

## Epitaph

### Epitaph

The story begins with the scene in the graveyard at Godric's Hollow, Ch 16. Harry and Hermione had gone to Godric's Hollow to seek out BathildaBagshot, but detoured to the old church cemetery to look for the graves of Harry's parents.

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**“Harry, here!”**

**Hermione was two rows of tombstones away; he had to wade back to her, his heart positively banging in his chest.**

**“Is it ... ?”**

**“No, but look!”**

**She pointed to the dark stone. Harry stooped down and saw, upon the frozen, lichen-spotted granite, the words KENDRA DUMBLEDORE and, a short way below her dates of birth and death, AND HER DAUGHTER ARIANA. There was also a quotation:**

***Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.***

...

**Hermione was looking at Harry, and he was glad that his face was hidden in shadow. He read the words on the tombstone again. *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* He did not understand what these words meant.**

...

**Then Hermione's voice came from the blackness for the third time, sharp and clear from a few yards away.**

**“Harry, they're here ... right here.”**

**And he knew by her tone that it was his mother and father this time. He moved toward her, feeling as if something heavy were pressing on his chest, the same sensation he had right**

after Dumbledore had died, a grief that had actually weighed on his heart and lungs.

The headstone was only two rows behind Kendra and Ariana's. It was made of white marble, just like Dumbledore's tomb, and this made it easy to read, as it seemed to shine in the dark. Harry did not need to kneel or even approach very close to it to make out the words engraved upon it.

**JAMES POTTER**  
**BORN 30 JANUARY 1960**

**DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981**  
***be destroyed is death.***

**LILY POTTER BORN 27 MARCH 1960**

**DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981** *The last enemy that shall*

Harry read the words slowly, as though he would have only one chance to take in their meaning, and he read the last of them aloud.

A horrible thought came to him, and with it a kind of panic. "Isn't that a Death Eater idea? Why is that there?"

"No Harry," Hermione explained gently. "It's not a Death Eater idea. It's a quote from the Bible."

"The Bible?" Harry frowned in puzzlement.

"You know, the ..." Hermione began to explain.

"I know what the Bible is," Harry cut in. "Not that I've ever read it, though. The Dursleys would never have wanted me to be seen in church with them. But why is there a Bible verse on their tombstone?"

"Well, they *are* buried in a church cemetery," Hermione noted. "And it's not uncommon for tombstones to have Bible verses on them as epitaphs. We saw the same thing on the one for Dumbledore's mother and sister."

"That was from the Bible too?" Harry was finding it difficult to believe that wizards gave their dead religious burials, but the evidence was right here in front of him.

Hermione nodded. "Theirs was a verse from one of the gospels, I think," she informed him. "But this one sounds like something from one of the letters of St. Paul." She turned to face him. "I'm sorry I don't know which one." Harry shook his head to let her know that it was OK that she didn't know this. "But to answer your original question, this verse refers to Christians' belief that death is defeated by Christ's death and resurrection, and that there is eternal life after death," she finished.

Harry shook his head, briefly recalling Dumbledore's claim that death was but the next great adventure. But none of this helped him right here and now.

**(His parents) were not living, thought Harry: They were gone.**

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Scene – Dobby’s burial at Shell Cottage, Ch 24. Harry, Hermione, Ron, Luna, Dean, and Ollivander escaped from Malfoy Manor with Dobby’s assistance, but Dobby was killed by a knife thrown by Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry decided to dig a grave by hand, and then found a smooth white stone in the garden to use as a headstone.

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**Slowly, under his murmured instruction, deep cuts appeared upon the rock’s surface. He knew that Hermione could have done it more neatly, and probably more quickly, but he wanted to mark the spot as he had wanted to dig the grave. When Harry stood up again, the stone read:**

**HERE LIES DOBBY, A FREE ELF**

**He looked down at his handiwork for a few more seconds .** Something was still missing. It needed more ... it needed ...

He walked up to the cottage, finding everyone together sitting in the living room. His eyes sought out the one he knew could provide what he needed, and spotted her sitting down, with Ron perched protectively on the arm of her chair.

“Hermione, I need your help,” he stated simply.

Hermione looked up, and evidently saw something in his eyes, as she immediately began to rise. Ron started to protest that she was worn out from her ordeal and needed to rest, but she put her hand on his arm to let him know it was all right. Without a word she followed him back out into the night.

Back at the gravesite, Harry motioned to the stone. “Do you think you can come up with ... you know, a Bible verse or something?” he asked hopefully. “Like in the cemetery?”

Hermione reached out and gave his hand a warm squeeze. When he glanced over at her, he noticed her eyes glistening. Swallowing hard to keep his own tears at bay, he reached out and put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close.

“Of course I can, just give me a minute,” she responded. After a few moments thought, her face brightened. “Oh, I have one that will be perfect,” she informed him with satisfaction. When she quoted the verse to him, he quickly agreed.

Carefully, taking his time to get it just right, he labored to add the additional inscription to the stone.

**HERE LIES DOBBY, A FREE ELF** *Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*

They stood there in silence for a while, as Harry contemplated what he'd just written, his exhaustion causing his mind to slip into free association. Love. Something he'd known so little of in his life, yet which Dumbledore had claimed he had such a high capacity for. His secret weapon against Voldemort. The 'power he knew not'. But if the greatest love was this ...

Suddenly a lot of pieces began to fall into place, and the ultimate implication hit him with such force that his knees buckled. He staggered back a few steps and sat down on a small mound of dirt.

"Harry! What is it?" Hermione queried worriedly as she dropped into place by his side. "What's wrong?"

"I ...I think I just figured out Dumbledore's plan," he replied haltingly. "Suddenly it all makes sense ..." And it did – the seemingly inexplicable things that had been such a regular occurrence in his life all fit into a pattern that he was now able to recognize.

"What do you think his plan was?" she asked nervously. She had a bad feeling that she knew where this was going.

He swallowed hard. "I have to die."

Hermione buried her head into his shoulder, shaking it vigorously in denial, murmuring "No, no, no ..." over and over. Harry wrapped an arm around her in an attempt at comfort, even though he knew it would be futile.

"I'm sure you've already suspected it," he pointed out softly. "The parseltongue, the visions, the way my scar reacts to his presence, the way he was able to possess me." Hermione was openly weeping now, but had ceased her objections. "I'm a horcrux. And that's why Dumbledore never gave me any training in how to fight him," Harry added. "All he was trying to do was prepare me to realize that I needed to sacrifice myself."

Hermione's hands fisted tightly into his jumper, as if she feared that he would leave her to go sacrifice himself that very instant if she didn't stop him. And while he knew that her heart wanted to say he was wrong, in her head she was analyzing his reasoning and was unable to find fault with it.

All of his life he'd been manipulated, Harry realized. Even as far back as his placement with the Dursley's, which could be viewed as intended to ensure that he grew up with no sense of self worth. How much of what Hermione called his 'saving people thing' was developed as part of Dumbledore's ultimate plan? Harry shook his head. He'd never know now.

"Hermione?" he requested in a low voice. "Can I ask you to do something for me?" She looked up at him finally, tears streaking down her face. With some trepidation, she nodded.

"Will you ... when I'm gone ... would you please find a Bible verse to put on my tombstone?"

Whatever composure Hermione had managed to achieve promptly disintegrated at this request, and she began sobbing again, even more fiercely than before.

“What’s going on out here?” an angry voice demanded. “What are you doing to Hermione?”

Ron emerged from the darkness and strode up to her, and would have pulled her away from Harry. But Hermione shook her head vigorously and refused to relinquish her hold on him, gripping his arms so tightly he thought they might soon go numb. Seeing this, Ron stepped back and glared at his best mate, impatient for his explanation.

“We’ve just figured it all out,” Harry informed him, his voice low and even. “I need to die because I’m one of the horcruxes.”

Ron’s ire soon evaporated, replaced with a mounting horror as Harry explained his shocking realization, punctuated by Hermione’s muted sobs. When he finished, Ron could only stare dumbfounded, standing there helplessly not knowing what to do or say next. Finally Harry glanced down to Hermione, who had finally gone silent in his embrace.

“We need to get her to bed, she’s exhausted.”

That task proved to be more difficult than he’d anticipated. The two of them helped her back to the cottage where Fleur showed them to a room she’d prepared. But as Harry turned to leave, Hermione’s grip on his arm tightened again.

“No, don’t go,” she whimpered. “Don’t leave me.”

Harry shared an uncomfortable glance with Ron, then looked at Fleur and shrugged helplessly. It was quite apparent that Hermione was on the edge of hysteria. And he couldn’t blame her one bit. After giving up essentially everything that she held dear in her life for him, and then being tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange not two hours earlier, holding out on giving her any information in a desperate attempt to keep Harry alive as long as possible, only to find that he needed to die – well, she was more than entitled to a breakdown.

Fleur didn’t know what was going on with this trio of friends, but she did know that her patient needed to calm down enough to go to sleep, and if this is what it took ...

“Fine then,” she sighed. “Turn around. Hermione, let go of his arm. I’ll make sure he doesn’t go anywhere, but we need to get you changed.” Hermione released her grip, although he could tell it was with a great deal of reluctance, and he turned his back. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Ron remained in the room too, and his eyes widened, presumably because Fleur had started to help Hermione disrobe.

“Ouch!” Despite the tension in the room, Harry couldn’t help the small grin that crept onto his face as Fleur hit his best mate with a stinging hex.

“I said, turn around,” she demanded.

Ron quickly whirled and faced the wall before she could hex him again, rubbing his arm and muttering, "... thought she only meant you." Harry wondered at that, if Ron somehow thought that his and Hermione's relationship had progressed that far – he was pretty sure it hadn't, but shook it off. That wasn't something he needed to concern himself with now.

In a few minutes Hermione was tucked into the bed, and Fleur indicated that he could approach. While she was no longer crying, he could see the anxious look in her eyes, and he reached out to take her hand again.

"Stay," she whispered. Harry glanced uneasily across the bed at Ron, and she turned to follow his gaze. "Ron can too," she agreed to his unspoken question.

It took a bit of maneuvering, but eventually Hermione shifted over in the bed enough that Harry could sit down, his hand still locked in a desperation grip. Fleur conjured a stuffed armchair for Ron to sit in, and the trio settled down for the rest of the night.

A short time later Harry was awakened from the light doze he'd drifted into by a tug on his hand. Hermione had fallen asleep, and was now trying to roll over in the bed. Across the bed Ron was sound asleep in the armchair, snoring lightly. But Harry's new plight was that Hermione's movement meant that he was being pulled along with her, and was forced to lean across her body in order to maintain their linked hands.

Knowing that he would not be able to stay propped up like that for long, he settled on a different approach. Carefully, he stretched himself out behind her and draped his arm across her body. This seemed to satisfy her and she settled down, still clutching his hand tightly to herself. After checking that his hand was neither too high nor too low on her body to get him in trouble, Harry relaxed and let himself finally fall into a deeper sleep.

The next morning he woke to find himself alone on the bed. As he lay there he wondered if Hermione had calmed down enough that she no longer felt the need to keep him constantly in sight. He would eventually learn that the answer to this was 'somewhat'. At this point, however, he was more concerned about their next course of action.

While he hadn't wanted to add to her distress the previous evening, he'd been aware through his connection with Voldemort that the dark lord had managed to locate and retrieve the Elder Wand. But he now realized that defeating the dark lord was no longer his task. His only hope was to be able to make him mortal once again.

His musings were quickly brought to a halt when Hermione appeared from the adjacent bathroom. He took a moment to study her. She seemed more composed now, although he could see the concern still in her eyes as she approached. She'd evidently just had a shower, and was wearing what could only be a dressing gown borrowed from Fleur.

Which meant that it was much more revealing than anything he'd ever seen on his best female friend. Its snug fit, V-shaped neckline, and shorter than knee length were clearly designed to show off the feminine form to its best advantage. And in this case it succeeded admirably – he was

reminded again (as he had been most recently at Bill and Fleur's wedding) that Hermione had developed into quite an attractive woman.

Without a word she sat next to him on the bed and promptly embraced him in a tight hug, which he returned with equal vigor. It had been an emotional night for him as well, and in light of his grim discovery he realized that he needed to treasure these simple physical comforts while he still could. Once they separated, Hermione was about to say something when she noticed him struggling to keep from staring at her legs, where the dressing gown had ridden up to expose even more shapely flesh.

To his relief, she merely smiled. "Fleur lent me this," she noted, confirming his surmise. "Fortunately, aside from her being taller than me, we're actually pretty much the same size." She patted his arm good-naturedly as she pulled a blanket up to cover her legs. "From your expression it appears that you approve?"

Harry found himself struck not only by her teasing remark but also by her statement that implied that her figure was of similar proportions to that of the stunning Veela. But this was not something he needed to be thinking about right now, particularly with a death sentence hanging over his head.

"You look great," he agreed. "But how do you feel?"

Hermione's face instantly assumed a more serious countenance. "I slept pretty well, considering ... well everything," she decided. "And thank you for holding me all night – it really helped." She punctuated this with a grateful squeeze of his hand. And he noticed that she didn't let go.

"And I've been thinking." She turned to look directly at him, and her nervous expression told him that she was about to make a suggestion that she wasn't sure he'd agree with. He nodded for her to continue.

"I think we should talk to Bill," she declared. "As a curse breaker he may know some things that could help us."

"But Dumbledore said ..." Harry began, but he was interrupted before he could finish.

"I don't care what Dumbledore said," she snapped. "So far Dumbledore's plan hasn't been working all that well, has it? And maybe he's wrong! Maybe you don't have to ..."

Tears once more flooded her eyes, and she buried her head again into his shoulder. And once again he attempted to comfort her. And he realized that she was right. What did they have to lose? When Dumbledore had told him not to tell anyone other than Hermione and Ron, he couldn't have known how desperate things would get, could he? He probably assumed he and Harry would be working together to hunt down and destroy the horcruxes. But he was gone now and Harry needed to make his own decisions. With Hermione's help of course.

"All right," he decided. "We'll do it."

He actually felt her body relax against his own when he agreed. A few seconds later she pulled away and rose to her feet. “Thank you,” she breathed in relief. “I’ll let him know we want to talk to him.” She took a few steps toward the door, then turned back. “After you clean up and get something to eat, that is.” She managed a half smile. “In case you were wondering, I checked, and there are no windows in the bathroom, and I sealed the bedroom door. So you weren’t going anywhere without me. Fleur will have some of Bill’s clothes ready for you, and I’ll be waiting for outside when you’re finished. Ron’s already eating breakfast – well, I guess it’s lunch by now, so hurry.”

Harry just shook his head. He should have known she wouldn’t relax her vigilance that readily. But she was Hermione, after all.

Their conversation with Bill was both good and bad. Yes, he knew what horcruxes were. No, he’d no idea that You Know Who had used them, but he wasn’t surprised. He was, however, furious to learn that Ginny had been possessed by one during her first year and no one in his family had thought to ask him about it.

When Harry told him that he thought there was one in Gringotts, he’d asked them what they planned to do about it. He’d more or less laughed at their half-baked plan to sneak into Gringotts, somehow break into the Lestrangle vault, and steal the horcrux. Instead he’d told them to rest up for a few days, recover their strength, and to leave that part to him.

True to his word, he’d returned home the following day to announce that the horcrux in Hufflepuff’s cup had been located and destroyed. When Hermione had asked how he’d done it (Harry still had Gryffindor’s sword), he’d grinned and told her it was a trade secret. Of course, that didn’t sit too well with Hermione’s incessant thirst for knowledge. Eventually he broke down and told her he’d used Fiendfyre in a ‘controlled’ environment, whatever that meant.

The bad part was when he regretfully informed them that it wasn’t possible to remove a horcrux from a living being without killing it.

Harry, who’d forced himself not to get his hopes up, merely gave a sigh of resignation and nodded grimly at this revelation. He was worried, though about Hermione. Instinctively, he and Ron had both moved to either side of her to offer their support if it looked like she were going to fall apart again. But although her shoulders slumped noticeably, she kept herself together. The look she gave Harry, though, worried him. The fire in her eyes, and the determined set of her jaw, not to mention the iron grip she once again clamped on his arm, caused him to fear that she still planned to not let him go without a fight. Or let him go alone.

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The time had come.

It had been an insane day of non-stop activity. When they’d left Shell Cottage that morning, Bill



had suggested they go to the Hogshead Tavern, where they met Aberforth Dumbledore, the Headmaster's brother. From there, they used a secret passageway behind a portrait of Ariana Dumbledore, his younger sister, to enter the Room of Requirement, which they discovered Neville and the rest of the DA had turned into a headquarters. Ginny was also there, and looked none too pleased at how possessive Hermione was being of Harry.

Indeed, she had refused to leave his side the entire day. When Cho had suggested going to the Ravenclaw common room to view the statue of Ravenclaw to see what the diadem looked like, Hermione and Ron had accompanied him. Which had been fortunate, as they'd encountered the Carrows, and with the extra two wands they had been able to subdue them. But not before they had used their Dark Marks to summon Voldemort.

Then it had been a race against time. Once he knew what the diadem looked like, he'd eventually remembered seeing it the previous year in the Room of Hidden Things version of the Room of Requirement. The three Gryffindors had returned there to find and destroy the horcrux, only to be set upon by Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. Another short battle followed, and another escape.

In the Shrieking Shack they had learned that Voldemort had not yet mastered the Elder Wand, and so he had killed Snape in order to win its allegiance. Harry knew differently, however. Snape had killed Dumbledore, but only after Draco Malfoy had disarmed him. He wondered if this fact might be important – perhaps it would make the dark lord less invincible once Harry himself was gone and he was no longer immortal.

But now it was nearly over. Voldemort had given an ultimatum. Harry Potter had to surrender himself within the hour or Hogwarts would be destroyed along with every man, woman, and child within it.

The three friends were temporarily alone in the destroyed entryway to the castle. Harry stepped away from Ron and Hermione and turned to face them. "It's time," he told them. "I have to go."

As he'd feared, Hermione stepped forward. "I'm going with you," she informed him, her face a mask of fierce determination.

Harry shook his head. "You can't. Even after I'm gone, the two of you still need to kill Nagini," he pointed out, holding out the Sword of Gryffindor.

But Hermione wasn't to be put off so easily. She merely gestured for Ron to take the weapon. "Ron can do that. I'm going with you," she insisted.

"Hermione," he replied softly, reaching out to take her hands in his. "I know this is hard for you, but I can't let you do this. I need to die. You don't. And I'm not doing this to save the wizarding world. The only way I can manage this is if I know it will help you survive. You, and Ron, and Ginny and Neville and Luna and everyone else dear to me. You are all that matters. If you come with me he'll kill you too. I can't accept that. The price would just be too high."

Hermione's body was beginning to tremble, and he knew she was about to crack. He pressed on.

“And besides, there’s another reason you can’t come.” She looked up at him, tears welling up in her eyes.

“You promised to find a Bible verse for my tombstone.”

Ron stepped up behind her to support her as she slumped back in defeat, her head bowed, her hands covering her face as she began weeping. Harry looked over to his best mate.

“Take care of her.”

Ron nodded and swallowed hard. Even though they’d told him this had to happen, the look on his face showed that he’d never quite believed it until now.

Harry turned to go, but he’d only taken a few steps when Hermione roused herself and called out to him.

“Wait!” He turned back to see her tear-streaked face filled with misery. It was all he could do not to go back and try to comfort her again.

“Harry, I ... I love you.”

A sad smile crossed his face and he nodded tenderly. “I know,” he responded. “I love you too, Hermione.” And then he turned his head and unfurled the invisibility cloak, and disappeared into the darkness.

Behind him he only just made out Hermione’s whispered reply.

“I know.”

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It was finally over.

Harry’s ‘death’ had not turned out the way either he or Voldemort had expected. The dark lord’s killing curse had destroyed the horcrux in his scar, but left Harry still alive, although he’d made a brief visit to what he could only assume was some sort of transit point on the way to the afterlife. Once back in his body, he’d feigned his death while Voldemort marched to the castle and taunted the inhabitants.

The rest had been a blur. Nagini had been killed, there was a chaotic battle, Hermione, Ginny and Luna had taken on Bellatrix Lestrange (who’d been defeated when Molly Weasley had joined them) and McGonagall, Slughorn, and Shackbolt had squared off against Voldemort. Harry had noted that the dark lord’s spells were now noticeably weaker, supporting his earlier surmise that he had still not gained mastery of the coveted wand. The final duel between the two of them had been decidedly anticlimactic – one exchange of spells and Voldemort was dead.

Naturally, the first person to reach him was Hermione. As she gripped him in the tightest embrace

she could manage, his other friends and companions joined in and it turned into a giant group hug, bursting out with backslapping, congratulations, and shouts of triumph and tears of relief. In the center of it all, Hermione leaned right up against his ear to make herself heard.

“Just so you know, I thought of a Bible verse for you. But I intend to make sure it’ll be a long, long time before we need it. And …” She pulled back enough so that they were face to face. “And it’s going to be on *our* tombstone.” Harry heard the challenge in her words, and looked into her sparkling brown eyes. He grinned.

“All right then.”

-oooOOOooo-

Sometime in the 22nd Century.

The old church in Godric’s Hollow still stands, although no longer used for worship services. The congregation that worshipped there moved many decades ago to a larger structure across the street, with a state of the art sound system, centrally located altar, and more comfortable tiered seating with clear sight lines. The original church has been kept as a historical site, maintained by a preservation society funded by a trust established by an anonymous donor (in actuality the Potter Estate).

The kissing gate is long gone, replaced a century ago by a more handicapped-accessible entrance. The cemetery is much bigger now, as the community has grown considerably since the late 1900’s, and is now the largest mixed magical/non-magical community in Great Britain. In a new section of the graveyard, on a slight rise as though standing watch over the rows of headstones that include many familiar wizarding family names – Abbott, Bones, Davies, Jones, Longbottom, Macmillan, Smith, Wood – there is a single gravesite marked by a tall obelisk that rises up over a tombstone bearing the name Potter.

On the obelisk the following words are inscribed:

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,  
but have not love,  
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.  
And if I have prophetic powers,  
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,  
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,  
but have not love, I am nothing. Love is patient; love is kind;  
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.  
Love does not insist on its own way;  
it is not irritable or resentful.  
It does not rejoice in wrongdoing,  
but rejoices in the truth.  
Love bears all things, believes all things,*

*hopes all things, endures all things.*

*Love never ends.*

At the foot of the obelisk lies the simple white stone that marks the final resting place of the most famous, most powerful, and most influential witch and wizard of their generation. And beneath their names and dates of birth and death the epitaph concludes.

*Faith, Hope, Love abide, these three*

*But the greatest of these is Love.*

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-