly made their way through the Leaky Cauldron into muggle London. A quick transfiguration of their robes and they could relax and blend into the midday throngs of the busy city.

Harry accepted Hermione's offer to buy lunch, and after a leisurely meal at a friendly pub, she suggested that they stop in to see her parents at their dental practice. The Grangers greeted him warmly as they recalled the first (and last) time they'd met him when he was just twelve years old.

He took the opportunity to assure them that he completely understood why they'd felt it necessary to remove Hermione from Hogwarts at the end of that year. This helped relieve them of some anxiety they'd had over how he'd react to the decision that had been a source of so much stress in their family.

Then Hermione revealed her ulterior motive for the visit, when she casually inquired if her mum would like to join her on a shopping trip to Paris. Her eyes sparkled as she explained why she needed a new ball gown. Once they got over the shock, both parents couldn't resist casting appraising glances in Harry's direction. They were not unaware of his stature in the wizarding world, and their daughter's eagerness to renew their former friendship.

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That evening, to Hermione's surprise, and slight dismay, Harry begged off on another round of his retelling of his life story, claiming a need for a break. And Hermione found herself, for the first time since she'd come back to Hogwarts, spending the night in her own bed.

It was somewhat disturbing how much that bothered her. After all, she'd been sleeping by herself for as long as she could remember – how could she have become so accustomed to sharing a bed with Harry in such a short time?

In his own room, Harry was having much the same thought. He was troubled by how much he was discovering he needed her. What if he did something to mess it up, and had to go back to the way things had been?

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Upon awakening the next morning, Hermione found a message in her sitting room suggesting breakfast in the Great Hall at 8:00. She quickly dressed and joined Harry, and the other professors who were in the castle that day, for an amiable meal. When the owls arrived with the morning's Daily Prophet, the pair learned that Harry's jesting prediction had been nearly correct – a story about Harry Potter visiting Diagon Alley in the company of a new young female Hogwarts professor was on page three, not page one.

Harry joked that it was probably because they didn't have a picture to go along with it, and predicted that there would be an interview request for her before the day was out. Hermione scoffed, but McGonagall informed her that she'd already received one!

Harry promptly announced that he intended to spend the day away from Hogwarts. Hermione was initially hurt by his seeming callousness, until McGonagall nodded her approval, explaining that if Harry was present for her interview the reporter and photographer would focus on him, not her. This way they stood a good chance of getting some publicity for their planned revision of the Muggle Studies course.

Both of them turned out to be correct. The reporter's first question was if Professor Potter would be joining them, and her disappointment was quite evident when informed that he was not

available. But she went through with the interview anyway, and politely took extensive notes on the changes they were making in the curriculum. She perked up considerably when Hermione revealed that Harry was helping her out, that the revision was his idea in the first place, and that her efforts had his full support.

Harry was back again for dinner, but once again delayed the continuation of his tale that evening, citing her need to get an early start the next morning. Hermione now suspected that she knew the reason for his reticence. He'd done something during that year that bothered him, and he was worried that she'd think less of him when she learned about it. She resolved to find a way to convince him that his fears were unfounded.

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Hermione was amazed to learn that famous fashion houses like Yves St. Laurent and Pierre Cardin had wizarding wear subsidiaries. But rather than take her to one of these, Fleur led her into a smaller, rather exclusive looking boutique. Inside, the proprietress instantly recognized her and welcomed her warmly. Fleur introduced the two Granger women to Madame Jeanette, who had been designing clothing for her family for years.

But when Fleur indicated to the silver-haired witch that Hermione was to be her customer that day, her enthusiasm dimmed perceptibly. Hermione couldn't really blame her; Fleur's near perfect body, hair, and face would be a much better showcase for her product than Hermione's rather ordinary looks. The woman promptly perked up, however, when Fleur informed her somewhat with some asperity that *if* they found anything suitable, their purchases that day were to go on Harry Potter's account, as Mademoiselle Granger was going to accompany him to the next week's Victory Ball.

Hermione began to protest about Harry paying, but Fleur whispered that he would get a *very* good price on whatever they bought. Hermione later learned what this really meant – Harry rarely paid for anything in the wizarding world; shopkeepers across Europe were only too happy to provide him with their wares free of charge.

She was fascinated with the magical boutique, which was far more elaborate in the way they dealt with their clients than Madame Malkin's had ever been. She realized that this was the difference between mass produced, ready to wear everyday clothing and custom tailored, individually created formal wear. They were escorted into a fitting room, a private parlor with racks of fabric, chairs, tables and several mirrors.

There, the first step was a complex spell that mapped her body and then created a perfect dressmaker's dummy with her exact proportions – a bit too perfect, perhaps, since it was essentially a three dimensional nude replica of her torso, including her exact skin tones and textures. At least the mannequin's nipples weren't hard; that would be even more embarrassing, Hermione thought. Probably because she hadn't been either chilled or aroused when the duplication spell had been cast. After all, it was rather warm in July in Paris. As for the other ... she felt her cheeks glow as she reflected that it was fortunate they hadn't made this shopping trip right after she'd viewed that daydream charm the other day!

Seeing her discomfort, Fleur assured her that the magical construct was only temporary and would disintegrate as soon as they walked out the door, so that only the four women present in the room would ever see it unclothed.

Next, Madame Jeanette brought out large books of pictures of different styles for her to choose from. A simple wand touch and it would appear on the dummy. Likewise with the fabric samples – another wand touch instantly transfigured the gown, and the same was true for colors.

A key decision to be made was strapless or straps, V-neck, straight neck, scooped neck, etc. Hesitant, Hermione asked Fleur what she'd wear.

“Usually strapless,” she replied promptly. “Except for ze times I was pregnant or nursing.” Next to her daughter, Mrs. Granger nodded knowingly.

“How much?” she asked the blonde French witch.

“Two full cup sizes,” she replied with a smile. “Eet was ze only time in my life I really needed ze support.” (She was not small-busted by any means, but Veela were naturally firm.)

“Same here,” the muggle woman agreed, inwardly amused at having something so simple in common with the gorgeous magical being before her. “Hermione’s father thought he was in heaven.”

By now Hermione had figured out what they were talking about and was blushing furiously. Before her mother got a chance to embarrass her further by speculating on how a future pregnancy might affect her own breast size, she asked what Harry’s other escorts wore. Fleur thought for a moment.

“Some of each,” she decided. “Katie usually goes strapless. Susan’s a lot bigger and always goes wiz wide straps and a V-neckline. Tracey’s done both. And Padma often wears a sari, which ’as a scooped neck.”

“What about Cho?” Hermione wanted to know. Fleur shook her head in disgust and stepped up to the table, flipping the pages in one of the books. She found an extremely revealing strapless gown and transferred it to the dummy.

Mrs. Granger gasped. “Hermione Jane, you are not going out in public wearing that!” Hermione wholeheartedly agreed. Half of her breast would be uncovered by the barely-there creation!

“How does that even stay up?” her mother wondered.

Fleur and Hermione shared an amused glance, and answered in unison. “Magic!”

She finally settled for a gown with thin straps and a V-neckline that showed a bit more cleavage than her mum would have preferred, but that Fleur and Madame Jeanette assured her was perfectly appropriate for the occasion. (Hermione didn’t want to risk any comparison with Cho.) The fabric and color combination she selected was a light, floaty material of periwinkle blue.

Just when she thought they were finished, with the ultimate mock-up of the formal gown arrayed before them for final approval, a wizard entered the dressing room, evidently summoned by Madame Jeanette. He was introduced as Jacques, another Delacour family friend who owned an exclusive jewelry store. He carefully studied the dressmaker's creation from multiple angles, nodding several times as he looked back and forth between the mannequin and Hermione.

“Diamonds and sapphires,” he suggested eventually. “For ze necklace and ze earrings.” He traced his finger along the V-neckline of the gown and looked to the two French witches, who nodded. Then he left the room. When Hermione realized what was going on, she was aghast.

“I can't let Harry buy something like that for me, no matter how much discount he gets!” she gasped in an aside to Fleur.

Just then Jacques returned, with a dazzling construction of silver and precious gemstones that made both Granger women's knees go weak. While he arranged it around the dummy's neck Fleur pulled the two protesting English women aside and explained that the jewelry would only be on loan, and this practice was customary for affairs such as these. Hermione and her mother realized that it was something like the BAFTA awards show, where designers provided their fashions to the stars in return for the publicity. (1) Here, in this world, Harry Potter was the equivalent of royalty, and wizarding fashion trendsetters would give their wand arms for the right to outfit him and his companion.

The three women decided to take full advantage of the trip and spend the day in Paris. At one point, while her mother was in a wine and cheese shop, Hermione got the chance she was looking for to ask Fleur about her relationship with Harry. Her French companion gave a fond smile, but assured the younger witch that she held only brotherly affection for the green-eyed wizard, pointing out that Harry had been only fourteen, and small for his age, when they'd met. Hermione persisted in wondering if that might have changed as they both grew older.

But Fleur was not interested in playing ‘what if’, telling Hermione that she believed in leading the life one was gifted with, not concerning herself with one that might have been. But she took the time to explain that if she hadn't met Harry when she did, she wouldn't have met Bill when she did. And if she hadn't become engaged to Bill, she wouldn't have become reacquainted with Harry, which was when they really began to get to know and respect each other. So despite their teasing of each other, there truly was little likelihood of them ever becoming romantically involved.

Now Hermione, on the other hand, had an opportunity now that she should seize while she had the chance, Fleur claimed. She was clearly hitting it off with Harry, and she didn't need to fret about their ‘lost years together’. Perhaps, if she had been at Hogwarts all seven years, they might have developed a brother-sister relationship and never reached this stage. It was impossible to know what might have happened – she might even have developed a romantic interest in Ron! Hermione scoffed at the possibility of that ever happening, given how their personalities clashed, but Fleur reiterated that one just did not know.

As for Harry, Fleur opined that he'd closed himself off so tightly that it would take a determined

effort to get him to open up and risk a romantic relationship. His past experiences in matters of the heart had not been good. She felt that it would be up to Hermione to take the initiative if anything were to happen.

Hermione pondered what she'd learned, and made a decision. It was time.

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Back at Hogwarts, Harry waited on the front steps of the castle. He'd done a lot of thinking the past two days, about what he really wanted in a relationship. Hermione had handled herself superbly in the pressure of their outing in Diagon Alley, better than he'd ever expected. And yet, he'd still backed off, reluctant to move things forward toward an actual romance. He'd become resigned to the fact that he'd never be able to find a woman who could look past his fame enough to really get to know him. But now, one who'd done exactly that had, as if by magic, reappeared in his life. Should he take that chance?

It was evening when she finally returned, and he went out to meet her as she walked up from the gate. She greeted him with a bright smile and a crushing hug.

"How was your shopping?" he asked eagerly. "Did you find something good?"

"Oh Harry, it was simply wonderful," she gushed, pulling back slightly. "The gown is so amazing and ..." she paused, and looked at him with shining eyes. "Thank you so much ... for everything."

And then she kissed him.

It was gentle, but firm. It was brief, and yet it seemed to linger indefinitely. It was unexpected, and yet not at all a surprise. It was a simple gesture of gratitude, but it was complex with subtle meanings and significance. It was a promise of a possible future.

When they broke apart Harry found himself at a loss for words. Hermione took his arm and led him toward the lake. "I think it's time we continued our conversation," she suggested gently. "Tell me about the next year."

"It doesn't end well," he warned, but did not put up any resistance.

"Don't worry," she assured him. "I'm not going anywhere."

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As they walked around the lake, Harry began to fill her in on the repercussions of his incursion at the Ministry. The first thing she wanted to know was what happened to Umbridge.

"McGonagall really did a number on her," he chortled. "She'd been keeping meticulous records all year, and remember, she'd made that deal with Rita Skeeter. As soon as the story came out that Dumbledore and I had been telling the truth all year, it was followed in the *Daily Prophet* by an exposé of all her misdeeds. Fudge wasn't likely to have survived the embarrassment in any case,

but that was the final nail in his coffin. She got sacked just before he was forced to resign.”

“And how about you?” Hermione asked hesitantly. “How did you cope with ... everything that happened?”

“Not well,” Harry admitted, shaking his head. “I was in a funk for several weeks. I had a bit of help. First Luna talked to me while I was wandering aimlessly around Hogwarts the last week of term. Her mother had died when she was younger, so she could relate. Then later that summer I talked to Tonks for a bit. She pointed out that quite a few people were at fault, not just me, and including herself. We all had to deal with it and move on – Sirius would want us to remember him fondly and not mope around.” Hermione nodded that she understood.

“And finally, there was Fleur,” Harry added.

“Fleur? How did she come into it?” Hermione wondered.

“I ended up spending most of the summer at the Weasleys,” Harry revealed. “And she was staying there too – she’d just got engaged to Bill. She didn’t get on too well with Mrs. Weasley, Ron went into something of a daze whenever she was around, and Ginny ... well, Ginny didn’t care for her at all. So she ended up spending a lot of time with me and ... well, we just clicked. Probably because we both had the problem of people not being able to look past our images and see a real person inside.”

Hermione realized that she’d heard about this from Fleur’s point of view that afternoon, as Harry continued. “She had trouble making friends, too. Guys generally went all stupid around her, and girls were jealous of her, and afraid she was going to steal their guys.” He grinned at her. “What was your first reaction when you met her?”

Hermione thought a moment, then shrugged. “I think I was mostly taken aback by how beautiful she was.” She looked up at Harry and saw his grin widen.

“You also tightened your grip on my arm,” he informed her with a smirk, and she felt her face turn red in the fading sunlight. She’d hoped he hadn’t noticed that. “Don’t worry about it,” he reassured her with a squeeze of her hand. “It happens all the time with her; she’s used to it.”

“Anyway,” he continued. “She was the first girl I’d found that I could really talk to ... since you’d left, I mean. But it was just my luck – she was older, already out of school, and engaged to boot. So I still didn’t have anyone like that at Hogwarts.”

“What about Luna?” Hermione suggested.

Harry’s eyes darkened a bit as he gazed out towards the western sky where the sun was approaching the horizon. “Luna was sweet, and kind, and the most loyal person you’d ever meet, but she wasn’t really someone you could talk to. With Luna you mostly listened. But not for too long at one time, because after a while you wondered about her sanity.”

He turned back to face Hermione and shook his head. “She always said things that sounded so absurd. She eventually turned any conversation into a discussion of creatures that you weren’t sure even existed, most of which were invisible. And then there were her opinions – you know those tabloid papers that specialize in farfetched conspiracies?” Hermione nodded – her parents occasionally vented about ‘those nutters’. “Well, Luna’s father published the wizarding equivalent of one of those, called *The Quibbler*,” Harry revealed. He managed a small, fond smile. “She would have driven you absolutely batty.”

“So, I assume she was a Hufflepuff?” Hermione guessed. Harry shook his head.

“Nope, a Ravenclaw,” he revealed. “She was really a one of a kind.”

They continued their walk in silence for half a minute, as Hermione mentally filed this curious Luna character away in her mind. From the way Harry was reacting, she was likely yet another friend of his who he’d lost during the war. She waited patiently for him to return to his tale.

“So anyway, what I really needed at that point was someone to talk about the prophecy with,” Harry pointed out. “But just as I was getting close enough to Fleur where I felt comfortable unloading on her, the summer was over. So I never told her.” A wry smile crossed his face. “It was probably just as well – we were spending so much time together by that point that some of the Weasleys were starting to get suspicious. Ginny was particularly put out.”

His smile broadened into a grin. “And then on the last day of summer holiday Fleur gave me a kiss on the cheek, and told me that I needed to find a girlfriend that year in school,” he told her with a chuckle. “Ginny was fit to be tied. As far as she was concerned, I already *had* a girlfriend – her! She blew up, and she’s pretty much hated Fleur ever since. I think she still blames her to some extent for us not being together. At any rate, she still refuses to be in the same room as Fleur when the Weasleys get together.”

Hermione had come to a realization – Harry’s first criteria for getting close to a girl was that she *not* act like a fan-girl. Fleur had passed that test, but Ginny never did. She wondered if the redhead might have been more successful if she’d ever discovered that important fact.

Deciding to change the subject, she asked him how he’d done on his OWLs. Harry informed her that he’d received O’s in DADA, Transfiguration, and Charms thanks to the extra studying he’d done that year, and mostly E’s in the other subjects. He specifically mentioned his E in potions, saying it would become important later. That piqued her curiosity, so he next related how Dumbledore had used him to persuade an old professor to come out of retirement.

“That was rather manipulative of him,” Hermione commented disapprovingly.

“You have no idea,” Harry muttered, shaking his head.

Hermione could sense that there was more to the story. “At least you got a decent Defense instructor, though ... didn’t you?” She trailed off at the dark look on Harry’s face.

“Did you notice that he never actually said it was for Defense?” he pointed out with some vexation.

“Well, what subject, then?” she wondered.

“Potions.”

“But ... oh no!” she gasped, connecting the dots.

Harry nodded grimly. “I’d resolved after the fiasco at the Ministry to think things through more thoroughly and try not to make assumptions. But that was exactly what Dumbledore wanted me to do – assume Slughorn was going to take over Defense Against the Dark Arts. But he was actually the former Potions professor – it turns out both the Weasleys and my parents had him as a professor. He also liked to befriend promising or well-connected students; he had a group he called the ‘Slug Club’. That’ll come up again later in the year,” he added in an aside.

“So, after thinking about it for a bit, I asked specifically if he was going to be the Defense Professor, and Dumbledore had to admit that he’d given that job to Snape,” Harry revealed. “I didn’t react well to that at all, and it pretty much undid all the good feelings he’d generated by springing me from the Dursleys so quickly. He, of course tried to defend Snape’s teaching, and I challenged him – I bet him that I’d get a better score on my Potions OWL than I’d ever received on any of Snape’s exams. I was right, too, and he knew it. He eventually compromised by allowing us to keep the DA going as a defense study group. His only condition was that we’d open it up to more students, including Slytherins, but I might have done that anyway. I still used McGonagall’s magical oath, which she modified to be a pledge that they didn’t support Voldemort in any manner.”

He shrugged. “The Slytherins who hated me didn’t want to join under any circumstances. From our year only Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis ended up attending regularly. Blaise Zabini came a couple of times but then dropped out. The other seven either tacitly or overtly supported Voldemort. As it turned out, Draco already had taken the Dark Mark.”

Harry then moved on to the year itself, calling it the closest thing he ever had to a ‘normal’ year. McGonagall had made him the Gryffindor quidditch captain, which along with running the DA and Dumbledore’s promise of private lessons led him to decline her additional offer of the Prefect’s badge. He allowed that in hindsight he’d rather he’d taken the prefect position and let Ron handle quidditch – there were too many hurt feelings among players who didn’t get picked, not to mention all the second guessing when things didn’t go perfectly in every match.

He briefly described the quidditch tryouts, and the appearance of a large seventh year named Cormac McLaggen who was an aspiring keeper. He and Ron had battled to a draw, so Harry had provisionally put both on the team, declaring that whichever one was doing best in practice the week before a match would play.

As it turned out, well before the first match McLaggen had so alienated everyone on the team with his arrogant, patronizing attitude that he’d been tossed off. But Ron had felt betrayed, and his

and Harry's friendship had been further strained. Harry then disclosed that he'd consequently relied more heavily on Katie for advice on coaching the team, leading to a closer relationship with the senior member of the team.

Other noteworthy items included the new title, 'Chosen One' that the press had tagged him with (Hermione made appropriate murmurs of sympathy) and an unusual potions book. Harry hadn't realized until the first day of class that Slughorn would accept an E on the Potions OWL, where Snape required an O, and so had to borrow a book when he'd suddenly found himself taking the class.

He extolled the virtues of this second-hand treasure to Hermione; how it contained notes in the margins that improved the recipes for all the potions, and also contained quite a few useful spells that the original owner had apparently created. It had even won him a prize on the first day for creating the best Draught of Living Death potion in the class – a vial of *Felix Felicis* potion.

"You'd have loved it!" he declared. (2) Hermione wasn't so sure, but kept that to herself. She did inquire about the good luck potion, but Harry just grinned and told her it would come up again later.

"So," he concluded as they reached the far side of the lake and began the return leg. "Nothing much out of the ordinary that year, except for the annoyance of Slughorn pestering me about his Slug Club, my private lessons with Dumbledore ... and oh yeah, Malfoy plotting to kill Dumbledore."

This revelation had the intended effect, eliciting a gasp from Hermione, followed immediately by a punch on his arm. "You prat!" she chided, before sighing resignedly. "OK, tell me about Malfoy first, then the others.

Harry recounted Malfoy's failed attempts to carry out the task that had been assigned him by Voldemort himself. The first one involved *Imperius* a student into taking a cursed necklace into Hogwarts during the first Hogsmeade weekend. As it turned out, it was Katie Bell, who Harry had invited to accompany him (taking Fleur's advice about dating to heart). That effort had failed, but Katie had nearly died, and ended up having to go to St. Mungo's for months to recover. Due to the seriousness of the situation, Hermione refrained from teasing him about his date.

She could not resist a few chuckles over the next episode, which started with Ron accidentally eating some love-potion laced cauldron cakes that had been given to Harry by an admirer named Romilda Vane. That hadn't turned dangerous until after Ron had been cured by Slughorn and they'd celebrated by opening a bottle of mead he had left over from Christmas. But the beverage had been laced with poison, and Ron had been the first to drink it. Harry had saved the day again by grabbing a bezoar and shoving it down Ron's throat.

"I don't really see how either of those attempts could have been expected to work," Hermione pointed out after some thought. "Especially the first one. How would the necklace even have reached Dumbledore?"

Harry shrugged. “I wondered the same thing. At the time, I thought maybe I was the target. It certainly made me think twice about asking another girl out for a while, since it had nearly gotten Katie killed. I finally concluded it was a diversion from Malfoy’s real attempt, but I never knew for certain.”

As for the Slug Club, Harry claimed that he’d mostly managed to avoid going. His first experience had been on the Hogwarts Express on the way to school, when Slughorn had invited him and Neville, along with a few other students, to join him in his compartment. Then there were weekly supper meetings. He did attend the Christmas party, taking Susan Bones as his date this time.

He confided that he’d noticed that Susan, despite being the niece of Amelia Bones, longtime head of the DMLE, had never been invited to join the Slug Club. He’d concluded that it was because Madame Bones had been murdered by Voldemort early the previous summer, and Slughorn hadn’t wanted to risk associating himself with her niece. So Harry was making a point by inviting her.

“And that was the only reason?” Hermione teased. Harry did admit that Susan was also a very nice girl, a loyal DA member, and filled out her robes rather fetchingly. Hermione allowed herself a satisfied smirk, and Harry rolled his eyes at her antics.

“And what did Ginny have to say about you dating two other girls?” she queried as her smirk grew broader. But Harry grinned back.

“Nothing, actually, except for a lot of glaring,” he responded. “See, she evidently decided on a change of tactics after Fleur’s comment. She got herself a different boyfriend, probably to make me jealous. She took up with Dean Thomas that term. So she really couldn’t complain, not out loud anyway. And Katie, since she was good friends with Fred and George, wasn’t afraid of her. Susan could take care of herself as well.”

Harry rolled his eyes as another memory came to him. “Ginny made sure that I saw her and Dean together too,” he added. “There was this one time when I came across them in a deserted corridor groping each other. Unfortunately though, at least from her perspective, Ron was with me at the time. So the two of them ended up in a blazing row while Dean and I got out of there as quick as we could.”

Hermione chuckled. “OK, back to the Slug Club,” she decided.

Harry shrugged. “Not much more to tell,” he declared. “Except that Malfoy was definitely *not* invited to join. His humiliation almost made the whole thing worth it. I had to put up with the nonsense at least a little because I needed something from Slughorn. And that brings us to the next part of the story – my so-called special lessons from Dumbledore.”

Harry spent the rest of the walk back to the castle filling Hermione in on the year-long series of meetings with the headmaster, which turned out, he noted with some disgust, to be not much more than a personal history/psychological profile of Voldemort, consisting almost entirely of viewing a lot of pensieve memories.

Hermione was horrified at his revelation of the dark lord's soul splitting and creation of horcruxes, and even more amazed, as well as revolted, when she learned that one of them had been the diary that had caused them so much trouble back in second year.

She expressed surprise at hearing that another one, a ring, had severely injured the headmaster, blackening and withering one of his hands. But she was even more astounded that the learned old wizard, reputedly the only person Voldemort feared, hadn't taught her friend a single spell or attack strategy during all that time!

"He did show me one thing, during our last lesson," Harry admitted, albeit grudgingly. "I'd been getting frustrated at the same thing, so I insisted that he at least teach me the spell for detecting the things, and tell me how he'd destroyed the one in the ring." Hermione's eyes lit up as she turned to him, eager to hear the closely guarded secret, likely known by only one or two other people in the world.

Harry did not disappoint her. "He stabbed it with the Sword of Gryffindor." A soundless 'Oh my!' formed on her lips as he explained how the enchanted blade had absorbed the destructive power of basilisk venom when he'd used it during their second year.

"Well, that was certainly worth knowing, at least," she commented once she got her voice back.

Harry nodded solemnly. "It definitely came in handy the following year," he agreed.

They walked along together in silence for a time before he sighed and turned to her. "And that brings us to the end of the year ... the day Dumbledore died."

Hermione's arm entwined with his as her brown eyes locked on his green ones. "There is a particularly painful part to this, isn't there?" she asked softly. Harry nodded, transfixed by her warm, accepting gaze. "Then wait a few minutes until we can get properly situated," she instructed.

Harry followed her lead as they entered the castle and made their way to his quarters. There she asked him what he customarily wore to bed during the summer. His cheeks turned pink as he informed her that on warm nights it was just a pair of shorts. She nodded and told him to get ready, and she would return shortly.

When she reappeared in his room she was attired in a lightweight summer sleep set consisting of a pair of pajama shorts and a loose tank top that left a patch of bare skin showing at her waist as she raised her arms to take the hair clips out of her hair. Then she entered his bedroom and climbed into his bed, beckoning him to join her.

"What are you doing?" he asked, once he got over his astonishment at her boldness.

"Demonstrating to you that I meant it when I said I was staying with you no matter what," she replied unhesitatingly. "You need me."

Harry nodded and got in beside her. He stretched out on his back and she snuggled into his side as he wrapped an arm around her. He caught his breath as their bare legs intertwined, fighting to keep his thoughts on the matter at hand, which was completing the tale of sixth year. Or, at least he thought it was. This was completely uncharted territory for him, although he had to admit that the exploration of it was not at all unpleasant! Hermione waited patiently until she sensed that he was comfortable with their position, and then prompted him to continue his tale.

Hermione listened in rapt silence as Harry first revealed what Draco Malfoy's actual plan had been – to use a linked pair of vanishing cabinets to smuggle Death Eaters into Hogwarts. He'd been using the Room of Requirement all year, right under everyone's noses, to bring his plot to fruition, culminating on the night Harry and Dumbledore left the castle to search for a Horcrux.

Harry, though, had been suspicious that something was up, and had requested that his most trusted DA members patrol the castle to keep an eye out for whatever Malfoy was planning to do. He even passed around his bottle of *Felix Felicis*, and everyone had taken a sip except for Ron. At Hermione's curious glance he chuckled and explained how he had pretended to give Ron some before the first quidditch match of the year, and Ron had performed superbly. Thus, by his fractured logic, he didn't need any this time either. Unfortunately, Harry added as his face darkened, Ron had consequently been severely injured in the confrontation that ultimately occurred, the only one in the DA to receive more than a few scratches. It had taken him weeks to recover.

Harry next recounted his and Dumbledore's journey to a cave by the sea, and their harrowing retrieval of a locket from a basin in the center of an underground lake teeming with inferi, made possible by Dumbledore's willing ingestion of a vicious poison which filled his mind with visions that left him trembling in terror. And Harry's subsequent successful side-along apparation to bring himself and a greatly weakened Dumbledore back to Hogsmeade, only to be confronted by the horrifying specter of the Dark Mark glowing its deathly green visage as it hovered over the Astronomy Tower.

His voice lowered almost to a whisper as he told of flying on borrowed brooms up to the tower, only to be petrified by Dumbledore and forced to watch helplessly beneath his invisibility cloak as Malfoy disarmed the headmaster, followed by more Death Eaters who burst out onto the Tower and began mocking the incapacitated but still amazingly calm and collected old wizard.

Until Snape arrived and spoke the words of the killing curse. *Avada Kedavra*.

Hermione fought back a sob as she felt the tension in Harry's body, and the look of anguish on his face. Somehow, though, she was aware that as awful as that scene had been, it was not ultimately what was causing him such distress. She reached up and lightly stroked his cheek, wordlessly offering her encouragement and support. After a long moment he continued ...

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As Dumbledore's body, like a great rag doll, toppled over the edge of the tower, Harry suddenly found himself free to move again. Acting without conscious thought, he tore off his invisibility

cloak and tucked it inside his robes even as he chased after the last of the Death Eaters disappearing through the door. He had only one thought – catch Snape and Malfoy and make them pay!

“*Stupefy! Incarcerus!*” Before the dark robed man ahead of him had even hit the floor, Harry hurtled him and raced down the stairs, summoning, catching, and snapping his wand as he ran. One down.

He emerged into a corridor that more resembled a battleground. All around him DA and Order members battled more Death Eaters. Thankful that everyone he could identify was still alive and relatively unhurt, he dodged through the chaos, throwing blasting hexes at the two largest Death Eaters as he passed through. But by now, Snape and Malfoy were almost out of sight.

He rounded another corner and just missed getting hit as a streak of red light flew past his head. Ducking back, he spotted one of his shortcuts that would take him to the Entrance Hall. Realizing that the fleeing Death Eaters would need to get outside the Hogwarts gates before they could apparate away, he cursed his lack of foresight. If he had simply grabbed one of the brooms they’d just flown up to the Astronomy Tower on a few minutes earlier, he could have easily headed them off. But that gave him another idea.

Just outside the Entrance Hall he pushed aside Ernie MacMillan and another Hufflepuff who, curious about all the noise, had wandered up from their common room, and shouted a hurried apology as he raced for the main doors. Out on the steps he caught sight of his quarry again, running across the grounds headed, as he’d suspected, for the gates. Taking careful aim, he let fly with the spell with which he was most proficient. “*Expelliarmus!*”

To his grim satisfaction, Draco’s wand flew from his grasp, but before Harry could summon it he was hit from behind by a bludgeoning curse and went sprawling. He quickly realized that he must have passed up some of the Death Eaters with his shortcut, and he was now in the precarious position of being in between two groups of enemies. It was time for his alternate plan.

Reaching into his robes, he gave the smaller of the two time turners he wore around his neck two quick twists, having worked out that everything that had just occurred had taken no more than twenty minutes. An instant later he found himself back in Hogsmeade.

With a smoothness born of constant practice, he whipped out his invisibility cloak and covered himself, so as not to be spotted by his previous self and Dumbledore. Then he forced himself to calm down and take a minute to think, and plan out his next series of moves.

His first priority, he decided, was to find out for certain what had happened to Dumbledore. It was possible that the killing curse had missed, and that the blast had knocked him off the edge of the tower. Unlikely, but still possible. After that, there would still be time to intercept Snape and Malfoy before they could escape. And make them pay for the unspeakable crime they’d committed!

Now resolved to a course of action, he ran through the massive gates and summoned his Firebolt,

then silently streaked up toward the Astronomy Tower, staying below the level of the battlements. Once there he hovered, listening again to the end of Dumbledore's conversation with Malfoy, and the taunts and jeers of the Death Eaters. When he heard Snape's entrance, he moved directly below where he'd determined that Dumbledore was, and braced himself.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Harry clenched his teeth, his anger still threatening to overwhelm him, but a second later he caught sight of the dark shape of the headmaster's body silhouetted against the sky, and moved to intercept it. With a jarring thump he caught it, then regained control of his broom and guided it to the ground at the base of the tower.

As he'd expected, his hopes were in vain. It had happened just like he'd witnessed the first time. Dumbledore, the greatest wizard of his generation, was dead. Carefully, he laid out his headmaster's unmoving form and straightened his spectacles on his face. Then he looked around until he spotted the wand that Draco had sent flying off the tower with his initial disarming spell, and retrieved it.

To his surprise, it throbbed in his hand with barely suppressed power. Putting that intriguing observation temporarily aside, he remembered the horcrux that had been their original goal of the evening's journey, and fumbled through Dumbledore's pockets until he found it, a simple gold locket. He tucked it away in his own pocket as he heard the clamor of voices from the castle entrance. He had perhaps two, no more than three, minutes until his quarry reached the gates.

He knew he could take out Snape and Malfoy if he caught them by surprise, but wished he had some backup for the rest of the Death Eaters. Then it came to him. “Dobby!” he called out softly. The previous year the excitable house elf had soundly berated him (that is, he had scolded him in that polite, formal way that servants worldwide admonished their employers) for not taking him along to the Department of Mysteries. His elfin friend immediately appeared, having been waiting anxiously for this summoning.

Harry quickly gave him his instructions – let Snape and Malfoy go, wait until his other self was knocked down, then stop the Death Eaters behind him ... by any means necessary. Dobby nodded fiercely and disappeared.

Harry next disillusioned himself and flew up and over the outer walls and toward the massive gate from the outside. Then he dismounted, still disillusioned, and got into position. What to do? If he captured the two murderers, they would likely be sent to Azkaban, but what were the chances that they would subsequently escape? With Dumbledore's death, probably quite high. In fact, if Voldemort succeeded in taking over the Ministry, they might even be released.

A loud squawking caught his attention. It was a hippogriff, *Witherwings*, the one Hagrid had acquired to replace *Buckbeak*, and it was now attacking the fleeing pair of Slytherins. (3) Harry made his decision. He would use Dumbledore's wand, just in case someone thought to check his afterward. And in addition, it would be poetic justice.

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Harry fell silent and the witch in his arms waited for a few seconds, then spoke in a soft, calm voice.

“You killed them.”

“I killed them,” he affirmed. “Cutting curses. They bled to death.”

Hermione knew that Harry desperately needed an affirmation of her support. This was what he’d been so worried about telling her. She remembered her grandfather, who had fought in World War II. He’d had to kill enemy soldiers, but he was most certainly not a bad person. She tightened her grip on Harry.

“Good,” she declared. Harry shot her a sharp look of surprise. “You were in a war, Harry,” she insisted. “That’s what soldiers have to do to the enemy.”

The look of relief on his face melted her heart. She leaned up and gave him a gentle kiss. “How can I convince you that I’m not going to leave you?” she demanded.

“You’re here right now,” Harry replied with a sigh of contentment. “That’s pretty convincing.”

Then he kissed her.

It was gentle, but firm. It was brief, and yet it seemed to linger. It was a simple gesture of gratitude, but it was filled with significance. It was a promise of a possible future.

After they broke apart she nuzzled her forehead against his cheek. “Is there anything else?” she asked.

Harry shook his head. “Not much. I told Witherwings to fly far away and not come back, so if they did think he did it, he wouldn’t be captured. I left the bodies there and went back onto the grounds, banished my Firebolt back to the quidditch locker room, and found Dobby and Hagrid standing guard over the other Death Eaters. I stunned and bound them, then went back to Dumbledore’s body. Three days later they buried him in the tomb by the lake.”

Hermione nodded and snuggled up against him. “And by the way,” he concluded, “The horcrux was a fake.” She hissed in surprise, but then relaxed. That story could wait.

She rolled onto her side, facing away from Harry, and urged him up against her back in a spooning position. Then she took his hand and pulled his arm across her stomach so that he was holding her tight, but at the same time she slid it under her top. To his amazement, she then moved it higher up, until it nestled up against the bottom of her breasts, making just the slightest contact.

Harry understood. She trusted him. She was ready to move their relationship forward. And she was allowing him to set the pace. He gave her ribs a gentle squeeze and nuzzled his mouth through her hair, laying a soft kiss on the back of her neck. Then they both closed their eyes.

Hermione felt herself warmed, not only by Harry's cozy embrace but by an inner glow of contentment and satisfaction. She considered uttering those three special words, but there would be another time for that.

“Goodnight, Harry,” she murmured. “Sleep well.”

He already was.

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I Need You

The Final Quest, Part I

Chapter 6, The Final Quest, Part I

Harry woke the next morning from the best sleep he'd had since ... well, since he could remember. And he knew it was all because of the wonderful witch lying beside him. He felt refreshed, lighthearted, and just so relaxed – like a tremendous burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

Hermione had moved away from him a bit, although their legs were still touching and her hand was resting on his arm. She was on her back, slightly turned toward him. And her tank top was enticingly loose. Harry considered the unmistakable invitation from the night before – should he accept? He was well aware that he could have had similar offers from a good percentage of the available witches in the United Kingdom over the past five years. (And there had been a few actual ones that had been quite explicit!) But he had never been the slightest bit tempted to take any of them.

He was definitely tempted by this one. On the other hand, it wouldn't be very gallant to do it while she was asleep!

He rolled to his side, propping himself up on one elbow. With the other hand he lightly touched her bare shoulder, then ran his fingers down her arm. He noticed her lips curl into a smile, and took that as a positive sign. Next, he moved his hand down to her stomach and began stroking back and forth, softly, but firmly enough not to tickle. Slowly, deliberately, he moved it beneath the bottom edge of her top and allowed the back of his knuckles to graze against the lower part of her breasts.

Hermione had awakened, but kept her eyes closed, hoping to prolong as much as possible the overwhelming feeling of comfort and security that she got from sleeping next to Harry. When he began his ministrations, she allowed a smile to escape, wanting to encourage him to continue without scaring him off. She had to force herself to keep breathing – the urge to hold her breath was so strong – and her pulse quickened more the bolder his activity grew. When he finally made the first intimate contact, she moaned softly.

“Mmm. That feels nice,” she whispered. Harry let out a breath that neither of them had realized he'd been holding, causing her smile to broaden. Pushing forward, he extended a single finger and traced the circumference of one her breasts, intending to gradually work his way in toward the center.

Unfortunately, with excruciatingly bad timing, Hermione's exquisite, unfailingly dependable brain chose this exact moment to remember something important she'd meant to tell Harry last night.

“Mum and Dad have invited us over for dinner today.”

Harry's hand flew back as though it had been burned. Hermione's eyes shot open and she inwardly cursed herself with language she'd never utter out loud. The scene would have been comical if it had occurred in a film, but neither of them felt like laughing just then.

"Harry, it's all right," she tried to reassure him as they both sat up in the bed. That statement could have been interpreted in two ways, and both would have been correct. Harry's face was bright red, and Hermione's was a bit flushed as well. She reached out and took his hands in hers.

Deciding to focus on the less intimate issue first, she continued. "It'll be fine, they both like you. There's nothing to worry about."

If she weren't trying so hard to ease his anxiety, she might have chuckled at the thought of the man universally acknowledged as the most powerful and confident wizard in the country cowering at the thought of spending the day with his lady friend's parents.

"What if your dad asks if I've been sleeping with his daughter?" he blurted out. This time she did permit herself a smile, understanding the juxtaposition of the two activities in his mind.

"Just laugh it off," she suggested with a shrug, scooting closer to him. "I'll be there so let me answer, since it's really me he'd be asking about." Before Harry could raise the alternative scenario – what if she wasn't there – she continued. "And that's a very personal question. So he'd never be so rude as to ask you to reveal such personal information about me behind my back." Harry wasn't so convinced of that but didn't contradict her aloud. "Besides, Mum will have threatened him to be on his best behavior," she finished with a grin.

Then she took his hand and brought it up to her breast, pressing it back into place. "Harry. It's OK." This time the thin cotton of her tank top provided a layer of separation, but her message was clear.

Sensing his acquiescence, Hermione maneuvered herself so that she was sitting across Harry's lap, her head leaning on his shoulder, and with her own hand coming to rest on his bare chest. She was quite pleased that his hand remained where she'd put it even after she let go of it. He chose to take the opportunity to explore the contours of this heretofore restricted area, ending with a gentle squeeze.

After a period of contented silence, Harry spoke again, requesting that they wait a few days before he concluded his recitation of the events of the final year of the war. Hermione agreed, aware of his need to regroup and recover from the emotional strain of having to relive the horrors of the war he'd been forced to fight at just seventeen years of age. Agreed, that is, as long as it was understood that she no longer needed that excuse to spend the night with him. Harry pretended to think about it for a minute before Hermione poked him in the ribs and shot him a glare. He grinned back at her and declared his enthusiastic support for the idea.

She did have a follow-up sixth year query though. "What about you and Ginny?" she asked. "You said you put your foot down at the end of the year."

“Oh yeah, I did,” he acknowledged. “Well, you have to go back a bit, to the final quidditch match of the year, when we won the Quidditch Cup.” He proceeded to describe how Ginny had raced across the Gryffindor common room, jumped into his arms, and kissed him furiously. He claimed that it seemed like it dragged on for several days, but in reality was probably only for a few seconds.

He'd pulled away as quickly as he was able, then turned to Katie and kissed her too, then gave Demelza Robins, their third chaser, a peck on the cheek. Ginny and Katie had exchanged glares for the rest of the party. Ginny – *Stay away from my boyfriend, Bell!* Katie – *I'm not afraid of you, Weasley!* (After all, she'd been friends with the twins for five years.)

Harry had finally laid it out as bluntly as he could during the intervening few days between Dumbledore's death and his funeral, causing the little redhead to go into a sulky fit.

“Molly was furious when she heard,” Harry revealed. “I wasn't exactly welcome at the Burrow after that day.” Hermione expressed surprise at that – given how close he'd been to the Weasley family.

“It wasn't only because of Ginny,” he explained. “She also blamed me for Ron and Bill getting injured. Bill had been attacked by Greyback during the invasion of the castle, and ended up with pretty bad slashes on his face.” Hermione nodded, as she now recalled the eldest Weasley son's appearance. When she met him at Gringotts she'd been distracted by his crippled state and hadn't taken much note of his scars.

“Ron had his pelvis crushed when a wall fell on him,” Harry continued. “Once he recovered though, he didn't have that much of a problem with me. He realized it was his own fault for refusing the *Felix Felicis*. Plus he got a lot of attention, since he was the only student seriously injured defending Hogwarts. The press played it up big. He was a hero. There was even talk of him getting an Order of Merlin, Third Class, but that was before the Ministry fell to Voldemort.”

Hermione nodded again – that fit what she remembered of her other good friend. He would have reveled in the praise, in contrast to Harry, who hated it. That thought reminded her that looking him up for a visit was high on her to-do list, and Harry wholeheartedly agreed. After a little more snuggling, she sighed and announced that they needed to get up and get ready to go.

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Hermione informed Harry that they should dress ‘casual elegant’, which for him meant he wore khaki slacks with a light blue button down Oxford shirt. Hermione changed her outfit several times, ending with a navy blue mini skirt paired with a snug-fitting white tank top under a blue and white plaid blouse, worn open at the top. Sensing that she was now the nervous one, he told her she looked great and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek as they left Hogwarts.

Upon arrival at the Granger residence, Hermione's mum whisked her away to discuss some detail of her ball gown, leaving Harry to be entertained by her father. He swallowed hard as the older man invited him into his study.

“Hermione thinks quite highly of you,” Harry was told once they were alone.

“I think very highly of her as well,” he responded quickly, wondering where this was going.

Mr. Granger nodded. “But she’s worried about you.” This caused Harry to smile – Hermione’s worry for him had characterized their relationship from the very beginning. Her father paused, studying the young man in front of him. “You’ve had a lot of bad things happen to you; been forced into some terrible situations. Things like that are hard to just walk away from. I’d like to show you something that might help.”

He walked over to a wall, upon which was displayed a framed medal with an accompanying citation. “Do you know what this is?” he inquired of his guest.

“Yes sir,” Harry replied. It was a Victoria Cross, the highest medal awarded for valor in the United Kingdom and its Commonwealth. He’d been told that his Order of Merlin, First Class was its wizarding equivalent, but he personally held this award in higher regard.

“My father served in World War II,” Mr. Granger continued. “He never told us kids much about what he did, and how he earned this. Didn’t really like to talk about it. I expect you probably feel the same way.” Harry nodded, beginning to feel his throat tighten.

“But I looked up his story when I got older. He saved his whole platoon when they were caught in an ambush. Crawled around behind the enemy – somehow they never saw him – and killed them all. To a man his mates swore it was the bravest thing they’d ever seen. But he tried to shrug it off, told everyone it was just something he had to do. His superiors practically had to force him to accept the honor.” Harry nodded again. He could certainly relate to that.

“The thing of it was, he was the kindest, gentlest man I ever knew. You should have seen him with Hermione. She’d climb into his lap and hug him, and he’d hug her back.” Hermione’s father paused, with a far off look in his eyes. “But he was also protective – nobody messed with his family.” He turned again to look at Harry and smiled. “I think Hermione got her courage from him. All through primary school, she always stood up to bullies. Never backed down an inch.” Harry smiled back, recalling the fiercely determined young girl from his first two years at Hogwarts.

Mr. Granger directed his gaze back up at the framed medal of honor. “He died the summer after Hermione’s third year at Salem.” After a respectful silence, he beckoned Harry toward the door.

“I just thought you might like to know about that,” he explained. “By the way, don’t tell Hermione the details of how he killed those soldiers. She only knew him as a beloved grandfather.” Harry nodded, but suspected that the man was underestimating his daughter. He’d be willing to bet that she’d looked up her grandfather’s war record too.

“Thanks for showing it to me, sir. I appreciate it,” he responded. Hermione’s father winced slightly at the honorific.

“I know you’re not ready to address me by my first name yet,” he declared, resting his hand on Harry’s shoulder. (And inwardly, he wondered if the young man might someday be calling him ‘Dad’) “But Mr. Granger is sufficient.”

While Hermione’s parents told some stories about their dental practice, the dinner conversation was mostly dominated by Hermione expounding on her first week at Hogwarts, and all the changes she and Harry were contemplating for the Muggle Studies curriculum. Amused by her enthusiasm, Harry gazed fondly in her direction, which did not go unnoticed by the elder Grangers.

At the conclusion of the meal, Hermione brought out the *Daily Prophet* to show her parents her interview. Her mother noted that the article mentioned Harry’s name at least half a dozen times.

“Actually, McGonagall says that’s fairly restrained for them,” Hermione informed them. Harry’s pained expression both confirmed that estimation and revealed his feelings about it. Hermione moved closer to him on the sofa and wrapped her arm around his in consolation. Again, her parents noticed their affection for each other, which was much more in evidence than it had been two days earlier.

“What’s it going to be like when the two of you show up at that ball together?” her mother wondered with some concern. Harry grimaced, then shrugged resignedly.

“Do you remember how the English press reacted when Prince Charles announced he was going to marry Lady Diana?” Harry responded. (He’d only been a baby at the time, but he’d later read about the media sensation.)

“You can’t be serious!” Mrs. Granger exclaimed. However, both of the young adults assured her that this was not a bad analogy. “Are you sure you want to do this?” she worried.

Hermione had heard this doubt so often she was getting tired of it. “Yes, we do,” she shot back in a tone of annoyance and determination that caught both her parents by surprise. The two of them shared a glance, realizing that this young couple was more serious than they’d thought.

Their daughter thought of a way that her mother might experience this situation for herself. “How would you like to go to Diagon Alley with us?” she offered.

Her mother wasn’t sure. “Won’t it look too obvious?” she pointed out. “You, Harry, and your mother all together?”

Harry grinned. “Have you ever wanted to be invisible?”

Later that afternoon Hermione and her mother passed through the Leaky Cauldron without notice, and headed for Flourish & Blotts. Once inside and out of sight of the other customers, Hermione threw Harry’s invisibility cloak over the older woman, then positioned her in a chair by the window (making sure that the cloak covered the chair as well, so no one would accidentally sit on her).

From her vantage point, Mrs. Granger noticed the commotion in the street as Harry approached. Pedestrians would look up, gesture to their companions, and move toward the growing mob surrounding him. Even if she hadn't needed to keep quiet, she would have been speechless.

Just inside the doorway he met Hermione, and asked how her shopping was going. Her reply was too low for her mother to hear, but seemed to indicate that she'd found what she wanted. They exchanged a friendly hug that could not be construed as anything more, and yet there were still some audible gasps from the onlookers. From somewhere in the Alley a camera flashed. Harry said that he'd see Hermione back at Hogwarts, and they parted. Under the cloak her mother shook her head in disbelief. This was simply too surreal. How was her daughter going to be able to put up with this all the time?

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Later that evening, as the Granger adults were sitting together in their living room, mulling over the events of the day, Hermione's father asked the big question.

"Do you think they're sleeping together?"

His wife shook her head thoughtfully. "I don't think they're having sex yet." She knew the young witch and wizard's relationship had changed within the past two days, and she was pretty confident she'd be able to tell from her daughter's body language if they'd gotten *that* intimate with each other.

"But sleeping?" she continued before turning to her husband with a devious grin. "You always say, 'don't ask a question if you don't really want to know the answer', right?"

The man groaned, shaking his head in mock dismay. "How can they have fallen in love in just one week?" he wondered.

"I don't think it happened just this week," she corrected. "I suspect it started eleven or twelve years ago. The process was just interrupted for ten years. He's the main reason Hermione was so devastated when we sent her to Salem, you know." He nodded in acknowledgment.

"Were we wrong to not let her see him during summer holidays?" he asked next.

"We did what we thought was best," she responded with a rueful shrug. (The family had spent the summer break that first year in the States. And the next year Harry hadn't responded to Hermione's letter, so she'd regretfully given up on seeing him during that break.) "She would have gone through all that grief and anxiety all over again at the end of each summer, if we'd done it differently," she added, recalling one of their justifications for the decision. "But it did turn out all right in the end, don't you think?"

Her husband shrugged, but she poked him playfully on the arm. "Well, I think it's very romantic," she declared with a smile. "It's like they were meant to be together all along, and now they've found their way back to each other."

That week's issue of *Witch Weekly* had an article speculating on which lucky witch Harry Potter would be escorting to the upcoming Victory Ball. One of their reporters had worked out his rotation system a year ago, and everyone knew that it was Katie Bell's turn. However, everyone was also aware that she would be unavailable due to her quidditch schedule.

A reporter had contacted Susan Bones, who would be up next, but she responded with a curt 'No comment'. None of his other friends would say anything either. Still, she was listed as the most likely candidate, but a few other names were suggested as possibilities, including Daphne Greengrass and even Cho Chang. New Hogwarts professor Hermione Granger, who had been spotted in Diagon Alley with Mr. Potter twice in the past week, was mentioned at the end of the article almost as an afterthought.

Hermione had been eager to see her other best friend that she hadn't seen for a decade, and she got a chance that week. Harry had contacted Ron, and they scheduled a visit for an evening that week. Unfortunately it didn't go as well as she'd hoped.

It wasn't unpleasant; it was just that they didn't have that much in common any longer. They definitely did not click as well as she had with Harry. In retrospect, she had always had more in common with Harry than with Ron, and the transition into adulthood had done nothing to change that situation. Ron and Lavender were not interested in Hermione's university studies, and neither regarded Muggle Studies as all that important. (To Ron, muggles were for the most part just an eccentric habit of his father's.)

After a while, Ron took Harry into another room to talk about quidditch, leaving Hermione with Lavender for 'girl talk'. But Hermione hadn't really been very close to Lavender at school, and to her dismay the two still had little to talk about. She eventually ended up listening to her former roommate go on and on about her children.

Ironically, where Hermione had once, to some extent, envied the attractive and vivacious girl Lavender had been, the woman she had become had now put on some weight following her two pregnancies, which seemed to have aged her more than ten years. Unexpectedly, Hermione found herself wondering if the buxom blonde would end up like looking like Molly Weasley. Finally, the disappointed witch managed to catch Harry's eye with a pleading look, and he announced that they needed to be going.

Other than that, the next few days passed by uneventfully. The nights, however, were more interesting. The young couple continued to share a bed, and took the opportunity to explore the new dimension in their relationship, each learning how and where the other liked to be touched. It was an extremely rewarding course of study.

Finally, on the day of the Victory Ball, Hermione suggested to Harry that it was time to finish his story. She explained that it would be more appropriate if she knew everything before attending the celebration itself. Harry pondered this for a short time, then agreed. After all, he intended to tell her eventually, and this was as good a time as any.

“How long do you need to get ready for the ball?” he asked after a few seconds of consideration.

“Oh, I ... two hours, I suppose,” Hermione replied hesitantly, caught off guard by the apparent change of topic. “Better make that three,” she amended after further thought. “Fleur’s sending over a hair stylist.”

“OK, right after lunch then,” Harry decided. “That should give us plenty of time.”

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When Hermione entered Harry’s room she found him standing and staring out the window, clearly troubled, no doubt over their impending talk. She walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his back.

“You know I love, you, right?” she asked him softly.

Harry turned in her arms and smiled. “I know. But will you still love me tomorrow?”

Hermione shot him a curious look. “That sounds like a song my parents used to listen to,” she recalled. “I forget who sang it though.”

“More than one group, I think,” Harry informed her. “But the version I heard was by *The Four Seasons* .” The look Hermione gave him at this revelation demanded that he explain further.

“After the war ended I found more of my parents’ stuff, which included my mum’s record collection, which was mostly 60’s rock music,” he revealed. “I used to sit and listen to some of the songs, feeling sorry for myself because I was so lonely.” He shrugged. “That one struck a nerve because the wizarding world seemed to alternate loving me and hating me.”

Hermione could feel her eyes dampen at the tone of longing in his voice. “Harry, I promise you that won’t ever happen with me,” she vowed, wrapping him up again in another fierce embrace.

When she released him, Harry nodded and took a deep breath. He picked up a small, somewhat worn and battered book from the table next to his sofa. “I think the best way to start is with a visit to Godric’s Hollow ... and this book.”

Hermione leafed through the pages as they made their way to the Hogwarts gates while Harry explained that *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* were wizarding children’s stories that were well known among those raised in the wizarding world. He then directed her attention to one story in particular, *The Tale of the Three Brothers* . Being a fast reader, she finished it in short order and turned to him expectantly.

“Notice the symbol that’s drawn in above the title,” he pointed out. “It represents the three gifts in the story. The line is the wand, the circle is the stone, and the triangle is the cloak.” Hermione glanced down at the page, nodded, and then looked back up at him.

Harry took a deep breath. “It turns out that they’re real,” he revealed. “The story was probably

embellished, with the part about them being given out by Death himself, but the three brothers were actual people – most likely very powerful wizards who created those three magical items.” He paused at the look of disbelief on Hermione’s face and nodded gravely to show that he was completely serious.

“There is a group who call themselves Questers, who’ve dedicated themselves to seeking out those three items, which they call the Deathly Hallows,” he continued. “They identify themselves by displaying that symbol. And they believe that if the Deathly Hallows are united, it would make the possessor the Master of Death.”

Hermione was still shaking her head, but by now they’d reached the gates so Harry broke off his explanation. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he turned on the spot and disappeared. They reappeared on the outskirts of a little village, and Harry led the way into it, toward a small square at the center of town.

First he showed her the war memorial, an obelisk covered with names of soldiers killed in action, which magically turned into a statue of the Potter family when they neared it. Hermione smiled at the depiction of baby Harry in his mother’s arms, and gave his hand a small squeeze. Next he turned toward a small church on the other side of the square, leading her around behind it where a kissing gate guarded an ancient cemetery.

Harry pushed it open, but partway through he stopped and gave Hermione a quick kiss. “I’ve wanted to do that ever since I first heard about these,” he grinned. She rolled her eyes at him, but couldn’t help grinning back at his antics. He took her hand again and guided her through the rows of tombstones, some ancient, some more recent.

He paused to point out the grave of Kendra and Ariana Dumbledore, the mother and sister of their former headmaster, which surprised Hermione. When she commented that she’d had no idea he and Harry were from the same village, he scowled briefly and told her that Dumbledore had never seen fit to mention it to him either.

Next he stopped at the tombstone of James and Lily Potter. Hermione pressed herself into his side and he wrapped an arm around her as they stood silently paying their respects for a few minutes. Internally, Harry was introducing the young witch to his parents and telling them that he thought she might be the one he was looking for – a partner to share his life with him. He felt a warm glow as he finished, which he took as a sign of their approval.

While she waited for him to conclude his silent conversation, Hermione conjured a wreath of roses and stepped forward to lay it on the grave. The appreciative hug she received as she returned to his side filled her with a warm glow of her own.

“I try to come here at least four times a year,” he informed her as they moved down another row. “My birthday, Halloween, Christmas, and Easter.”

“I’ll be happy to come with you each time, if you like,” she offered. His response was another quick kiss of appreciation.

“Now, I need to show you something else, that sort of brings the whole story together,” he declared, stopping at an extremely old, weathered stone that looked like it must have been there hundreds of years. And in fact, it had been.

Hermione caught her breath when she spotted the symbol of the Deathly Hallows just below the name – Ignotus Peverell.

“Yes,” Harry confirmed in a low voice. “This was one of the three brothers from the story. He was the one with the invisibility cloak ... and I’m his direct descendant.”

“You don’t mean ... your cloak!” Hermione gasped.

“Is the one in the story,” Harry confirmed. “And it gets even more bizarre. The brother with the Resurrection Stone was Cadmus Peverell, and he was the ancestor of Marvolo Gaunt, and ultimately of Tom Marvolo Riddle. Also known as Lord Voldemort.” Hermione’s eyes went wide as she grappled with the idea that Harry and Voldemort were descended from two legendary brothers.

“And in the ultimate irony, Voldemort, who spent so much effort trying to escape death, didn’t even realize he’d inherited one of the Deathly Hallows,” Harry continued. “He turned it into a horcrux.”

“The ring,” Hermione breathed softly.

“The ring,” Harry confirmed.

“So, what about the wand?” she ventured after taking a few moments to absorb this shocking revelation.

“It passed from wizard to wizard down through history,” he told her. “It went by several names – the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny – but was lost for a long time before Gregorovitch, a wand maker on the continent, found it. It was taken from him by Grindelwald, and from Grindelwald by Dumbledore.”

“You mean ...?” Hermione felt her knees go weak as the full implication struck her, and Harry shot an arm around her waist to steady her. “Dumbledore’s wand, which you picked up after he was killed, and ...” she broke off, hesitating to bring up the next part.

“And used to kill Snape and Malfoy,” he finished for her. “You see, control of the wand passes on whenever a wizard is killed or defeated. I’m not sure if it passed to Malfoy when he disarmed Dumbledore on top of the Astronomy Tower, or to Snape when he killed him, but either way it’s mine now, since I killed both of them.” He paused, watching her eyes as she processed this information and reached the correct conclusions, first narrowing in concentration and then going wide again.

“Yes, it was a big factor in Dumbledore being considered the most powerful wizard of his time,

and also for me now,” he confirmed.

“So at that point you controlled two of the Deathly Hallows,” she mused. “And the third was the stone in the ring, which Dumbledore had ...”

“Which comes up again later in the story,” Harry broke in. This resulted in a glare from Hermione which clearly communicated that ‘later’ had better be ‘sooner’. He responded with a cheeky grin that didn’t placate her a bit.

“Come on, there’s one more place I need to show you here before we go back to the castle,” he announced. Reluctantly, she allowed herself to be led from the cemetery and through the village until they were heading back out towards the countryside again, and the houses were spaced further apart. They stopped at the end of a street in front of a wrecked cottage with rubble scattered across the yard, which was filled with waist high grass and bounded by overgrown hedges. It didn’t take long for Hermione to figure this one out – it was the house where Harry had lived as a baby, where his mother and father had been killed by Voldemort but he’d survived.

Harry showed her the hidden magical sign commemorating his parents’ death and his first defeat of the Dark Lord. Then he told of the first time he had come here, with Dobby during their hunt for the horcruxes. How they’d been accosted by Bathilda Bagshot who’d somehow spotted him even though he was under his invisibility cloak at the time, and beckoned him to follow her

“Bathilda Bagshot?” Hermione interrupted. “The writer of *History of Magic* ? Did she live in Godric’s Hollow too?” Harry nodded and continued with the revolting revelation that it had actually been her corpse, inhabited by Voldemort’s familiar, Nagini, who had attacked him once he’d entered her house. To Harry’s dismay, hexes had seemed to have no effect on it.

But Dobby, who had made himself invisible, had followed along. He’d stopped the giant snake in its tracks and threw it against a wall with a burst of house elf magic. This had given Harry time to draw Gryffindor’s sword and kill the snake before it could strike again.

“Not too much problem compared to the basilisk,” Harry quipped as the story concluded. Hermione allowed herself to exhale a sigh of relief, but then frowned.

“Wait a minute. When did you get the sword?” she demanded.

Harry ran his hand through his hair and shot her a sheepish grin. “I guess I’d better go back to that part,” he admitted. Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed in response, but didn’t resist as he wrapped an arm around her again and apparated them back to Hogsmeade.

As they walked back onto the Hogwarts grounds Harry related how he’d had a long talk with McGonagall after Dumbledore’s death and informed her about the prophecy, including the information he’d received from the headmaster about Voldemort’s horcruxes. The stern professor had reluctantly concurred with his idea to leave school to carry out the mission of finding and destroying the soul repositories, and also agreed that he should take the Sword of Gryffindor to use to destroy them when he found them. She then expertly transfigured an identical copy to

replace it on the wall of the Headmaster's office.

After Dumbledore's funeral Harry and Dobby had simply disappeared. They had set up several safe houses – ordinary flats throughout muggle England and Scotland. Dobby was adept at hiding himself from muggle and wizard alike, so Harry appeared to be no different than any other teenaged male striking out on his own, struggling to make ends meet.

At this point Harry noticed Hermione becoming more and more impatient, and realized that she was still waiting to learn the fate of the ring. He surprised her again by telling her that Dumbledore had left it to him in his will.

“What? How ...?” was all she could manage initially. He grinned again and took her hand to lead her on another private circuit of the lake.

“He left me two things – the book I showed you earlier and a snitch, the one I caught in my first quidditch match,” he explained. “With no clues other than that symbol. It was almost a year later when I discovered that the ring was inside the snitch, although I'd suspected it earlier. It had a cryptic message that read, ‘I open at the close’ but that was all. I finally had the idea to try to cut it open with the Elder Wand, and that worked.”

He looked away across the lake and his eyes unfocussed briefly. “I only used it once. I talked to my Mum and Dad ... for real instead of just to their tombstone.” He felt Hermione's arms encircle him from behind and leaned back into her comforting embrace for several satisfying seconds.

“But what was the point?” Hermione complained once they'd resumed their trek around the lake. “What did any of that have to do with finding and destroying the horcruxes? I can see how useful the wand would have been, but it doesn't seem like he intended you to have *that* one. Why such a vague set of clues? And why the stone at all?”

Harry shrugged. “He liked to play mind games with people. I guess he wanted me to figure it out for myself or something. But it seemed more like a distraction to me.” A dark look flashed across his face, but Hermione did not see it.

“That's so ... so ... arrgh!” she fumed. “I don't understand him!” She turned back to Harry and scowled. “I can at least see now why you don't have as much respect for him.” Harry nodded stonily.

“I wasn't the only one,” he told her with some satisfaction. “After he died his image took a real hit. Two books were written about him – one by Elphias Doge, a close friend of his, that treated him like a saint and the other a tell-all by Rita Skeeter that painted a less than flattering picture of him. Guess which one was more popular?”

Hermione made a mental note to get hold of a copy of each one and read them for herself. “But, Rita Skeeter was the writer who made your life so miserable during the tournament,” she pointed out.

Harry nodded. “But she also helped me out fifth year,” he countered. “And it turned out that pretty much all of the stuff she wrote about him was true, even if she did put the worst possible interpretation on it. For example, he was friends with Grindelwald when he was younger.”

“No!” Hermione thought she should be used to Harry’s surprise revelations by now, but they kept throwing her off balance.

“Yes, he was,” Harry assured her. “They spent the summer together the year after he graduated from Hogwarts. Grindelwald was Bathilda Bagshot’s nephew. According to Rita, and she had an actual letter from Dumbledore that supported it, they made plans for world domination together.” Hermione could only shake her head in stunned amazement.

“But they had a falling out, supposedly when Dumbledore didn’t approve of Grindelwald’s methods. And Dumbledore’s sister was killed during their argument, which really shook him up. He regretted that until the day he died.”

They walked on in silence for a time, as Hermione digested this new revelation. When she finally looked back at Harry again, he took up his tale once more.

“Getting back to the summer after Dumbledore died, Dobby and I were getting things in order for our horcrux search, and I was also getting accustomed to using Dumbledore’s wand,” he revealed. “Mind you, I didn’t know it was the Elder Wand at that point, just that it was particularly powerful. And in the meantime we had Bill and Fleur’s wedding coming up. There was quite a dispute on where to have it, but Molly insisted on hosting it at the Burrow. I thought that was a bad idea, since a gathering of that size would be quite an inviting target for an attack, but remember, I wasn’t too popular in the Weasley household at that point so my opinion didn’t matter. Molly didn’t even want me to be invited to the wedding, but Fleur wasn’t having any of that. I ended up attending under a glamour as a guest of the Delacours.”

“But as I feared, during the reception all hell broke loose ...”

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There was one flaw with this plan, Harry thought to himself as he sat at a table surrounded by Fleur’s friends and relatives – he didn’t speak French. Fleur’s mother had done a superb job with the glamour charm (which were evidently a Veela specialty) so no one would recognize the blonde haired ‘Delacour cousin’. She’d even managed to mostly conceal his scar. But the only person he knew among Fleur’s other guests was Viktor Krum, and Harry had to act like he didn’t *really* know him.

It didn’t matter – Krum was only interested in the pretty girls present, and currently had his eye on Ginny. He was welcome to her as far as Harry was concerned, although Ron, Fred, and George were keeping a close watch on that particular pursuit.

There was a benefit to the relative lack of distraction, however, since Harry was nervously anticipating a Death Eater attack, and wanted to stay on high alert. As the happy event continued

without interruption he was beginning to think they might get through it. But then it happened.

With a loud, earsplitting crack, the wards came crashing down, temporarily disorienting everyone present as a wave of fractured magic rolled over them. And when the guests regained their equilibrium they were faced with the terrifying sight of Voldemort himself leading a dozen or more of his Death Eaters toward the head table.

Harry clenched his time turner in one hand as he hurriedly began to concoct a plan. A few brave souls stood up and drew their wands to confront the invaders, but they were quickly and harshly dealt with. With no coordinated response, the resistance soon faded. For his part, Harry knew he needed to restrain himself until he could manage to catch his foes by surprise.

However, his hand was about to be forced. As Voldemort reached the bridal party, he loudly demanded, in a raspy, hissing voice that sent shudders through everyone who heard it, “Where is Harry Potter?”

When no response was immediately forthcoming, he leveled his wand at Fleur and snarled a threat to permanently disfigure her lovely face if Potter didn’t reveal himself at once. Immediately, Bill leapt to his feet, drawing his wand, but Voldemort was quicker, casting a curse that Harry couldn’t hear from where he was, but caused Bill to collapse, screaming in agony. As Fleur’s voice joined his in a horrified shriek, Harry decided that it was now or never, and rose to his feet.

“Tom Riddle, you are nothing but a coward!” he shouted. Voldemort whirled in fury as several nearby Death Eaters took aim with their wands. But before everyone’s eyes, Harry vanished!

As he reappeared an hour into the past, he quickly dove to the ground and rolled under one of the now empty tables. Since the ceremony was still in progress, no one was looking in this direction as he hurriedly pulled his invisibility cloak over himself and dispelled his glamour. Now, the waiting was going to be the most difficult part.

Quietly summoning Dobby, he explained what he had in mind. Dobby fetched his Firebolt, and nodded rapidly as Harry explained that he was to wait unseen until his future self stood and shouted, then he should do what he could to hinder the Death Eaters while taking care not to put himself in danger. Harry knew that these instructions would hold only as long as *he* was unharmed – after that Dobby would enter the fray with no regard for his own safety.

For his part, Harry would stay under his invisibility cloak (which for some reason seemed to be even more effective lately, since Dumbledore’s death) (1) and move into place near the head table. There he hoped to somehow counter whatever curse Bill had been hit with, and then entice Voldemort and his Death Eaters into chasing after him. He thought he could probably kill Voldemort right then and there with a surprise attack, but knew that would be futile since he hadn’t destroyed the horcruxes yet. A serious injury would be a perfectly acceptable outcome though, he thought grimly as he replayed Voldemort’s cowardly attack on Bill in his mind.

Finally, exactly an hour after he’d activated the time turner, the scene repeated itself. Under the cloak, only a few feet behind the head table, Harry had to fight to keep his stomach from emptying

itself as he witnessed up close the curse that Voldemort had cast. It was some horrifying combination of flesh dissolving and bone vanishing spells that began with Bill's feet, and gradually worked its way up his legs. His screams rent the air as his lower limbs began to disappear.

Knowing that he would need all the power he could muster, Harry used Dumbledore's wand, while holding his own in reserve. As soon as Voldemort turned toward the taunting shout from the crowd, he allowed the wand tip to emerge from the confines of his invisibility cloak.

'Finite Incantatum!'

He poured everything he could muster into his silently cast cancellation spell, and was relieved to see the magical disintegration stop at Bill's knees. He managed to force himself to look away from the sickening sight just as Voldemort turned back in an even greater rage, somehow aware that his curse had been countered.

This time Harry's holly and phoenix feather wand in his other hand seemed to act almost on its own accord – it shot up and a golden jet of light impacted the dark lord squarely in the chest. With a loud crack the evil wizard was hurled through the air, his wand flying off in another direction. A satisfying crash signaled his flight path's intersection with a table filled with bottles of champagne, wine, firewhiskey, and other alcoholic beverages.

But Harry didn't take the time to enjoy the view. Seizing his broom from where he'd hidden it, he hopped on and took off in one motion, streaking over the heads of the astonished crowd, hoping the second part of his plan would work as well as the first.

Unfortunately, he hadn't counted on the fact that Voldemort had left lookouts on the outskirts of the Burrow. With a sixth sense developed from dodging unseen bludgers, he swerved just in time to avoid a pair of red streaks that shot past him, missing by inches. He immediately banked into a sharp turn and readied his wand again.

However, another player now entered the fray. A flash of white feathers entered his field of vision as an enraged snowy owl left her post in a nearby tree and dove down on the wizards who would dare attack her master.

"Hedwig, no!!" Harry screamed. He watched helplessly as one of the Death Eaters fired a blasting curse at point blank range.

The faithful owl's sacrifice was not in vain. Shaking his head furiously to clear the tears from his eyes, Harry took full advantage of the distraction provided by his familiar. A pair of overpowered blasting curses of his own avenged her death, leaving bloody holes in the ground where his assailants had stood. But it was not nearly enough to offset the hole that was now tearing his heart in two.

Shouts from behind him let him know that there would be no time to grieve, as a handful of Death Eaters had summoned brooms of their own to take up the pursuit. And to Harry's astonishment,

soaring above them like smoke on the wind, was Voldemort himself. Flying without the aid of a broomstick.

Harry shot off again, out over the fields and woods of the countryside along the Otter River. This was as far as his plan had gone. He knew his Firebolt was the fastest broom in existence; his relatively low weight and his skill would ensure that none of them could catch him. But how long would they chase after him before giving up? There was only one way to find out.

But there was yet another unforeseen factor to alter his calculation. Voldemort was not on a broom, and so was not limited by any such performance characteristics. He rapidly outpaced his followers, and Harry quickly realized that he would have one more confrontation before this day was over.

In fact, it was rather anticlimactic. Even though Voldemort had borrowed another wand, Harry's original wand still asserted its mastery over the dark lord. Again, without Harry seemingly even needing to aim, he scored a direct hit with his first spell, and Voldemort was blasted backward with a crack and a scream that seemed to echo across the gradually darkening horizon. Temporarily stunned and now unsupported, the artificial body that housed his foe plummeted to the earth. It was too much to hope that this incarnation of his nemesis would be destroyed by the damage he'd just inflicted, but with any luck he would be out of commission for a while.

Harry, though, flew on into the dusk, not knowing or caring where he was headed. He might just fly all the way to Scotland; there was no way he could go back to the Burrow, not now or possibly ever again. This disaster had been visited upon the Weasley family because Voldemort had come looking for Harry Potter.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as his thoughts turned back to his beloved familiar. Here was yet another loss in his life, possibly the most painful one so far. He was too young to remember his mother and father, Cedric was just an acquaintance, and Sirius ... he never really got to know the man that well; he represented an ideal more than a reality. But Hedwig had been his faithful companion all through the darkest times of his recent life. (2)

And it wasn't over yet – he dreaded the likelihood that there would be more deaths to come. Who would be next?

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox

I Need You

The Final Quest, Part II

Chapter 7, The Final Quest, Part II

The two of them stood on the shore of the lake in silence for a time, wrapped in each other's arms as together they mourned the loss of his oldest and truest companion. Hermione waited patiently until he was ready to continue, which he acknowledged by placing a soft kiss on the top of her head.

In a low voice that was nearly a whisper, he told her of how some of the guests at the wedding had finally been spurred into action and overcome the remaining Death Eaters, led by Fleur herself. He wondered if Hermione knew that when Veela became angry enough, they could throw fireballs. She nodded with a shudder, trying to imagine the beautiful woman with whom she had recently become acquainted transformed into such a state of rage.

Harry went on to reveal that Bill had been attended to in time to save his life, but nothing could restore the part of his legs that had been lost, as she already knew from seeing him at Gringotts. Amid all the screaming and confusion, it took some time before order was restored, but eventually Fred and George had retrieved Hedwig's body. They got word to Harry who surreptitiously came back the next day to join them to give her a respectful burial in the woods near the Burrow.

But after that day, and witnessing up close what had happened to their older brother who both respected and admired, neither of the twins were ever the same again. The inveterate pranksters turned their talents to an entirely different sort of mischief – devising and setting deadly traps for any of Voldemort's supporters they could locate.

It turned out that before coming to the Burrow, Voldemort had led a much larger force to the Ministry of Magic itself, assassinating Minister Scrimgeour and taking control after a fierce battle. As at the wedding, most of the wizards in the building had offered no resistance, being more concerned with keeping themselves alive, and, not inconsequently, also keeping their jobs. Within days things were more or less back to business as usual, but with a new Minister and new department heads who took their orders directly from the dark lord.

The primary exception to this was in the Auror force. A large number were killed in the battle for the Ministry, but a good portion escaped and went into hiding, waiting for their chance to fight another day.

The Ministry takeover turned out in one way to be an advantage for the light side fighters. The roles had been reversed – they were now the insurgents, conducting hit and run raids, while the Death Eaters found that now that they were in charge, they couldn't just kill people randomly anymore. They were still but a small fraction of the wizarding population, and they didn't want a large scale rebellion on their hands, so they had to make sure that ordinary wizards would feel safe in their homes. And particularly, that they would believe Hogwarts was a safe place for their children. So the castle essentially was off limits, and actually became safer for the students than it

had been during any of the years that Harry had attended!

As for the Weasleys, they were publicly declared to be enemies of the new order. While Ginny and Ron would be protected at Hogwarts, the Burrow was fair game. But Bill and Fleur, planning ahead, had already set up a new residence in a small house by the sea in Cornwall which they called Shell Cottage. It was already protected by the Fidelius charm, and ultimately served as a staging area for Fred and George's deadly game of cat and mouse. Arthur and Molly, who was badly shaken by the turn of events, moved in with other relatives.

Harry took a deep breath, and taking Hermione's hand, resumed their stroll. "So what it came down to was a race between me and Voldemort," he declared. "He came to the conclusion that he needed the Wand of Destiny to defeat me, and therefore he put as much effort as he could spare into tracking it down and finding it. For my part, as you know, I had the task of tracking down and finding his horcruxes and destroying them so that he could ultimately be defeated." Hermione nodded her agreement with his analysis.

"Ironically, you each had the information the other needed, since he knew where the horcruxes were and you knew where the wand was, although he obviously wasn't aware of that," she pointed out. This time it was Harry's turn to agree, with one important clarification.

It was a while before I realized what Dumbledore's wand actually was," he pointed out. "I'd discovered that it was incredibly powerful, and I didn't really understand why it would work that well for me, given what we'd learned about wands needing to be matched to the wizard. I think it was months later before I suspected it, and not until the following spring before I was sure." A grim expression crossed his face. "It was actually Ollivander who confirmed it, after I'd rescued him. Then he insisted that I obliviate him of the knowledge that I had it." He shook his head at the thought, and looked back at Hermione.

"At that point I had to be extremely cautious about the link I still had into his mind," he added. "But all along the way we were both delayed by the raids. I felt I needed to provide at least some support to the folks who were fighting back, and he felt the need to retaliate. It was pretty brutal."

He hesitated, then stopped walking and turned to face her directly. "Like you said the other day. It was a war, and in a war you kill the enemy because he's trying to kill you. Dumbledore would not have approved."

Hermione took his hands in hers and leaned forward, kissing him gently on the cheek. "You did the right thing," she assured him. "Is that how Fred and George died?"

Harry nodded solemnly. "Remus and Moody too. For the twins, someone on the other side eventually got smart and set up an ambush. Remus was killed when he went after Fenrir Greyback. He got him, but he didn't survive his wounds." He took a few minutes to fill her in on the bitter history between the two werewolves, as well as Remus's secret marriage to Tonks. Before he could get into the details of Moody's demise, Hermione interrupted him.

"Tell me about the horcruxes," she suggested, not wanting to dwell overmuch on the distressing

topic of how so many of his friends had been killed.

“Well, you already know about the one in Voldemort’s snake,” he responded after a moment’s thought. “There was also one in Gringotts, and one at Hogwarts. And the one we thought was in the cave was actually at Grimmauld Place for a long time.”

Harry paused to shake his head. “There was so much luck involved, both good and bad. The locket was a perfect example. You see, Dumbledore had tracked down its location, but by the time we got to the cave where it was hidden, it had already been taken by someone else. So it could have gone anywhere. Bad luck. But the person who took it turned out to be Sirius’s brother, who’d been a Death Eater but had a change of heart. And he took it back to Grimmauld Place. We’d actually found it two summers before while cleaning up, but didn’t know it at the time. Good luck. But by the time I figured that out, it wasn’t there anymore. Bad luck. But fortunately, we were able to find out where it went pretty quickly. See what I mean?”

Hermione nodded and he continued. “So anyway, after the wedding I ended up back at Grimmauld Place. I was feeling miserable and pretty down about life, and that location seemed to fit my mood – dark and gloomy. Sirius had left the place to me in his will, but this was the first time I’d been back there since he’d died. I decided to check out his room, which turned out to be at the top of the house. Right across from it was his brother’s room. And there I recognized his handwriting and initials from the message that had been left in the locket.”

Harry went on to describe the note in more detail, along with what he’d learned from the Black house elf Kreacher about Regulus’s attempt to strike back at the dark lord. This was followed by Kreacher’s change of heart when he’d discovered that Harry was attempting to fulfill his beloved master’s last request, and his revelation that Mundungus Fletcher had stolen the locket along with quite a few other valuable treasures. Harry had thereupon instructed the ancient house elf to track the thief down and learn where the locket was currently located. Which he did.

“And ...” he finished with a dramatic pause. “Delores Umbridge had it.”

“What? The same one who gave you so much grief?” Hermione blurted out in amazement.

“The very one,” Harry confirmed. Then his face darkened as he recounted the role the evil witch had chosen to play in the Voldemort controlled government – rounding up muggleborn witches and wizards, accusing them of ‘stealing magic’, and sentencing them to detention camps that were guarded by dementors. Most of them hadn’t survived.

He stopped and turned toward the lake, bending down to pick up a stone and throw it into the water. Three more stones followed as he worked off his irritation as he recalled the repugnant regulation.

“We took care of her,” he almost snarled. “With the cloak, and with Dobby’s abilities, it wasn’t too difficult to sneak into the Ministry and find her. She was in a courtroom, happy as she could be as she passed judgement on one muggleborn after another. I can still see her simpering little smile as another one was dragged away by a pair of dementors.” Two more stones sailed into the

lake, as if there were a target floating out on the water with Umbridge's face on it.

He finally nodded in grim satisfaction. "I stunned her and summoned her wand, Dobby grabbed the locket, and we left her with the dementors. Once her patronus faded away they were all over her, while we locked them into the courtroom and hustled away the muggleborns who were still waiting to be tried."

Harry let out a long sigh as he turned back to her. "I have no idea how many of them actually escaped without being recaptured, but we did the best we could," he concluded with a resigned shrug. Hermione stepped forward and took his arm, giving it a brief hug before urging him to continue along the path.

"So that's two down, if you count the one in Nagini," Harry commented as they resumed their walk. "The one at Hogwarts wasn't too difficult to find; at least it wasn't once I asked the right question."

"Wasn't it hard to sneak in?" she wondered.

Harry shook his head. "Not at all. There are several secret passages if you know where to look. And even without them, you can always come in through the Forbidden Forest." He shrugged. "I actually spent quite a bit of time here."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. She'd expected that he would have spent the year in hiding, moving from place to place, setting multiple protective enchantments. "Weren't you worried about getting caught?" she demanded.

"Not really," he insisted. "Just like with the Ministry. Easier, actually, since none of them even suspected I was there, and most of the students and staff were on my side anyway. Especially the DA."

A smug grin flickered across his face. "Voldemort tried to install some of his supporters at the school, but they kept disappearing. They had a habit of wandering into the Forbidden Forest and not coming back." Hermione stared at him in wide-eyed disbelief. "Powerful *Confundus* charm with the Elder Wand," he revealed in a mock conspiratorial whisper. "And always when all the students and staff had airtight alibis," he finished with a nod of satisfaction, before adding, "They really didn't have any competent people to spare, so the ones they sent to Hogwarts weren't exactly the brightest of the bunch." (1)

"As it turned out, half the time McGonagall was in charge while the Board came up with yet another Headmaster," he chuckled, causing her to roll her eyes and respond with a smile of her own.

"So anyway, I was convinced a horcrux would be in the Chamber of Secrets," he continued. "Dobby and I searched in there for days! After a certain point I was so frustrated that I said something like, 'where else would you hide something in Hogwarts?' And Dobby immediately suggested the Room of Hidden Things! Which turns out to be the most popular version of the

Room of Requirement.”

“Which horcrux was there?” Hermione inquired.

“Ravenclaw’s Diadem,” Harry answered as his good mood vanished. “And that brings us to the darkest part of the year.”

He stopped at a grassy clearing and conjured a blanket, placing it over a moss-covered log. Then he sat down in front of it and leaned back, stretching his legs out as Hermione dropped down beside him. The sun shone brightly, reflecting off the lake, with Hogwarts in the background. It was such a peaceful, serene location, an ironic counterpoint to the disturbing information he was about to reveal. Sensing this, Hermione snuggled up against him and took hold of his hand, preparing for the worst.

Harry told her that after he and Dobby had left Godric’s Hollow, he’d run into a dry spell, with few ideas of where to look next. In the meantime, he was still trying to work out the story of the three brothers. Recalling that he’d seen Xenophilius Lovegood, Luna’s father, wearing a medallion that resembled the symbol above the title of the story, he paid a visit to the strange man. It was from him that he learned about Questers and the legend of the Deathly Hallows, and also about the legendary Diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw. After thanking the man for the information, as well as for the support he’d been giving Harry in his newspaper, he left to continue his search, ultimately discovering the Diadem in the Room of Requirement.

It was several months later that he’d learned that Death Eaters had subsequently paid the publisher of *The Quibbler* a visit and threatened him. And that over the Easter holiday they had captured his daughter to force his compliance.

“I found Luna a month later at Malfoy Manor,” he revealed in a low voice. “I’d run out of ideas for where else to look for the last horcrux, and decided to look into the possibility that he’d given it to one of his Death Eaters, like he had the diary. Since Malfoy had the diary, and Dobby could easily get us into his house, we started there. Dobby took us to the hidden cellar where Lucius kept his dark artifacts and there she was.”

Hermione’s hand tightened her grip on his own; she could hear the pain in his voice. “She’d been tortured,” he whispered. “I could see it in her eyes. They were completely blank, no life in them at all. And that’s when I lost it and broke down. She was such a gentle soul – she’d never hurt anybody, and those animals tortured her out of her mind.” He turned to look at Hermione, a tear running down each cheek.

“And because I couldn’t control my emotions, I lost Dobby too,” he blurted out, causing Hermione to catch her breath in a startled gasp. “You see, we had a system for our raids. He could disappear any time he wanted to – no wards could hold him because of his elf magic. So anytime we were in trouble, I’d activate my time turner and he’d vanish. But this time, I wasn’t paying attention, because I was freaking out over Luna. So they heard me, and came down to investigate. Bellatrix Lestrange spotted me first, and shot a cutting curse at me. And Dobby jumped in front of me instead of saving himself. It killed him.”

Hermione wrapped her arms around him as her tears joined his, rocking the two of them back and forth as she tried to take on some of his pain. Eventually, Harry continued in a far off voice.

“I snapped. I activated the time turner, and kept cycling back until every Death Eater in that house was dead.” He gave a mirthless snort. “The Elder Wand casts a particularly powerful blasting hex. Then I burned the whole place down with Fiendfyre.”

Hermione was reminded of the latest Star Wars movie, where Anakin found his mother in the raiders’ camp after she’d been tortured, and went into a killing rage. She could still picture the haunted look in his eyes, when he returned to Padmé and confessed that he’d ‘killed them all’. In the movie, that had been the beginning of his turn to the dark side. She found herself wondering how close Harry had come to a similar fate, and was grateful beyond words that he had avoided that path. (2)

She remained silent for a time, struggling to get a grasp on what that horrifying scene must have been like. But she determinedly maintained her tight grip on Harry, intent on conveying her undiminished support.

Finally he resumed his tale. “I was at a loss at that point, not sure what to do or where to go. That was as close as I ever came to giving up. It all came crashing down on me – nearly everyone close to me was gone by then – Dobby, Remus, Fred and George, Hedwig – I felt that I had no one left. Then I remembered Bill and Fleur, at Shell Cottage. I needed to do something with Luna, and also Mr. Ollivander, who’d also been held prisoner at Malfoy Manor, so I took them there, along with Dobby’s body.”

Harry relaxed a bit at that point and related how he’d been worried about what sort of reception he’d receive there. Fleur had come running out to meet him and he’d tried to stammer out an apology for Bill’s injury, but she would have none of it. Instead she thanked him profusely for saving not only Bill’s life, but also everyone else who’d attended the wedding. Sensing his despair, she wrapped him in a crushing embrace, kissing him all over his face repeatedly until he got the message.

He shot her an embarrassed grin. “There’s nothing quite like being hugged and kissed by an emotional Veela to change your outlook on life,” he asserted.

Hermione managed a smile in return. She was now beyond any jealousy toward Fleur, and felt only gratitude that the French witch had been able to help him out of his gloom. But despite the advice the beautiful Veela had offered her about not dwelling on what might have been, she couldn’t help but think that if Harry hadn’t saved Bill’s life at the wedding, her best friend might now be with Fleur and living a very much different life.

Harry continued by noting that Fleur had taken Luna and Ollivander into the house and got them into beds, while Bill, getting around on a flying carpet that the goblins at Gringotts had rigged for him, came out and kept Harry company while he dug a grave and buried Dobby. Back inside and sitting around the kitchen table, he filled them in on what he’d been doing while eating a casserole Fleur had prepared.

Something Bellatrix had said while they'd battled in Malfoy Manor had made Harry believe that she might have been entrusted with the final horcrux, and had put it in her Gringotts vault for safekeeping. He now sought their input on how best to get it out. Bill suggested they try the direct approach, since the odds of Harry sneaking into a vault were slim, even with his invisibility cloak.

But the goblins had refused, despite being generally sympathetic to his quest. Voldemort had already alienated them with his demands that they turn over control of the bank to him. However, a Gringotts vault was sacrosanct – their reputation for security was the main thing that made wizards trust them to guard their treasures.

The only other idea they had was to ask Tonks to impersonate Bellatrix (who actually did resemble her mother Andromeda) and try to gain access to her vault. But before they risked that, Harry decided to return to Hogwarts. McGonagall was once again the temporary Headmistress, as Voldemort's supporters on the Board of Governors had given up on appointing yet another of their own for the rest of the current school year after the remains of their most recent choice had been found outside the Acromantula colony.

“She snuck me into the Head's office so I could talk to Dumbledore's portrait,” Harry explained. “I'd hoped he could give me some advice on what else to try.” He scowled. “But instead he only let me know how disappointed he was in me and how I'd gone about things. He told me it had been unnecessary to kill Snape and Malfoy, because their actions that night had all been part of his plan.”

“What!” Hermione exclaimed. “How on earth were you supposed to know that?”

“That's exactly what I said,” Harry assured her. “I blew up at that point, going off on him for not letting me in on this grand plan of his, instead just leaving me with only a vague idea of how to carry out this mission, along with some obscure clues. But he just sat there with his maddening ‘I know better’ look. At that point I was so angry the room started shaking. McGonagall had to grab me to calm me down. But that was only the beginning. After I regained control, I informed him that I only had one horcrux left to go, and I thought it was in Gringotts, and asked if he had any thoughts on how to get it out.”

Harry shook his head and sat up, still bitter over the next exchange five years later. He turned to Hermione, knowing that it would likely infuriate her as well. “He just got this sad expression on his face and informed me that I was mistaken,” he told her. “Besides the horcrux in Hufflepuff's cup, Voldemort had created one more, *accidental* horcrux on the night he tried to kill me at Godric's Hollow. When the killing curse rebounded on him it split his soul again, and the fragment latched onto me. So I was the last horcrux, and I would need to die before Voldemort could be defeated.”

Hermione exploded, as he'd expected, although it was several seconds before he could make out anything coherent from the rant she unleashed. She leapt to her feet and stormed away from him, then whirled and stalked back, inveigling about senile old men, among other more colorful denunciations. Harry grabbed her as she went past a second time, and hugged her until she calmed down.

“What did you do then?” she finally managed. Harry shrugged.

“I sat down in shock for a few minutes,” he replied. “By that point I was so weary of everything that I actually considered it. Just end it all by walking up to him and letting him kill me. Maybe manage to take him out at the same time or something.”

“No!” Hermione shouted, dismayed that he could have even contemplated such a solution.

“That’s the same thing McGonagall said,” Harry informed her. “She wouldn’t hear of it, and instructed me to leave while she gave the portrait a piece of her mind.” He chuckled at that memory, and Hermione found herself smiling as she pictured how that exchange might have gone.

“Well, then I got to thinking about alternatives, and went back to talk to Bill and Fleur again,” he continued. “I wondered if the goblins had expected me to negotiate after their initial refusal. They said it was worth a try. I also asked if Bill knew any way to remove a horcrux from a person. He said it might be possible, but he’d have to look into it. So I went back and asked for another meeting with Ragnok, who was the head goblin in Britain.”

By now both Harry and Hermione had calmed down sufficiently to resume their walk, and they began heading back along the lake toward the castle.

“I presented it to him as a potential danger to the goblins who tended the vaults,” he declared. “I proposed that they should search all of the vaults belonging to Death Eaters, particularly any belonging to Bellatrix Lestrangle. And if they found anything they could destroy it themselves; I didn’t need to go into the vault, so their security wouldn’t actually be compromised. They wanted some evidence for this possibility, and I offered them my pensieve memory of the Chamber of Secrets, to show that a horcrux was capable of possessing an unsuspecting individual.” Beside him, Hermione nodded in approval. It certainly seemed like a convincing argument to her.

“Well, they were rather impressed with that adventure, particularly how Gryffindor’s sword appeared,” he noted with a touch of pride. “They initially were going to demand the sword in exchange for helping me, since it was a goblin made weapon.” Harry paused his narrative to explain to Hermione the goblin notion of ownership of their creations. “But when Ragnok saw how I pulled it out of the Sorting Hat, he declared that I could keep it, as it had chosen me. Instead, they wanted the remains of the basilisk in payment for helping me.”

He turned and grinned at her. “After Voldemort’s defeat they held a celebration and invited me. They proclaimed that I would forever hold special status among the goblins. And they served basilisk meat.”

Hermione was fascinated, and couldn’t resist. “What does it taste like?” When she saw his smirk, she knew what his answer was going to be even before he said it.

“It tastes like chicken.”

Hermione groaned, mentally chiding herself for having fallen for that old cliché, but on reflection,

she declared with a smirk of her own that this actually made sense, since basilisks were hatched from chicken eggs.

Harry laughed and returned to his story. “Bill was able to find a ritual in Gringotts’ collection of curse breaking books, that would transfer a soul fragment from one person to another,” he announced. “So that was part of the deal. They had a prisoner who had been sentenced to death, so they performed the ritual, then beheaded him with the sword. They were all pretty impressed with the scream the horcrux made when it was destroyed.”

“Was it painful, having it removed?” Hermione immediately wanted to know.

Harry nodded. “It felt like my head was being split in two. I think I might have passed out briefly. But I got through it by keeping telling myself that it was better than the alternative.” Hermione shuddered at that comment, and he wrapped his arm around her for a quick hug.

“After that, it didn’t take long before they found Hufflepuff’s Cup, in Belatrix’s vault just like I suspected,” he finished. “They let me do the honors that time, and then we were on our way back to Shell Cottage.”

They were getting close to the castle now, and Harry turned off the path and, taking Hermione by the hand, guided her around some boulders until they came to a secluded spot just a few feet from the shoreline. In a low, reverent voice he revealed that this had been his special spot all through his last three years at Hogwarts, where he came when he wanted to be by himself. No one else had known about it except for Dobby and Hedwig.

Hermione gave him a warm smile of appreciation, aware of what it meant that he was sharing this location with her. They settled themselves down on a large, flat rock for the conclusion of the saga.

“After that, it was just a matter of time ...”

-oooOOOooo-

Harry glanced again at the slowly setting sun as he paced back and forth along the shore of the lake, a few hundred feet from Dumbledore’s white marble tomb, but perfectly concealed in his cloak of true invisibility. He had a feeling that tonight would be the night it all ended.

It had seemed relatively simple back at Shell Cottage when he’d settled on this strategy. Knowing that Voldemort was searching for the Elder Wand, he would just wait at Hogwarts until he showed up, while hiding in the Forbidden Forest in a tent that Bill loaned him. The implementation, however, had been altogether more challenging. For one thing, he no longer had the connection with the dark lord, so he couldn’t know exactly when he’d show up. And he quickly discovered that a month long around-the-clock stakeout was beyond the capabilities of a single wizard, even with a time turner.

He’d solved that problem by enlisting Kreacher’s assistance. The old house elf had changed his

attitude completely since he'd helped Harry recover and destroy Slytherin's locket, and now served his new master respectfully. He'd also cleaned himself up, dressing in a clean white towel, and always wearing Regulus's locket around his neck. Harry still wasn't fond of him, but managed to put those feelings aside. So Kreacher kept watch during the night, while Harry took his turn during the day. As long as he was alerted before Voldemort actually reached the tomb, he could use his time turner, if necessary, to get himself into position to ambush the evil wizard.

McGonagall had taken care of making certain that his search would lead him to Hogwarts. She'd informed Harry that they'd found Dumbledore's original wand tucked away in his robes, and, not even realizing that he'd had more than one, had buried it with him. Just to be on the safe side, she'd suggested to Rita Skeeter that she do a followup article on Dumbledore on the anniversary of his death, and the story, which just so happened to mention that critical fact, had run in the *Daily Prophet* last month.

Harry had only briefly considered, then rejected, any thoughts of being noble and challenging Voldemort face to face. He had only to take the time to recall those close to him who had fallen in the struggle – Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, Hedwig, Fred, George, Remus, and Dobby, as well as those whose bodies or minds been irreparably damaged, like Bill and Luna – sacrifices to the dark lord's vision of complete domination, to realize that the only thing that mattered was his ultimate destruction. If that meant hexing him in the back from ambush, so be it. He had used the Resurrection Stone to summon the spirits of his parents to confer with them, and they'd both assured him that it was the right thing to do.

He'd been greatly relieved when the school year had ended and the students had been sent home for the summer two weeks ago. Now there would be no innocent bystanders that might be put in danger. In their place McGonagall had summoned some of the former Aurors who formed the largest resistance group to the dark lord's takeover of wizarding Britain, led by Shackbolt and Tonks. She'd even included a goblin delegation as additional witnesses. Unknown to Harry there were also a few select DA members staying in the castle, ready to defend it should Voldemort's visit include an assault on the massive fortress. Even now, there were several pairs of omnioculars trained from the tower windows, recording any potential activities at the tomb by the lake.

Harry paused his pacing and once again checked his wands. He'd faced a difficult decision over which one to use. The Elder Wand cast more powerful spells, but his holly and phoenix feather wand was more attuned to Voldemort. The last time they'd met it had rapidly and unerringly found its target with his first cast.

What had finally decided it was that ever since he'd had the horcrux removed, he'd been feeling more and more infused with magical power. He finally reasoned that either the Deathly Hallows were making him more powerful, or the horcrux had been draining him. Or perhaps it was a combination of the two. In any case, he'd settled on keeping the Elder Wand strapped to his leg, in reserve; he'd use his original wand for the first strike.

A snapping sound drew his attention toward the tomb – halfway there a house elf had just popped into view and was looking around frantically.

“I’m over here,” he whispered, causing the small creature to focus in his direction.

“He is being coming now,” the little being he now recognized as Winky squeaked. “He is bringing many bad creatures with him, but is leaving them in the forest for now.” Her message having been delivered, the nervous elf promptly disappeared.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. This news removed a potential complication he’d been concerned about. Now it would be a simple one-on-one encounter. Silently he moved closer to the gleaming white monument, as the sun finally disappeared below the horizon. There was a solemn stillness surrounding him, broken only by the buzzing of an insect that hovered down by the shoreline.

Suddenly he felt an overwhelming presence of pure evil. He glanced around rapidly, but couldn’t see anything, until something in the sky over the forest caught his eye. There was a shimmering in the air moving toward the tomb and he realized that it was the disillusioned form of his mortal enemy, gliding silently to a landing just a few dozen paces away. Thanking his ancestor for passing down the world’s only perfect invisibility cloak, Harry silently moved closer even as Voldemort dropped the concealing charm and strode purposefully up to the marble structure.

Harry aimed his wand through the opening in his cloak and drew a deep breath. *Control your emotions! Make the first shot count!* He repeated these mantras in his mind as he waited for his best opportunity, when Voldemort’s focus would be entirely on his task. The dark lord raised his wand and cast a powerful severing spell, and with a deafening crack the tomb split in half.

Simultaneously, a golden jet of light streaked from Harry’s wand, with devastating results. Voldemort was hurled against the unyielding stone surface, impacting it with an audible thud, and slid to the ground as his wand sailed off in the opposite direction. Without pausing for self-congratulations, Harry snapped off a succession of spells, stunning and immobilizing his opponent, and summoning the wand as he shrugged off his cloak.

Only then did he stop to take a breath, inhaling several great gulps of air as he willed his pounding heart to slow down. With only a glance at his newly won trophy, he snapped it in half and dropped it at his feet. *Focus! Finish the task! Don’t get distracted or start making speeches!*

Harry reached back over his head and drew out the Sword of Gryffindor from the scabbard strapped to his back. A few more strides brought him up to his unconscious foe, now slumped against the gleaming monument. He spent only a few seconds regarding the snakelike visage that had haunted his dreams for so long, then with one swing it was severed from its pale, skeletal body.

Harry braced himself for the expected magical backlash, but it was merely a ripple, certainly nothing like the shrieks that had accompanied the destruction of the horcruxes. It was almost as though Voldemort’s essence, having been steadily weakened throughout the process, was finally letting loose its final tenuous grasp on existence. Instead, there was flash of light off to his side and he whirled and ducked, taking a quick step back to avoid the spell he thought was heading his way, while simultaneously raising his wand and readying a spell of his own.

But it was only Rita Skeeter, and her camera flashed again, taking a picture that she later would state unequivocally was the most terrifying one she or her photographer had shot in all her years as a reporter – Harry Potter, crouching like a panther prepared to attack, raising a wand and a sword in her direction, his emerald eyes glowing with danger.

Before either of them could say anything, a clamor of voices was heard, as shouts of triumph echoed from the walls of the castle, and a throng of his allies stormed out to join him. From the Astronomy Tower several brooms streaked his way, Ron and Katie being the first to reach him. They were quickly joined by Angelina, Alicia, and Lee, and then by those on foot – Neville and Susan and the DA, Tonks and Shackbolt and the Aurors, and finally McGonagall and Flitwick and the rest of the professors, all coming together in a joyous tumult.

But the battle was not yet finished. From the edge of the Forbidden Forest another horde emerged, with a more evil intent. The defenders immediately turned toward this new threat, and Harry quickly levitated the head and body of his slain foe as they retreated to the more defensible walls of the ancient fortress of Hogwarts.

-oooOOOooo-

From their position at Harry's private spot by the lake, the young couple had a clear view of the white monument rising from the shoreline with the castle behind it, and both of them had been picturing the scene in their minds as Harry recounted the events of that evening, five years ago to the day.

Hermione was by now sitting on Harry's lap, leaning her head against his chest as his arms enfolded her. She'd let out a long sigh of relief at the apparent conclusion of the story, but now realized that it wasn't quite finished yet.

She looked up at him when he didn't continue, wondering at the reason for his hesitation. He looked down at her and shrugged.

"It was rather anticlimactic," he assured her. "Raising Voldemort's dead body into the air turned out to be an unintentional stroke of genius. You see, by then nearly all of his followers were mercenaries. Fred and George had taken out a lot of the key Death Eaters, and I finished the rest of them off at Malfoy Manor. Once these newer recruits saw that he was defeated, they lost interest rather quickly. The intelligent ones all turned around and disappeared back into the Forest. Some of them were captured, but most eventually made their way back to wherever they came from. Our main concern was the giants."

"Oh no!" she gasped. "They're formidable opponents. How did you deal with them?"

He tightened his arms around her briefly in a reassuring squeeze. "You know how elephants are said to be afraid of mice?" he inquired. Confused at this seemingly random remark, she nodded silently. "I think that legend may have a realistic basis, at least as far as magic is concerned," he asserted. "I think that there is some sort of magical balance in the world. For example, you discovered that a basilisk, one of the most dangerous magical creatures that exists, can be killed

by something as simple as the crow of a rooster.”

Hermione nodded again, now realizing where this analogy was headed. “So you’re saying giants have a weakness, and it seems like it must be a small creature of some sort,” she reasoned.

Harry grinned at her, impressed yet again by her sharp mind. “Yep,” he confirmed. “House elves.” Hermione’s face broke out in a broad smile. She’d always had a soft spot for the eager-to-please little creatures. “Giants are highly resistant to all forms of magic – except one,” Harry continued. “House elf magic is defensive in nature, but when their dwelling is threatened they can be fierce. As soon as the first giant attacked the castle, the house elves snapped their fingers and they were all thrown back into the Forest. It didn’t take them too long to get the message.”

Hermione laughed and clapped her hands in delight. “So then it was all over?” she persisted.

Harry described how Shackbolt and his Auror force had retaken the Ministry the next day, with minimal resistance. At one of the goblins’ suggestion, they had mounted Voldemort’s head on a pike and displayed it in the busiest part of Diagon Alley, right in front of Gringotts. That act had established the finality of his defeat most convincingly. That, along with the photo of Harry, sword in one hand and wand in the other, standing triumphantly over his foe’s headless body. It had filled the top half of the front page of the Daily Prophet’s special edition that declared the victory of the Boy Who Lived, now tagged with yet another label - The Hero of the Wizarding World.

He also related how he’d used his now nearly unlimited influence to make certain that all the claims of being under the *Imperius* Curse made by the defeated dark lord’s suddenly reformed supporters were subjected to confirmation by Veritaserum. And that he had insisted that Remus, Fred and George be awarded Orders of Merlin, First Class for their heroic sacrifices. When there had been resistance from the reconstituted Wizengamot to bestowing such an honor on a werewolf, he’d exploded in anger. They’d quickly relented.

Hermione chuckled, picturing the scene. Although she herself could never fear that blazing look of grim determination in Harry’s eyes, she was now aware of its effect on the rest of the wizarding world. It buckled the knees of most wizards (and many witches, but for an entirely different reason).

He skimmed over the celebrations and awards for himself, and focused on all the funerals and memorial services for those who had been killed, or simply disappeared without a trace, during the year long nightmare. He also revealed that Luna was in the long-term care ward at St. Mungo’s, just like Neville’s parents from the first Voldemort war. Adding to the heartbreak, her father, when he heard what had been done to her, had lost his mind as well. The two of them were housed together, occupying a world entirely separate from reality.

“It wasn’t too long before I was completely overwhelmed with everything,” he confessed. “I wanted to just go somewhere and hide, maybe leave the wizarding world completely – at least the parts where I was so well known. But Fleur and McGonagall weren’t having any of that. McGonagall brought me to Hogwarts and put me up in the staff quarters here. The Ministry

announced that they were granting me honorary NEWTs, but she put her foot down on that one. She said that eventually I would feel bad for not having earned them.” Hermione nodded her agreement with that assertion, and Harry shrugged, acknowledging the point.

“I took the NEWT for Defense immediately, and scored an easy O,” he informed her with a touch of pride. “For the upcoming term she made me an assistant professor for DADA, along with an Auror that Shackbolt loaned us. By the end of the year I had taken over the whole course, all seven years, and I’ve had the job ever since. During that year I studied the other subjects, and that spring I took the NEWTs for Transfiguration, Charms, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes. I got two O’s and two E’s,” he added before she could ask, chuckling at being able to anticipate her. She shot him a mock glare and they both laughed.

“And that brings us up to now,” he concluded.

She had one more question. “And what exactly is the significance of you being the Master of Death?” she wondered.

“You mean, besides the fact that I get discounts at wizarding establishments all across Britain and parts of the continent?” he smirked. Her response to this was a quick elbow to his ribs.

“You make it sound like a credit card commercial!” she complained.

“Actually, not much,” he explained. “It turns out that the legend was entirely speculative. I use the Wand for the heavy lifting, and the Cloak when I want some privacy, and keep the Stone hidden away where no one will ever find it.”

“That’s it?” she exclaimed in disbelief.

“Pretty much,” he assured her. “It’s not like I sit down to have tea with Death on a regular basis or anything.”

She rolled her eyes but said no more, and the two of them settled back into a comfortable cuddle. Harry found himself filled with an inner peace that he hadn’t experienced in years, if ever.

“I love you,” he whispered after a few minutes.

“I love you too,” she responded promptly, punctuating her reply with quick kiss.

But he had more to say. “I need you,” he declared fervently. “Over the past two weeks I’ve come to realize just how much I needed you. But my fear has been that if you realized how desperate I was that it would scare you off.”

Hermione wiped a tear from her eye. “I’m still here and I’m not ever going to leave,” she vowed. This led directly into a passionate embrace.

Eventually they relinquished their tight holds on each other. Harry had an idea, and leaned back to ask a question. “Do you want to stop by your parents’ house before the ball?” Hermione returned a

puzzled look. “You know, so they can take pictures and stuff,” he clarified.

Hermione, thrilled that he could be so thoughtful, even after the emotion-filled past several hours, gave him a tender kiss. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” he replied with one last hug. Then he stood, and helped her to her feet. “Time to go get ready for the ball.”

A large grin broke out on Harry’s face as they walked hand in hand toward the castle. “You know,” he announced with immense satisfaction. “This is the first one of these that I’ve ever looked forward to.”

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I Need You

The New Professors

Epilogue, The New Professors

Harry, Hermione, and several of their fellow Hogwarts professors appeared in a flash of swirling color at the entrance to the castle. They'd used one of the portkeys McGonagall had provided for the staff to travel to and from the Ministry of Magic for the Victory Ball, and had now returned upon its conclusion. The group gradually split apart as they walked up the steps into the main entrance, and began to bid each other good night. Some of the younger staff, Aurora Sinestra and Bathsheba Babbling in particular, smiled knowingly as they waved to the pair who had fallen behind, hoping for a bit of privacy as they reviewed the events of the evening.

Hermione sighed contentedly as she pressed herself into Harry's side. It had been an amazing experience, far outside anything she'd ever done before. When she'd first arrived she'd felt something like she imagined Cinderella must have felt when she'd been selected to dance with the Prince. When she and Harry entered the ballroom a hush gradually settled over the hall as conversations broke off and the assembled witches and wizards turned toward them, twisting and shifting position to get a look at them. After a few seconds the clamor swelled once more, only this time the focus of nearly all the talk had merged to a single topic.

She was certain that she'd had more pictures taken of her in one night than she'd had in the past ten years, at least. The whole evening had been both strenuous and exhilarating at the same time, and now she was exhausted, but yet far too keyed up to relax anytime soon.

For his part, Harry was extremely satisfied with how things had gone. Hermione's gown had taken his breath away when she'd first revealed it, upon removing her cloak at her mother and father's house. He'd been glad he'd suggested they stop there first, as he'd needed some time to compose himself so he wouldn't be constantly staring at her when they arrived at the ball. And the delight in her eyes at his reaction had made all the teasing he'd taken from her parents worth it.

By prior agreement, they'd limited any public displays of affection at the ball, confining themselves to no more than hand holding as they worked their way across the hall. That hadn't stopped the rampant speculation as to the depth of their relationship, but at this point it would remain just that – speculation. Some of the more astute women present, such as Fleur, could readily discern their feelings from the glances they gave each other throughout the evening, but fortunately most of the attendees were too self-absorbed to pick up on that.

Harry took the opportunity to introduce Hermione to his acquaintances in the Ministry, particularly Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Minister of Magic, Gawain Robards, the Director of the DMLE, and Tonks (just Tonks) now a Senior Auror. Hermione was glad to now have a face to put with the names, although, as Harry quipped, with Tonks one was never certain about that.

As always at these events, Harry had danced primarily with his own partner. Also in accordance with his normal practice, his first dance with another woman had been with Fleur, and he would later join Susan and Tracey for one dance each, fending off a seemingly unending series of overtures by other eager witches.

The only break from his normal routine had been when, at Fleur's request, he'd agreed to dance with Gabrielle. The two of them had caught the attention of most of the onlookers because Gabrielle had looked absolutely dazzling. To her dismay, her allure had no effect on Harry, although dozens of wizards dancing close by had needed to be shaken or slapped by their annoyed partners when they temporarily took leave of their senses. Hermione's initial anxiety quickly turned to amusement and she shared a quiet chuckle with Bill and Fleur, whose company she'd sought to sit that one out with, particularly at the disappointed pout on the young Veela's face as the song concluded.

During Harry's dances with Susan and Tracey (Padma had not attended this year), Hermione had sat and talked with Lee and Angelina. The two of them were also a serious couple, and along with Alicia were the only ones other than Fleur who had an inkling of how far along Harry and Hermione's feelings for each other had developed. They both assured her that they were very happy with the way things were turning out. Lee also informed her that he'd been serious about hiring her for consulting, and that she should stop by the shop again when she had some spare time later in the summer.

She'd spent a few minutes talking with Neville and Hannah, and Seamus and Parvati, catching up with her former housemates and hearing about what was currently going on in their lives, while also patiently answering the same questions over and over again. Ron and Lavender stopped by their table for a time, and they were treated to an in-depth analysis of the current round of the quidditch playoffs. (Ron's team, the Chudley Cannons, had long since been eliminated, which was why he was able to attend the ball.) Fortunately, Hermione thought, those same playoffs had also necessitated Ginny's absence from the evening's festivities, so she didn't have to deal with any possible unpleasant displays from the fiery redhead.

"Well, what did you think?" Harry asked, interrupting her thoughts, as they passed into the Entrance Hall. Hermione beamed at him and squeezed his hand, her eyes answering the question for her.

"It was just amazing," she gushed. "I felt like a princess, even though at times the attention got to be somewhat overwhelming. Although I know that's what you have to go through all the time."

"You looked like a princess too," he declared, eliciting another broad smile. "I had a hard time paying attention to anyone else there." She clucked her tongue at the obvious flattery, then shot him a calculating look.

“Are you saying you didn’t notice all the gorgeous gowns the other women were wearing?” she challenged. Harry shrugged, so Hermione pressed him to tell her how the other witches he danced with were attired. He could not remember what Tracey’s outfit looked like, but correctly recalled the color for Susan – red. Hermione was skeptical, since Susan filled out her gown rather impressively – she had the sort of figure that made it almost impossible *not* to show off her assets. It had made Hermione glad she’d chosen the neckline that she had, with modest cleavage of her own. Of course the diamond and sapphire necklace had been guaranteed to draw most everyone’s attention to that area of her anatomy.

“And did you happen to note what Fleur was wearing?” she teased.

“A strapless silver gown,” he answered promptly. Hermione raised an eyebrow at this admission. “Because she *always* wears a strapless silver gown,” he explained with a grin. She rolled her eyes, but couldn’t resist a grin of her own.

“So do you think you want to accompany me again to the next one?” he suggested hopefully. She stopped, and turned to look at him, her expression turning serious.

“I’d like that very much,” she whispered, as she lifted up her head to give him a kiss. “Though I suppose that would pretty much confirm to everyone that we’re a couple.” There was a bit of a challenge in her tone of voice with the latter statement. “When is it?”

After assuring her that they were most definitely a couple, Harry informed her that the next major formal celebration was Halloween, that the theme was a remembrance for those who had died in the two Voldemort wars, and that it was held on that day in honor of his parents. Everyone wore black, although it was dressy black, not mourning style black.

“OK, LBD then,” Hermione responded with a nod, more relaxed about the event now that she could see that he wasn’t at all upset about the nature of the occasion. Indeed, he seemed to genuinely appreciate the tribute to his mother and father. Then she smirked at the puzzled look at his face as he tried to work out what an LBD was. She took pity on him and explained that every woman owned a so-called little black dress, a simple, elegant, short black dress appropriate for a wide range of occasions. After hearing her description, he agreed that this would be perfect for the Halloween ball.

“Well, I suppose I should tell Susan that she’s off the hook then,” he decided, shooting her a sly grin.

To his surprise, Hermione responded with a sheepish smile. “Actually, I sort of already did,” she confessed. “You see, she and Tracey cornered me in the lady’s room ...”

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Hermione looked up from the mirror and gave a cordial smile to the two women who’d just entered the loo, recognizing Susan Bones immediately, and Tracey Davis a moment later. While Susan had striking dark red hair and an impressive figure, Tracey had a more ordinary appearance

– much like how Hermione thought she herself would look if she had shorter hair. They all greeted each other and formally introduced themselves, making the typical comments about how long it had been, etc.

Then Susan cast a privacy charm on the door.

“You’re more than just a replacement for Katie,” she stated, phrasing it more like an accusation than a question. Hermione nodded warily. But Susan broke into a smile, while Tracey adopted a calculating expression.

“I’m sorry if ...” Hermione began to apologize.

“No, don’t worry about it, we’re not upset at all,” Susan interrupted. “We only want what’s best for Harry. It’s actually something of a relief, to tell the truth.”

“I can see now how difficult this must have been for the four of you with that system of his,” Hermione acknowledged.

This time it was Tracey who waved her off. “We all owe him our lives,” she stated firmly. “This was a pretty small price to pay when you think about it.”

“Well, of course that’s true of the whole wizarding world, but ...” Hermione began to protest, not wanting to minimize their particular contribution to Harry’s well-being over the past five years.

“No, I don’t think you understand,” Tracey broke in. “We literally owe him our lives. Susan and I, and most of the rest of the DA, would not be alive today if Harry hadn’t taught us how to defend ourselves.” Hermione was taken aback at how earnest the Slytherin woman was, and decided it would be best to hear her out.

“Do you know just how good he is?” Tracey challenged. Hermione shook her head, having not actually observed Harry doing any teaching.

“Our class was the smallest in recent history by the time everything was over,” Susan informed her. “Less than half of the students we started with finished seventh year. The rest were either dead or had fled the country.”

Tracey snorted at that. “Or ended up in prison,” she corrected, referring to the fate of not a few of her own housemates, who’d been captured by the resistance forces. “Most of my house chose the wrong side. All except Daphne, Blaise, and me. Daphne and I were in the DA; Blaise and his mother moved to Italy for the final year. We finished Hogwarts with two Slytherins, five Gryffindors, six Hufflepuffs, and four Ravenclaws. And every one of the ones who were left was in the DA.”

“And we all had to fight for our lives on more than one occasion,” Susan added. “Harry made sure we all knew how to take down and secure an opponent, and do it fast. And every one of us was able to produce a Patronus.”

“Our class’s OWL results in Defense were skewed,” Tracey declared. “Daphne’s father looked them up – half of the students were in the DA, and they all got O’s and E’s. The other half had only a few E’s, and not a single O. That’s why she and I joined in sixth year. And Harry even met with us on and off during seventh year, whenever he was in the castle. I still can’t fathom how that man could sneak in and out with such impunity! But for NEWTs we set a record that will never be broken. Every one of us got an O. That’s how good Harry is. He may well be the best Defense professor Hogwarts has ever had.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped in amazement at this revelation. “He never mentioned any of that!” she exclaimed. Susan and Tracey jointly shook their heads and rolled their eyes.

“That’s Harry ‘too bloody noble for his own good’ Potter,” Tracey sighed. “I’ll bet anything that if you bring it up he’ll feel bad about the ones that didn’t make it.” Hermione nodded, silently agreeing that she was most likely correct.

Susan lowered her voice and leaned closer. “But Hermione, see if you can get him to lighten up a bit. He’s soooo intense.”

Tracey nodded. “To him, Defense Against the Dark Arts is a matter of life and death, and to some extent you can’t blame him, because for us, it was,” she explained. “But he scares the crap out of the younger students, and even the older ones are afraid of him.”

And perhaps even some of the professors, Hermione thought to herself. Aloud, she responded, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Now Susan grinned. “So, are you sleeping with him yet?”

-oooOOOooo-

By now Harry and Hermione had passed through the staff room and the enchanted doorway into her quarters, and that last revelation brought Harry up short.

“What did you tell her?” he asked nervously.

Hermione grinned. “I just shrugged and gave them my most enigmatic smile,” she replied. Seeing that he wasn’t reassured yet, she continued, “Susan pouted but Tracey smacked her on the arm and told her to back off. They both know how guarded you are with your privacy. They won’t tell anyone.”

Harry relaxed, knowing that she was right. Their trustworthiness was the main reason they were part of his group of escorts in the first place.

“Susan also said one other thing,” Hermione revealed, her voice softening. “She said that she’d known that you missed me, but until tonight she’d had no idea just how much.”

Harry took her in his arms. “Up until last week, neither did I,” he whispered. He punctuated this assertion with a tender kiss, which gradually became more passionate.

When they broke apart Hermione gestured toward her bedroom. “My turn to play hostess tonight?” she suggested. Harry shrugged that it didn’t make any difference to him and smiled as she took his hand and led him through the door. It did feel somehow more illicit for him to sleep in her bed than when she joined him in his, but he couldn’t explain why.

Hermione stopped by her dresser to remove her diamond and sapphire earrings and asked him to do the honors with the matching necklace. Once they were safely tucked away she asked him to unzip her dress. His pulse began to beat faster as he complied, his hands trembling slightly.

Then she turned to face him as she allowed the gown to fall to the floor, leaving her attired only in a delicate pair of periwinkle blue satin and lace knickers.

Harry’s breath caught in his throat and he was conscious of his heart pounding against his chest, as she turned away and bent over to pick up the gown, presenting another delightful view. Then she shot him a sly grin back over her shoulder.

“Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back,” she announced as she disappeared into her dressing room.

When she returned Harry had stripped to just his undershorts, deciding correctly that she would want him shirtless. For her part she had an impish smile on her face as she presented him with his first view of her most recently acquired sleepwear – a Harry Potter quidditch jersey.

It was a marketing phenomenon. Even though it had been six years since he last played the sport, jerseys with Potter 1 inscribed on the back were by far the best selling on the market. (Harry’s income from just the royalties alone would have ranked him among the top ten highest paid quiddich stars in Britain. He found it both mind-boggling and embarrassing.) The jerseys were available in any team’s colors (including that of the Holyhead Harpies, which he found somewhat disturbing), but the top seller was the one in Gryffindor red and gold. Which Hermione was now sporting.

His predictable reaction was a groan and a mock scowl, which elicited a broader smile from her, as she put her hands on her hips and turned to model it for him. He couldn’t help noting that hers had been somewhat altered from the normal style of nightshirt, being both sleeveless and rather short. It only just covered her knickers (which he was somehow both relieved and disappointed that she was still wearing).

The knickers in question were fully exposed when she threw her arms around his neck and pressed herself into him for a hug. “How do you like it?” she inquired with a saucy grin.

“I certainly can’t complain about how it looks on you!” he quipped as they broke apart.

“And did you notice the knickers?” she persisted. Harry had to think for a moment, wondering exactly what he’d been supposed to notice about them. Her cute pout at his hesitation didn’t help matters any.

“Well, there were a couple of other things distracting me,” he protested, glancing pointedly at her now covered chest. Her face reddened, but she managed to maintain her expectant expression.

“Uh, they’re blue, right?” he offered, scratching the back of his head, now focusing on the memory of her bending over. “And ... they matched your dress!” he decided finally. This turned out to be the right answer, as she beamed at him and moved in for another hug.

“Fleur says it’s important for *everything* to match, including your undergarments,” she informed him primly. “Because you just never know what might happen.” Harry wasn’t sure exactly what could happen that would cause her knickers to be revealed while she was still wearing the gown, but decided it wasn’t worth arguing about. Besides, they certainly did look *very* good on her.

“And the fabric matches too. See how nice it feels.” She caught him by surprise when she moved both his hands into position on her bum to verify her claim. It did indeed feel amazing, and he couldn’t resist allowing them to roam, thoroughly exploring her shapely behind through the thin silk coating. This was new territory – up until now he’d kept his hands above her waist during their amorous activities.

She pulled his head down and they began to kiss, and as things grew more heated he slipped one hand inside her top, while the other continued to caress her bottom. Her hands were not idle either, and soon both of them were moaning aloud.

“Hermione!” he gasped. “Do you ... want to ...?”

“N..no...,” she finally managed. “Not tonight ... but soon.” Both of them breathing heavily, they fell into the bed, and she quickly snuggled up against him in one of her favored positions.

“Although,” she murmured into his ear, “it probably would be a good idea to for me to ... relieve some of your tension.”

When she finished, he gladly returned the favor. They both slept quite well that night.

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At breakfast the next morning Harry wondered, “What now?” Despite the fact that the question could have been construed in many different ways, Hermione had an answer ready.

“I think we should get away for a while; let things settle down around here,” she suggested. “After the past two weeks, we could both use a holiday.”

Harry considered the idea for several moments, then asked, “Have any place in mind?”

“I was thinking of someplace with a beach,” Hermione suggested, biting her lip. Harry noticed a blush forming on her cheeks, and wondered why the thought of a beach should embarrass her. After all, he’d seen more of her last night than he would on a beach.

“Sure, why not?” he agreed. “Do you have anything more specific than that?” In fact, she did.

“Greece?” she offered tentatively. “It’s beautiful, there are plenty of sunny beaches, and several very interesting magical sites as well.”

“It’s a little too close, though,” he objected. “I assume the goal is not to be recognized?” Hermione nodded. “How about some place in America? You must have some idea of good beaches over there; you lived there for five years.”

“Perhaps Jamaica,” she responded after some thought. “It’s in the Caribbean, they speak English, and there are supposed to be some interesting magical sites there too.” She paused for his evaluation, and he shrugged. “I’ll do some research on both places,” she offered. “Then we can decide. It will take a few days to make the arrangements in any case.”

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Hermione paused in the doorway and watched the small blonde girl take Harry’s hand and lead him outside. Victoire Weasley was the most adorable four-year-old she had ever seen. And she had Harry completely wrapped around her little finger. As soon as they had arrived she had announced that it was about time he had come, and insisted that they go down to the beach right away, as he had promised to look for shells with her.

Harry had taken the time to introduce her, and the little Veela had immediately regarded her with suspicion – she had needed to fight back her laughter at the girl’s possessiveness, but she would soon have to learn how to share. Hermione intended to be a big part of her godfather’s life for quite some time to come.

“You will need to make friends wiz ’er,” Fleur advised from behind as she came up to stand next to her. “It may take some time, but she will ’ave to deal wiz eet.” Hermione smiled and nodded, and at that moment Harry turned to look back at her. He beckoned her to join them, and she smiled and hurried to catch up.

Upon reaching them, instead of taking up a position on Harry’s other side, she moved next to Victoire and offered her hand. The little blonde hesitated for a moment, looking up at her with a calculation in her big blue eyes, as if to take her measure. Eventually she relented, and the three of them continued down the path to the beach.

Once they reached their destination Harry conjured a blanket and he and Hermione sat on it, enjoying the warm afternoon, while Victoire searched for shells, occasionally picking one up and bringing it back. Hermione impressed the girl significantly when she was able to identify most of them. After a while she abandoned her restraint and leaned her head against Harry’s shoulder, while his arm found its way around her waist.

She soon removed her jumper, leaving her attired in a pair of thigh length shorts and a very snug fitting spaghetti strap tank top, and she didn’t fail to notice the glances of appreciation Harry was sending her way. He upped the ante by removing his T shirt, leaving him in just a pair of shorts, and she reciprocated with appreciative looks of her own. She couldn’t help but think about the shopping they had planned for the next day, in anticipation of their upcoming holiday. Harry

would need a whole set of lightweight vacation clothing, and there was one other special item she needed to purchase.

After Shell Cottage had once again lived up to its name, with Tori (as everyone but Fleur called her) proudly displaying her new finds across the railing of the porch deck overlooking the sea, Harry took Hermione down another path to visit Dobby's grave. It was yet another solemn reminder of what he'd lost, and the sacrifices that had been made, and they spent several minutes standing there silently paying their respects. Hermione conjured another spray of flowers to lay next to the headstone, this time lilies.

At dinner later on, the two professors revealed their plans for a holiday. Hermione took the opportunity to ask Fleur about glamour charms, such as the one used on Harry at her wedding. To her delight, the older Veela was happy to show them several, including a very effective one for blonde hair. With both of them thus transformed, she was confident that there was little likelihood that they'd be recognized in Greece, appearing to be just another pair of Scandinavian tourists. Harry agreed, and their destination was settled.

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Harry was quite happy to help her shop for a new bikini, and was delighted that she wanted a rather skimpy one, with triangle tops and string tie sides, but he couldn't understand why it had to be such a specific shade of blue. At the outset he'd commented that she looked great in light blue, which earned him a kiss. But Hermione had insisted that it had to be a certain color; she had it in her mind and would know it when she saw it.

After the fourth store, Harry made a suggestion – why not just use a color changing charm? That way she could have several different suits in one. That had earned him another kiss, even when he teased her for not thinking like a witch. She just stuck her tongue out at him and claimed that she should be allowed some slack, since she'd been living as a muggle for five years!

The suit she finally settled on was a plain white one. When Hermione emerged from the dressing room to model it for him, Harry swallowed hard. He was taken aback at just how thin the material was, and decided that it was a good idea that she would be making it bright blue because otherwise the top would be rather revealing when it got wet! (1)

It was only later that he would discover an important fact that had not entered into his analysis. The beaches they visited in Greece were ones on which many women went topless, and it really didn't matter how see-through the top was once it had been removed and tossed into her beach bag!

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Before they knew it they found themselves on a plane soaring over the blue waters of the Mediterranean. Harry turned to smile at Hermione when she squeezed his hand as they were beginning their descent into Athens. He still couldn't believe how different she looked with honey blonde hair and a light tan, courtesy of another of Fleur's spells. At the same time, he was aware

that similar appearance alterations looked even more dramatically different on him – spending nearly all his time inside a castle in Scotland for the past five years tended to leave one’s complexion rather pale, to say the least.

Fortunately, that same castle life had permitted them to mostly avoid the press in the days since the Victory Ball. There had been plenty of speculation and conjecture, but without any solid evidence he hoped that they would eventually move on to other subjects, at least until classes started up again in the fall.

Harry was soon to discover that much of what he thought he’d knew about ancient Greece from primary school had been wrong. The Colossus still stood sentinel over the harbor of Rhodes, under powerful notice-me-not and muggle-repelling charms, as were many other so-called ruins. In fact, the Acropolis of Athens itself was the location of the Greek Ministry of Magic, which was situated directly beneath the Parthenon!

It didn’t take long for Harry to conclude that he wanted to continue to travel with Hermione as often as possible. He hadn’t ever taken a real holiday, being more concerned with serious pursuits like staying alive. Later, when he had the means and the freedom to travel, he just didn’t have anyone he felt comfortable asking to go with him, and wasn’t inclined to try it by himself. But her thirst for knowledge and her willingness to share it with him, combined with her joyful, upbeat attitude and playful teasing, made her the perfect travel companion.

Their week in Greece was divided between muggle and magical sites, with privacy concerns necessitating mostly the former. It was memorable from beginning to end, but a couple of episodes particularly stood out.

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After a day on the beach, in particular after watching Hermione rub magical sunscreen on parts of her anatomy that never saw the sun in England (and particularly after being invited to assist her) Harry was understandably less enthusiastic about visiting historic magical sites. That quickly changed with their visit to the Sacred Healing Pools of Athena at Edipsos. (2)

“What’s so special about this place?” Harry complained as Hermione led him into the underground grotto. It didn’t seem like much – just a pool of water carved into the stone, with some benches and a couple of nooks carved into the wall around the outer edge. And a simple bed at the opposite end of the pool. A bed?

“Well, for one thing, it’s completely private,” Hermione responded with a coy smile. “And it is a *bath*, isn’t it?” That comment brought Harry up short, and he watched in stunned silence as she removed her halter top and hung it on one of the hooks in the changing space.

Then she removed her skirt, and did the same, causing his jaw to drop. He’d been aware that she wasn’t wearing anything under the top, as that had been her practice throughout the holiday. But today she’d evidently decided to forgo underwear completely.

Unable to move, Harry stared in amazement as she descended the steps into the steaming water. Finally, she cocked her head and beckoned to him with a come hither look. “Well, aren’t you going to join me?”

Harry ripped off his shirt and stumbled slightly as he tore off his trousers, causing her to giggle at him as he finally joined her after discarding the last vestiges of his clothing. Hesitantly he put his arms around her; then more confidently he drew her close into a kiss.

“Hermione?” he gasped as they broke apart when her hands started to wander.

“I’m ready now,” she replied to the question they both knew he was asking.

“Here? Right now?” he asked with some disbelief.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed herself into him again. “There are all sorts of interesting qualities to this water,” she explained with a sly grin. “It’s best known for its ability to relieve people of their chronic aches and pains. But the next most frequent visitors are newlyweds.” Harry’s eyes widened in understanding.

“It’s supposed to be particularly effective for alleviating the discomfort of a woman’s first time,” she added with a blush. “As well as providing a bit of a boost for the man.”

The first time was awkward, but satisfying. The second time was much better. The third time was fantastic.

The end of the hour found them cuddled together on the bed in each other’s arms as they murmured endearing words of affection to each other. A flashing light signaled that their allotted time was up, and Harry groaned. Not wanting to move from this delightful position, he promptly offered to pay for another hour.

But Hermione just chuckled and pulled him to his feet. “There’ll be plenty of other opportunities, don’t you think?” she teased, bringing a dazed grin to his face.

She then gave another impish smile as she deliberately took her time dressing in front of him, making sure he remembered her lack of undergarments. And she insisted he follow her example.

By the end of the day Harry clearly understood the consequences of that decision. All through the afternoon and during dinner, the two of them had exchanged knowing glances, and Hermione had managed to frequently brush up against him, making sure he was constantly aware of their partial state of undress. At the beginning of the day, Harry had thought she looked great in the white halter top and green floral wrap skirt. Now all he could think of was getting them off of her! By the time they returned to their hotel they were both in such a state of arousal that they were practically running to their room.

Hermione’s halter flew off while Harry’s trousers vanished almost before the door closed. Not waiting to disrobe further, he flipped up her skirt and threw her over the sofa, causing her to shriek

with delight. The fourth time was fast and furious.

Eventually they made it into bed. The fifth time they took it nice and slow. It was simply magical.

And Harry resolved to never dispute Hermione's selection of tourist sites ever again.

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On the last day of their week in Greece, Hermione was finally able to live out the fantasy from the Daydream Charm. Up until then it had been thwarted by timing considerations, and the crowds on the beaches, but early that morning they finally stood alone on a sandy beach, hand in hand, watching the sun rise.

Their privacy was ensured by some remarkable privacy spells that Harry had told Hermione about, which he'd used to hide his tent in the Forbidden Forest – *Salvio Hexia* , *Cave Inimicum* , *Protego Totalum* – as well as the standard muggle-repelling ward, *Repello Muggletum* . They were so efficient, and hid them so well, he assured her, that an intruder could walk right up next to them without any hint that they were there. (3)

Harry played his part to perfection, and one by one the pieces of the blue string bikini hit the sand, along with his swim trunks. And they made another lasting memory.

They also discovered that a beach is not the best environment for lovemaking, as sand and pebbles are prone to irritate certain sensitive body parts. But they both agreed that it was certainly worth trying once.

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Back at Hogwarts, they spent the month of August preparing for classes, planning out Hermione's new Muggle Studies curriculum. On their occasional trips to Diagon Alley, Harry endured the incessant crowding and queries with much more equanimity than he'd managed in the past. They both answered questions from the press graciously, but without revealing anything more than that they were each glad to be reunited with one of their best friends. The only clue anyone received was noticing that Harry seemed to be smiling a lot these days, an expression the wizarding world had rarely seen on him in the past.

Harry was happy to listen to Hermione practice her lectures, and made suggestions for when she needed to slow down, especially when she lapsed into know-it-all mode and became overly pedantic. But she insisted that he also go through his lessons for her, both to give her the benefit of his experience, and also to help him 'lighten up'.

She'd shared Susan and Tracey's concerns with him, and made the point that he no longer needed to establish his authority as he had as a fifteen year old teaching students who were older than himself. It wasn't necessary to intimidate his classes, as they came to Hogwarts already in awe of him. He agreed that he needed to find a better balance in his approach, and was happy for her insights.

It wasn't all work and no play. For one thing, they made some interesting discoveries about the Room of Requirement. While it could reproduce any single room, no matter how large, it could not mimic an outdoor area. Sadly, that meant no beach activities inside the castle walls. On the bright side, it did reproduce the grotto containing the healing pool. Hermione teased, as they disrobed and entered the warm water, that although it was probably just water, without the extra beneficial qualities, she didn't think either of them needed any more assistance. As far as she was concerned, his performance always merited an Outstanding. Harry returned the compliment, declaring that if that were so it was due to her inspiration.

One day, Hermione showed up to his classroom wearing school girl robes that were extremely short and had a very distracting neckline. While he attempted to maintain a professional demeanor, she flirted shamelessly, leaning forward often to give him a full view of her unsupported state. But he managed to make through his lesson without losing his cool. At the end she gathered up her books and pouted, staying in character.

"Miss Granger, I'm afraid I'll have to give you detention for your improper attire today," Harry announced in a grave tone. Hermione smiled and glanced down at her chest, reaching up a finger to tug her neckline down even further.

"I'm sorry, Professor Potter," she simpered. "Do you want me to serve my detention now?" She nodded toward his office, causing his breath to catch momentarily.

"I suppose that might be for the best," he agreed, wasting no time leading her through the door. Once inside, she set her books aside and stood before him, eyes downcast and hands folded in front of her. Then she informed him that she'd been such a bad girl that she deserved to be spanked.

Before he could protest (not that he had any inclination to!) she'd pushed him into a chair and stretched herself across his lap. She had one more surprise for him. When he pushed aside the short robes that were straining to cover her bum, he discovered that she was wearing thong style knickers.

With a loud groan, Harry managed only a couple of light smacks on her bared bottom before deciding on a different form of 'punishment', and bent her over his desk instead. Her squeals of indignation quickly turned to ones of enthusiasm. Shortly afterward, once that particular piece of office furniture had been properly christened, the two of them retired into his bedroom for the remainder of the afternoon.

The rest of the staff never did figure out why, after that day, the two of them always broke into broad grins whenever Hermione addressed Harry as 'Professor Potter'.

By the end of the month 'his' bedroom had become 'their' bedroom. Hermione then decided that there was no need to clutter up her quarters with a bed she never used, when the space could more profitably be taken up with additional bookshelves. Harry teased her for several days about that, right up until she inquired cheekily if he'd prefer that she had the elves bring the bed back so that she could move back in. He quickly declined, deciding that she'd been absolutely correct in her

assessment of the situation.

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September 1

“Thanks, Hagrid, I’ll take them from here.”

McGonagall had been hoping to eventually name Harry the Gryffindor Head of House, but knew that before this summer, with his mental state what it was, it would not have been a good idea. But now things were different. After seeing what a positive effect Hermione had on him, and he on her for that matter, she approached the young couple with an unusual proposition – they would jointly assume the position. Hermione was up for it, and her enthusiasm was enough to overcome Harry’s reticence. In fact, he delighted McGonagall by asking to be the one to lead the first years into the Great Hall for the Sorting at the Opening Feast.

The eleven-year-old witches and wizards ceased their nervous chatter and their eyes went wide as soon as they noticed who was leading them. Harry just smiled and shepherded them into the small antechamber off the Entrance Hall.

“OK, listen up,” he directed. Seeing the awestruck expressions on all their faces, he dropped to one knee and gestured them to gather around him. He went through the standard speech about the house system, how their house would be like their family, and how they would earn (and lose) points toward the House Cup awarded at the end of the year. After each point he made he received a silent chorus of wide-eyed nods.

“Now,” he declared after he’d finished the spiel. “Do you want to know something I didn’t learn until my fifth and sixth year, that I wish I’d figured out earlier?” After a brief hesitation, a few nodded again, and then the rest followed suit.

“Your house may be like your family, but that doesn’t mean you can’t have friends in the other houses,” he advised. “In fact, I recommend it. If you don’t, you’ll miss out on getting to know some great kids.” The assembled children looked around at their peers as if to check out the validity of his pronouncement, then turned back and nodded yet again.

“OK,” he continued. “Another thing – are any of you scared right now?” Many nervous glances were exchanged before he received another set of head bobs. “Well, would you believe I was just as nervous when I first came to Hogwarts as you are now?” This time they all shook their heads, causing him to chuckle. “Well, it’s true. I was scared to death that they’d tell me they’d made a mistake, and I wasn’t supposed to be here.” Four dozen jaws dropped in disbelief.

Harry grinned. “What you need to do is show a bit of self-confidence. Act like you belong here. So what do you say, shall we give them an entrance that makes a statement? Let’s put on a show they’ll never forget!” The first years were now completely perplexed. Was this really *the* Harry Potter saying all of this? A few of the braver ones managed to overcome their doubts and begin nodding with determination, and soon the confidence spread throughout the room.

Harry quickly explained his idea. First he had them line up in alphabetical order, then began to pair them up from the ends of the alphabet to the middle – first Abbott (a distant cousin of Hannah’s, he later determined) with Williamson, and so forth until he matched up Lawrence and Martin. Then he announced that they were to march in and split up when they reached the front of the hall, Abbott going to the right and Williamson to the left, with each line following along behind.

He told them to start marching in place, then cast a charm on them that synchronized their steps so that they would be in perfect formation. By now they were all grinning back at him, and with a conspiratorial smile he opened the door and led them across the way and into the Great Hall. As they passed through the door he cast one more silent charm, that caused their robes to billow out slightly behind them as they moved.

The noise in the hall came to an abrupt halt as the upper years witnessed Professor Potter leading this unexpected procession. Upon reaching the head table he turned and faced his little band, giving each pair of students a wink as they reached him and turned in their appointed directions. When the line was complete he gave them a signal and they all snapped to attention.

Sitting at the head table next to an empty chair, Hermione thought it was the cutest thing she’d ever seen at Hogwarts. She’d known Harry had something special planned, but even she was surprised at what happened next. With a subtle motion from his wand and a silent incantation, a flash of fireworks appeared over the head table, and the sparkling lights arranged themselves into a fiery sign.

Welcome, Hogwarts Class of 2010!

A stunned silence settled over the hall before a few students began to applaud, soon followed by the rest. And at the front, the row of first years stood that much straighter, beaming with pride in themselves, and gratitude for their new favorite professor.

Harry smirked at the professors sitting before him with looks of astonishment on their faces. When his gaze fell upon Hermione she rolled her eyes at him in a feigned admonition then shot him an approving smile. But he wasn’t done yet.

Another subtle wave of his wand and the robes of the faculty all changed, from the standard black to red, green, yellow, and blue, according to the house they’d been in as students. Except for McGonagall, who was now attired in a plaid pattern that incorporated all four colors.

“Harry, behave yourself!” Hermione chided in a loud voice, shocking everyone who heard her. Even more astonishing was his response.

“Yes, dear.”

He snapped his fingers at the fireworks (while casting another nonverbal command with the wand up his left sleeve) and they promptly extinguished.

“Professor Potter, if you are quite finished with your entertainment, may we continue with the sorting?” the Headmistress admonished, making a supreme effort to keep a straight face.

“Certainly, Headmistress,” Harry agreed with a low, sweeping bow. Near him, several of the first years giggled. He took a critical look at the stool traditionally used for the sorting, and with another flick of his wand transfigured it into a much more impressive, cushioned chair, raised up on a platform so that everyone in the hall could see it.

“Abbott, Sarah!” he called out, turning to smile to the young witch in blonde pigtails at the end of the line. She hurried up to him, and he bowed, then took her hand to guide her up the steps to the elevated chair, and lowered the Sorting Hat onto her head as she settled herself.

“Hufflepuff!” the hat announced, and immediately yellow fireworks shot into the air from the back of the chair, triggering enthusiastic applause from the Badger house. Things continued in this fashion with each successive student, every one of them heralded with a fiery display in their new house’s colors.

When the first years had finally all been sorted and seated, Harry dispelled his transfigurations and bowed to the Headmistress. He then walked (with his robes billowing impressively behind him) around the table to take his seat next to Hermione, the eyes of everyone in the hall following him all the way, as all wondered what would happen next.

Under the table Hermione gave his hand a squeeze, and leaned in to whisper to him.

“Show off.”

He leaned back and affected an innocent, ‘who, me?’ expression, causing her to shake her head in mock exasperation, and many of those who saw it to laugh in surprise.

“Thank you Professor Potter, for that ... enthusiastic ... display,” McGonagall declared with her trademark tightlipped smile.

She then proceeded to announce that before they began to eat, she had some important introductions to make. The first was no surprise to anyone who hadn’t been asleep all summer – Hermione Granger was the new Muggle Studies professor. But she further informed the assembled students that all those who weren’t muggleborn or muggle raised were strongly encouraged to sign up for the newly revised offering.

When Harry leaned over and gave Hermione a congratulatory kiss on the cheek a dismayed sigh emanated from most of the young witches in the hall. It was so noticeable that it was followed a second later by amused laughter from the rest of the occupants in the room. The mirth quickly spread to most of those who’d originated the display of disappointment, as they realized how silly it had sounded.

When McGonagall followed up by informing them that Professor Potter and Professor Granger had been named Gryffindor co-heads of house, loud applause followed from all four tables, as by

now all the students were beginning to recognize that some remarkable changes had taken place in the castle while they'd been gone over the summer. (McGonagall refrained from voicing her private thought that by the next school year it would be Professors Potter and Potter.)

At the Headmistress's prompting the two young professors stood to acknowledge the appreciation of their students. As they did so, each wrapped an arm around the other in a gesture that had become natural to them, but generated an excited murmuring in the onlookers. Finally, Hermione removed all doubt by tipping her head up to give Harry an affectionate kiss, confirming for all present that the speculation in the papers for the past month about their relationship was indeed correct.

After regaining everyone's attention with a loud clearing of her throat, McGonagall concluded her announcements with a traditional greeting. "Welcome to the beginning of a new school year"

Harry and Hermione caught each other's eyes and smiled, silently sharing the same thought.

And a new life.

-oooOOOooo-

I need you.

Like the flower needs the rain

You know I need you.

I need you.

Like the winter needs the spring

You know I need you.

I need you.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-