

So Close

By

Sloth

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Chapter 1

Anyone walking along the well manicured lawns of Privet Drive this evening would have no idea how close the world was to losing their hope to stop the upcoming war. A dark haired boy sat alone in his room going through the same motions as he had most every night since arriving home from school. As soon as it got dark, he opened the cage to let his companion, a snowy owl out to hunt. Each night, the owl had flown instead onto his knee, not wanting to leave the boy alone and yet each night, the boy forced the owl to fly off and hunt. Once the owl was out of sight, the boy went through what had become a routine, but each night before he finished the motions, his owl came back and refused to leave his shoulder. Even after the boy would lie down, the owl only moved onto the nightstand until the boy she was watching finally fell asleep. Only then did the owl actually leave long enough to quickly catch something to eat before returning to keep an eye on her friend. Most nights saw the same motions play out. The difference between the world still having a chance to win the war and having no chance at all was being decided by the love a pet had for her master. While most everyone slept, Hedwig seemed to know how close the wizarding world was to losing its only hope and how close she was to losing her companion.

Harry Potter woke up early, sleep being no comfort for him. He followed the same routine each day, not really thinking. First he would glance at the photograph in the album Hagrid had given him after his first year at Hogwarts. The picture was of his parent's wedding and also showed his godfather, Sirius Black. He would spend a few minutes watching the black and white people smile and wave up enthusiastically at him. Next he spent a few minutes stroking Hedwig while staring absent-mindedly out the window. Without having any good reason to, he would then take a shower each morning before going down and grabbing some breakfast before retreating to this room to eat.

His Aunt and Uncle, the Dursleys were treating him differently this year. After being threatened by Mad-Eye Moody, Remus Lupin and other members of the Order, the Dursleys hadn't said anything on the drive home. The few weeks since his return had been the same as well, no nasty comments, no threats, no anything. Aunt Petunia always had meals ready for him, but never called him when they were ready. He quickly fell into the routine and it fit his mood perfectly. The comfort he felt at having the members of the Order standing beside him was soon replaced by the realization of what had actually happened just a few weeks earlier.

As was expected of him, he sent the same note to the Order every three days.

Everything is fine.

Harry

Like last year, the notes from his friends had been short and cryptic. Even though he understood the need for this it didn't help his mood at all. He had realized that they were staying at 12 Grimmauld Place again this summer, but he didn't get much more information out of the notes. Hermione always included a comment, "*Don't let everything get you down. It's going to be ok.*"

It only took a few of these before he quit opening the letters and sent a reply saying his Uncle was getting very upset with him receiving owls. "She has no idea what I feel," Harry thought. But as soon as he became angry at her, he quickly remembered that she was seriously hurt

following him into danger for no reason at all. That changed the strong anger he had felt at her into even stronger anger at himself. This time, no one could truthfully say that his friends' injuries and Sirius' death wasn't his fault. Harry led five students into a trap where they were all hurt. It was pure luck that any of them made it out alive. Harry's best friends were nearly and his godfather was killed because he had; as Hermione put it 'A saving people thing.'

Harry alternated between hating everything to do with the wizarding world and hating the thought of not being a part of the magical community. Even though the best memories in his life had come after he found out he was a wizard, by far the worst memories were also bound to that world. His thoughts of his friends swung equally as far. Some moments he desperately wanted to be sitting around talking to them both, and the next moment he didn't want to be around them at all. He couldn't understand why they would want anything to do with him either. He had been the direct cause of so much pain for both of them that Harry couldn't comprehend how they could want to be around him anymore.

This particular day was hard on Harry for some reason. As had been happening every few nights, he was woken up by a terrifying vision of someone, or more often multiple people being tortured or killed. After the first couple times, Harry began recording the visions on parchment. He didn't know why for sure, but he felt compelled to do this. Harry told himself he deserved the pain of seeing these visions since he could have prevented them by learning Occlumency. Most times, this thought quickly turned to the memory that Professor Snape never did try to teach him anything. The only thing the Professor ever said was for him to clear his mind, never once telling Harry how to stop the mental intrusions. At these times, Harry didn't know who he hated more, Professor Snape or himself.

As was quite common since returning from school, the guilt and remorse quickly flared, and in one swift motion, Harry grabbed his wand and pictured what he wanted to do. The nightly routine had suddenly intruded into his daylight activities. He was in the right mood, the anger and guilt more than enough. "It would only take a second," he thought, "One spell and it would all be over." Closing his eyes, the decision had been made.

The instant his arm began to rise, Hedwig frantically flapped her wings and hooted loudly. Harry tried to take a deep breath and focus so he could continue but the flapping persisted and when Harry looked, he noticed a large owl waiting on the ledge outside his window. The distraction was sufficient to interrupt his motion and after slowly letting out his breath, he walked to the window and removed the letters from the owl. Before the strange owl could fly away, Hedwig began clicking her beak and giving small hoots. Harry noticed the other owl looking at her slightly cocking its head to one side. The other owl gave a few clicks before Hedwig flew out the window and quickly disappeared.

Harry looked confused for a moment and then noticed the letters were from Hogwarts. 'Probably my O.W.L.s,' he thought. Looking back, he noticed the other owl still sitting near the window watching him closely. "Thank you for delivering these. You can go now," Harry said to the owl. However, the creature seemed to pay him no mind and didn't move at all. Harry shrugged and then threw the letters onto his desk, being in no mood to deal with the people running his life.

Picking up the photo album again, Harry sat at the edge of his bed and thumbed through the pages as he had done more this summer than in the other four summers since he received the album. He knew from memory which pictures were on which pages and could turn directly to the ones he thought would make him feel the best at any time. All he wanted right now was

to look at the picture that showed his godfather. If he hadn't spent so much time crying during the past few weeks, he would surely be doing that now, but the tears would no longer come. He sat in silence, watching his godfather wave up at him wishing he could go back in time five weeks and change his decision to charge into the Department of Mysteries. It all seemed so clear at the time and now the results of his haste were painfully clear.

Looking up, Harry saw the delivery owl still looking at him with a cocked head. Instead of anger flaring again, he felt bad for being short with the creature before and got up, retrieved a treat and went over to the owl. "Sorry I was short with you," Harry said handing the treat to the owl who quickly took it from his fingers. Harry stroked the bird and said, "I haven't been very nice to anyone this summer." Harry continued softly stroking the bird for a few minutes, contemplating the simple pleasure he got from the softness of its feathers under his hand.

After a couple minutes, Harry glanced at the letters the owl delivered and now that his mood had mellowed out, his curiosity got the best of him and he opened the first letter.

Ordinary Wizarding Level test results for Harry James Potter

Divination: Poor

History of Magic: Poor

Astronomy: Acceptable

Herbology: Acceptable

Transfiguration: Theory Exceeds Expectations

Transfiguration: Practical Exceeds Expectations

Potions: Theory Outstanding

Potions: Practical Exceeds Expectations

Care of Magical Creatures: Outstanding

Charms: Theory Exceeds Expectations

Charms: Practical Outstanding

Defense Against the Dark Arts: Theory Outstanding

Defense Against the Dark Arts: Practical Outstanding

'Exceeds Expectations and Outstanding in Potions?' Harry thought. He knew he felt more comfortable and confident taking the test without Professor Snape around but had really only hoped for an Acceptable. It really didn't matter because Harry never intended to take another class from Professor Snape. He knew there would be no way he could ever control his anger once the Professor started trying to humiliate him. Two months ago, receiving these O.W.L.s would have made him very happy, but as things are now they just added to his emotional confusion. He had wanted to pursue becoming an Auror but now with the Prophecy, what he

wanted to do didn't seem to matter, other people always seemed to decide what he was supposed to do. Evidence to how widely Harry's mood swings were, reading this letter got him thinking about the future and not about the thing that had been so close to the surface lately.

Turning his attention to the second letter, Harry noticed it was about N.E.W.T. level classes.

Mr. Potter.

Based on the results of your O.W.L. exams, you have the option to begin N.E.W.T. level classes in the following disciplines; Transfiguration, Potions, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts.

If your intention is still to pursue a career as an Auror, I would suggest you sign up for all four of those classes.

Please return this letter indicating your choices by August 15th.

Professor McGonagall Head of Gryffindor House

Transfiguration _____

Potions _____

Charms _____

Defense Against the Dark Arts _____

"Well, there goes my chance to be an Auror," Harry thought. There was no way he was taking Potions, no matter what. "I wonder if Potions is a real requirement?" Harry thought before shrugging his shoulders and turning to the third letter.

Harry,

I wondered if you were planning on continuing with the Defense group you and Miss Granger founded last year? I imagine Miss Granger would be interested in continuing if you agree and it could prove useful to you as well.

Please send your response back with your N.E.W.T. class selection.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts

Harry knew his answer to this letter. He wasn't going to lead the group again. If he hadn't been the leader of the group last year, at least Neville, Ginny and Luna wouldn't have come with him to the Department of Mysteries. Ron and Hermione would still have probably come, but at least no one else would have been around. Quickly, Harry grabbed a quill and signed up for Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense. He also wrote a note back to Dumbledore.

Professor Dumbledore,

I don't really want to do anything with the Defense group this year. Looking back, it was probably a mistake to form it last year.

Harry Potter

Harry rolled up the two parchments and tied them back to the owl. The creature still made no move to fly away and continued looking at Harry strangely. Shaking his head, Harry sat on his bed thinking how bizarre it seemed to be thinking about which classes to take when he went from day to day not knowing if he would make it back to school or not. Some days he was sure that he wouldn't be back at Hogwarts this year, and some days he longed to be back playing seeker for Gryffindor.

The notes had started him thinking about Hogwarts and his friends. "I nearly got them killed for no reason," Harry thought. "How can they still want to be my friend?" They had all been in dangerous situations in previous years, but each of those times, there were real, valid reasons for the risks. This time there was no reason, they had blindly followed Harry into a trap. "They probably won't want to be around me much this year," he mumbled. Again, this caused very mixed emotions. On the one hand, he liked this idea since they would be placed in less danger if they weren't around much. On the other hand, they were his best friends and he didn't know how he would make it through a year without them around.

"Ah! This is driving me crazy!" he loudly exclaimed, causing the delivery owl to hoot and jump to the top of Hedwig's cage. "I wish I could just get this over with," he added, meaning that he wished he could just face Voldemort and let it end, one way or the other. Then, the fear over what that would mean for his friends hit him. He didn't fear for his own life, getting so close to taking it himself these days, but if the prophecy was true, and he was the only one who could defeat Voldemort for good, his death would cause the people he cared about to be placed in even more danger. These were the thoughts Harry tried to focus on. Even though the pressure of this responsibility weighed on him heavily, it did give him something other than his grief to deal with.

Grabbing one of the advanced Defense books that Lupin and Sirius gave him last year for Christmas, Harry fell back onto his bed and began re-reading the chapters, concentrating hard on understanding what each spell did and trying to understand when it could be useful.

A sudden sound interrupted Harry's reading. Looking up, he saw Hedwig land next to her cage and begin clicking her beak at the delivery owl, which responded, with many rapid clicks. The delivery owl quickly left and Hedwig, looking exhausted entered her cage, picked at her food and water and then looked at Harry with her large, brown eyes.

"Where'd you go girl?" Harry asked as he approached her cage to stroke her for a moment. Hedwig hooted softly and closed her eyes as Harry stroked the back of her head. "You be careful out there," Harry added, "I don't want anything to happen to you." The owl nipped his finger lightly and closed her eyes again.

Harry didn't realize he had been reading so long, as the sun was beginning to set. He decided to go downstairs to see if there was any supper left. As had been the case since he returned this summer, his relatives pretended not to see him come down the stairs so Harry moved quickly to the kitchen and found some leftovers still available. After eating a bit, Harry returned to his room and tried to keep his mind off of the things that would cause his sense of despair to well up again.

Chapter 2

The house was dark and quiet as the soft green light caused the back door to swing open. Two figures walked purposely up the stairs, the smaller stopping at the first bedroom while the tall, thin one continued on to the large bedroom at the end of the hall. With a sudden flash of red, both doors were blown open and after a moment of confusion, the screams started. The man in bed quickly reached for a thin piece of wood laying at the corner of a nearby table, but as his fingers began to close around the instrument, a thin beam of red light struck severing the fingers at the knuckle.

A loud cold laugh could be heard over the screams of fear and pain. "You will never be quicker than me Banks," the thin wizard said causing the hairs on the other occupants of the bedroom to stand on end.

Just then the other figure came in dragging the first bedroom's occupant roughly by the arm. The girl looked to be no more than five and was crying in fear.

"Let her go!" the man in the bed yelled and tried to stand. Instantly a blue light flew from the standing wizard's wand locking the other man into his position in bed.

"I think not Banks," the wizard said. "You should have known better than to turn down the offer my associate presented you with."

"Please don't hurt them. I'll do what you want, whatever you want!" the man pleaded.

The female hooded wizard laughed and then the taller one spoke, "You had your chance Banks. I do not allow second chances."

The wizard nodded to his companion who pushed the girl against the wall and said 'Crucio!' The young girl's screams filled the house, but her parents were powerless to do anything about them. After seemed like hours, the curse was lifted and the little girl lay twitching on the floor. Her mother had become violently ill watching the spectacle.

"You should have joined me Banks," the wizard said before raising his wand, pointing it at the girl and softly saying 'Avada Kedavra'. The green light flew out and the young girl instantly stopped twitching. The only sound now was the ghoulish laughter from the female hooded wizard.

"Do you think he's ready for his other daughter to die Bellatrix?" Voldemort asked.

After a short laugh, she replied "Oh yes my Lord. Seeing his other daughter die would be just what he deserves."

"What are you talking about? I don't have another daughter," Mr. Banks got out through the gasps of sorrow.

"You don't know! Your wife hasn't given you the wonderful news yet?" Voldemort asked causing Bellatrix to laugh again. "Oh yes, you do indeed have another daughter. It seems your wife hasn't found the time to give you the news."

Mr. Banks turned to his wife who was silent with utter terror in her eyes. Her arms were crossed over her stomach as if that act could protect her unborn daughter. The man turned back to Voldemort and said, "No! Please, I'll do anything."

"Bellatrix, I'll leave the decision up to you. Do we give him a second chance and allow them to raise another daughter?" Voldemort calmly asked.

"Hmmm...Let me think..." Bellatrix said as if deciding what to order. "I think... NOT!" she screamed as a red beam lashed out of her wand striking the woman squarely in the stomach causing a large gash. Instantly, the bed was covered in blood and the next moment, the woman's screams stopped.

"I don't think I'll kill you yet Banks," Voldemort coldly said. "I think you should live with the guilt of what you choice cost you. I dare say that the next Minister of Finance will be more accommodating of my wishes. Come Bellatrix," Voldemort added as the two turned and walked out of the room.

Even before they reached the stairs, they heard 'Avada Kedavra' from the bedroom and saw the green light fade. "I thought he would last longer. If I had known it would have been that quick, we would have stayed to watch," Voldemort said before the two disappeared with a crack.

Quickly snapping upright, Harry wiped the sweat from his face and tried to get his rapid breathing back under control. Recalling what he had just witnessed, he ran from his room and barely made it to the loo before getting sick. After wiping his face with cold water, he slowly made his way back to his room, took out parchment and quill and began recording the details of the latest killing. The joy Voldemort got watching others experience pain and suffering almost made Harry ill again.

Walking over to his Owl, Harry softly said, "How can I fight him Hedwig? What do they expect of me?" Harry was absent-mindedly stroking his bird. After a few moments, he shook his head, headed for the shower to start his daily routine again.

After a bite of breakfast, Harry gathered the other dream parchments and placed the latest one on top. Glancing at the stack, he sighed heavily realizing that there were about ten dreams and probably twenty-five deaths. The day after having a dream was somehow easier for Harry. His guilt at what his own actions had caused was tempered by the remorse for the latest family killed at Voldemort's hands.

Just as he was placing the parchments back into his trunk, his silent brooding was interrupted by the booming voice of his Uncle Vernon.

"Get down here boy!"

Most summers it was quite common for his uncle to yell at him like this, but this would be the first thing the man had said to him this year, so Harry was very interested to know what had brought this on. Arriving at the bottom of the stairs his Uncle spoke up again, "Mrs. Figg just called and needs some help around the house."

"Why can't she do it herself?" Harry angrily asked, not wanting to be around anyone at the moment.

"You'll go help her and keep your attitude to yourself. You've done nothing around here but eat our food since you got back," Vernon bellowed back.

"Fine, I'll go help her," Harry dejectedly said.

"You'll act normally around her. None of your funny business," Vernon said narrowing his eyes while staring at Harry.

Harry was already out the front door when he mumbled, "That won't be a problem, compared to her I'm as normal as the come."

Walking along the street, Harry wondered which member of the Order was following him and where they were. He hated that they were trying to protect him so much. "They should be out trying to stop Voldemort!" he angrily thought to himself.

Arriving at the house, Harry took a moment to breathe deeply, trying to suppress the emotions that had been so quick to bubble up in the past few weeks. He knew Mrs. Figg hadn't done anything that would deserve him flying off the handle at. Harry knocked on the door and was not prepared at all for who answered.

"Hello Harry," Remus Lupin said as the door swung open. He looked worse than Harry could remember, with dark circles around his eyes. Harry just stared at the man with so many different feelings running around inside of him. The sound of Lupin's voice refocused his attention, "Please come inside Harry. I want to see how you're doing."

This was the person Harry was both most anxious to see and at the same time dreading seeing. Harry knew he had been responsible for the death of Professor Lupin's best friend, the only friend from school that he had left. He wasn't prepared for this meeting and was trying his best to conceal his panic as he stepped inside, with his head hung low.

Trying to come up with anything to say he managed "Where's Mrs. Figg?"

"Out for a few hours. I wanted us to have some time alone," Lupin said softly.

"Oh," Harry got out and began to worry about how this would go.

"How are you doing Harry?" Lupin asked and then continued, "Your owl paid us a visit yesterday and seemed very agitated."

"So that's where she went," Harry thought. Harry shrugged and said, "I guess I'm ok."

"Really? Then you're doing better than I am," Lupin stated, shocking Harry with his frankness. It must have shown because Lupin continued, "I forgot how bad it was to lose someone you really cared about. Losing James and Lily was so long ago that I didn't remember it being this hard, but it must have been."

Harry just stared as his former teacher, his breathing becoming more rapid. He didn't understand the point the man was trying to make and really didn't feel like having this conversation right now.

After a moment or two of silence, Lupin continued, "You have to be hurting right now, and I wanted you to know that I understand how you feel."

Those words didn't sit well with Harry. Everyone always said they knew how he felt and he knew there was no way they could. "You don't know how I feel, you can't. It wasn't your fault that he's gone, it was mine!"

"Harry! It was not your fault," Lupin forcefully stated. Harry started to reply but the man cut him off, "No one thinks it was your fault. Many things could have been done differently and any one of them could have changed the outcome. You did what you truly believed was the right thing. You risked everything when you thought he was in danger, just as he did for you."

"But he wasn't in danger! I led five other students into a trap," Harry exclaimed.

"Did you ask them to come with you?" Lupin asked.

"No, but I didn't stop them either," Harry quickly replied.

"And they're all ok now. Listen, this is the kind of thing Voldemort thrives on. He wants things to happen that tear us apart. It's not nearly as bad as it was the first time."

Harry looked at the man and sounding defeated asked, "How can you even stand to be around me? I wouldn't want to."

"Harry, Sirius and I always knew something like this could happen. We chose this path. As much as I miss him, I am very proud of him and how he dealt with his life." Lupin paused for a moment before continuing to speak, "I won't lie. Seeing you is hard, but not because I blame you. I just see so much of James in you that it brings up how much I've lost to Voldemort. I'm not your father, or even your official godfather, but I do want to be as much a part of your life as you'll let me. I think we could both use each other; it's going to get worse before it gets better. But, we'll get through this eventually."

Harry shook his head and said, "I can't believe how much I miss him."

"I know Harry, I really do," Lupin said. The two sat in silence for a while before Lupin spoke up, "We'll bring you to headquarters right after your birthday. Your friends are already there."

Harry tensed up before saying, "I'm not going back to that house. I'd kill Kreacher the first time I saw that little traitor."

Lupin must have been expecting this attitude because he calmly replied, "Kreacher has been dealt with. We couldn't trust him in the house and we couldn't set him free."

"Good," Harry stated with some pleasure. "I'm still not going back to that place."

"That's the only place we can bring you."

"Then I'll stay at the Dursleys. There is no way I'm ever going back to that house," Harry stated with determination.

Lupin sighed. "I won't make you come, but think about it. Everyone wants to see you."

Harry felt bad at passing up the chance to see his friends but couldn't bear to think about returning to the house. "I can't go back there." Thinking for a moment, Harry asked, "What happens to the house now? Wasn't it Sirius'?"

"Everyone in the Order plans for something like this happening, so Sirius had made arrangements. The house has been transferred to me, along with half of the remaining family assets. The other half of the family assets was transferred to your vault," Lupin sadly said before reaching into his robes and producing a letter. "Here," he said, handing the letter to Harry. "Sirius wrote this for you. You can read it now or later, I don't know what it says."

Harry looked at the unopened letter for a moment and then said, "I'll read it later."

"Ok. I need to get back. Trust me when I say things will get better. Remember what Voldemort does and why we're in this struggle," Lupin said and then seemed to be struggling with something. "Oh, try to not be too hard on Dumbledore. I think he's concerned what you think of him now. He's trying to do what he thinks is best, don't forget that."

Harry nodded and the two got up. Before Harry could turn to the door, Lupin spoke up, "I can never replace Sirius, but I'd like for you to consider me your backup Godfather. I was next on the list you know."

Harry could tell Lupin was trying to hide his sorrow and genuinely meant the comment. Trying to do the same, and appreciating the offer Harry replied, "Thanks...Remus, I'd like that." Without further words, Harry left and slowly walked back to the Dursleys trying to keep his mind from wandering to dangerous thoughts.

Not remembering anything about the walk, he entered the back door just as Aunt Petunia was about to throw out the leftovers. Remarkably she paused, set the bowls down and went into the living room, giving Harry enough time to make a plate for himself and disappear up to his room.

Harry walked straight to Hedwig, who was sitting near the window and handed her a scrap from his plate. "So, you've been telling on me," Harry said in a non-accusing tone to the owl. Hedwig clicked her beak a couple times before Harry stroked her back and said, "I guess I'm lucky you can't talk, huh?"

After eating, Harry's eyes traveled over the photo album that was still lying open to the picture that showed his godfather smiling up at him. This reminded him about the note Lupin had handed him. Hesitantly, he pulled the note out and just looked at it for quite some time before taking a deep breath and breaking the seal and opening the note.

Harry

First of all, IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT!

Now I don't know what happened of course, but I know how you are and have probably been blaming yourself for something careless that I did. Unless you snuck up on me and personally killed me, don't blame yourself. I won't.

Now, let's change the subject a bit. It's been great knowing you and my only regret is that we weren't able to spend much time together doing fun things. We should have been able to

travel during the summers and just enjoy being together. Hell, James and Lily should have been with us as well. But, things don't always work out the way we'd like. I'm sure I don't have to remind you of that. You've dealt with more before your sixteenth birthday than most will in a lifetime, and you've amazed me at how you've dealt with it all. Better than I would have, that's for sure. I need to say that you get that from Lily, James wouldn't have done any better than I would have.

This was written right after Christmas, so depending on when you're reading this ,it may be out of date. Lupin and I try to update these kinds of things every few months. It was his suggestion; you know I wouldn't think of things like this. You also had to realize that staying in this house is driving me crazy; it's almost as bad as Azkaban.

Let me guess what happened: I was standing at the door and a big white female poodle walked by...Ah wait, that was a dream.... Let's see, I heard a rumor that worthless slime Wormtail had been seen and I, ignoring Dumbledore's suggestion, bolted out to find him and landed in a trap. Hopefully you didn't hear about it and try to come after me and get yourself hurt or anything.

Ok, good news and then my biggest regret. First, I had a fair amount of gold in Gringotts (how do you think I could get a Firebolt for you). I'm giving half of it to Lupin since the worthless Ministry keeps passing laws that make it harder for him to find work. I'm giving you the other half, even though you really wouldn't need it unless you went really stupid after graduating. You're family did pretty well.

Now, my biggest regret is that I won't be there to give you "the talk". You know about girls. You're going to have to hear it from Moony! I would have been so much better; you could have learned things that would have had them lined up around the block. Ah, but I guess Moony knows how most things go, but I'm sure the way he'll explain it will make it sound like work.

I know the basic gist of the Prophecy and I imagine you're wondering how you could possibly ever kill him. Well, my advice is to not think about it. The first time around every one of us would have given anything to kill him and we never got the opportunity to try. Just try to live your life as best you can. Play Quidditch, get a girlfriend (or two), and stay close to your friends. Even though the Prophecy says you have to fight him, you don't have to be alone. Don't forget that.

Well, hopefully by now, I've found James and Lily and am in the process of telling them everything I can about you. We aren't gone forever you know. You already saw your mom and dad after your fourth year. Maybe you'll see all three of us before you join us. I will kick your ass if you join us before you're Dumbledore's age though.

Give Moony a chance to be a godfather, he was a bit tweaked at James when he made me the first choice.

Take care Harry. Your parents and I will be watching and if we can ever help, I promise we'll find a way.

Sirius

Harry read the note at least three times before he placed it into the small box in his trunk where his sentimental notes were kept along with his first Hogwarts letter. Harry had expected the letter to make him fall apart but he actually felt a little better after reading it. He still blamed himself for what happened, but somehow things didn't seem quite so dark at the moment.

Before trying to sleep, Harry stroked Hedwig and said, "You can go hunt tonight girl, I promise, I'll be ok." Hedwig cocked her head, appraising her friend closely before nipping his finger and flying out. Harry fell asleep quickly and was having a sound and peaceful sleep until the vision of another man being killed by Bellatrix Lestrange shocked him awake. Seeing the sun begin to rise, he quickly recorded his dream and started his daily routine.

Over the next few days, Harry had done nothing to cause Hedwig to become overly concerned for her friend and she had begun hunting on a regular schedule when it got dark. One night however, this almost resulted in something terrible happening. Harry hadn't received any packages on his birthday and after three days of wondering why, the sadness of this coupled with the guilt of what he felt was his fault had allowed the thoughts of being unable to deal with the future to creep back into his mind. After watching Hedwig fly out the window one night, he barely pushed the thoughts into the background and went to bed still clutching his wand. Soon after falling asleep, he had another dream, one that pushed him to the brink. Voldemort and Bellatrix had just finished killing a woman who looked vaguely familiar to Harry. He heard the whimpering sobs coming from down the hall and heard Bellatrix say, "So, the daughter IS at home."

"Timms was indeed talented. He hid that well," Voldemort said as the two walked toward the door where the sound was coming from. "Nevertheless, his deception didn't change the outcome."

The door burst open and the little girl began screaming loudly. Harry suddenly knew why the lady looked familiar. The girl was Mila Timms, a Hufflepuff two years below him. Harry had noticed her and her friends rooting for Gryffindor at Quidditch unless they were playing Hufflepuff. Hermione mentioned the girls had a crush on him.

Voldemort bent down and picked up something, the Daily Prophet. "Look Bellatrix, she must think him her savior!" Voldemort showed the paper to Bellatrix and Harry saw it was a large picture of himself.

"Ah, does the little girl think Harry Potter will save her?" Lestrange said laughing.

"Harry Potter can do nothing to save you Mudblood. In fact he's the reason you're going to die! He exposed me to the world before I was ready. If I had finished my plan, you would have lived much longer," the evil wizard said before laughing out loud, causing the girl to scream even more. "You can thank Harry Potter that your death has come so soon," Voldemort said before uttering the killing curse, sending a green flash into the girl causing her to slump down silently.

Bellatrix began laughing but Voldemort cut her off, "You see what they think of him! He has made a mockery of me! None of you have been able to stop him, NONE!"

"But Master, I was about to before he showed up," Lestrange said with fear in her voice.

"He is but a boy Bellatrix, how could you have failed?"

"It will not happen again my Lord," Bellatrix pleaded.

"It will be your last if it does. Come, we must get back," Voldemort commanded before they both disappeared.

Harry woke up with tears streaming down his face. "See, if I was gone that girl would still be alive," he thought. "How many more is going to kill just to get back at me? I wish Sirius was here, I can't do this without him." Harry closed his eyes and breathed deeply but couldn't clear the thought. "I don't WANT to do this without him. I want OUT!" Harry gripped his wand even tighter, glanced around the room, stopping on Hedwig's empty cage. "I'm sorry girl, I just can't stand this. I'll miss you," Harry whispered as he wiped a tear before regaining his resolve. Roughly placing the tip of his wand against his chest, he started saying the words. As they were coming out, everything seemed to slow down so much that each syllable seemed to take minutes to complete. "Avada Ke..."

Chapter 3

There was suddenly a loud sound and something brushed past him ripping the wand that had already begun to glow green from his hand. Harry barely focused quickly enough to see Hedwig turn and soar back out the window with his wand firmly in her beak. He jumped up and ran to the window, but by the time he looked out, he couldn't even catch a glimpse of her. "Great, now I don't even have my wand," Harry muttered before angrily throwing himself back on his bed, covering his face with his arms.

Harry hadn't seen Hedwig for three days. Three days that Harry felt as vulnerable as he could ever remember. He didn't realize how much comfort having his wand around gave him. Every action he did around the Dursley's was carefully considered since he didn't want them to realize he was defenseless.

The forth morning after Hedwig made off with his wand, Harry was reading his Defense book when Vernon bellowed that Mrs. Figg wanted to see him again. Harry walked slower than normal on his way to the woman's house sensing what was to come. "Hedwig probably told on me again and now I'm in real trouble," he thought as he walked up the drive. Knocking on the door he was greeted by a voice he didn't expect to hear.

"Wotcher Harry! Come on in."

"Tonks? What are you doing here?" Harry said being totally bewildered by her presence.

"Had to return this now didn't we," she said handing Harry his wand back. "Your owl wouldn't let go of it for two days, she looked really pissed off. Nearly took my finger when I tried to get it from her." Tonks was eyeing him strangely. "You wouldn't know anything about that would you?"

Harry was sure he looked guilty but shook his head and said, "I don't know what the bloody bird was doing when she stole it."

"Hmmm...If you say so," Tonks replied still eyeing him strangely.

"So, why'd you bring it back? " Harry said and instantly regretted how that came out. "I didn't mean that like it sounded. I meant, how come you got stuck with the job?" Harry couldn't help but feel a little better when Tonks was around. Her insistent perkiness and odd ever-changing hair color just lightened any situation. Well except for seeing her fall down the stairs at the Department of Mysteries Harry thought.

Tonks laughed and said, "I just thought you may want to talk to someone you weren't so attached to. I mean Lupin is probably like family, and all the Weasley's may as well be your family, I know they consider you part of theirs." Harry's heart jumped a bit hearing this. "I just thought you may want to talk about stuff with someone who could be a bit more impartial."

"You can't be impartial, you're part of the Order, you have to guard me," Harry replied with a bit of annoyance.

"Hey, I've guarded rooms full of junk before so that doesn't necessarily mean anything," she replied in the same tone. "But you're right, I'm not totally impartial and it's not just because of the order." She saw Harry looked confused. "Listen Harry. Most of the Order that didn't have any contact with you before last year feels just like I do. We're all amazed at what you've done and how you've handled everything. So, in that respect none of us are truly impartial. But, unlike the ones who have seen you grow up and knew your parents we can be a little more open with answers and things. Give me a shot. If you say so, I wouldn't mention anything we talk about to the others, I promise."

Harry appraised her for a few minutes and really felt she was telling the truth. "What do you want to talk about?" he asked.

"I don't care, don't you have anything you'd like to talk about?" she asked, obviously wanting to talk about Sirius.

"I don't want to talk about him right now, that's all I know," Harry said with determination.

"Ok, well then, what would you like to do?" Tonks asked.

"What? What do you mean what do I want to do?" Harry asked sounding confused.

"I mean now, the rest of the summer. I also mean after you get out of school. I'm curious what you want to do in the future," she asked still looking at him intently.

Harry thought for a minute, trying to decide how much he wanted to tell her and after a moment said, "I want to get away from the Dursleys, but I don't want to go back to Grimmauld Place." He paused and then added, "I had wanted to be an Auror when I got out of school, but it doesn't look like that will happen."

"Why won't that happen? Didn't you get good enough grades?" she asked.

"That's not it, I did fine on my O.W.L.s. It's that I'm not going to take N.E.W.T. level Potions. I'm never going to take another class from Snape," said Harry with enough conviction that Tonks didn't have to ask if he was serious.

"Well, I'm not sure much can be done about getting you away from the Dursleys since you won't come to headquarters. But, maybe we can do something about being an Auror," Tonks happily said and saw she now had Harry's attention. "Most of the people at work think very highly of you. They heard what happened at the Unspeakable's department and how you dueled Voldemort last year. They were also really impressed that you led the illegal defense group at school behind Umbridge's back. None of them have ever been fond of Fudge but needed to follow orders."

"It was Hermione's idea, and she did as much as me," Harry corrected her.

"Either way, these things have caused people in the department to think a lot of you. Maybe we could get the Potions requirement waved, or at least we could allow you to study more after school. I can understand not wanting to deal with Snape anymore; he's about the most unpleasant person I know."

"You really think there's a chance I could still get in?" Harry asked excitedly.

"If you keep up your grades and continue to excel in Defense, I think there is. You've seen already how almost everything to do with the Ministry is *negotiable*," Tonks replied, smiling at how excited Harry had suddenly become. "Now, is there anything else you want to talk about?"

Harry thought for a minute and asked, "Do you know about the prophecy thing?" Tonks nodded and Harry sighed before saying, "Even if somehow I'm able to kill him, what will my friends think of me if I become a murderer?"

"Let me tell you something Harry. Every Auror feels the same way I do on this. If any of us get the chance, we're going to try to kill him. Maybe we can and maybe we can't. I'm not a big believer in prophecies, so I still think I have a chance to kill him, and if I can, I won't feel bad in the least, won't regret it, and I'm sure none of my friends or co-workers will think bad of me at all. I think that's how your friends would feel as well. They'll realize how much pain and death you would have saved by stopping him for good. Dumbledore didn't tell us the details of the prophecy, only that you have to be the one that stops him for good. I hope you won't mind if I get to him first and take that responsibility away from you."

Harry looked at her with newfound respect as he suddenly felt much better. "Thanks Tonks, that helps a lot."

"No problem," she replied happily. "Now, let me ask you something. How are you handling all the stuff in the Daily Prophet?"

Harry suddenly got a bewildered look on his face and said, "I haven't seen the Prophet. What are they saying now, that I'm still a crazy attention-seeking little boy?"

Tonks laughed and said, "Not quite. They seem to have taken the other extreme this time." She paused and noticed that Harry looked confused. "I don't know if I should tell you or just let you find out on your own." After a brief pause where she watched Harry start to get agitated, she said, "You're back to being everyone's favorite boy wizard. How did they put it? Oh yeah... 'A fifteen year old boy who showed as much courage as Albus Dumbledore in standing up to the Ministry and their lies.' You're in nearly every issue these days. Wizarding families have been writing in saying they'll take you in so that you don't have to live with your Muggle relatives. And younger witches have wanted to know where they can send you letters and things. You'd better watch out for them," Tonks said with a laugh.

Harry shook his head and said, "I wish they'd just forget I even exist."

"C'mon Harry, you should be enjoying this. A sixteen year old boy with all of these witches pledging their love. Isn't that what most teenage boys dream about?" she asked laughing.

Harry didn't see the humor and said, "Maybe, but most teenage boys don't have a psycho ready to kill anyone they are close to now do they?"

Tonks sighed and said, "I guess not, but you can't let that one thing totally rule your life. Try to enjoy your life as much as you can." She thought for a minute and said, "Listen, I didn't know your parents, and I wasn't that old the last time he was causing trouble but I've heard enough stories about the Marauders and other families to know that they still tried to enjoy their lives. Your parents, Lupin and Sirius knew he was after them and they still got out and had loads of fun. Your parents fell in love, got married and had you as well. They continued

to try and enjoy life, and I'm sure that's what they would want you to do. Let's say worst case you don't win and he gets you in a few years." This caught Harry's attention. No one had ever been so direct with him. "Do you want to go meet your parents and have them ask why you didn't try to enjoy the life you had? Or would you rather meet them having lived your life to the fullest while you were here?" She saw him thinking and continued, "And let's take my prediction. Another Auror or myself get to kill him in a couple years and this whole prophecy thing is baloney. Wouldn't you look back on all the time you wasted worrying about things and regret it?"

Harry sighed and said, "I'm just so tired of all of this, I want to be left alone and just be a normal student at school."

"Yeah well I want to walk into a room without breaking things too, but you've seen how well that worked out," she said quite seriously.

Harry thought for a second and said, "I do have a question. What happened to Umbridge? She set those Dementors on me last year and everything."

"That story got into the Prophet as well and the next day Fudge sacked her and anyone that worked with her saying he had no idea what she was up to and hinted that she may have tricked him into signing all those decrees. Fudge is really worried about his job now, but at least he's admitted to Voldemort being back," Tonks said. "The Prophet also ran a story about how Fudge realized Voldemort was back. They said you led a group of elite students into the Department of Mysteries to foil his plan to steal some valuable object and that Dumbledore and the rest of us came along to assist you."

"That's not what happened! I led the students into a trap and you saved us!" Harry exclaimed.

"Yeah but that doesn't sell as well now does it. At least the other students are getting some good press as well," she replied as she looked at her watch. "I should be going. Are you sure there's no way you'll come to headquarters?"

"No way at all," Harry said before softening and saying, "Thanks for coming Tonks."

"No problem, maybe I can arrange it again since you're going to be stubborn and not join us. Oh and don't cause your bird to take your wand again," she said with a wink as Harry turned to leave.

Walking slowly home, Harry tried to think about what Tonks said, his parents must have tried to enjoy their lives. Sirius and Lupin always talked about having fun and enjoying the time they spent together. That just seemed too hard to him right now. He just couldn't see how he could enjoy his life when people were dying and he was the only one who could stop it.

Over the next few days, Harry's mood stayed out of the danger zone after the talk with Tonks. He had visions of a couple other deaths that did depress him but they didn't cause him to get as down as they had before his talk with Tonks.

After having a shower one morning, Harry was thinking as he lightly stroked Hedwig and said, "Well girl, in a couple weeks we'll be back at Hogwarts. It looks like I'll actually make it." The owl hooted and nibbled his finger. "Thanks for staying with me, I wouldn't have gotten through this without you," he added scratching behind her ears.

Harry was just enjoying petting his owl when he heard a knock at the front door. He walked to his door which was partly open and listened as his Aunt Petunia opened the door.

"Hello?" Petunia asked warily.

"Hello. I'm here to speak to Harry Potter," a female voice replied.

He heard his aunt suck her breath in quickly. "What has the boy done now?"

"He hasn't done anything, I just need to speak to him," the female voice answered.

"Well, he's not here and I'd prefer you not come back," Petunia said and after a second added, "Do I know you? You look vaguely familiar."

Harry poked his head out and saw a woman with long black hair, looking slightly oriental speaking to his aunt. "We've seen each other before," the woman responded and then said, "I happen to know that Harry is indeed home right now." Harry saw Petunia squirm a little before the woman spoke, "Maybe you'd recognize me like this." Harry watched as the woman's long dark hair suddenly shortened and became shocking pink in color. Petunia gasped. "I thought that may help," the woman said before turning her gaze up the stairs catching a glimpse of Harry. "Wotcher Harry!" Tonks said happily. "I'm going to speak with Harry for a while," she said to his Aunt who was still standing open-mouthed.

"Tonks, what are you doing here?" Harry asked, still surprised at the interaction between Tonks and his Aunt.

"I've come to get you out of here," she added. "I think you've spent enough time with these Muggles."

Tonks was glad to see Harry get a huge smile, but then suddenly saw it fall. "I'm not going to Grimmauld Place!" he stated firmly.

"That's right, you're not," she said hoping to alleviate his fears. She saw his confusion and she added, "The Burrow would be ok though, wouldn't it?"

"Really? The Burrow? Is it safe?" he asked.

"We'll only be there a couple weeks and everyone thinks it will be fine," she added with a smile. "C'mon let's get you packed. I've been practicing." Tonks quickly said some spells and everything flew into his trunk, much neater than the last time she packed for him. "You can let Hedwig fly, she'd probably rather travel that way."

Harry let his owl out and said, "Go see Ron girl. I'll see you there later." The owl hooted and flew off out the window. Harry turned to Tonks and said, "How are we getting there? We don't have to fly the whole way, do we?"

"No, we won't be flying this time. You'll be using a portkey and I'll Apparate once you're gone," she said retrieving a small disc from her pocket. "Dumbledore made this for you to use. Ready?" she asked and Harry quickly nodded. "Ok then, one...two...three," she said taping the disc and Harry felt the pull of the portkey. The next instant he was standing near the kitchen of one of the most comforting places he knew of, the Burrow.

Before he totally had his bearings, he was engulfed in familiar hug. "Oh, Harry, I'm so glad we were able to get you out of there. How are you dear?"

Struggling to take a breath, he was able to get out. "I'm fine Mrs. Weasley."

She held him at arms length and said, "Let me take a look at you." She appraised him for a moment and then said, "You look like you've been eating enough but you look tired. Have you been having trouble sleeping?"

He had been woken up by the vision of another attack last night but didn't want to bother Mrs. Weasley with it. "I just woke up too early and couldn't get back to sleep, that's all," he said trying to sound as honest as possible.

"Hmmm... Well, I'm glad you're here. The others are out playing Quidditch. Why don't you..."

A sudden pop followed by a crash interrupted her, "Tonks!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed.

"Sorry about that Molly. I see you made it Harry," Tonks said.

"Yeah, I'm just going to take my trunk up stairs. Thanks for coming to get me Tonks," Harry said as he pulled his trunk up the stairs. Entering Ron's room, he smiled at how nothing changed. There were clothes all over the place and Chudley Cannons posters still covering the walls. Harry sat on the bed and looked around feeling jealous of Ron and the family he had. He knew that he would gladly give up any of the fame and money in his Gringott's account to be a part of a family like this. "But Trelawney's stupid prophecy ruined everything," he mumbled to himself.

Harry sat there for a while wondering how it would be to see his friends after six weeks, and almost four without any notes. Of course he knew the lack of letters was his own fault for being short with Hermione and telling her his Uncle Vernon was complaining about the owls.

He didn't know how long he had sat there when all of a sudden, the door burst open and a tall figure with bright red hair came in. "Harry! What are you doing up here mate? We were wondering when you'd get here."

Just seeing Ron brightened Harry's mood. He could always count on Ron to not bring up unpleasant things. "I haven't been here long," Harry lied. "How come everyone got to come back here? Did something happen at headquarters?"

"Thanks to you, we finally get to leave that place for a while. I can't tell you how much I missed playing Quidditch and just being here. I'll never complain about this place again."

"Me?" Harry asked, obviously confused. "How did I have anything to do with this?"

"By refusing to go to Grimmauld Place of course," Ron said surprised at how dense Harry could be. "Dumbledore, Lupin and Kingsley have been working for a week putting up all kinds of wards so we could stay here for a bit. They really wanted you to get a break from those Muggles."

"Yeah, I'm never going back to that place," Harry said firmly. "So, is everyone staying here?"

"Yep. Hermione's been at Headquarters too, and she's taking right after Mum, forcing us to clean every little bit of the place. Even though they're meeting here, they still don't let us into the meetings, but at least we can fly a bit. Grab you broom, we need another player," Ron happily exclaimed.

Harry smiled and grabbed his Firebolt, temporarily forgetting the worries that had been troubling him so much. The two walked outside and were almost upon the others who were sitting around a table talking before they were noticed.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, running over to give him a hug. "Oh, it's so good to see you," she continued surveying him as Ron rolled his eyes behind her. Harry had to force himself not to laugh.

"You too Hermione," Harry said as soon as the hug ended.

"Hi-ya Harry," George yelled as Fred waved. Harry quickly waved back.

"How have the Muggles been treating you Harry," Ginny asked, coming to stand next to Hermione. She seemed a bit hesitant, not knowing whether to hug him like Hermione did or not.

Harry too felt a bit odd but quickly replied, "They haven't been too bad this year. Pretty much ignored me all the time."

"But they still get mad when you receive letters," Hermione angrily said and Ginny agreed.

Harry felt an instant pang of guilt as he said, "Well yeah, but they were still better than normal."

"C'mon mate, let's play," Ron said as Bill walked back out. Then he added, "Fred, me and Harry will take on you lot."

For the next hour or so, Harry completely forgot everything that was troubling him and totally enjoyed flying around with his friends. He hadn't been on a broom since Umbridge banned him from Quidditch last year. Harry did notice that his friends were watching him more closely than normal, probably wondering if he was going to crack. Mrs. Weasley brought a stop to the game when she announced a meeting was starting and that Fred, George and Bill should come inside.

"The twins are in the Order now?" Harry asked, sounding impressed.

"Junior members," Ron replied. "They still get booted from some of the meetings."

"And, they don't tell us anything!" Ginny exclaimed. "I thought for sure we'd know as much as them once they started going to the meetings."

"Well they can't tell us, Dumbledore made them promise," Hermione said and then turned to give Harry a strange look. "Are you still getting the Prophet Harry?"

Harry noticed all three of them looking at him anxiously with Ron fighting to hold back a grin. "No, I didn't get it this summer. Tonks told me that they've changed their tune on me though."

"That's an understatement!" Ron exclaimed. "You're like the editor's son or something. Every issue has some kind of good thing about you."

Harry shook his head and said, "I wish they'd just forget about me."

"But these are at least closer to the truth Harry," Ginny added.

"How did you do on your O.W.L.s?" Hermione asked.

"Hermione! You promised not to badger him about that the first day," Ron angrily said.

"Those two have been fighting about this ever since they got their results," Ginny said with a laugh.

"I did ok, a bit better than I expected," he replied. "I suppose you got perfect scores," he added directing this to Hermione.

She blushed a bit and said, "Well, just about. I only got an E in Astronomy. Remember we were interrupted."

Harry did remember. That was the night McGonagall was stunned and Hagrid fled when Umbridge tried to arrest him. "How about you?" Harry asked looking at Ron.

"I got ten, but good enough to get into Auror training, and better than the twins," he said proudly. "I reckon McGonagall fudged a bit to give me and E in Transfiguration." Ron wanted more details from Harry so he asked, "What was your count? Still on track to be an Auror?"

Harry's face fell but he tried to sound upbeat when he answered, "I got eleven. They were good enough to be an Auror. I don't know how I got by Potions."

"Without Snape around to deduct for made up problems, you probably did great," Ron said, making Harry smile.

"But something's wrong isn't there?" Hermione asked, looking at him intently. "What is it Harry?"

They were all looking at him now so he sighed and said, "I'm not taking Potions so I don't know if I'll be able to get into Auror training."

"What! Harry, you can't let me go into training alone," Ron exclaimed, clearly worried.

"Hey, what about me?" Hermione said sounding irritated.

"Well, you haven't said that's what you're going to do now have you?" Ron quickly threw back.

"Isn't that what you really wanted to do once you're out?" Ginny asked, surprising Harry that she knew. She must have realized this, so she added, "Ron mentioned that's what you two were going to do."

"Yeah, that's what I'd like to do but I'm never taking another class with Snape, no matter what," He firmly stated. "Besides, Tonks is checking to see if that's a real requirement or if there's something else I can do. I may be able to get tutored in Potions during Auror training."

"That's an option?" Ron exclaimed. "Oh man, I've already signed up for the slimy git's class."

"Are you sure about this Harry?" Hermione asked intently. "I mean he's awful to you and everything, but this is your dream."

Harry quickly interjected, "No, my dream is to not have some madman trying to kill me every year. Being an Auror is just a career where I'd get paid to learn to stay alive."

Everyone was silent for a moment, due to Harry's comment ruining the mood. Ginny finally spoke up, "What about professional Quidditch? I mean you're good enough already." Ginny caught the way she said this and kind of blushed.

"Thanks Ginny, but you showed last year that you're as good as me. Gryffindor never missed a beat with you playing seeker," Harry said causing Ginny to really blush. "But, I doubt any team would want me with Voldemort still out there. I imagine it would hurt attendance knowing he may decide to blow the place up any moment."

After another minute or so of silence, it was George's voice that interrupted them, "Hey you lot! You can come in now, I think they want to talk about some stuff that children can here."

"He's always rubbing it in that we don't know anything," Ginny angrily said.

"I can't believe you can't get it out of them," Harry said as he was walking with her behind Ron and Hermione.

"I may have to start hexing them," she replied and Harry couldn't tell if she was serious or not. Entering the kitchen, Harry was surprised at all the people still there.

"Hello Harry," Lupin said as Harry passed behind him, following Ron. "Glad to see Tonks got you here ok."

"Told you I wouldn't lose him Remus," Tonks added.

"I trust you had an acceptable summer Harry," Dumbledore said looking directly at him.

Harry thought this was already an improvement over last year. "Yes sir, it was fine."

"I imagine you'll enjoy the last two weeks more though," the old wizard added with a twinkle.

Harry greeted the other people he knew in the room but only glared at Professor Snape, just the same as the Professor was doing to him. After a long uncomfortable pause while the two looked hatefully at each other, Dumbledore's voice got everyone's attention. "I think it would

be wise to fill those of you who haven't been attending the meetings in on a few developments. We have agreed it is beneficial to have all of you aware of what is going on."

Harry saw Mrs. Weasley shift uncomfortably, but saw Lupin give a slight smile. "Now, as everyone knows what happened at the end of last term," Dumbledore started and just hearing these words caused the dark feelings Harry had been experiencing this summer to start boiling back up. He tried hard to keep them down as he listened to the headmaster continue. "As unfortunate as that was, it has probably saved countless lives in the wizarding community. Now that Voldemort's return is out in the open, people can prepare and may recognize his attempts to increase his power. If his return was still not widely believed, there is no doubt many more people would die before he did make his presence public."

Harry could tell his friends kept glancing at him, wondering how he would react to all of this. It was all Harry could do to retain his composure. Dumbledore continued, "Now our sources tell us that Voldemort was extremely upset that his plan to steal the prophecy was foiled and his return exposed. He has become even more violent to some of the Death Eaters, who in turn have become more violent during their acts. Now Harry, I've heard you no longer get the Daily Prophet, is that correct?" Harry nodded and Dumbledore continued, "Well then I think we should tell you about some of the attacks Voldemort and his followers have committed since the students will no doubt be talking about them."

Harry heard Mrs. Weasley give an annoyed 'Huff'. "I think I know about most of them already," Harry mumbled causing everyone to stare at him.

Chapter 4

Dumbledore had a sad, knowing look but it was Snape that spoke up. "I thought you weren't taking the Prophet, Potter," Snap spat out, his opinion of the student clear in the tone of his voice. "How could you know what has been going on?"

Harry could tell he was having trouble controlling his anger towards the Professor, but as calmly as he could he said, "Because I've watched them happen."

This caused a collective intake of breath and Harry noticed Mrs. Weasley's, Hermione's and Ginny's hands go to their mouths. "What do you mean watched them Potter?" Snape coldly asked.

"I dreamt about them and watched the people die," Harry said over the loud breathing of the women in the room.

"Maybe you really read about them and are just trying to make sure everyone continues to coddle you with sympathy," Snape spat.

"Why you ..." Lupin started but was cut off by Dumbledore, "Severus!"

"Read about it did I!" Harry exclaimed, no longer trying to keep the anger down. He began by rattling off the names of some who were killed, but realized this information would have been in the Prophet. "Did the Prophet print what picture the Hufflepuff girl was holding when she was killed?" Harry yelled, and not waiting for an answer he continued, "She was holding an article from the Prophet where it said that I'm some big hero. She thought I'd come save her and this just made Voldemort angrier." No one was saying anything and Harry continued, "Did the Prophet print how Mr. Banks and his family were killed? Did it say that his fingers were cut off first when he tried to grab his wand? Did it say that he had to watch his daughter tortured with the Cruciatus Curse before being killed? Did it print that Voldemort kept taunting him with the fact that his wife had just found out she was pregnant with another girl and hadn't told him yet?" At this, there were gasps and obvious crying. "I bet it didn't. He had to watch his daughter, his wife and unborn daughter die before he killed himself. You want more? I'll show you more," Harry exclaimed and quickly drew his wand and said, "Accio Parchments." No longer caring about any underage magic law.

The next moment, a stack of parchments landed in front of him. "Here! Read these and you tell me if I got this from the Prophet," Harry yelled pushing the stack towards the Potions Master and angrily sitting back down, not looking at anyone.

For the next few minutes, there was silence except for the sound of turning parchment as it was passed from Snape to Dumbledore. "Why did you write this down Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"Because I never want to forget how evil he is. You all talk about him killing people, but that's not the half of it. He doesn't just walk in and quickly kill them. He tortures and humiliates them first," Harry replied still unable to contain his anger.

"If you would have even attempted to learn Occlumency, you wouldn't have seen this," Snape said, still sounding very cold.

"We're not going to talk about that, Snape," Lupin said sounding angrier than Harry had ever heard him.

"I'm not going to let you poke around in my head again," Harry added, glaring at Snape.

"So you'll just let him lead you into another trap," Snape said causing more gasps. "Who will get hurt next time? Why...."

Harry cut him off before he could finish, "That will NEVER happen again."

"Why's that, do you think you know better now? Without blocking him, he'll lure you back," Snape coldly replied.

"That's not what I meant. I meant that no one else will ever get hurt if I...how did Hermione put it?" Harry sarcastically said, not looking at her. "Oh yeah, if I get another 'thing for saving people.'"

Now there was mumbling from many people but Snape was the loudest. "And how do you think you can prevent them from being hurt?"

"Because, next time I guarantee that no one will go with me. I don't care if I have to stun them, I'm going alone," Harry firmly said over the other voices.

"That's just what he wants. He'd have no trouble killing you by yourself," Snape said, sounding like Harry was the stupidest thing he'd seen.

Harry suddenly stood up, knocking his chair over as he did, and yelled, "I DON'T CARE IF THAT HAPPENS! You don't get it, do you? You seem to be under the impression that I think that would be a bad thing! Well I don't!" Pausing for a moment, Harry got more confident with the silence. "And what do all of you care anyway? Huh? You think I don't know? Most of you don't give a damn about me, Harry. You care about me, The Boy in the Prophecy." Now there were more gasps. "You guard me and make me stay at the Dursleys because you know what it will mean to your precious prophecy if I die, not because you liked my parents or anything, otherwise you'd be guarding Ron and Hermione as well." After another second of silence, Harry announced, "I'm going out!"

There was still silence as he reached the door, but before he swung it open, the calm voice of Professor Dumbledore said, "Please don't leave the property, Harry."

This caused Harry to stop for a second as he breathed deeply, trying to rein in his anger. Then he swung the door open and continued walking straight outside.

Hermione had jumped up and watched him walk down the lane. "He's going to leave Professor, we have to stop him. It's not safe out there," she said obviously worried about her friend.

Again Dumbledore spoke up very calmly, "I do not think Harry will leave the property, Miss Granger. At least not yet." Hermione continued to watch her friend until he stopped at the line of shrubs marking the edge of the Weasleys' property. At this point, he began pacing back and forth along them.

"I thought the prophecy was destroyed," Ginny said, causing everyone to look at her.

"The official record of the prophecy was indeed destroyed," Dumbledore said. "However that was not the only way to learn what it said. Harry does know exactly what it contained."

"And all of you know as well?" Ron said looking at everyone.

"We don't!" Fred exclaimed and George shook his head as well.

"Mum?" Ginny said turning to her mother.

"They know the basics Miss Weasley," Dumbledore answered her. "Only Harry and I know the details that Voldemort does not."

"Can you tell us?" Hermione asked and then turned to watch Harry as he paced.

"I'm afraid that has to be Harry's decision," Dumbledore responded. "However, now that he is aware you know that he has been told about the prophecy, I would imagine he may be interested in talking about it to someone. If he does, please do not press him for the details. He knows Voldemort isn't aware of them and would do almost anything to find out more."

"Do you really think Harry believes all we care about is the prophecy?" Mrs. Weasley asked though the many tears in her eyes.

"Molly, I have no doubt that Harry knows that you and Remus truly care for him with or without what any prophecy says," Dumbledore said reassuringly, and after a pause added, "Now for the rest of us, I'm not so sure."

"What about my idea now, sir?" Tonks asked causing the rest of the order to look confused.

"I have changed my mind and now am in full agreement with your idea. I'll speak to Harry about this before I leave," Dumbledore said.

"Do you really think he'd go off, you know by himself?" Ron asked.

Dumbledore sighed and said, "Of that I have no doubt that he would."

Harry didn't know how long he had walked back and forth along the shrubs, trying to decide how he felt about what just happened. In some way he felt better now that everything was out in the open, but he felt very guilty for saying that they didn't care about him and for storming out like he did. Turning to retrace his steps along the shrubs, he saw Fred and George walking towards him. He stopped and when they were close and said, "You two give up apparating everywhere?"

"Ah, well no," Fred said and then George added, "We just thought it was safer to not sneak up on you right now."

"So, I guess I kind of lost it in there, huh?" Harry said hanging his head.

Now the twins beamed as Fred said, "I'd say. You'd make a fine Weasley you know."

"You both know about the prophecy then?" Harry asked, sounding depressed.

"Not us!" they both said before George added. "We don't know anything about it."

"But," Fred added, "you know none of us, especially Mum, give a damn about any prophecy."

"I know," Harry quickly said. "I would never think that any of you and especially your mum would care."

"You may want to mention that to her," Fred threw in.

"Yeah, she's worried you think that about her," George agreed.

Harry felt his heart drop. The last thing he would ever want would be to cause Mrs. Weasley to think he thought anything bad about her. "I'll do that!" Harry quickly replied. "I'd never think that about her."

"That's what Dumbledore told her, but it would be good to come from you," George said.

Harry saw the twins look between each other and knew they wanted to say something else. Just then Fred spoke, "Now, we heard what you said in there and everything, but we both want you to know that if you go off, we want to come with you." George nodded.

"What?" Harry asked.

"We're saying that if go off like before that we want to help," Fred added.

"You heard what happened last time! Sirius died, Ron, Ginny and Hermione were hurt bad. I can't let that happen to anyone because they followed me," Harry said.

"Yeah well, maybe they didn't know what they were getting into," George said.

"But now we all know," Fred added, "and we're willing to risk it. All we're saying is that we can help. If all you need is some...supplies...we can provide some things for a diversion. Whatever you need."

"And, we won't tell the rest," George said.

"Yeah, it'll be just between us," Fred confirmed.

"You two are mental, you know that," Harry said shaking his head, but this comment caused the Weasley's to smile broadly.

Before they could respond, a voice startled them all, "I trust you two aren't trying to pass on your legacy to a younger student." Professor Dumbledore had walked up carrying a sandwich on a tray.

"Ah, no sir," Fred said.

"Harry would never," George added. "ever do anything to disrupt the school." Fred finished.

Dumbledore just gave a slight smile at this comment. "Would you two mind if I spoke to Harry for a minute before I leave? I believe your mother has sandwiches waiting for you as well," Dumbledore said and the twins quickly apparated away.

"They're quite brilliant aren't they?" Dumbledore asked.

"They sure are," Harry said.

"Have a sandwich Harry," Dumbledore said, handing him the tray. "I'd like to speak to you about a few items." The old wizard paused as Harry took a bite of the sandwich. "First off, I'd like you to try again to learn Occlumency."

Harry nearly choked trying to talk so quickly. "There's no way I'm letting Snape poke around in my head. He never tried to teach me anything."

Dumbledore put up his hands. "I'm not talking about Professor Snape. I regret how things turned out last year for both of you. I cannot do it either, but there is someone else who is talented in Legilimency and he has offered to teach you."

"I don't see the need anymore. I can deal with the dreams now," Harry said sadly.

"Let's forget about the dreams for a second. Couldn't you see the benefit of Voldemort not being able to recognize when you aren't telling him the truth?"

Harry perked up at this and Dumbledore continued, "Wouldn't you like to be able to hide thoughts from him? You will meet him again and what if he asked who you care about the most? Wouldn't you like to hide the answer from him?"

Harry hadn't thought of it like this before. That would be a very useful thing to know how to do. "I hadn't considered that," Harry admitted.

"Blocking the dreams would still be entirely up to you, but I think you would find it beneficial as well."

"I guess as long as it's not Snape, I'd be willing to learn," Harry said, now seeing other uses for learning the technique. "Thank you for explaining it like this," Harry added.

"Oh, don't thank me, it was Tonks' idea. I hadn't agreed until hearing you earlier," the Professor honestly said. When he realized Harry wasn't going to say anything he continued, "The other thing I wanted to ask you was a favor." Harry looked confused as Dumbledore said, "I know you declined my initial request to continue with the D.A. group, but I'm asking again. I would consider it a personal favor if you reconsidered."

"But sir, if we hadn't started that last year, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna wouldn't have been placed in so much danger," Harry exclaimed.

"I think that's the wrong way to look at it Harry," Dumbledore said. "The progress of some of the members of the group has been remarkable. I'm sure you saw how far Mr. Longbottom has come because of the group."

Harry had to nod because he realized this was true. "But sir, this year we will hopefully have a real Defense teacher and they can learn that way."

"You know it isn't the same Harry," Dumbledore replied. "In addition to helping the other students, leading this group would look good on your Auror application," the old wizard added with a slight smile.

This caught Harry's attention, knowing he may need as much help as he could get to become an Auror without taking Potions. "What changes would we have to make? I mean can we run it the same way?" Harry asked.

Now Dumbledore smiled more openly as he said, "We would like to open it up to more students fifth year and up, but you and Miss Granger may reject any you saw fit."

Harry shook his head and realized he would do nearly anything Dumbledore asked him to do. "I suppose you knew all along that I'd give in."

"Well," the Headmaster said with a grin, "I had my suspicions. However the intensity of your comments inside did cause me to doubt slightly." Harry frowned remembering how much of a tantrum he had thrown earlier. "I think you would be surprised to realize what some people think of you Harry. Prophecy or not, we would have an abundance of volunteers to help out."

"But I'll never be able to really know for sure," Harry sadly said.

Dumbledore appraised him for a moment and said, "I've already told you that you have struggled under more than any other student to come to Hogwarts, and I wish I could say it would get better soon. Alas, we cannot count on that happening. You can do this Harry; you just have to believe that you can. Don't give up hope."

"I just want it to end sir," Harry admitted, sounding defeated.

"I imagine you do, but make sure it ends at the right time, for the right reasons," Dumbledore replied studying him closely. "I'm confident things will get better. I should return to the school. I trust you will at least try to enjoy your remaining holiday."

"I'll try sir. Thank you," Harry said, still sounding sad. Dumbledore nodded and disappeared the next moment.

Harry stood there in silence for a while and then noticed Ron and Hermione sitting at the table outside of the Burrow. He knew he would have to face them sooner or later and decided to get it out of the way. As he walked toward them, he saw them exchange looks with each other and he could tell they were worried how this was going to go. Harry promised himself he would try his best to not become angry with them, knowing they weren't to blame for how he was feeling.

Just before he opened his mouth to speak, the back door of the Burrow flew open and a very angry, very loud Ginny Weasley stormed towards him. "You listen here, Harry Potter! If you think for a second that we're going to let you go storming off to fight alone, you've got another thing coming. If I so much as think that's what you're planning to do, I'll hex you so much Madame Pomfrey will need to work overtime. We know what's going on out there and I

don't care if you do have a," Ginny turned to glare at Hermione, "saving people thing," turning back to Harry she continued, "I'm coming with you."

Harry, having never borne the brunt of Ginny's anger was stunned. She must have realized this and spoke again in a very determined but calmer voice. "I know the risks Harry and I'm willing to take them. You can't do everything on your own."

"Yeah, um... you know... what she said," Ron sheepishly added nodding toward his sister.

"We all feel that way Harry," Hermione threw in.

Harry shook his head and said, "I don't know about all of you. Fred and George just told me the same thing. I think you all are a bit off in the head." He tried to smile after saying this.

"Hey, don't lump me in with that lot," Ron piped up. "I like to think I've got a bit more sense than them."

Ginny spoke up again before Harry could sit down, "So, do you promise to let us go with you?"

Harry looked between the three of them, then sighed and honestly said, "No, I can't promise that. All three of you were hurt seriously last time and I walked out without a scratch. I couldn't live with myself if something worse happened."

"Harry," Hermione said in a soothing voice, "let it be our choice. We may try to talk you out of it or we may want to come along. Give us the chance to make that choice."

Ron was vigorously nodding his head in agreement, but Harry could only say, "I'm not going to lie to you, I can't promise that. But, I'll seriously think about it."

"I meant what I said earlier you know," Ginny added as she sat down, clearly not happy with his answer.

"So tell us the bit about the prophecy," Ron finally said.

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed. "You promised to give him some time on this."

"I did! He doesn't seem to be yelling at us now," Ron quickly replied.

Chapter 5

Harry shook his head in wonderment at his friends and briefly caught Ginny still looking at him warily, but she softened a bit when she caught his eye. "It's ok Hermione; I really wanted to talk about it all summer but couldn't put it in a note." Ron gave her a 'see, I'm not such an idiot' look.

"Ginny, maybe you should go inside," Ron suggested and quickly became the target of the younger girl's wrath.

"Who are you to decide what I should do Ronald?" Ginny menacingly said.

Harry quickly put up his hands. "Stop! Ron, it's ok with me if she hears, I mean she went through what we did last year. I think she has as a right to know." Harry saw the look of pride in her eyes and he quickly added, "Besides, I don't want her yelling at me again, she's too scary."

Ginny smiled brightly for a moment, but became serious when Harry started talking. "Basically the prophecy is that I'm the one who can destroy Voldemort for good and one of us has to kill the other one. It said, 'neither can live while the other survives.' I think this means that my life will continue to suck while he's alive and that he can't get back to full power while I am. So that's why he's trying to kill me so hard."

They all looked stunned but Hermione finally said, "But what about Dumbledore? Why can't he stop him?"

Harry shrugged and said, "Don't know. But Dumbledore didn't try to kill him in the Department of Mysteries and told me it has to be me. So, either I win or die trying."

"But what if you just stay away from him? Don't let him get to you," Ron suggested.

"You mean stay locked up like Sirius?" Harry angrily replied but quickly regained his composure. "That's not for me, and besides that would just leave him out there to keep on killing other people. I don't have a lot of choices here."

"Bloody hell," Ron said in a huff.

"How do you think you can do it?" Ginny asked, not sounding angry at all anymore.

"Wish I knew," Harry replied shrugging his shoulders again.

"Well, we'll figure something out," Hermione said confidently. "I mean we always do."

Harry looked at her and instantly felt better about telling them. "Thanks Hermione," he said gratefully, causing her to smile proudly. "Oh, and before you say anything, I didn't mean any of you or your family when I said that before about only caring about the prophecy and I plan on telling your mom as well."

"We know you didn't Harry, but mum just worries so much lately," Ginny said, giving him comfort.

"It must have been horrible seeing all those attacks," Ron said sheepishly. "They wouldn't let us read them but you could just tell watching the others."

Harry nodded and Hermione asked, "They'd stop if you knew Occlumency wouldn't they?"

"Yeah, Dumbledore already asked me to try and learn again. Not with Snape this time," Harry said spitting out the teacher's name coldly. "I don't trust him at all. He didn't try to teach me anything last year and the visions kept getting worse."

"Yeah, I say he's still working for You-Know-Who," Ron angrily agreed.

"Ron! We've talked about this already," Hermione scolded causing Ron to give her a mean look. The four friends were quiet until Hermione said, "Oh, I almost forgot. Isn't it great that we can continue the D.A. this year?"

"What?" Harry said sounding confused. He had only moments ago told Dumbledore that he would agree to continue. "I told Dumbledore I wasn't going to do it this year! He just convinced me a few minutes ago. What did he tell you?"

"Oh, well I agreed to do it right away and he said he was sure that you and I would help the group make even better progress this year. I just thought you had agreed," Hermione said causing Harry to shake his head. Try as he might, Harry couldn't really stay angry with the Headmaster, the old wizard just exuded compassion and caring.

The group sat around talking until it began to get late and then headed inside. Mrs. Weasley was doing chores in the kitchen when they entered. Ron elbowed his friend and said, "Hermione, can you show me that bit about History of Magic now."

Hermione looked confused but then caught on, "Of course. Ginny, you may find this interesting as well." Grabbing Ginny's arm she pulled her up the stairs with Ron, leaving Harry alone with Mrs. Weasley.

"Um...Mrs. Weasley," Harry said softly.

"Yes dear," she said not turning around.

"Well, I hope you didn't think I meant any of you when I spouted off about only caring about the prophecy. I would never think that about you," he said this last bit with confidence.

Now the woman turned around looking very relieved. "Oh no, of course not Harry. I understand you were upset." She stepped forward and engulfed him in a hug as she added, "All I care about is you dear, just like the rest of my children."

This was a rare time when Harry wasn't anxious for the hug to end, but when it did he said, "Thanks. You know you don't have to worry about me so much, I'll be fine. I should go upstairs now." Mrs. Weasley nodded, wiping a tear from her eye as she turned back around.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he saw Ginny rolling up an Extendable Ear and wiping away a tear. "That was nice. She worries so much anymore. I hate to see her so concerned."

"She wouldn't have to worry so much if it wasn't for me," Harry said hanging his head.

"That's not true! Everyone other than me, Ron and Percy are in the Order. She would worry anyway," Ginny corrected him.

Harry nodded toward Ron's door and said, "Are they in there?" Ginny nodded. "Think we should knock?" Harry joked.

Ginny giggled and said, "You know they fight so much that they might just go from arguing to rolling around in bed one of these times."

Now Harry laughed as he opened the door to Ron's room. He and Ginny were disappointed however to find their friends sitting across from each other, both with books in their hands. "So Harry, are you ready to get back onto the Quidditch team?" Ron asked quickly closing the book.

Harry looked at Ginny and said, "If you still want to be seeker, I can stay out. You were really good last year."

Ginny smiled and said, "Oh no, I don't like seeking much. I want to be a chaser."

"That shouldn't be a problem since all of our chasers are gone this year," Ron added. "If you're back as seeker Harry, we'll only need two more chasers."

"I haven't been told my ban is lifted, but if it is I'll be back," he said feeling a bit of excitement at being able to play again.

"I'm sure Professor McGonagall will get it lifted," Hermione said.

"Speaking of the ban, I heard Umbridge was sacked, what happened to Percy?" Harry asked.

Ginny gave a low hiss. "Booted as well, the stupid git," Ron said.

"Dad took him into his department," Ginny said. "Won't let him move back home but at least gave him a job."

"I can't believe Fudge got off so well. He sacks the others and nothing happens to him," Harry said clearly annoyed.

"Well not nothing," Hermione added. "He's not in very good standing with the Aurors or the Wizengamot. I think if he slips up at all, they'll remove him. Those two groups are very powerful in the Ministry."

Ginny yawned and announced she was going to bed and was quickly followed by Hermione. Ron and Harry decided as well to try and sleep and thankfully Harry had a rare peaceful night.

After a peaceful night's sleep, Harry was woken up early the next morning by the soft voice of Mrs. Weasley, "Harry dear, there's someone here to see you." Shaking his head trying to wake up, Harry rolled out of bed and dressed quietly trying not to wake Ron up.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, he saw a large bald black man with a hoop in one ear standing near the door, "Morning Harry!"

"Mr. Shackbolt! Good morning, what are you doing here?" Harry asked clearly stunned by the Auror's presence.

"Call me Kingsley and I'm here to teach you Occlumency. We have to do it early in the morning before I go to work. Sorry about that," Kingsley said sounding too cheery for this hour of the morning.

"The morning's good, everyone else will still be asleep. What do I need to do?" Harry asked, actually looking forward to learning this now.

"I need to find out what you know. How far did you get with Snape?"

"Not very far I think," Harry replied.

"Well, what did he tell you to do?"

"All he said was to clear my mind and then he would tell me I hadn't been practicing. That's it," Harry firmly stated.

"That's it? Did he tell you why you were clearing your mind or give you ideas how to do it?" Kingsley asked amazed.

"No! All he ever said was for me to clear my mind and then he'd force his way in," Harry exclaimed.

"That worthless..." Kingsley started to say before catching himself. "Sorry Harry, but that's no way to teach this. Now, you don't actually have to clear your mind but you will need to focus your thoughts. The reason you're doing this is so you can quickly recognize when your thoughts are being directed to something you didn't intend. Now, I give you my word that if I happen to see anything uncomfortable, I won't tell anyone, not even Dumbledore. Do you trust me?"

Already Harry felt better. "Yes, I trust you," Harry said honestly. "So, should I try to clear my mind or focus on something?"

"Well I find that focusing on something works better. I usually think about my wife doing the dishes. It's something familiar and comforting. Some people think about their hands and others about their pet. You have that snowy owl don't you?" Harry nodded. "I'd suggest focusing on her sleeping or something like that. She's very distinctive and probably comforting. Can you picture her sleeping?"

Harry thought and quickly pictured Hedwig sleeping on top of her cage. "Yes, I can see her sleeping."

"Good, now focus on the little things about her. How her ears look, how she breathes. Now, when you're doing this, I'll try to enter your mind. If you recognize your thoughts changing to something you don't intend, then you'll know something is redirecting them."

"What should I do if I recognize it?" Harry asked anxious to get going.

"Well nothing yet, the first step is to consistently recognize when it happens. After you get that down, you'll learn to either stop the intrusion completely or hopefully redirect the intruder to thoughts you choose."

"Really? I could do that?"

"With practice you could. This may not come easily but if you can really throw off the Imperious curse like I've heard, you should be able to. The key is to recognize the intrusion as soon as possible. Now focus," Kingsley stated.

Harry tried to focus on Hedwig and now found it a bit harder than he thought it would be. He could picture her easily enough, but his thoughts kept drifting to his friends and Sirius. Concentrating as hard as he could, he tried to just keep his focus on Hedwig and how her head slowly moved as she slept. Within a few minutes Harry realized he was thinking about chasing Bellatrix out of the Department of Mysteries. As soon as he realized this, he was able to snap himself back to the present.

"I guess I'm not very good at this," he said sounding dejected.

"I wouldn't say that. You didn't recognize when I redirected your thoughts at first, but you were able to shut me down when you did realize it. That's not bad. This time, try to realize your thoughts have changed sooner."

Harry took a minute and focused again, trying to picture every little part of Hedwig's head. It was much quicker this time when Harry realized that Hedwig wasn't a part of his thoughts. Again, he was able to snap back to reality soon after realizing what had happened. "Damn!" Harry exclaimed.

"Don't be disappointed Harry, this is going surprisingly well. You were much quicker at realizing something happened."

"But how will I ever be able to do that when I'm sleeping?"

"With practice, it will become second nature, trust me," Kingsley confidently said, giving Harry some comfort. "We can try a few more times before I leave for the day, but I'll be back each morning until school starts."

"I really appreciate you taking the time to do this," Harry said gratefully.

"Well, I have my personal reasons," Kingsley admitted. "Tonks said you wanted to be an Auror and I'd like to have you but you'll have to be an expert at this as long as Voldemort is still out there. We couldn't have you on the team if he could get into your mind, so the sooner you learn this, the better you'll be when you apply."

"I never thought of that before," Harry admitted. "Now I have a lot of reasons to learn."

"Good. Let's go again," Kingsley announced. Before Kingsley left, Harry had been able to recognize the intrusion instantly on one attempt and very quickly on most. Kingsley seemed pleased but Harry had been disappointed that he couldn't recognize it instantly each time. Still, it was much further than he had ever gotten with Snape.

He saw Hermione leaving the bathroom as he came up the stairs. "Is it open now?" Harry asked feeling happier than he had for a while.

Hermione noticed this and said, "It's all yours. You seem in a better mood."

"I just had an Occlumency lesson and it went pretty good. That just shows me that Snape wasn't trying to teach me anything. One of these days, I'm going to get him back for how mean he's been to me," Harry said as he entered the bathroom for his shower.

Harry took every opportunity over the next week to watch Hedwig sleep, studying her features. He also quietly thanked her for watching over him earlier in the summer. He felt better after a week at the Burrow than he had imagined he could feel after the loss of Sirius. There had been two dreams that woke Harry up, but he didn't bother to record them because he didn't want to remind the others he was still having the visions.

Harry also noticed that many times when the friends were sitting around talking, that Hermione seemed to try to direct the conversation to Sirius or to how Harry was feeling, but each time Ron had interrupted and started talking about something trivial. Harry didn't know if he appreciated this or not. Sometimes he felt like he wanted to talk about what happened, but most of the time he didn't.

At the end of the first week, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were sitting outside late one afternoon when Hermione said, "It's weird isn't it?" The others looked at her having no clue what she was talking about. "I mean it's so calm and peaceful right now but he's out there and you're the only one that can destroy him for good."

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed. "What are you doing making him think of that? And you call me an insensitive twit."

"It's ok Ron, I think of it all the time anyway," Harry added without emotion. "She's right, being here is great but the truth is I'm either going to be killed or become a murderer, I just don't know when."

"You won't be alone Harry," Ginny added forcefully.

"Why you though?" Hermione asked, still trying to make sense of the prophecy. "I mean you're the only person to survive the killing curse but why can't anyone else destroy him?"

"Well, Tonks said she doesn't believe in it and if she gets the chance, she's going to try and kill him. Maybe she'll be right," Harry said not believing what he said.

"If not, we'll figure out some way to beat him," Ron said patting Harry on the back.

"You don't have any idea why you?" Hermione asked.

"No, the prophecy just says I'll have powers he doesn't," Harry said exasperated.

"You didn't tell us that before!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Well it didn't say what powers or anything so I don't see what help it'll be," Harry replied.

"But if we can figure it out, then you'll have a better chance," Hermione said, now sounding anxious at the thought of something to figure out.

Harry and Ron exchanged glances as they both realized what Hermione was doing. She was getting that look like she was on a mission.

That night, Harry had dreamt about Voldemort and Bellatrix entering a home and preparing to kill a very young girl, but before they could do anything he snapped awake. Looking around confused, he didn't know which he liked better, not seeing the attack or at least knowing what Voldemort had done. He attributed this to the Occlumency lessons, but now was thinking only about Voldemort and the pain he has caused. Throwing on his robe, he silently snuck out of Ron's room and went to the kitchen for something to drink.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Harry's thoughts quickly went to the Burrow and how kind the Weasley's were. This caused him to think of Sirius and how it would have been to be able to live with him. After a bit of thinking about Sirius, Harry was hanging his head into the palms of his hands, trying to not cry openly. He didn't realize someone had come up behind him until he felt a soft touch on his shoulder.

"Are you ok Harry?" Hermione asked in a very soothing voice.

Harry snapped his head up and was instantly glad it was still dark, not wanting Hermione to know he had been crying. He didn't look at her as he tried to wipe his eyes as he said, "I'm fine Hermione. What are you doing down here, is everything ok?"

Hermione was torn up inside to see her best friend in so much anguish and know she couldn't directly do anything about it. Harry was indeed her best friend. Oh, Ron was a best friend as well, but there was something different about her relationship with Harry and she knew it. It was like they were a brother and sister that were very close. Her relationship with Ron was...well...complicated. "I woke up and needed something to drink," she said, still standing with her hand on his shoulder. "Are you really ok?"

Hearing the way she asked this and feeling the weight of her hand on his shoulder caused something in Harry to open up a bit. "I really miss him Hermione. He wasn't really family, but he's the closest thing I ever had." Harry was fighting hard to keep the tears back.

Hermione's heart was just crumbling. "You have me Harry, and the Weasleys. We'll be your family."

Harry thought for a moment and said, "Thanks Hermione, but it's not the same. I mean in a couple years, we'll be out of school. And, even if I make it that long, everyone will be off to other things. You and Ron will always have a home and family to go back to and I always thought I'd have Sirius."

"You'll make it Harry. I know it's not logical or anything but I really believe that you can do this. I don't know why, it's just something I believe with all my heart. You'll be able to have your own family."

"Yeah right. If he's still out there any girl would be in too much danger to be with me and if I win, what girl will want to be with a murder?" Harry said sarcastically.

"Harry! There are plenty of girls that want to be with you, even knowing the danger. Remember there are a lot of people that don't know you who are dying right now as well. Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald and everybody still loves him. When you win, no one will consider you a murder, you'll be a hero."

"I don't want to be a hero!" Harry quickly exclaimed. "I just want this," he said pointing around the room. "I just want to be a normal person with a great family, just like Ron."

"Well sorry, but that's never going to happen," Hermione said bluntly causing Harry to look at her, not caring about his watery eyes. "Even if Voldemort never came back, you're still 'The Boy-Who-Lived'. For good or bad, that's you. You'll have to find someone who can see past that and just sees Harry."

The two sat there in silence for a minute until Harry looked directly at her and said, "Hermione, I'm really sorry for what happened last year. I haven't apologized to all of you for nearly getting you killed. I should have listened to you."

"You don't have to apologize Harry. No one blames you. You did listen to me, remember? We used the fireplace, just like I suggested. Other than Sirius, things worked out, we're all fine," Hermione said, resting her hand on his shoulder again. "If it hadn't been for your quick thinking once we got there, we wouldn't have gotten out. I know Ron and Ginny feel the same way; they don't blame you at all. Even knowing the odds up front, they would still have come. I know I would have."

This made Harry feel better and he said, "Is that really you Hermione? You've said two totally illogical things so far." He tried to smile after this.

"Well maybe after five years, you and Ron are rubbing off on me a little. Now if only I was rubbing off on you two," she jokingly replied. Then she added, "You know that after we get out of school, we'll still see each other loads."

"I know you and Ron will," Harry replied causing Hermione to look confused. "I mean you two will probably start having loads of kids right after."

"What?" Hermione exclaimed fairly loudly. "Where do you get the idea that anything like that could happen? You know how much the two of us fight."

"Whatever Hermione," Harry said, now feeling better. "Do me a favor and don't tell the others about this, I don't want Ron to think I'm falling apart or anything."

"Boys," Hermione said shaking her head. "I won't tell, but no one is going to think badly of you for missing Sirius and worrying about what's going to happen."

"Yeah well it wouldn't look good if everyone knew the person who has to defeat Voldemort was missing his godfather and wishing he was someone else. You have to keep my secret Hermione," Harry said looking at her intently.

She sighed and said, "I'd always keep your secrets Harry. I promise."

"Thanks. I guess I should go back upstairs. You never did get your drink."

"I'll just grab one and head up in a minute, you go ahead," Hermione said confidently, but after watching Harry turn the corner of the stairs she sat down and silently wondered how her friend held it together with all the responsibilities placed upon him.

Neither Harry nor Hermione realized most of their conversation was also overheard by the youngest Weasley who had been woken up by Hermione leaving her room and decided a drink was a good idea. She had just shut her door when Harry came by and she wished she could be as close to him as Hermione was, even as just a friend.

Chapter 6

Kingsley came by in the morning and noticed Harry didn't look like he slept well. "Another dream?" the Auror asked.

"Yeah, but I woke up before anyone was killed," Harry replied still not sure if this was better than seeing it.

"Maybe you're getting the hang of this. The ideal thing would be for you to not even realize anything had happened, but I'm sure you'll get there. Ready?"

Harry nodded and they began practicing. Before Kingsley left, Harry had instantly stopped three intrusions and the Auror as pleased. "Tomorrow we'll try to redirect the intrusions. Here's how it's going to go. When you realize something's wrong, you can't change your thoughts suddenly or the intruder will know they've been caught. You have to slowly push another thought into its place. If you feel me trying to get to a thought about the incident, you could push in a thought of the Weasley's kitchen when we walk through a door or something like that. The art is to make the transition seamless. That way if Voldemort asks you a question, instead of him sensing your thoughts going to the true answer, your thoughts would be on something that you want him to see. It'll take work, but that's the goal."

"Thanks again Kingsley, I'll try hard," Harry promised.

One afternoon in the middle of the week, Mrs. Weasley came to the group who were sitting out back. "Everyone thinks it will be ok if we make a quick trip to Diagon Alley," Molly said.

"Really? We actually get to go this year?" Ron asked.

"Remus, Tonks and Mad-Eye will wait for us in the Leaky Cauldron and we'll have to stay with them, but everyone felt we needed a bit of a break," Mrs. Weasley said sounding very nervous. "You all get ready."

"C'mon mate, let's change," Ron said as he bolted for the door.

"Harry dear, can you wait a moment," Mrs. Weasley said and Harry instantly had a bad feeling. After the others were inside she said, "Now they told you about the articles in the Prophet this summer didn't they?"

"They said that there had been a lot and they weren't trashing me like last year," Harry replied.

"Well, they really built you up this year. I just want to make sure you're prepared in case you get a bit more attention this year," she said.

"I'll be fine, thanks," Harry said before heading up to get ready. He felt very confused about going. He really wanted to get out and about but also felt guilty being excited about something as trivial as a trip to Diagon Alley when the whole wizarding community was being drawn further into darkness.

Harry arrived at the Leaky Cauldron to find himself face-to-face with Mad-Eye Moody. "Hello Potter," Moody growled.

"Hi Mad-Eye. Did everyone else make it ok?" Harry asked wondering why Mad-Eye was right in front of him.

"Talking to Remus and Tonks. I need to speak to you for a minute."

Harry looked directly at the scarred face wondering what the talk would be about when he saw Mad-Eye move his wand. Instantly he saw flashes in his mind. The cupboard door shutting on him. Cedric falling... Mr. Weasley getting bit by the snake. But then he thought he heard another voice telling him to pull out of it and the next second he had come back to realize where he was.

"Not bad Potter. Kingsley said you were making progress but there's nothing like an unexpected attack to throw you off. Constant Vigilance!" Moody Growled and directed Harry who was still shaking his head a bit towards the others who were waiting.

After passing through the magical barrier behind the pub, they were all struck by how different it was. There were none of the happy groups of students running around, almost every group had a couple adults with them and their moods seemed much more somber. Hermione noticed the look of sorrow on Harry's face and whispered, "This won't last forever. At least their taking precautions."

"This was the first magical place I ever saw," Harry quietly replied. "It seemed like the happiest place on earth and now look at it."

"Keep up you two. We're off to Gringotts first," Moody growled from behind them.

Almost every group of people they past stopped after recognizing who Harry was and began whispering and pointing. Even a few of the groups, mainly of girls called out 'Hi Harry!' Tonks came over smiling and said, "Told you you'd have to watch out."

"I hate this," Harry replied.

"C'mon Harry, enjoy it while you can. Get a few dates, have some fun," Tonks said but this was the last thing Harry had on his mind. He just shrugged his shoulders back at her, knowing she was trying to help. He also didn't see Hermione and Ginny both shooting dirty looks at the female Auror.

They arrived at Gringotts and all did their business. Before leaving, Harry was near the back of the group with Moody when he asked. "Mad-Eye, can I learn those Disillusionment Charms?"

Moody appraised him both with his real and magical eye for a moment and said, "They're normally restricted, but I think this may be worthy of an exception. When we get your schoolbooks, ask for "Concealment and Illusion Charms" by Watkins."

Harry looked very happy and said, "Thanks Mad-Eye."

"Now don't use them for anything that causes trouble or I'd be in a real pickle. Suppose you wouldn't mind having one used on you right now?"

Harry quickly replied, "Yeah, I think I'd like that."

As soon as he answered, Moody mumbled something and whacked him on top of his head and again, he felt like a glass of cold slime had been poured on him. Looking down, he noticed his skin was darker. "Thanks Mad-Eye!"

"No problem Harry. My eye can still tell who you are. When you want to end it, just say Finite and whack your wand to your head. Now, let's get going," the Auror said pushing Harry out the door where he saw the others waiting.

"Nice one Mad-Eye," Tonks said as the two approached the group. "Quite the hottie."

"Harry?" Ron asked looking at the strange face. Harry nodded.

"What did you do that for Harry," Hermione asked.

"I'm tired of people staring at me all the time. C'mon let's go shop," Harry replied and headed off towards the book store. He was walking next to Ginny and noticed she kept glancing at him. "That bad huh?"

"No, I just like the real you better," she honestly replied.

"That's good to know," Harry replied with a smile.

They arrived at Flourish & Blots and were all able to quickly find their required books. Of course Hermione spent another twenty minutes looking for extra reading. When Harry approached the counter to pay he said, "Excuse me, but I also need Concealment and Illusion Charms by Watkins."

The man behind the counter gave him a disapproving look and said, "I'm sorry but that is a restricted title and you don't have authorization."

Harry felt the disappointment until he saw a small identification card drop onto the counter and heard Mad-Eye say, "Auror's Privilege. The boy will also need Advanced Shields, Auror level."

The worker studied the identification and then looked between Harry and Mad-Eye before turning to fetch the books. "Good to know they're at least doing their job," Mad-Eye said. "Now, you better make it through Auror training on your first shot."

"Thanks again Mad-Eye," Harry said as the Auror glanced over the books the worker had returned with. Harry quickly paid and put the books into his bag before going outside to wait on Hermione.

Harry, Ron and Ginny were standing a bit away from their guards when they heard the sickening voice of Malfoy, "Well if it isn't the Weasels. Where's scarhead? Still in hiding or is he off shagging the Mudblood?" He noticed the unfamiliar face. "What other kind of low-life have you started dragging around?"

Turning, they saw Draco with his two goons, Crabbe and Goyle. Ron started to move forward, but just then Hermione came up and was able to grab Ron before he punched Draco. "Sod off Malfoy," Ron spat.

"Get lost you worthless git," Ginny added.

"Don't speak to me you..." Draco started to say before Harry stepped right in front of him.

"One more step and it'll be your last," Harry coldly said.

"And who are you to make me?" Malfoy spat back.

"I happen to be her boyfriend," Harry said turning to give Ginny a wink. "Did you have a nice summer? Get to visit you father in your future home did you?"

Malfoy looked confused for a second, but quickly let the anger come to the surface. "I don't care who you are, don't you ever talk about my father," Malfoy loudly said and then made a move as if to grab his wand.

Harry was much quicker and before Malfoy even had his fingers around his wand, Harry's was pointing directly at his chest. "Please give me a reason," Harry said with obvious hatred.

Just then Tonks and Mad-Eye appeared on either side of the two students. "Put that away Potter," Mad-Eye growled causing Draco's eyes to get huge.

Tonks turned to the Slytherins and said, "Next time we won't stop him. Now get out of here."

"You can't make us do anything," Malfoy said but continued to walk away.

"Let's get back to shopping," Tonks said as they walked to Madame Malkins for new robes.

"You know, if those Disillusionment Charms work so well, why didn't Crabbe and Goyle's moms use it when they saw how bloody ugly they were?" Ron joked as they headed to the robe shop.

Before getting there, they were approached by three girls, one of which used to make Harry's stomach flip a little, but no longer caused any sensation at all. "Hi guys," Cho said. "Umm... Have any of you seen Harry?"

"He's right..." Ron started to say but Hermione stepped on his foot and said, "Sorry Cho but we haven't seen him yet this summer. Things are kind of crazy right now." Harry was impressed at how well she lied.

"Oh... Well if you happen to see him, can you tell him I said Hi and hoped he had a good summer?" Cho asked, looking disappointed.

"Sure, we'll make sure he knows," Hermione said before Cho turned to look at the strange Gryffindor and ask, "I don't recognize you."

Harry said, "Oh, I'm just her boyfriend. I'm off at a private school."

Cho looked like she was thinking of something but then said, "Ok then. See you guys at school."

"What'd you stomp on me for? You're getting entirely too violent," Ron asked after Cho and her friends were gone.

"Maybe Harry didn't want to talk to her," Hermione said and then turned to Harry. "You didn't, did you?"

Harry chuckled and said, "No, thanks Hermione."

"Yeah, you thank her but I've got a broken toe," Ron grumbled.

"Wonder what she wanted?" Ginny asked, sounding annoyed.

"Maybe she needed a good cry," Harry said before walking into the robe shop. He was able to get fitted for a new robe and talk to different workers without anyone staring at his forehead or whispering about him. He thought it was kind of nice to be someone else. After finishing with his robes, he sat off in a corner with Ron waiting for the girls to finish when they saw Parvati and Padma hurry up to Ginny.

"Where is he Ginny?" Parvati asked excitedly.

Ginny was totally confused. "Where's who?"

"C'mon you're new boyfriend," Padma replied. "Cho told us you had a new one."

Ginny blushed and said, "Oh... He just...He had to leave, sorry."

"Oh," they both said sounding disappointed. "You bring a picture of him to school," Parvati added before the twins left.

Harry heard this and came up to Ginny. "Ginny I'm sorry I said that about being your boyfriend."

Ginny looked confused and asked, "Why, don't mind them."

"Now that they know, it'll get back to Dean and he may get mad at you. I'll explain it to him if you want," Harry offered, feeling bad he may have gotten Ginny into trouble with her boyfriend.

"Dean?" Ginny looked confused again but then realization hit her. "Oh, I remember. There was no Dean." Ginny said and now Harry looked confused. "I just said that to rile Ron up. I almost said Draco but just the thought of that kind of made me sick."

Harry laughed and said, "Well good, I'm glad I didn't mess up again. Oh, and thanks for not saying Draco, I would have probably fallen right over."

After shopping was done, Harry offered to treat everyone including their guards to ice cream so they were all inside Florean Fortescue's parlor eating when Luna Lovegood came in humming a strange tune to herself.

"Luna!" Ginny exclaimed, standing to hug her friend. "How are you?"

"Hi Ginny," Luna warmly responded before giving her order to the girl behind the counter. "I'm getting some ice cream for me and my dad. Hi Ron," she added in her dreamy voice and then looked at Hermione a bit more coldly and said, "Hello Hermione." Turning to Harry, she only stopped on him a second longer than the others before saying, "Nice disguise Harry."

Everyone stared at her but Harry said, "Umm... Thanks Luna. Did you get all your stuff back and have a good summer?"

"Oh yes, it turned up like always. We didn't find any Snorkacks, but we had fun looking," Luna replied in a cheerful sing-song voice.

"Luna," Hermione said, sounding serious. "How did you know that was Harry?" At this, even Remus, Tonks and Mad-Eye were listening.

"Well, he's here with you three and the three guards over there so who else would it be?" she said this as if were the most obvious thing. Her order was ready so she grabbed the cones and then sounding very serious added, "Besides, no one else *feels* like Harry now do they? Bye." Before anyone else figured out what she meant, she was out of the shop and walking down the street.

"What'd she mean *feel* like me?" Harry quickly asked. "How do I feel?"

The others shrugged and Ron said, "C'mon mate you know Loony...Who knows what she's talking about. Unless of course you've been letting the wacko actually *feel* you and not telling us about it." Harry made an amusing his face at Ron who just smiled in return.

"It's time to go you four," Mad-Eye growled causing them all to rise quickly and head back to the Burrow, but not before Mad-Eye cancelled the Disillusionment Charm on Harry.

They were sitting around that night talking about how different Diagon Alley seemed when Harry said, "You know I really liked not being me today. I wonder if Mad-Eye would do that for the whole year."

"Harry!" Ginny said before smacking his arm. "We don't want you like that; we want you just the way you are."

Ron looked at his sister strangely, but Hermione smiled and seeing Ginny blush said, "She's right Harry. That other guy's hair was too neat." Harry laughed but still thought it was nice to not be noticed for a day.

Later when the two girls were alone in Ginny's room, Hermione saw the younger girl smile and asked, "What's making you so happy?"

Ginny blushed a bit and said, "Oh nothing, just thinking."

Hermione smiled a bit knowingly and asked, "So, how did it feel to have Harry as your boyfriend for the day?"

Ginny became a little flustered but said, "I didn't have Harry as my boyfriend, I had some stranger."

"Um. Hmmm.." Hermione said. "Still, he seemed pretty comfortable saying he was your boyfriend. You know how he is; I can't believe he got that out without stumbling."

"He was just making an excuse for being there. Honestly Hermione. Anyway, I don't think of him that way anymore," Ginny said, trying to sound convincing.

"If you say so," Hermione slyly said. "I hope he won't be too disappointed."

"What??" Ginny said. "What do you know?"

"Oh nothing," Hermione said and then faked a yawn. "Goodnight Ginny."

There was another meeting of the Order the final night before returning to Hogwarts but even when the students were invited in, Harry decided to stay outside. He hadn't lost his temper since that initial meeting and didn't feel like doing it again. He was sitting outside near the boundary of the property when Remus Lupin walked up to him. "How are you doing ok Harry?"

Harry stood up and brightened a bit at seeing who was speaking. "Hi Professor. I'm doing ok. You look better."

Lupin laughed and said, "Remus, remember. I'm trying. What about you?"

"I still miss him a lot but being here helps," Harry replied.

"Good. We both have to remember that we have other people who care about us. Kingsley says your lessons are going well. How have the dreams been?"

"I've had a couple but have woken up before anything bad happened. I'm not sure which way is better," Harry replied sighing.

"At least you'll be in control now. Try not to think too much about the prophecy. Nothing says it has to happen anytime soon. Now that the Ministry has admitted he's back, we've been able to get more cooperation and hope to keep him from gaining power too quickly."

"I'll try. I'm looking forward to getting back to school," Harry said.

"Well remember, I can't replace Sirius but if you ever need anything, I'm here for you, and not just because I feel some debt to your parents or anything," Lupin said patting Harry on the back.

The next morning the Burrow was in chaos as usual on the day the children left for school. Even with Fred and George out of the house, having Hermione and Harry there made up for their absence. Since the Minister of Magic was not trying to do everything he could to suck up to those who had believed Dumbledore for the past year, there were two large Ministry cars waiting outside to take the family to London Station to catch the Hogwarts Express. Tonks, Mad-Eye and Lupin joined Mr. & Mrs. Weasley in escorting the students to the train. Harry had really expected something to happen, but after everyone had hugged Mrs. Weasley and boarded the train, he breathed a sigh of relief and went to find a compartment with Ginny. Ron and Hermione had to attend to prefect duties before they could join their friends.

Many of the students were again whispering and pointing as Harry and Ginny walked down the halls, but this year they didn't sound accusatory. Following the same pattern as last year, the two were able to find a compartment occupied only by Luna Lovegood, the Ravenclaw girl that entered the Department of Mysteries with Harry the previous year. "Hi Luna," Ginny said cheerfully. "Is it ok if we sit with you?"

"Oh yes," Luna dreamily replied, not looking up from behind her upside-down Quibbler. Ginny looked at Harry who just shrugged and the two hoisted their trunks into the overhead storage. Ginny sat down next to Luna and took out a magazine to read and Harry sat directly across from the Ravenclaw and pulled out the Advanced Shields book hoping to get some ideas for new things to work on in the D.A. meetings. Thinking about how he felt when Professor Dumbledore had first asked about continuing the D.A. group made Harry realize how close he had come to not being around right now. Silently, he thanked Hedwig for looking over him this summer.

It had been silent in the carriage until Ron's head came through the door. "There you are! We've looked all around," the tall red-head said as he dropped down next to Harry. "Being a Prefect will be loads easier this year without Fred and George around."

"I should hope so!" Hermione exclaimed as she sat down next to Ginny.

"Well, they did put a big box of things in my trunk after the meeting the other night," Ginny said causing Hermione to glare at her. "Said something about upholding the family honor."

"Why didn't they give me any?" Ron heatedly asked.

"They know you're a Prefect Ron!" Hermione quickly said. "Surely you won't be using anything they gave you Ginny," the bushy-haired girl said to her friend.

"I wouldn't dream of it Hermione," Ginny said giving Harry a slight smile.

"C'mon Hermione, it'll be boring in the common room without a Weasley stirring things up," Harry said, enjoying seeing Hermione get flustered.

"Hey, I'm a Weasley!" Ron exclaimed.

"Ron! Prefect!" Hermione spat.

"I should have never taken this bloody thing," Ron angrily said looking at his badge.

"I wish we had some excitement in our common room," Luna said still not looking up. "Everyone's either studying or talking about fashion."

Hermione looked like she wanted to say something to Luna but pulled out a book and said, "Harry, we need to start thinking about what we'll cover in the D.A. this year." Harry held up his book. Hermione seemed surprised. "Oh, well even though we'll hopefully have a proper Defense teacher, we can still learn loads of other things." She looked closer at the title. "Can I see that?" Harry handed her the book with a very sly smile on her face. Hermione glanced at the first few pages. "Harry! This is a restricted book. How'd you get one?"

Now everyone else in the carriage was looking at him. "Moody thought it may come in handy for the Auror tests. There should be some good things to use in here," Harry said with a smile as he took the book back, causing Hermione to frown. "But, I'm sure you'll come up with loads of things we'd never learn as well," he added and this caused Hermione to cheer up a bit.

"Can I have a go at the book?" Ron asked causing Harry to quickly hand it to him. After skimming it for a few minutes he said, "If we learn all of this, maybe he'll get you another one next year. We could ace our Auror tests."

"You may," Harry said sounding depressed. "I'll still have to get tutoring in Potions."

"Are you that bad?" Luna who had now looked up asked.

"No, he's not bad," Ginny snapped, causing Hermione and Ron to look at her strangely.

Harry saved her from any comments by quickly adding, "No, I did ok. I'm just not going to take Potions anymore." Harry thought of something, "Thinking of Snape reminded me of something. Is Malfoy still a prefect?"

Ron answered, "Yeah, the stupid git's still there. He wasn't so pushy though."

"I imagine he's having a harder time intimidating people with his dad being locked up," Hermione added.

Luna gave a loud snort causing everyone to look at her. "Did you choke on something," Ron asked.

Luna just laughed and said, "Baboon's buttocks, that was so funny."

Ron cocked his head and looked at the girl he obviously thought was crazy. "How *did* you make it out of there alive?" Ron asked causing Ginny and Hermione to gasp and Harry to suddenly stare at his feet.

It took Ron a second but then he said, "Oh..Sorry mate, I wasn't thinking." Hermione caught Ron's eyes and nodded toward Luna. "What?? Oh... And Luna, I didn't mean anything. I...We're all really glad you made it out too."

Luna didn't seem offended and said, "I know Ronald. You didn't bother me."

"Don't think about it Harry. Other than...you know... it all worked out," Ginny said in a comforting voice.

Harry looked directly at her for a second, realizing she was right and said, "Yeah, you're right." He went back to reading his book in silence and didn't see the glares Hermione and Ginny were giving Ron who had slunk down in his seat.

Harry didn't even look up when the compartment door opened. "Hi everyone," Cho said but was clearly looking directly at Harry.

Harry looked up but didn't feel anything special towards the pretty girl standing in the doorway. "Hi Cho," Luna happily said.

"Um...Harry, are we going to continue the D.A. this year? I just thought that it was really helpful and hoped we would," Cho said a little quicker than she normally spoke.

"Well yeah, we're going to continue," Harry replied in his normal voice that he used when he talked to any other student. This was the second time he was able to speak so normally in front of Cho.

"We'll have a sign-up for new students," Hermione said causing Cho to look at her. "Harry and I have to approve any of the new ones. Oh, and I don't think Marietta should come back."

"Oh," Cho said with a mixture of disappointment and annoyance. She turned back to Harry, "Well I'll see you at school Harry." She turned with a wave and walked out.

Harry had already gone back to reading his book when he heard Luna's sing-song voice from behind the Quibbler. "She's quite taken with you, you know."

"Yeah, but Harry's well done with her," Ron quickly replied causing everyone to look at him. He looked at Harry and said, "Aren't you?"

"Yeah, guess I am," Harry said trying to focus back on his book.

Chapter 7

When the train finally arrived, Harry saw a tall figure yelling for the first years. "Hi Hagrid!" Harry called out, still feeling a bit guilty about running out on him at the end of last term.

"Ello Harry!" Hagrid replied, ushering first year's towards the boats. "Doin' ok?"

"Better, thanks," Harry replied before being pulled to the carriages by Ron. "You think all those adults are guards?" Harry asked looking out the windows.

"Probably," Hermione sadly answered. "I can't believe how much things have changed."

"Yeah, I hope this all ends soon," Ron absent-mindedly said then heard both Hermione and Ginny gasp a little. Ron saw Harry's head hanging down and quickly said, "Sorry mate, I didn't mean anything."

"I know Ron but that's how I feel as well," Harry replied. "As long as I stay locked up in this school or at the Dursleys, this is going to just get worse."

"Harry!" Hermione scolded him. "There's nothing you can do right now. I'm sure Dumbledore will think of something, but until then, you can't worry about it."

"Right," Harry silently thought to himself. He tried to give a smile but could tell that Hermione knew it wasn't genuine.

Harry could tell that other students were talking about him and mumbling when he walked by. Hermione and Ron both noticed this and tried to shield him from it as much as they could. Inwardly, Harry was thankful for having such good friends.

The sorting hat had just finished another hauntingly solemn song about the houses needing to work together or the school would fall. "Like that's going to happen after what they did last year," Ron said, pointing over his shoulder at the Slytherin table.

"Maybe they didn't all go along with it Ron," Hermione argued back. "If things keep getting worse, we will need their help."

"I wouldn't trust Malfoy's help," Harry angrily added.

"No, not him of course," Hermione agreed. "He doesn't seem as popular this year anyway. But maybe some of the others aren't so bad," she offered.

Once the sorting was over, the sound of the tapping glass caused everyone to look as Dumbledore rose to speak. "Welcome back everyone and especially welcome new first years. I am please to see so many of you returning. First, I would like to take a moment for all of us to give thought to those who haven't returned this year. Some by choice, and some at the hands of the evil that has entered our community again." There was total silence for a moment; even most of the Slytherins were respectful. "Now, I hope the official announcement of the return of Lord Voldemort came as no shock to most of you since it was announced here over a year ago. We finally have some assistance from the Ministry and will do our best to prepare you all. Remember what was said when it was first announced; you will soon need to

choose between what is right and what is easy. That choice will be something you will live with the rest of your lives." Dumbledore paused to let this sink in. "Now we will again have an instructor that will teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, but he is slightly delayed in joining us. He is finalizing things in his current position and will join us tomorrow. As some of you may know, there was a private club formed last year to study Defense in the absence of practical lessons. The founders of this club have agreed to continue this year and I expect to see the same exceptional results as were gained last year. There will be a sign up sheet posted in the hall for any fifth-year and above who would like to join. Attendance will be limited and the founders have the authority to reject anyone they see fit."

"No Slytherin has a chance to get in," Ron said happily.

"Shhh." Hermione angrily hissed.

Dumbledore continued, "Even more so this year, please exercise caution when venturing outside of the castle and remember that the forest is strictly out of bounds. Trips to Hogsmeade will not be announced until the day before to help insure your safety. Now, everyone tuck in." With a wave of his hands, the tables filled with food and everyone filled their plates.

The sound of all the voices and movement of all of his friends really made Harry feel like he had come home. He was very much looking forward to getting to his room and unpacking his trunk. Harry heard the new boy fifth-year prefect announce, "Gryffindor first years follow me."

Turning to Ron, Harry said, "That sounded just like Percy!"

"Yeah, he acts like him too," Ginny added.

"Well, he's just trying to take his responsibilities seriously," Hermione piped in.

"Yeah, we see how well that turned out with Percy," Ron added, drawing a glaring look from Hermione. "At least I don't have to deal with the midgets this year; all I need to do is try to catch Slytherins at stuff."

"Ron! Will you at least try to act like a Prefect?" Hermione asked in exasperation as he got up to follow her.

Ginny and Harry exchanged looks and Harry asked, "How can they argue so much and not kill each other?"

Ginny laughed and said, "Maybe if they'd just admit they like each other they could spend time doing things other than arguing."

Now Harry laughed but did manage to get out, "I think Hermione's too stubborn and Ron, we'll he's too...."

"Chicken!" Ginny finished for him. "I guess we should go up as well."

Just as Harry was going to agree they heard, "Good evening Miss Weasley, Potter."

"Hello Professor," Ginny cheerfully said.

"Miss Weasley, you mentioned that you would rather play chaser this year, do you still feel that way?" McGonagall asked.

"Oh yes. I'd much rather be in that position," Ginny agreed.

"Well then Mr. Potter, your ban is lifted of course and if you'd like your old position back it seems to have just become available," the Professor said with a slight twitch of her lip.

"Sure! As long as Ginny's sure she doesn't want it," Harry said looking at Ginny who nodded.

"Excellent, now I have another matter concerning the team. You Mr. Potter are the senior member of the squad and as such, I'd like to offer the position of captain to you," McGonagall said, now with an obvious smile.

Harry was stunned but Ginny exclaimed, "Congratulations Harry, that's great."

Harry didn't think it was that great. He loved Quidditch no doubt but he really didn't know that much about the strategy. He just flew around and caught the snitch. "Um Professor," Harry said causing the Professor to look at him strangely. "I really think Ron Weasley would be a better captain." Ginny and McGonagall both looked at him like he was crazy. "Ron grew up around Quidditch and knows everything about it. I never heard of it until I came here and really all I do is fly around and chase the snitch. I don't think I could do as good a job as he could."

Ginny just had her mouth open in surprise but McGonagall said, "If you're sure Potter." Harry nodded. "Very well then, Mr. Weasley will be the new captain. I'll leave it to you two to tell him then. Now, onto other matters," she said causing both students to give her their attention again. "The Headmaster and I would like to see you in his office."

Harry's stomach lurched. It was rarely a good thing to be summoned there. He looked at Ginny who seemed concerned and he said, "Try not to tell Ron until I get back, ok?"

"I won't Harry," Ginny promised.

The two walked in silence until McGonagall gave the password to the Gargoyle guarding the office. After ascending the stairs and being let into the Headmaster's office, Harry's feeling of dread worsened when he noticed Professor Snape standing inside as well. "Ah Harry, welcome back," Dumbledore greeted him. Harry could see the portraits eyeing him warily, having witnessed his tantrum at the end of last year. He could have sworn a couple of them shifted and tried to stand behind objects in their pictures. "I imagine you're still wondering about the new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor?" Dumbledore added, his eyes twinkling behind his reading glasses. Harry nodded and the Headmaster continued, "Well, I'll leave it for a surprise, but I'm quite sure you will be pleased." Harry noticed Snape's mouth curl up even more. "Professor McGonagall of course mentioned your desire to be an Auror, and also shared her intentions to help you succeed." Harry turned to give a smile to the Professor. "However, we noticed you did not sign up for N.E.W.T. level Potions, even after Professor Snape made an exception to his requirement for Outstanding O.W.L. grades. I noticed Mr. Weasley did take advantage of this exception."

Harry didn't really want to say anything for fear he would go off on another tantrum. "Yes sir, that's correct."

"Correct? What exactly does that mean Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, seeming a bit irritated.

"I really appreciate your offer of help Professor," Harry said looking directly at McGonagall, "but I won't be taking any more Potions classes here."

"And why is that Potter? Think you know enough already?" Snape bitterly asked.

Harry didn't look at the Potions' Master, but instead looked at Dumbledore as he said, "I'm just not going to take anymore."

"I respect your decision Harry but would appreciate knowing the reason why," Dumbledore asked in the voice that made you realize it wasn't a request.

"Um sir, I'd rather not start off the year in detention, so I'm not comfortable saying," Harry sheepishly said.

"I'm sure that anything that is said in this office would be overlooked this one time, am I correct Severus?" Dumbledore asked.

"Of course Headmaster I myself am very curious why Mr. Potter would not take advantage of my generosity," Snape coolly said.

Harry was silently trying to pick his words carefully. "Harry?" Dumbledore said, trying to hasten his answer.

Harry sighed deeply and said, "I don't trust him and all he does in class is try to humiliate me. I showed during the O.W.L.s that I can do the work when I'm being treated fairly. He doesn't try to teach me, just like he didn't try to teach me Occlumency."

Harry caught a glimpse of McGonagall's face and saw that she was obviously surprised by this answer. Snape started to say something but Dumbledore raised his hand. "Harry, Potions is very important for your future and I'm sure Professor Snape will treat you the same as he treats every student."

"No sir, I don't believe he will. You have never seen how differently he treats me in class," Harry said, the anger building up now.

"Oh, it couldn't be because you always act like you're so much better than the other students. Like you deserve special treatment," Snape spat.

"No, I don't act like that, my *father* did! I've seen how horrible he and Sirius were at times but that isn't me. I never knew my father and didn't know he acted like that until last year. You've treated me horribly from the first because of a grudge against my father and his friends," Harry said, getting into the mood of letting his emotions out as he had done in the Burrow. "But my grudge will be against you," Harry continued, now looking directly at the Potions' Master, "because of how you treated me, not because of how someone else treated me. If I

live long enough to get out of this school, I will pay you back for every horrible thing you've done to me."

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall exclaimed but Harry didn't even slow down.

"To me you're nothing but a Death Eater and when I become an Auror, you're the first one I'm coming after," Harry said, now feeling as angry as he could ever remember. To his astonishment, Snape was looking at him with a most unusual expression.

"Harry," Dumbledore said in his very stern voice and after a moment, Harry turned to the Headmaster. "As I have told you before, I fully trust Professor Snape and hope you do not mean what you just said."

"I'm sorry Professor, but I don't trust him at all and never will. I also meant every word I said. When I'm away from this school, I'm coming after him unless Voldemort gets me first," Harry said this with such confidence that the Headmaster dropped his head into his hands.

"This is just what Voldemort wants," the Headmaster said softly. "Once we are divided, we will fail."

"Potter, you are...." Snape started to coldly say but was cut off.

"Severus! Not another word," Dumbledore said sounding very irritated. "You may go Harry," Dumbledore added still not in a pleasant voice, but Harry didn't hesitate and turned, quickly leaving the office and returning to Gryffindor tower.

"I don't think you realize the ramifications of this," Dumbledore said, no longer sounding irritated, just tired.

"This will not affect what needs to be done," Snape said.

"It has already affected it Severus. Harry's greatest strength is his compassion and ability to love, and as that is replaced in his heart by hate he will have less hope of succeeding. He has dealt with so much since rejoining our world and yet he only knew compassion but now it is all falling apart. We have brought this on ourselves, and I am to blame as much as anyone."

Harry walked very slowly on his way to the Common Room, feeling guilty with himself for saying those things. His thoughts went back to Professor Snape, and how he had learned the Professor had actually been trying to save him from falling off of his broom in his first year. But then it went to the Professor's actions in the Shrieking Shack and how Snape so wanted Sirius to be thrown back into Azkaban. Then, just last term, Snape had alerted the Order to what Harry had said about Sirius being held captive, but Harry didn't fully believe he had done it as quickly as he could have. He just didn't trust the man. But was not trusting him really enough reason to hate him so? He thought of how Snape goaded Sirius and tried to make him feel worthless, and knew how much that bothered Sirius. This caused the hate to begin to swell as quickly as anything, but then Harry remembered the visions of how his father and Sirius treated Snape in school. All of this was very confusing to him as he walked; almost in a trance back to the Common Room. Even though he truly believed he hated Snape enough to harm him back in Dumbledore's office, Harry couldn't bring himself to that level of loathing now that the moment had passed.

Not realizing where he was, Harry was pulled out of his thoughts by the portrait of the Fat-Lady saying, "Are you going to stand there all night or are you going to give me the password?"

Harry climbed through the portrait hole and was happy to hear the sound of so many voices sounding so cheerful. This was home, and the place he felt safest. Harry saw Ron standing near the back of the room and as he was trying to make his way over, he was stopped by many of the sixth-year students thanking him for leading the D.A. last year since they had done so well on the O.W.L.s in Defense.

Harry had just made it over to his friends when Neville came over, "Hey Harry! How was your summer?"

"Hi Neville. It was ok. Was your Gran upset that your wand broke?" Harry asked.

"Oh no! Dumbledore had sent her an owl telling her what we did and she was really impressed. Said she didn't think I had it in me. We went and got a new wand the next day. You should hear her now. When we go to visit my parents, she just keeps telling them over and over what we did. She says we couldn't do much better than following your lead," Neville said beaming at Harry.

"Yeah right! I mean it was luck that any of us walked out of there," Harry said, not sounding angry or anything.

His friends were staring at him but Neville intently continued, "But this is war Harry! If we just wait around until it's safe to do something, we'll lose. We can't let them win!"

Now they were all looking at Neville with newfound respect. Hermione broke the silence, "You know Neville, you're right. We can't let them win, no matter what." Ron and Ginny quickly agreed and Harry stood there amazed at his friends. They still had a choice in this and here they were; ready to fight after narrowly surviving their last encounter with Death Eaters.

"So Harry," Ron said turning to his favorite subject. "Ginny says McGonagall made you seeker again. Now all we need is two more chasers."

Ginny looked like she would burst and said, "And a captain!"

"Well that'll be Harry. He's the senior member of the team," Ron said sounding confident.

"Well McGonagall did ask me to be captain," Harry said looking at his friend.

"Brilliant!" Ron exclaimed, no trace of jealousy sounding in his voice.

Hermione was watching Harry intently and said, "But? There's something else, isn't there?"

Ron looked at her strangely, but Harry said, "Hermione! How do you always do that?"

She just beamed a little and Ron said, "What? What else is there? Did they boot Malfoy?"

"I doubt they booted Malfoy," Harry said, the disgust sounding in his voice. "I just told her that I really don't know that much about Quidditch strategy and that she should find someone more qualified."

"You what? Are you mental?" Ron exclaimed. "Being captain would be great; you could come up with new plays and everything. I'll help you, you'd be perfect."

"I'm glad you think it would be so great since you're our new captain," Harry said smiling brightly at his best friend.

"Huh? What? Really?" Ron choked out. Harry and Ginny nodded in reply.

"Congratulations," Hermione said and before she knew what happened, Ron had hugged her tightly and was twirling her around. Harry and Ginny both stared at them wide-eyed, not believing Ron would hug Hermione like that.

Apparently Ron came to his senses and quickly let Hermione go and started stumbling with his words, "Oh, sorry. Didn't realize..." Ron's ears were bright pink and Hermione was quite flushed herself.

"Um...No problem. I know you were just excited," Hermione got out still sounding flustered.

Harry and Ginny were now laughing openly but Ron smiled brightly again and said, "I can't believe I'm going to be Quidditch captain."

"Believe it," Harry happily said. "Oh, and don't go getting all Oliver on us or anything." Harry was able to almost forget the terrible weight on his shoulders as the rest of the evening was spent enjoying being around his friends.

It was after Ron and Hermione's Potion lesson the next day that found them eating lunch. "Snape's acting really strange," Ron said. "He was out of it today."

"Yeah, he did seem a bit preoccupied," Hermione added.

"Probably doesn't know what to do without making me look like a fool," Harry said, taking a bit of his sandwich.

Just then Ginny sat down next to Ron and with a smug look on her face announced, "I know who the new Defense teacher is."

"Who?" Ron demanded.

Ginny slowly took a bite of her food, savoring knowing something the others didn't. "Ginny!" Hermione scolded.

"Oh all right," Ginny said. "It's Kingsley!"

"That's great!" Ron announced.

"That is very good. I mean he's a senior Auror so he should really know a lot," Hermione said happily.

At breakfast the next morning, Harry and Hermione were discussing their first period class, Defense Against the Dark Arts but Ron was busy writing onto sheets of parchment. Hermione seemed very excited as she ate. "I'm really anxious to see how Professor Shacklebolt runs class. We should learn loads."

"It'll be weird calling him that," Harry said between bites of toast.

Harry and Hermione both glanced at Ron who was busy writing onto a piece of parchment, not paying any attention to his friends. "Ron, what are you doing?" Hermione asked.

"Planning for Quidditch! You know, new plays, practice schedules," he said without looking up.

"You should really be focusing on your studies," Hermione said.

"I'm captain Hermione, this is really important," Ron exclaimed. "I'll just copy your notes later."

"Remember you want to be an Auror Ron. Your studies should come first," she replied.

"I know, but I'm almost finished. This is really important," Ron mumbled.

Ginny had just sat down and asked, "Ron, are you going to make Harry and me try out for the team?"

"Um...Not Harry of course, we all know how he plays. Don't know how you'll do at chaser though," he replied still scribbling on the parchment.

Hermione glared at him and Ginny started to say something, but Harry beat her to it, "Ron, you've seen her fly, she's amazing. She shouldn't have to try out." Ginny suddenly felt very proud and Harry gave her a slight smile.

"What?" Ron mumbled. "Fine, Ginny you're a chaser. Now all we need are two more."

The three made it to the Defense class just before Kingsley arrived. Most of the Slytherins were already there and they took seats in the back of the room. "Good morning class," Kingsley cheerfully said. "I am Professor Shacklebolt and I will hopefully do a better job than your teacher last year. I have been an Auror for quite some time now and will do my best to prepare you for the current environment." Kingsley surveyed his room. "I know some of you have chosen to attempt to become Aurors after you leave Hogwarts. It will be very difficult but I will try to make sure you know everything you need to before this class is over."

The three friends walked out of class very excited about how much they could learn from this professor. "He was really good," Hermione exclaimed. "Even Malfoy paid attention."

"Yeah, well the same things are important for Death Eaters I guess," Harry said.

Chapter 8

Transfiguration was interesting as well with McGonagall starting to teach them to conjure things. All three of them paid attention and were anxious to learn.

Ron had asked last year's members of the Quidditch team and Harry to make the tryouts that were held Saturday morning. There were four students that signed up to tryout. After the first round, Seamus and a fifth-year, Terry Simpson were clearly better but Ron insisted on holding the second round of competition. Ron had setup for a competition using Ginny and Harry as the other two chasers. This was the first time Harry had ever played that position but Ginny said she'd tell him what to do. After thirty minutes of play, Harry and Ginny had beat Seamus and Terry, and had destroyed the other two candidates. Ron declared Seamus and Terry the new chasers.

They were all walking back to the castle when Harry said, "Being a chaser is way harder than being a seeker."

"I don't know," Ginny replied. "You did great at the position."

"Yeah, but only because you were telling me what to do," Harry admitted. "Thanks."

"Anytime," Ginny happily replied.

Hermione came into the Common Room and announced, "Well, I put up the signup sheet for the D.A. We lost seven people from last year, counting Marietta. I really think we shouldn't take more than twelve."

"I agree," Harry said. "There were almost too many last year. You think that many will sign up."

"Are you kidding," Ginny said. "Everyone's been talking about it. You're going to have to turn them away."

The four were sitting outside the next day after lunch when Ron looked up and said, "Don't look now, but Slytherins are heading this way."

The other three turned to look in the direction Ron was still gazing and saw Blaise Zabini, Diedra Simms and Beka Jergin walking purposely toward them. All three girls were good looking, but Blaise was a tall, strikingly pretty blonde. Before they had a chance to say anything Ron confronted them, "What do you want?"

"Ron!" Hermione scolded him. She turned to the Slytherins and said, "Hi Blaise, did you want something?"

Blaise was still glaring at Ron but said, "We were wondering what the Requirements were for joining your D.A. group." She turned to look at Harry after saying this.

"Not being a Slytherin is one of them," Ron sarcastically said.

"Ron!" Hermione again scolded.

While the three Slytherins were glaring at Ron, Harry calmly asked, "Wouldn't joining cause you problems in your house?"

Blaise studied him for a second and said, "I suppose it will but we can handle it. We're not in that good of standing since we didn't support the Inquisitorial Squad last year."

"Draco didn't put you up to this did he?" Harry asked, not in an accusatorial voice.

Blaise quickly replied "Draco doesn't have that much influence anymore."

"Right!" Ron snorted.

"Fine," Blaise spat out. "I should have expected this." The three girls angrily turned and began to walk away.

Harry quickly stood up and took a couple steps after the girls, "Blaise," he called. The three girls stopped and glared at him. "Why do you want to join?" he calmly asked.

Blaise's expressions softened a bit and she said, "We heard what happened last year and saw how much some people learned. You know not all Slytherins are like Draco."

Harry studied the girl standing confidently in front of him, then his mouth slowly moved into a slight smile as he said, "It's ok with me if you join." He turned to Hermione and asked, "What about you Hermione?"

Hermione was a bit surprised by Harry's action but quickly said, "Fine by me."

Harry turned back to Blaise and said, "We'll let you know officially before the first meeting. It looks like more signed up than we can handle."

The three Slytherin girls looked at him with expressions he couldn't read, but Blaise smiled, touched his arm and said, "Thank you Harry."

Harry turned back to his friends as the girls left. He sat back down and saw Ron and Ginny giving him a dirty look. "What?" he asked.

"They're Slytherin!" Ron exclaimed.

"They're not so bad Ron, they've never really started anything with us," Hermione said.

"But they're Slytherin!" Ron said.

"Would you treat me that way if I was Slytherin?" Harry asked, now a bit annoyed.

"You? You couldn't be Slytherin," Ginny quickly said.

"Yeah, no way. That'd be like me being Ravenclaw," Ron added.

"Why?" Harry asked hoping to hear some answer he could understand.

"Just because of the way you are," Ginny answered.

"Did you know the Sorting Hat wanted to put me into Slytherin?" Harry said with obvious annoyance. "Said I'd do great there." His friends, Hermione included were stunned. "Know the only reason I'm not in their house?" Harry said looking directly at Ron. Ron shook his head. "Because of you Ron. I'd never had anyone just sit down and talk to me before like they actually enjoyed being around me. You told me about many of the dark wizards coming from Slytherin. Then when the hat mentioned Slytherin, I begged it not to put me there. That's the only reason I'm in Gryffindor."

Ron was just staring at him but Hermione asked, "Why didn't you ever tell us this?"

"I never thought about it much until second year," Harry said sounding a bit depressed. "You remember that everyone thought I was the heir of Slytherin and even you guys were treating me differently with the whole parslemouth thing, I didn't want to give you even more reason to stop being my friend. Besides, you didn't tell us that you were almost in Ravenclaw either."

"Bloody Hell," Ron exclaimed. "Slytherin would have won the Quidditch cup all those years."

Harry kind of chuckled that Ron's mind instantly went to his favorite topic. "Well maybe until you guys put Ginny at seeker. I say she could have given me a run."

That evening, Hermione and Harry were sitting in the back of the common room trying to decide which students to take into the D.A. group. They had filled most spots and were still talking about Blaise and her friends when Ron came up. When Hermione wrote down their names on the parchment, Ron started to say something but Hermione gave him a dirty look and it caused him to hold his comments.

Hermione sent notices to all of those who signed up telling them if they made it or not. For the ones that did, she told them the location for the first meeting.

Classes quickly fell into a routine and even though they were difficult, Harry couldn't believe how much less stressful things were when he didn't have to dread going to Potions every few days. Ron did comment that Snape didn't seem quite as hard on the Gryffindors without Harry and Neville in the class. Ginny had already started to complain about all of the work her Professors were giving out.

Harry, Ron and Hermione arrived at the Room of Requirement early for the first meeting. Harry wasn't as nervous as last year but still felt weird to know students were going to show up to learn anything from him. Mostly the students returning from last year were first through the door and immediately went to look at the dark detectors or glance over the many books in the room. Cho Chang walked in with Padma and Parvati Patil and came directly to Harry.

"I'm so glad you're doing this again Harry," Cho said standing very close. "Did your friends tell you I saw them in Diagon Alley this summer and said to tell you hi?"

"Well Cho, I..." Harry started to say but saw the look Hermione gave him and it reminded him that he was under a Disillusionment charm at the time. "Oh, yeah, they told me. I was just too busy to come that day."

The door opened and the mumbling instantly began. Harry turned to see Blaise and her friends come in. They all seemed to ignore the mumbling and walked straight to Harry and Hermione. "Thanks again for letting us in Harry," Blaise said, again touching his arm and drawing a very evil look from Cho Chang who moved off to next to Padma.

"I told you it was ok," Harry said.

"Yeah, well we weren't really sure until we got the official note," she admitted.

"Blaise, Hermione and I wouldn't lie to you," Harry said, not used to people not believing Hermione.

"I'll remember that," she said with a smile before the three stepped back.

Hermione handed out her enchanted coins to the new members at the first D.A. meeting. Harry let Hermione tell everyone the basic rules they followed and how they hoped everything would go. Harry was glad Hermione was so good with the organization and instruction part of the group, and knew without her the group would be a failure. Hermione finally asked Harry to explain what the group would be working on.

"I think we should start going over the Patronus spell again. Since the Dementors aren't under Ministry control, this could be very useful for us," Harry saw everyone pay attention at this. "After we do the Patronus for a bit, we'll move onto Shield Charms which are very useful when you're being cursed. Some of you made great progress last year and I hope you'll help those having problems. Remember, it is very different doing it here in the light. You have to really focus on your happy memory to produce a Patronus when a real Dementor is around." Harry paused and then said, "I'll work with the new members and Hermione who has made great progress with her Patrons can work with the rest of you." Harry looked at Hermione who had a very proud expression on her face and nodded at her before moving off to the side with the twelve new members.

Harry's mood was lifted after a few D.A. meetings by how much progress people made and how seriously they were taking the lessons. He was also very impressed by how quickly Blaise picked things up.

Quidditch practices had started and Harry quickly realized how much more confident Ron seemed this year. He was amazed at how much strategy his friend knew and saw the gleam in Ron's eyes when he was explaining this to the team. Harry also noticed that the team wasn't near as good as the one before Fred and George left. He had been so used to Angelina and Katie as chasers and the twins as beaters that watching this set of players made him long for the others to be back. Ginny was by far the best chaser and the two beaters were barely better than they were last year. Harry didn't hold out much hope for winning the Quidditch Cup and could tell Ron was worried about this as well.

The next morning, Harry was late to breakfast but when he entered the hall, he was struck by how somber everyone was. He noticed Ron, Hermione and Ginny looking at him with obvious concern and he went directly to them grabbing some toast as he sat down. "What is it?" he asked.

"There was an attack at the Underground," Hermione sadly said.

"Fifty Muggles were killed," Ron added.

Harry knew his scar hurt a bit this morning but didn't think anything this big happened. His mouth dropped after hearing the news. "How did they explain it?"

"Well, the Muggle paper said it was a gas explosion, but the Dark Mark was hanging over it until the Auror's banished it," Hermione answered.

"He's not trying to hide at all is he?" Harry asked, though not really expecting an answer. Every time Harry heard about an attack, he felt a jab of guilt because he knew they wouldn't stop unless he could defeat Voldemort and he had absolutely no idea how he could do that. Harry tried to eat but could see his friends watching him warily.

Things between the four friends had become very comfortable. Harry never really considered how hard it was for Hermione to have two boys as best friends. She never complained, but Harry could see the subtle differences in how she acted when Ginny was around. Of course Harry enjoyed having Ginny around as well now that she had gotten over her crush and started talking normally around him. The four would spend time studying together and this gave Ginny the added bonus of having three students who had already taken their O.W.L.s to help with her homework. Hermione seemed to tolerate the Quidditch talk much better as well and since the first match of the year was quickly approaching, the talk often turned to Quidditch.

Ron and Ginny both seemed really nervous the morning of the first match. Neither of them were eating much breakfast and looked like they hadn't slept much either. "C'mon you two, you've been through this before." Harry pleaded.

"But it's my first time as captain," Ron exclaimed. "There's nobody to yell at me if I'm doing bad."

"Oh, don't worry, I'll yell," Harry joked.

"It's not funny Harry," Ron replied. "We can't lose to them."

"Yeah, we can't let Slytherin beat us," Ginny agreed. "I feel like I could be sick," she quickly added.

Harry leaned over, put his hand on Ginny's shoulder which made her eyes fly open and said, "Ginny, you're going to be great, I've seen you fly." Ginny was looking into his bright green eyes and suddenly felt at ease. She could feel the warmth of his hand on her shoulder and could just tell he was being honest.

Ron groaned and said, "It's time." This caused Harry to remove his hand and this allowed Ginny to start breathing again. She turned and saw Hermione with a bright smile on her face raising her eyebrows at the still blushing girl. "C'mon Ginny," Ron demanded and Ginny followed the two down to the Quidditch pitch.

"Ok team," Ron said, sounding more confident. "You all know the plays and they've had to add just as many new people as we have so that shouldn't be a problem. We can't let Slytherin beat us! Go kick some Slytherin arse," Ron exclaimed and everyone cheered.

Harry laughed at his friend but could see the difference in his attitude. Ron lived for Quidditch and after the rough start last year; he now seemed comfortable in his position. Harry kicked off hard and quickly soared up, ready to begin his search for the snitch. His silent search was interrupted by a voice he had been expecting, "How pathetic is it that King Weasley is the captain of your worthless team. I mean you can't even beat him out for that."

"Stuff it Malfoy," Harry spat, not stopping his search.

"It was good of your little weasel tag-along to hand you a spot back on the team. She's not very good but at least she's better to look at," Malfoy taunted.

Harry suddenly spun around and dove at Malfoy, causing him to nearly fall off his broom to avoid the collision. Malfoy glared and began tracking Harry around the pitch. Harry wasn't able to watch much of the plays but soon heard that Gryffindor was up 30-0. "Your token girl is doing pretty good," Malfoy shouted. "Think I'll have to go compliment her." Malfoy sped down and got along side of Ginny and Harry could see he was saying something but couldn't hear what. He saw Ginny angrily reply and as she took her eye off the goal, one of the Slytherin chasers knocked the Quaffle out of her arm and sped off in the other direction.

Malfoy came back up and Harry shouted, "Leave her alone Malfoy."

"Oooh, found your button didn't I?" Malfoy gleamed before he said something to the chasers on his team. Harry was barely able to concentrate on looking for the snitch as he saw the chasers deliberately trying to run into Ginny. After a few minutes of this, Ron realized what was happening and called time out.

"What the hell are they doing to Ginny?" Ron exclaimed. "And you're not even looking for the snitch Harry!"

"They're trying to knock Ginny off her broom," Seamus exclaimed.

"I can handle myself!" Ginny yelled. "Pay attention to your own job Harry!"

"Fine," Ron said. "Get back up there and end this." Before Harry took off he whispered, "Don't let her get hurt." Harry nodded confidently.

The Slytherins wasted no time in continuing their assault on Ginny. This time it was the beaters going after her, leaving the chasers free to try and score. Ron had been so preoccupied watching Ginny barely avoid bludger after bludger that Slytherin soon had a 80-40 lead.

Harry saw the beater swing the bat and pictured exactly what was going to happen. Ginny was watching the quaffle fly from one chaser to the next and hadn't noticed the beater behind her. Harry instantly dropped flat onto the Firebolt and instantly set off toward her. Ginny didn't know anything was happening until she heard someone yell "Harry!" She turned at the last moment, stunned to see Harry so close to her back and heard the bludger hit Harry in the side and saw him spin out of control for a second.

The next instant she heard Ron yell "Harry! Below you! Snitch!"

Still in pain, Harry caught the glint of gold below him but also saw Malfoy streaking in, quickly closing on the prize. He was still holding his side but tried to pull his Firebolt down,

realizing there was no way to get turned around in time to beat Malfoy to the snitch. Only one choice snapped into his mind and he leaned over and allowed himself to fall off his broom, focusing totally on the winged ball. The seconds seemed to drag by but he saw his hand coming closer to the snitch but also saw the shadow of his rival coming in from the side. The instant his fingers slipped around the cold metal ball, he felt the contact with Malfoy and the two spiraled toward the ground. Suddenly they landed with a thud and a loud groan. Harry quickly realized it wasn't him that groaned and in fact he felt fine. Malfoy who had broken Harry's fall was still groaning in pain.

Jumping up, Harry held the snitch up in his left hand and heard the roar of the crowd. He quickly retrieved his wand and called out 'Accio Firebolt'. Turning, he saw his teammates streaking toward him but then saw his own broom fly by them and come to a stop at his side. He knew his side must be injured but he was too happy to feel much of anything.

Suddenly, he was surrounded by the rest of the team congratulating him. "Bloody Brilliant!" Ron roared as he stepped on the still groaning Malfoy.

"At least Malfoy had some use in him," Seamus added.

Harry finally saw Ginny approach but couldn't quite figure out the expression on her face. He was ready for her to give him a big hug and thanks for stopping the bludger but when she got next to him, he quickly realized that wasn't going to happen. "What the hell did you think you were doing!" she roared, causing the rest of the team and in fact many still in the stands to get suddenly silent. "You nearly lost the match for us! Why can't you just do your own job?"

Harry was stunned but also annoyed by this. Hadn't he just stopped a streaking bludger from smashing into her head? "Well, you're welcome for stopping the bludger from sending you to the hospital," he spat.

"I don't need you to protect me Harry!" Ginny yelled. Harry's first impulse was to remind her about the Chamber of Secrets, but some little voice in his head told him to hold that thought. "I don't need another big brother!" Ginny finally roared before turning and storming off.

"I guess you should have let it hit her," Seamus tried joking.

Harry was still in stunned silence when Ron said, "I always knew she was barker. The parents should have stopped at me. She's gone over the top on this one." Harry was still shaking his head as Ron said, "C'mon, forget about her. That was just Bloody Amazing. Too bad it couldn't have been from higher."

The Slytherins were helping Malfoy up and Harry heard the words Madame Pomphrey come from one of them. He turned and yelled, "Oh Malfoy! Thanks for breaking my fall."

By the time Ron and Harry cleaned up and made it to the Common Room, the party was in full swing. Everyone was talking about the catch but Harry tried to find Ginny. He wanted to know why she had acted like that. He also noticed that Hermione had left the Common Room as well.

Ginny was sitting on Hermione's bed feeling very confused. She was angry at what Harry had done though she wasn't exactly sure why. However, she felt an extreme sadness at how she

had treated him. The past couple months had been wonderful. She had felt part of their group and Harry had consistently asked her to do things with them. Almost everything she had ever wanted had been coming true and she had just screamed at him in front of all his friends.

After sitting in silence for a while, Hermione softly asked, "Why did you do that Ginny?"

Ginny sighed and tried to come up with an answer, "He's trying to protect me, just like my brothers do."

"Why is that a problem?" Hermione asked.

"I don't want him to see me as a little sister Hermione," Ginny sadly said.

"I don't think he does Ginny," Hermione honestly said. "That's just Harry. He would have done the same thing for anyone on the team. That's just him, he won't change."

"But he nearly missed the snitch because he was protecting me," she replied, trying to justify her actions.

"You've seen him do it before with other people," Hermione said. "He loves Quidditch, but would help a teammate out before worrying about the game. You know he would."

Deep down, Ginny knew this to be true. She had no idea why she flew off at him like that. "I know," Ginny sighed. "I just want him to know I can handle myself."

"I think he knows that," Hermione said. "Why is that so important?"

Ginny took a deep breath and sighed. "I still like him Hermione," Ginny said with pleading eyes. "I see how he is with you. He trusts you completely and has confidence in you. Harry's not going to want to be with someone he has to protect all the time."

Hermione inwardly felt warm knowing it was obvious how she and Harry were. They were more than friends but not in a romantic way. "I'm not sure yelling at him in front of the entire school is the way to show him that."

"I know," Ginny admitted, letting her head drop. "I just don't know how to act around him."

"Just be yourself," Hermione quickly said. "You were this summer and look how much closer you two got. He's got a lot to deal with, try not to add to that ok?" Ginny was a good friend of Harry's but she knew that Harry was her best friend.

"I'll try," Ginny finally said. "I'm not going to go back down though. I've made a spectacle out of myself enough for today."

Hermione went back down and quickly saw Ron in the middle of the celebration but after scanning the room, didn't see Harry. She made her way to Ron and asked, "Where's Harry?"

"Went to bed," Ron said shaking his head. "Why'd she have to go and ruin this? He doesn't need stuff like that now."

"Don't be too hard on her Ron," Hermione said. "It'll be ok." They looked at each other knowingly but the mood was suddenly broken by a pillow hitting Ron in the head.

"Oi! Seamus you prat!" Ron yelled before throwing one back in response.

Hermione thought about talking to Harry but decided to let him have his time alone so she quietly slipped out of the celebration and went to bed. She wouldn't have found him anyway. Harry had grabbed his invisibility cloak and slipped out of the common room soon after he left the party. He didn't go far, only to the end of the corridor but at least he was alone. The cloak sat discarded next to him as he sat there with his hands in his head, mood slipping back into the self-doubt and guilt that had been kept at bay since leaving the Dursleys. Even when he tried to do good, he ended up hurting someone. He really couldn't understand what he did to upset Ginny, but obviously he had and this just tugged at him. "Why can't I do anything right?" he thought.

Harry was so wrapped up in his gloom that he didn't hear footsteps approaching until a voice he hoped never to hear again startled him, "Roaming the halls after curfew. Let's see, that will be 10 points from Gryffindor." Harry looked up to see Professor Snape standing in front of him. Harry grabbed his cloak and tried to push it behind him but Snape had already seen it. "Ah, I see. What mayhem have you been causing tonight?"

Harry thought to everything Kingsley said about focusing his mind and controlling his emotions but knew it would be hard with Snape's taunting. "Answer me Potter!" Snape loudly said.

Chapter 9

"I haven't done anything...sir," Harry said. "I've just been sitting here."

"Sitting alone instead of celebrating your deliberate act of violence against my seeker? Somehow I doubt that," Snape coldly said. Harry could barely control his anger and keep his mouth shut. "I'm sure your friends have told you how much more smoothly class runs without the need to revisit instructions for you and Longbottom all the time."

Harry stood up and was about to say something when he heard, "Mr. Potter what are you doing out?" He saw Professor McGonagall walk up behind Professor Snape.

"I was just sitting here professor," Harry said.

"Potter here would like us to believe that he was innocently sitting alone along with his invisibility cloak while the rest of his house is celebrating, noisily I might add, his assault on my player," Snape calmly said, still glaring at Harry.

McGonagall looked closely at Harry and said, "Get back to your Common Room, Mr. Potter. If you really want to be alone, I would suggest your dorm next time."

"Yes Professor," Harry said before giving Snape a hateful look and then sneaking back to his bed.

Harry got up early and was able to grab some breakfast and get out of the hall before his friends found him. He quickly made his way down to Hagrid's hut. "How ya been getting along 'Arry?" Hagrid asked.

"I'm ok Hagrid. How's Grawp?" Harry asked.

"Oh, loads better," Hagrid said beaming. "His English will be good as mine before long."

"Do the centaurs leave him alone?"

"Ah well they pretty much have to don't they?" Hagrid said chuckling. "Wish Bane and them would come around." Hagrid took a drink and asked, "Where's the other two?"

"Oh, probably still eating. I just needed to get away," Harry admitted.

"Yeah, know how you feel sometimes," Hagrid added. "Imagine it's hard to keep everything in your head from spilling out now and then."

Harry actually laughed thinking that was exactly how it felt sometimes. He had a good conversation with Hagrid before running to get to his first class. Hermione and Ron had been irritated with him for not waiting on them this morning but quickly forgave him. They were heading to lunch and after entering the Great Hall, saw Ginny sitting near their usual spot. Harry stopped and said, "Um...you know I'm not that hungry. I'm going to go grab my books for next class."

Ron gave him a pleading look before scowling at his sister but Hermione grabbed his arm, "You've got to talk to her Harry."

"Why? I didn't do anything wrong," her quickly replied.

"She thinks you see her as a little sister," Hermione whispered.

"Well I don't! Excuse me for caring," Harry angrily said before turning and walking out. However, as soon as he got out the door, his stomach gave a loud growl so instead of heading up for his books; he snuck down to the kitchen to get something to eat.

Over the next few weeks, Ginny slowly began getting back to spending more time with the trio and Harry quit making excuses to leave when she was around. They never talked about what happened, even though Hermione kept telling them both they really should. Harry was too stubborn, not thinking it was his fault and Ginny was too embarrassed to say anything.

The D.A. group had done well with their Patronus Charm, with a few more making full corporeal versions. Blaise's had been a large raven and Harry enjoyed watching it fly around the room. Harry had started them working on shields and was happy that nearly everyone was able to produce a shield that would at least reduce the effects of curses. Neville had been able on a few occasions to produce a shield that blocked the entire effect of a hex, even when Hermione cast it. When Kingsley had asked about the progress of the D.A. students, Harry mentioned what they were working on and how everyone was doing. Kingsley offered to come to the meeting to show them a different form of shield charm. Harry told the rest of the group this and at the meeting where Kingsley was supposed to come, everyone was there early, anxious to learn this.

"Well, thank you Miss Granger and Mr. Potter for allowing me to come to your meeting," Kingsley said, clearly having everyone's attention. "I understand you've made great progress with your shields, but there are times when you need to protect someone who is not standing right next to you. There is a special shield charm that may be useful." Kingsley looked around the room and everyone was still giving him their full attention. "The charm is 'Protego Truan' and it can be used over line-of-sight distances."

Everyone started mumbling about the possibilities of this. "However," Kingsley continued getting their attention again, "this is not a standard spell. It is not based entirely of the magic of the caster. The caster has to really want to help the recipient and even more important, the recipient has to fully trust the caster and believe that the caster can indeed perform the spell correctly." Now everyone looked confused. "If the recipient doesn't believe nor trust the caster, the shield will fail, no matter how powerful the caster. If the recipient believes the caster can perform the spell but doesn't fully trust the caster, the shield will glow green and will only be partially effective. If the recipient fully trusts the caster but doesn't really believe they can successfully cast the spell, the shield will glow blue and again be only partially effective. However, if the recipient fully trusts the caster and believes they can successfully cast the spell, the shield will have a slight golden glow and should be very effective."

Now, the students started openly talking about this. "Ok, now pair up and try this out. Please do not take offense if you find out your partner doesn't fully trust you. This is a hard thing for some people to do and it cannot be faked."

For the next thirty minutes, students paired up and tried doing the new spell. Harry, Ron and Hermione were all able to perform it on each other with the shield glowing slightly gold each time. Harry saw that with some partners, Neville's shield would glow blue meaning the recipient didn't fully believe Neville could do it. However, the people who were at the Ministry of Magic last year did believe Neville and the shield was slightly gold when he was paired with one of them.

"Look at that," Ron said nodding to Blaise. "Nobody trusts here, it's always been green."

Harry felt bad and wondered if he trusted her enough. She had been very nice since joining the group and had done nothing to make him suspicious. He walked over to Blaise who had just cast it on Cho causing a green glow to surround the other girl. "How's it going?" Harry asked.

Blaise was obviously disappointed but said, "I suppose as I expected."

"Hermione!" Harry called. "Can you come over here for a second?" Hermione walked over to the two.

"Hermione, can you cast some hex at me and Blaise can try the spell?" Harry calmly asked. Hermione looked slightly nervous but Blaise seemed very reluctant.

"Oh no Harry, that's ok," Blaise quickly said.

"That's ok Blaise, Hermione wouldn't do anything to put me in the hospital. Would you Hermione?" Harry joked.

"Of course not Harry," Hermione said giving Blaise a look that said, "You better do this right."

Hermione started to say a curse and Blaise pointed her wand at Harry and said, "Protego Truan!" Hermione's curse flew at Harry but the shield charm was faster and Harry was suddenly surrounded by a shield that had a slightly golden glow just before Hermione's curse was deflected harmlessly into the ceiling.

Blaise was beaming as Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you Harry," she said with obvious appreciation as she gave his arm a squeeze, drawing scowls from Cho and Ginny.

Kingsley had watched the entire thing and got everyone's attention. "Ok, you all seem to be doing very well and have found out how much some of your classmates really trust you." He watched some of the uncomfortable faces in the crowd. "Now, there is another part to this. The caster really has to want to protect the recipient. The shield will be more powerful if both the caster and recipient feel a real need for the protection. If neither of you feel like there is danger in the curse, it will be less powerful. Let me demonstrate." Now everyone got a little nervous. "Mr. Potter would you and.....Miss Weasley come up here please."

Harry and Ginny walked to the center of the room. Ginny whispered, "This will be easy Harry." Harry felt some of tension that had still been between the two vanish as she said this. He smiled warmly back at her.

Ginny started to put her wand away but Kingsley spoke up, "Keep your wand out Miss Weasley. Mr. Potter, you may put yours away."

Now Ginny suddenly became very nervous realizing that she was going to have to protect Harry. Kingsley's voice interrupted her thoughts, "Now, I will be using a curse that won't cause permanent damage, but if it gets through your shield will indeed be very painful and will most assuredly send Mr. Potter to the hospital wing."

Now everyone was mumbling and Ginny began to shake a little. Harry put his hand on her shoulder and whispered, "You can do this, I know you can." Ginny looked deep into his bright green eyes and again knew he was completely honest, he really believed in her. She felt much better after this as she watched Harry walk a few meters away ready to receive the shield.

"Ready Miss Weasley?" Kingsley calmly asked. Ginny took a deep breath and nodded.

Kingsley started saying the spell and Ginny yelled, "Protego Truan!" Her spell past Kingsley's in mid-air and suddenly Harry was surrounded by a brilliant golden glow that nearly obscured him from view. There was a loud 'gong' sound as Kingsley's curse glanced off the shield and crashed into a shelf, causing it to crumble to the ground.

There were many gasps from the students as the shield faded revealing Harry standing calmly in the same place. Ginny ran forward and hugged him tightly, realizing that Harry did have confidence in her and fully trusted her abilities. "You did great Ginny," Harry said hugging her back.

Ginny suddenly realized what she was doing and let him go, face glowing red. "Thanks Harry," she said, obviously embarrassed.

"Well, that was quite impressive and shows just how powerful a thing trust can be," Kingsley said. "Thank you all again for allowing me to come to your meeting," he said as he strode out of the room.

"That was amazing Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Bloody Hell mate," Ron said.

Things between the four went back to being very comfortable and maybe even a little better between Ginny and Harry than before. Some of the doubt Ginny had been having about what Harry thought of her had been alleviated and she felt like she could just be herself again.

The first of December had Ron working the team hard to get ready for their next match against Hufflepuff. The Hufflepuff team had gotten considerably better in the last couple of years and Ron wanted to make sure his team didn't take them lightly. After the team's announcement, Harry kicked off and soared high above the center of the pitch. Casually looking around before the Quaffle and snitch were released, he noticed one of the Hufflepuff chasers fly next to Ginny and say something. In contrast to what happened at the last match, Ginny actually smiled and engaged him in conversation for a few seconds. Harry's stomach gave a slight twitch but the next second the match was on. The match ended quickly as Gryffindor was up 30-0 before Harry saw the snitch and was able to get to it before the Hufflepuff seeker was even close.

After landing, the team was congratulating each other but Harry noticed that the Hufflepuff player was again talking to Ginny for a minute before she came and joined the celebration. Harry was annoyed with himself for even letting this bother him. He did want Ginny to be happy above all else.

These things quickly were put out of his mind as studying became top importance again. The week before the Holiday break was to begin found the friends having supper after the final class for the week when Dumbledore got everyone's attention to make an announcement. "I know you have all been disappointed by the need to cancel every Hogsmeade visit so far this year, but please believe it was in the interest of safety. I hope the next announcement will be received well. Next Saturday, we will hold a Holiday Ball open to all students fourth-year and above." Instantly there was a lot of mumbling. "Now I'm sure you are all worried about being able to get things you may need for this and to relieve your concerns, tomorrow will be a Hogsmeade visit. I must ask you all to stay near the center of the village and be prepared to leave if a professor asks you to."

"Not another ball," Ron groaned.

"Ron," Hermione said. "This will be good for everyone; they haven't gotten out all year."

"Oh yeah good for everyone. All this stress before we get out of here," Ron said. "We'll have all break at the Burrow to get over it though," Ron said to Harry.

Harry gave a nervous laugh, himself being worried about the ball. The last one was a memory he would just as soon forget. Hermione grabbed Ginny and the two started to leave before she said, "Are you two coming with us to Hogsmeade tomorrow then?"

Harry nodded and said, "Yeah, sure we'll go." Ron gave him a strange look.

Harry and Ron followed the girls around in Hogsmeade and were sitting, watching them try on robes. When Ginny was in changing, Harry walked up to Hermione and whispered, "I want to talk to you later." Hermione looked at him and then gave him a knowing smile before nodding.

Ron was still groaning about the ball. "Why did he have to do this to us?"

Harry laughed and said, "Now Ron, don't fly off the handle at this but I've got to say it." Ron looked up with a pitiful expression. "You better ask her this time. You know she's going to go."

"Me? Why me?" Ron protested but after thinking for a second continued, "I don't know if I can do it."

"Listen Ron, you don't want some other bloke to ask her. Then she'll be off with him all night and I think she'd rather be around us," Harry said trying to give Ron another reason.

"I suppose she would rather hang around with us," Ron said, clearly thinking. "I'll try to bring it up."

"She's going to get asked, don't put it off," Harry said as the two girls came over to them. The rest of the day went well but both Harry and Ron were unusually quiet, even at the Three Broomsticks.

That night, Harry saw Hermione give him a look and say, "Harry, can you help me with the schedule for the D.A.?"

She raised an eyebrow and Harry quickly caught on, "Sure, let's go to the library."

The two quickly left the Common Room and walked in silence until Hermione said, "So, what did you want to talk about?" Harry saw she had a sly smile on her face.

Harry stopped and thought that she probably knew what he was going to ask so he just came out with it. "What do you think Ron would say if I asked Ginny to the ball?"

Now Hermione smiled brightly and said, "Well, you know Ron, he'll moan and groan a bit and make comments but I think he'll be ok with it. You know it's about time you did this, at least you're getting some guts."

"Yeah well I haven't done it yet. I feel ill just thinking about it," Harry admitted. "And, don't think I'm the only one with guts, give him a chance."

Hermione looked flustered, "Give who a chance? What are you talking about?"

Harry smiled and said, "For the smartest witch I know, you're kind of slow sometimes." Harry grabbed her arm and the two headed back to the Common Room.

Harry prodded Ron throughout the next day, not admitting that he was being just as chicken as Ron was. The four were in the Common Room the next night when Hermione announced she needed to go to the library for a book.

"I'll go with you," Ginny said.

Ron quickly gave Harry a pleading look and Harry said, "Would you mind staying Ginny? I need to talk to you about something."

Ginny looked at Harry and could barely suppress a smile, clearly expecting him to ask her to the ball. "Sure," she said as calmly as she could.

"Ron, didn't you need something from the library as well?" Harry asked, staring at his friend.

"Um...What?" Ron stumbled. "I guess," he added before slowly standing up and following Hermione out of the room. While scanning for a book Ron said, "Umm...Hermione can I ask you something?"

"Of course Ron," Hermione replied as she still scanned the books.

"Um...You know...Well...What book are you looking for?" he finally said anything just to finish the question.

Hermione stopped her search and looked pitifully at Ron. Shaking her head she said, "For Merlin's sake Ron, are you trying to ask me to the ball?" Ron nodded sheepishly. "We'll I'd love to go with you."

Ron's jaw dropped and it took him a minute to say, "Really? Um... Thanks...That's great. Later." Ron quickly turned and left the library leaving Hermione to think "Boys."

Harry hadn't said anything to Ginny since Hermione left so she asked, "Did you need something Harry?"

Harry who was still smiling about what he hoped was happening between Ron and Hermione suddenly felt nauseous. "Oh..Well I guess I can tell you. I think Ron's going to ask Hermione to the ball."

"It's about time," Ginny exclaimed, suddenly forgetting her own predicament.

"Do you think she'll go?" Harry asked.

"If he actually gets the nerve to ask she will," Ginny replied.

"Yeah, well getting the never is the big problem," Harry admitted, thinking both about Ron and himself. Harry had nearly gotten the courage himself when Ron stumbled through the portrait looking quite lost and dropped into the chair next to Ginny drawing a glare from her.

"Well?" Harry asked. Ron nodded looking very lost.

"You actually asked her?" Ginny said causing Ron to snap his head staring at Harry, who just shrugged.

"Well not exactly," Ron admitted. After seeing the other two looking very confused he said, "Couldn't get it out. She knew and asked me if that's what I was trying to do."

Ginny burst out laughing but Harry felt even worse. Between talking to Ron and Hermione coming back, Harry lost what little nerve he had and didn't ask Ginny before everyone went to bed.

Harry had made excuses and hadn't asked Ginny by the time the middle of the week rolled around. He could tell something was wrong with Ginny but didn't put the pieces together. That night he was sitting in the Common Room with Ron and Hermione wondering where Ginny was. Ron was in a very good mood now and had been pushing Harry to find a date. "C'mon Harry, you've got to come to the ball," Ron exclaimed just as Ginny was about to reach the bottom of the stairs. She stopped, wondering how Harry would respond. She had been asked by someone but told him maybe since she really wanted to go to the ball but hoped to go with Harry.

"I know, I know," Harry admitted, clearly exasperated.

"Why don't you just ask Ginny," Ron clearly said. Both Harry and Hermione's heads snapped up. "I mean at least you'll go and we'd all be together."

"Listen, I'll figure this out on my own," Harry said looking at Hermione for help.

"Ron, leave Harry alone to find his own date," Hermione said. Ginny turned and went back to her room fuming mad. She didn't want Harry pressured into asking her.

The next night after Quidditch practice, Harry held back and was able to catch Ginny walking back. "Ginny, can I ask you something?" Harry sheepishly asked.

"What is it Harry?" Ginny replied sounding very cold.

This almost made Harry back out but he knew it was now or never. "Would you please go to the ball with me?" he managed to get out without speaking too fast.

Ginny glared at him for a second and then her very loud, very angry voice said, "If you think I'll ever be your last chance date, you're mistaken Harry Potter. Do you think every girl just waits around for you hoping you'll ask them out? Well that's not me and you're just an arrogant prat for thinking I would." Ginny spun around and marched off leaving a stunned and quickly growing angry Harry.

When Harry made it to the common room he was angrier than he could have ever thought he would be at Ginny. This was twice that she had jumped to conclusions and thought the worst of him. Yes he was a coward for not asking her sooner but he never considered her a last chance date. He saw Ginny sitting with her arms crossed looking menacing next to Hermione and saw Ron and Hermione both turn between her and him. Instead of heading to his friends, he went straight to his room where he read until he heard Ron come in. Trying to pre-empt a conversation he said, "Don't want to talk about it."

"Is it her fault again," Ron asked, still not over Ginny's last outburst.

"Both of us," Harry honestly replied. Thankfully Ron took that and left him alone.

Harry avoided Ginny completely over the next couple days. It was the night before the ball and Harry had just left the common room when he saw Ginny sitting with Ron and Hermione. "Ok Ginny, what's up with you two?" Hermione asked clearly wanting an answer.

"Harry asked me to the ball," Ginny admitted.

"And that made you mad why?" Ron questioned.

"I overheard you telling him to ask me so at least he'd have a date," Ginny spat back at her brother.

"Oh Ginny, what did you do to him?" Hermione asked, her tone changing to concern.

"I told him I'd never be his last chance date and that he was an arrogant prat for thinking girls just sit around waiting for him to ask them out," Ginny angrily replied.

"Oh no Ginny," Hermione sadly said.

"What? I won't be," Ginny started to say but Hermione cut her off.

"He never thought of you that way," Hermione quickly said causing Ginny to look confused. "The day after the ball was announced he asked me what I thought Ron would say if he asked

you. He just couldn't get the nerve to do it. I know he tried a couple times but couldn't." Ginny looked shocked as her face dropped.

"He *wanted* to take Ginny?" Ron asked sounding amazed.

"Yes Ron," Hermione said looking at Ron's stunned face. "Ginny, Harry had at least four girls ask him to go, including Cho Chang and he turned them all down."

"What?" Ron exclaimed. "Why didn't I know this?"

Hermione shook her head as Ginny softly said, "Harry wanted to take me all along?"

"Yes Ginny," Hermione replied.

Ginny put her head in her hands and said, "And I was so horrible to him."

"So go apologize. He doesn't have a date yet," Ron said.

"I've already said yes to Scott," Ginny admitted.

"Scott? Who's Scott?" Ron demanded but was ignored by the girls.

"Just explain it to him, he'll understand," Hermione said, trying to reassure her friend.

"But this is twice I've flown off on him when he was just being nice. This is horrible," Ginny said before heading to her dorm.

"Told you your temper would cause you problems," Ron said.

"Ron! Don't make this worse," Hermione scolded. "Harry will understand. You can talk to him at the Burrow over the Holiday."

Chapter 10

Harry made himself scarce the day of the ball and none of his friends knew where he was. This made Ginny feel even more terrible. Harry knew everyone was getting ready for the ball so he made his way to the Room of Requirement and was about to go in when he saw Blaise walking along the hall. "Aren't you going to the ball?" Harry asked.

"No," she calmly replied. "I'm not too popular with the Slytherins right now."

"What about someone from another house? I can't believe you weren't asked," Harry said.

Blaise gave him a small smile and said, "How often do people from other houses ask a Slytherin to do anything?"

Harry shook his head and said, "That's just wrong."

"But what about you?" Blaise asked as they entered the room.

Harry studied her and said, "Long story. I thought I'd spend the time practicing."

Now it was Blaise's turn to study him but she asked, "We're becoming friends, right?"

"Sure," Harry said, confused by this question.

"Well, I had wanted to go to the ball since it's been such a stressful year. Why don't we go as friends?" she confidently asked.

Harry's first thought was no but then knew Ginny was going with the guy from Hufflepuff and remembered how she treated him. "Ok," he said smiling. "But, it's only thirty minutes until it starts. Can you get ready?"

"You think I need longer than that?" she replied, sounding hurt.

"No! I mean..." Harry stammered.

"Relax Harry, I was kidding," Blaise said. "I'll meet you here in one hour." She smiled brightly at him but then turned serious, "One rule, you cannot hex a Slytherin. I'll handle them. You can deal with the rest of the houses but not mine."

"Deal," Harry said as he watched Blaise leave. He felt guilty about going but had kind of wanted to see everyone having a good time. Harry spent the next half hour practicing spells before running back to the Common Room to get ready. Ron was just about to leave the dorm when he came back.

"Do I look ok?" Ron asked still fidgeting.

"You look fine Ron. Don't worry, it's Hermione," Harry said, trying to hold his laughter.

"I don't even know how to dance," Ron admitted.

"Don't be nervous and please don't provoke her tonight. Just let things slide," Harry pleaded.

"Yeah, you're right. I'll try," Ron sighed. "You'll be ok won't you?"

"I'll be fine Ron," Harry replied. "I won't do anything stupid, I promise."

As soon as Ron stepped out the door, Harry took a quick shower before putting on his dress robes and running back to the Room of Requirement, just beating Blaise. "You clean up nice," she said approaching. The girl was dressed in robes made of a silvery substance that seemed to change colors as it trailed her. She had put her hair up and had long earrings that also shimmered to match her dress.

"You look great Blaise," Harry said and then laughed. "This is going to cause a lot of talk, you know that."

Now the blonde girl laughed, "You just remember our deal. I handle the Slytherins."

"Ok, but you might have to keep reminding me of that," Harry said as he led her to the Great Hall.

They could hear the music and talking coming from inside but before Harry could open the door Blaise stopped and said, "Thank you for being nice to me. You didn't have to."

Harry gave a genuine smile and said, "But if I hadn't been, I'd be alone in my common room right now."

The two entered the Great Hall and couldn't help but be impressed by the decorations. There were large floating balls giving off the light and the ceiling was enchanted to look like it was snowing. Seeing everyone smiling and dressed so nice made Harry forget about everything that was normally on his mind. The two watched the people dance for a second then Harry said, "Oh, I'm not a good dancer."

Blaise laughed and said, "I knew that. We all laughed at you and Parvati in fourth year. We'll do ok, you'll see." They each started walking towards their own house tables on opposite sides of the hall before realizing the other wasn't next to them. When they turned and looked at each other, they both broke out laughing.

"Well, what do we do now?" Harry asked.

"I doubt either one will want us. Let's say hi to my friends and they move on to yours. I imagine yours will treat us better," Blaise said before taking his hand and leading him to the Slytherin table. Harry would have been happy to walk around the edge, but Blaise walked confidently across the middle of the hall, ignoring the whispers and stares.

They got to her friends who looked at Blaise like she was crazy before one of them pulled her off to the side and began to talk animatedly. "Trying to upgrade your friends I see," Malfoy announced as he and Pansy Parkinson approached. "I wish you'd quit stinking up our side of the hall Potter." Pansy laughed out loud.

Harry started to say something but heard, "Leave him alone Draco," Blaise forcefully said.

"I didn't think you could sink so low. Joining his club was bad enough but at least you may learn something," Malfoy spat.

Harry again started to say something but was stopped by his date. "Our deal Harry," Blaise said to him before turning to Draco. "I'm warning you Draco."

"Your parents will be very disappointed when they find out," Draco coolly said.

"I wouldn't talk about parents Draco," Blaise said back in the same tone.

"I suppose if you're teaching her Defense she's repaying by showing you her talents. Of course we all know them already," Malfoy sneered.

Harry tensed up but Blaise took his arm and said, "C'mon Harry." Harry glared at Malfoy with his hand resting on his wand. "You promised," she whispered.

"How can you let him talk to you like that?" Harry asked still annoyed.

Blaise smiled and said, "Harry, don't worry about protecting my honor. I lost that a long time ago. Just forget about it. Let's dance." She pulled him to the floor and the two started to move in unison. Harry wasn't paying attention to the dancing; he was still fuming over Malfoy. "You're not so bad at this," Blaise admitted.

Harry was snapped back to thinking about what he was doing. "What??"

"Ah, I see. You're not bad when you don't think about dancing. Your mind should be on me and not on hurting Malfoy though." Harry laughed and actually felt more comfortable dancing the next two songs with her.

"Your friends seem kind of uncomfortable," Blaise said nodding to where Ron and Hermione were sitting. She was right; they didn't look comfortable together at all.

"Let's go talk to them," Harry said leading Blaise by the hand to his friends. "Hi guys," Harry said. He noticed Ginny giving him a strange look but he quickly turned away, not wanting to feel guilty, jealous or angry right now.

"Hi Harry, Blaise," Hermione said.

"Your robes look great Hermione," Blaise replied.

Ron looked very irritated and said, "Can I talk to you Harry?" Ron quickly got up and moved toward the wall. Harry looked at Blaise and shrugged his shoulders before going to his friend.

"What's up?" Harry asked. "You're not having a row with Hermione are you?"

"What are you doing with her?" Ron snapped. "Why didn't you tell me you were bringing her?"

"She just asked me a half hour before the ball," Harry replied, not understanding why Ron was upset.

"You're telling me she got ready in less than an hour," Ron asked, clearly not believing Harry's story.

Harry laughed, still not thinking Ron was that serious and said, "Yeah. I didn't believe she could do it either."

"You're not dating her are you?"

"We're just friends. Why is that a problem?" Harry asked, now becoming irritated himself

Ron glared and asked, "What about Ginny?"

"What about Ginny," Harry quickly replied.

"You want to date her," Ron snapped.

"She seems happy enough with that Hufflepuff bloke. At least she's not yelling at him," Harry snapped back.

"But Harry..." Ron started.

"I don't want to talk about it Ron. I'm tired of her thinking the worst of me all the time," Harry angrily said. "Now speaking of dates, how are you and Hermione?"

Ron got a bit red and said, "It's not a date... We're friends."

"Friends or not, you better dance with her. Remember Panda. You don't want Hermione mad at you."

"I guess so," Ron admitted. "You didn't do so bad out there."

"Yeah well I was just thinking of how to curse Malfoy. Maybe that's the key," Harry said with the mood lightening.

"I can do that," Ron exclaimed. The two went back to the girls in time to ask them to dance when the next song started. After dancing for a while, it seemed Ron and Hermione were both in a better mood.

Harry thought he saw Ginny trying to catch his eye but he didn't want his mood spoiled so he tried to direct Blaise away from her every chance he got. They were standing near Ron and Hermione when Harry saw Ginny say something to the Hufflepuff boy and start to walk towards them. Quickly Harry took Blaise's hand and said, "Let's go talk to your friends for a bit." Blaise gave him a strange look but went along with Harry.

Surprisingly, the rest of the evening went well. Blaise's friends that were also in the D.A. didn't treat them too badly. When the ball was winding down, Harry saw his friends leaving but he slowly walked with Blaise. "Well this is where I need to turn for my common room," Blaise said.

"I know," Harry said with a smile. Blaise gave him a questioning look. "Would you like something for dessert before you go up?" Harry asked.

"I'll always take dessert but even I won't sneak out of the castle for that," she said.

"We'll stay in the castle," Harry said. "Follow me." Harry led her to near the picture of the fruit. "I have to ask you to close your eyes," Harry said. Blaise shook her head but complied. Harry pulled her to the portrait and tickled the pear causing it to slide out of the way. "Ok, open them and follow me," Harry said as he scrambled through the newly revealed opening.

Reaching the bottom, Harry was suddenly struck by the small grey creature. "Harry Potter sir! Sir is coming to see Dobby."

Harry laughed and blushed a bit. "Thanks Dobby. This is Blaise." Harry said and saw Blaise holding back laughter.

Dobby hesitantly shook her hand but seemed to be very nervous. Harry had never seen the house-elf like this before. "But sir, miss is from his house."

Blaise understood and actually looked disappointed. She had been so used to hearing students talk badly about Slytherins that it didn't bother her but hearing it from a house-elf did. "Dobby! Blaise is very nice. She's my friend."

Dobby's ears perked back up. "Dobby is sorry miss. Any friend of Harry Potter is a friend of Dobby. What can Dobby get you sir?"

"May we just have a piece of pie with whip cream? We'll share one piece," Harry said getting a nod from Blaise. Instantly Dobby returned with the plate and two forks. "Sorry about that Blaise," Harry said.

"It's not your fault," she said. Looking around she said, "I didn't know there were so many of them."

Harry laughed. "Oh yeah, there's a bunch. Hermione tried to free them all by making them hats and socks but it didn't work." The two sat there for almost an hour talking before they made their way back out of the opening.

"Thanks for tonight Harry, I had a really nice time," Blaise said.

"Me too," Harry admitted.

"Maybe when we're both out of here we'll still see each other," she said.

Harry's mood suddenly fell but he said, "Yeah, I'd like that."

"Did I say something wrong?" she quickly asked, seeing the change in his mood.

"No, just remembering things I have to do. Goodnight," he said before turning and walking back to the common room. Harry was able to get into bed without anyone seeing him but sleep didn't come. His solemn mood increased as he thought about Ginny and what he really expected. For once, he wasn't really looking forward to spending time at the Burrow. He knew it would be uncomfortable. Ginny would probably make him feel worse than he already did and Mrs. Weasley would just fuss over him. That's not what he wanted right now.

He hated fighting with Ginny, more so than fighting with Ron or Hermione. Something seemed so personal when Ginny made him angry and he didn't like when he said things back to her. Sometime later when Harry did fall asleep, it wasn't peaceful. He had practiced Occlumency but that didn't stop nightmares not caused by Voldemort from happening.

A tall thin wizard slowly walked to a darkened room. Upon entering the room he muttered a spell, causing an unnatural light to be cast on the area. The wizard walked to a body kneeling on the ground with a hood over its head. "This will be your sacrifice. Prove to yourself what you have become," the wizard said.

Another, shorter wizard walked up and placed his wand against the hooded person's head but before he could utter a spell, the first wizard said, "Not you, YOU!" Harry saw the wizard seeming to look directly into his eyes. "This is your sacrifice."

The next instant, Harry felt as though he was in the room, seeing through the eyes of the second wizard. "Yes," hissed the first. "Show your true self. But first see what you have caused." The wizard ripped the hood off of the person kneeling and Harry was staring into the face of Ginny Weasley.

"I won't," Harry said through the shorter wizard's mouth but the other wizard just laughed.

"You have no choice," he said.

Harry tried to fight it but his wand was now pointing at the tied up form of Ginny who looked up and said, "I don't blame you Harry."

Harry suddenly sat straight up in bed breathing very hard. He could tell sweat was rolling down him but from the other sounds in the room it didn't seem like he cried out or woke anyone up. "How could I have been so stupid," Harry thought. Harry realized Ginny would be the first one Voldemort or in fact any of the Death Eaters went after if anyone knew how he really felt. Harry cursed himself for forgetting what was destined to happen. For some time now he had been deluding himself into thinking he could actually have something close to a normal life.

Quickly taking out parchment, he scribbled a note to his friend and placed it on his trunk, along with the presents he was going to take to the Burrow. Harry dug into his trunk to get his cloak and the Marauder's Map before sneaking out of the dorm and finding a place to spend the next few hours.

Not long after, Ron woke up and threw on some clothes. Noticing the stack of presents on his trunk, he also saw the parchment.

Ron

I appreciate you and your mom saying I could come to the Burrow, but I have a lot of work to do for the D.A. group right now. It would also be a little uncomfortable if you know what I mean. Can you take the presents for everyone?

Don't be too mad at me, I'll see you when you get back.

Tell Hermione that I promise I won't do anything stupid until you both get back.

Happy Holidays

Harry

Ron instantly got angry and threw open Harry's trunk. After rummaging through it all he exclaimed, "Arg...He took it!"

He saw Hermione and Ginny waiting for him by the exit, ready to catch a carriage to the train. "Where's Harry?" Hermione asked and noticed Ron's foul expression.

Ron glared at Ginny and said, "He's staying."

"What?" Both Ginny and Hermione said.

"And he took his cloak and the map so I couldn't find him," Ron scowled.

"Why's he staying?" Hermione beat Ginny by asking first.

Ron was still looking at Ginny and said, "Says he has a lot of D.A. work to do and that it might be a bit *uncomfortable* to go right now."

Ginny's expression quickly fell but Hermione looked angry. "Oooh.. He's so aggravating!" She glanced at Ginny who looked like she might cry and said, "We'll talk to him when we get back. He's just being stupid."

"He probably won't ever talk to me again," Ginny sadly said.

"Of course he will Ginny," Hermione said in a comforting voice. "He's such a baby though!"

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed. "He does have a lot on his mind if you'll remember."

Hermione seemed surprised that Ron said this. "Still Ron, he shouldn't be hiding."

"Are you sure you could handle everything better?" Ron calmly asked again surprising Hermione.

Chapter 11

By later that evening, Harry started regretting his decision not to go to the Burrow. Nearly every other student seemed to be gone. Harry ended up spending an hour with Hedwig before falling asleep in the common room reading his Concealment Charm book that Moody had let him get.

After showering the next morning, Harry was surprised as soon as he exited his common room by a familiar voice, "Wotcher Harry!"

"Tonks!" Harry exclaimed. "What are you doing here? Wait, let me guess. Someone told the Order that I didn't go to the Burrow and you're here to make sure I don't do anything stupid."

Tonks laughed and said, "Close but not exact. You were ok up until saying I'm here to stop you doing anything stupid. I'm here to work on your Concealment Charms and anything else we want to. Dumbledore gave me full access as long as I don't break anything."

Harry laughed and said, "So that means we won't have much time."

"Hey, don't push me," Tonks said, "or I may just have to leak some embarrassing story like you're dating a teacher or something to the Prophet."

"Don't even joke about that Tonks," Harry pleaded.

The two walked down to breakfast together and after starting to eat, they were greeted by the Headmaster, "Ah, Tonks. I see you made it fine. I also didn't hear anything break so it looks like you can stay for a while." Dumbledore's bright eyes twinkled. "Molly was distressed when you didn't arrive at the Burrow Harry, but I told her it was probably because of the demanding requirements leading the D.A. group were putting on you," Dumbledore added with a slight smile.

"Thank you sir," Harry said hoping that this kept Mrs. Weasley from being too mad.

"However things being what they are, I didn't want you sitting around with too much idle time and Tonks here volunteered to spend some time working with you," Dumbledore added.

"Volunteered? Like guarding rooms of junk?" Harry asked with a smile.

"No," Tonks quickly said. "Volunteered like something I'm looking forward to doing. I don't get to hang around celebrities all the time."

"Ok, that's crossing the line," Harry fired back.

"I see you two will do just fine," Dumbledore said. "Harry, please do not leave the castle alone and not at all after dark. I hope you understand."

Harry hung his head but did understand. "Yes sir."

"Don't worry Harry, it won't be all work. I brought my broom and tomorrow we'll see if you can keep up," Tonks challenged.

After breakfast the two went directly to the Room of Requirement but before entering, Harry told her what to concentrate on and she was impressed by the selection of Dark Detectors and books in the room. "And this room can be anything you want?" she asked clearly amazed.

"Yep," Harry said. "And, if you break something, a new one will take its place."

"My mother needed one of these," she softly said.

The two were surprised by Dobby bringing lunch into the room, neither of them realized so much time had passed. Right after lunch, they changed to practice dueling with Tonks showing Harry some of the things he would learn in Auror training. Harry recognized some of the spells as ones that were used against the Death Eaters last year. By the end of the day, they were both worn out.

"I haven't worked that hard in a long time Harry," Tonks said with a big smile.

"We don't have to do so much next time," Harry said, feeling bad for causing her to work so hard. "I'm just glad you're helping at all."

"I think this is great!" Tonks admitted. "If I wasn't an Auror, I'd probably be a teacher."

"Are you staying in the castle?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, Dumbledore's got me up in the Professor's wing. Not a bad gig," she said.

Harry quickly fell asleep, feeling very happy after having spent the day Tonks practicing. A strange dream did creep in early in the morning. Harry saw Sirius putting up Holiday decorations and fussing about Grimmauld Place. He also saw all the Weasleys helping him. When he woke from this dream in the morning, he was in a very good mood but then thought about it. This couldn't be something he was remembering from last year. He was up with Buckbeak while those things were happening. Harry quickly brushed this off as just wishful thinking of something he hadn't been a part of and continued on with his day.

After lunch the next day Tonks and Harry went to the Quidditch pitch to fly around. "Didn't get to see you do much the last time," Tonks said referring to when they rescued him from the Dursleys the previous year. "See if you can keep up," she taunted and kicked off hard, quickly rising.

Harry followed and his Firebolt easily caught up to her, rising much faster than her broom could. Tonks raised her eyebrows and sped off, weaving, diving and doing maneuvers that even had Harry impressed. However, it wasn't much of a challenge for Harry to stay right behind her and after doing this for a while, he decided to show her what his Firebolt could really do and before Tonks knew it Harry was directly in front of her before he nudged the front of his broom up and went vertical. She tried to follow but couldn't come close.

Tonks continued to act like she was following but really was just watching, amazed at some of the things Harry and his Firebolt were doing. She was a big fan of Quidditch and seriously doubted some professional players could make some of the turns and loops that Harry did without any effort. After a final loop, Harry pulled up along side Tonks with a huge grin and said, "You'd have been close if you had a Firebolt."

"Ok showoff, let's get back to work," Tonks said, trying to act upset. "I want to get back to something that I'm the expert on." She smiled at him and added, "But if you keep making such quick progress, you'll probably beat me there before long as well."

Harry ended up having dreams that showed Sirius in situations where he was very happy. Harry himself was never a part of the dreams but he always woke up wishing he could have seen more and in a good mood. Christmas morning, Harry was woken up by a thump followed by, "Ow!" Quickly grabbing his wand, he pointed it at the lump on the floor before suddenly smiling and yelling, "Tonks! What are you doing in here?"

"Well I came to give you a shock but didn't see the trunk down here," she said rubbing her foot.

"This is a boy's dorm! How'd you get in?" Harry said not really bothered by her being here.

"Auror's Privilege," she said with a gleam in her eyes. "Another benefit to the job as I'm sure you'll find out. Here," she said handing him a package.

"You didn't have to get me anything," Harry said surprised by the gift.

"Yeah well I figure that when you join up, maybe we could be partners and I want you to be prepared," Tonks said and Harry couldn't tell if she was serious about the partner bit or not.

Harry opened the package and pulled out a pocket-sized mirror. It suddenly made him think of the two-way mirror Sirius had given him but he could see things swirling in it. "It's a pocket foe mirror," Tonks happily said. "Not as powerful as a normal one, but you can't go carrying those around now can you."

"Thanks Tonks," Harry honestly said before turning to the other presents from his friends. He received books from everyone except Ron and the twins who had given him a gift certificate for their store. He was relieved to see the familiar jumper Mrs. Weasley usually made for him.

Over the next week, Harry had made great strides with Concealment Charms but still couldn't master the chameleon effect that Moody performed on him. It turned out that changing skin color was the easiest. Now Harry was able to selectively change almost anything about his appearance with his favorite being able to hide his scar for a fair amount of time.

One day at lunch, another member of the Order joined them for lunch. "Remus!" Harry exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been busy with the Order but couldn't let the entire break go without seeing you," Lupin said as he sat down next to Harry. "How has it been so far?"

"Great!" Harry exclaimed. "Except that Tonks needs a Firebolt," he added with a grin. For the next several minutes, Harry could barely contain his laughter as his former Professor and Tonks exchanged light-hearted insults. It really made Harry feel good to see Lupin actually smiling. This relieved a bit of guilt Harry had been feeling over the times he had let himself forget the grief of missing Sirius and actually enjoy his friends. Harry knew that's what Sirius would want but it was still hard to do, especially this time of year.

Harry caught Tonks give Lupin a strange look and then a nod. Right after this Lupin cleared his throat and said, "I heard you had a date for the Holiday Ball."

"Yeah, I guess so," Harry said, now feeling a bit uncomfortable.

"I think I'll leave you two *men* alone for a bit," Tonks said clearly having trouble suppressing a smile. She got up and quickly strode out of the Hall. Now Harry worried what Lupin was really going to talk about.

"Now Harry," Lupin said, sounding a bit nervous. "I was wondering if there was anything you'd like to talk about? I heard this girl was very pretty and a Slytherin, correct?"

Harry squirmed and said, "Yeah, she's a Slytherin, but we're just friends."

"Friends...That's good," Lupin nervously said. "But, you know I was thinking that maybe we should talk about that."

Now Harry was sure where this talk was going to go and his mind instantly flashed to the note Sirius had left. Lupin's voice still continued, "You know that you have to be sure of what you're doing and...." Harry could feel the laugh coming and tried to keep it down. "...you should go slow, even if you feel like rushing in. There's a right way and a wrong way..."

That was it, Harry lost it and broke out into a loud laugh, causing the other couple students sitting at other tables to look. Lupin looked confused and said, "This is serious Harry, you have to make sure you consider...." Again Harry gave a loud snort and held up his hands to get Lupin to stop talking.

After calming down a bit, Harry saw Lupin looked confused at a bit put-off so he composed himself and said, "Sirius said he hated that you were going to have to do this." Harry laughed again but Lupin didn't look happy.

"He did, did he?" Lupin questioned.

"He said you'd make it seem like work!" Harry snorted.

"Work! Why that..." Lupin angrily said. "Just because I didn't give into every pretty witch that winked while he was off...well he just didn't have my restraint, that's all." Lupin had begun to get a smile while he said this and soon the two were both laughing at the situation. "His letter to me said I should have this talk with you soon because he hadn't been able to yet. He set this whole thing up," Lupin said while smiling broadly. "He was the best friend I could have asked for," Lupin finally said.

Harry didn't even get that sad thinking of this. "Yeah, I could see that..."

Tonks walked in and came over with a confused look as she saw the two still laughing. "Now I understand what the problem with guys is," she said to them. "How can you learn about anything when you're too busy laughing about it."

Lupin shook his head and told Tonks what had happened. "So you still haven't had the *talk* yet?"

Harry quickly blushed and said, "And we're not going to have it! I'm ok with what goes on."

"Really!" Tonks said grinning broadly. "That Slytherin teach you a thing or two did she?"

"No!" Harry quickly replied. "I'm not having this talk. Don't irritate me, you've taught me some really good spells Tonks and I'm ready to start using them."

Lupin left that afternoon and Tonks and Harry went back to practicing, even though she couldn't help but throw in comments that embarrassed Harry to no end. Tonks had been most impressed with Harry's aptitude with the dueling techniques they had been practicing. She saw that Harry was extremely focused when she would explain moves and counters to various hexes. "I really don't think potions is going to be an issue when you want to join us," she admitted after he had bested her with a spell that forced all of her spells to rebound at her.

"Now all I have to do is make it that long," he said jokingly.

"Seriously though, what would you think about being my partner when you join up?" she asked.

"That would be brilliant," Harry quickly exclaimed and then thought about Ron. "But I should really partner with Ron."

"That won't be possible at first," Tonks replied. "They don't want new recruits together. Besides, if you keep up this progress we could get the really good assignments."

"Good as in dangerous with a bunch of action?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Exactly!" Tonks said with a large smile. "I intend to make a difference and thought you might be willing to tag along."

"So all I have to do is stay alive long enough for you to start dragging me into life-threatening situations," Harry laughed.

"I knew you were a smart boy," she joked.

The two took the rest of the afternoon off to fly before Tonks left and Harry waited for his friends to return. Harry had time to think about what Tonks said and about the dream he had that showed Ginny saying she didn't blame him when he was about to curse her. Harry realized he probably would take the dangerous assignments when he became an Auror and with Voldemort still around it would mean there would be good chances of him being hurt. He couldn't become seriously involved with anyone and put them through that. Harry saw how happy Tonks seemed and she didn't have any serious relationship, and this made him think that maybe that's how he should be for a while. He was in fact still very young and thinking about anything serious just didn't seem to fit with what he knew his future would bring, at least not for a while.

Harry waited for the train and saw his friends with Luna get off the train as a group. He quickly walked toward them and noticed Ginny looking very uncomfortable and Hermione not looking that anxious to see him. Ron however seemed normal.

"Hey guys," Harry said. "Did you have a good Holiday? It wasn't the same here without you." Harry was trying in his own way to say he missed them all.

"It was pretty good. Could have used you as another player though," Ron replied in his own way of saying he wished Harry would have come.

"Yeah, that would have been good," Harry said apologizing to Ron.

"Mine was fine Harry," Hermione said slightly coolly.

Now Harry didn't know how to address Ginny. He was still annoyed at her for how she reacted to him but also resigned to put any attempt at a relationship with her out of his mind. "Hi Ginny," Harry simply said, trying to not sound trivial or mean but also not implying that he was completely over her actions.

"We wish you would have come home with us," she replied with a strange look on her face.

"Probably should have," he replied.

Ron quickly started telling him everything that happened during the break. Harry didn't want to tell them about how great he thought his break was as well since it might re-open the issue of him not going to the Burrow. Even after all four eating together, Harry could tell that Hermione wasn't happy with him and that Ginny... Well he couldn't tell exactly what Ginny was thinking. They were in the common room that night when Hermione shut her book, stood up and said, "Can I talk to you for a minute Harry?"

Harry immediately knew this couldn't be good and he turned to Ron for help but his friend just gave him an 'I'm sorry' look. Harry followed Hermione out of the common room before they found a quiet corner of a corridor. "You should have gone with them Harry," Hermione said very sternly. He was about to respond when she continued, "Ginny felt terrible and I know Ron blamed her for causing you to stay. She really wanted to talk to you and apologize. She thinks you hate her now."

"How was I supposed to know she wanted to apologize? All I get is her yelling at me," Harry snapped back.

"You would have known if you wouldn't have kept running away from her at the ball. You really hurt her," Hermione said.

"Me hurt her? What about her Hermione? Why aren't you yelling at her?" Harry heatedly asked.

"You don't know what I say to her Harry, so don't assume things. I'm not talking to you where they can hear and I won't talk about this conversation," she calmly said, causing Harry to realize Hermione wouldn't treat him unfairly.

"You're right. I'm sorry I snapped at you," he admitted.

"Ok, I'm going to say this straight away," Hermione continued. "I think you two could have something really special but you've got to get past this."

"I tried Hermione!" Harry exclaimed. "I can't help it if I'm not smooth asking girls out, but I tried." Harry suddenly remembered his resolution and stopped Hermione before she could say anything else. "But it's probably a good things happened the way they did," he quickly said drawing a confused look from Hermione. "There's just too much going on with me to spend time worrying about stuff like this and she obviously doesn't have a handle on what she wants. I mean Cho cried when she was around me and Ginny just yells. I can't deal with you girls."

"Harry, if you just talk to Ginny I think you can both be happy. You're both stubborn for your own good. Talk to her," Hermione pleaded.

"No Hermione," Harry firmly said. "This isn't just about Ginny. There is *really* too much going on with me. I don't want to spend time trying to deal with a relationship and worrying about her getting hurt." Harry kicked himself for letting this last part slip.

"Oh, I see," Hermione said realizing exactly what Harry was doing. "Going back to your normal way of thinking. Don't let anyone in because you're afraid."

"Hermione I don't want to have this conversation," Harry firmly stated. "It's really hard enough right now without anything else going on. That's all."

Hermione really wanted to beat it into his head that they all, Ginny included knew the risks but decided to let Harry have this one, for now. "Fine. I tried," she coolly said. "If I hear you complain when she's going out with someone else, I'll make you pay."

"If they're making her happy, I won't complain. If you say anything to Ginny, just hint that maybe it would be good for her to continue on with the Hufflepuff bloke," Harry said before the two stared at each other for a minute and then made their way back to the common room.

Harry wondered if Hermione had indeed said something to Ginny because she never brought up what happened between them and things seemed to go into a tolerate each other kind of agreement. Harry wouldn't leave when Ginny was with his friends but the two rarely talked directly to each other. This was starting to become a little awkward because Ron and Hermione were spending more and more time alone. This was one thing that made Harry genuinely happy. His two best friends didn't fight so much. Well the fights didn't last so long really. They would both start to get into it but then one of them, usually Ron would let a comment slide without replying and things would quickly die down. All in all, Harry was very impressed with Ron and how he was not jumping on things that he would have only a few short months ago.

However, this did cause more times when Ron and Hermione were not around when Harry and Ginny were both in the same room. It generally ended up with them studying or talking to other Gryffindors instead of them paying attention to each other. Harry wouldn't admit it to anyone, but this was really bothering him. He really felt like he could deal with not being in a relationship with Ginny but having so little contact bothered him a great deal. He didn't know if it bothered Ginny at all, but he did think he caught her looking sadly at him on a few occasions.

Studies had increased greatly after the holiday break and in addition to all the normal class work, Kingsley was working Harry harder in Occlumency, trying to help Harry redirect the intrusions so that he could easily lie to Voldemort without the evil wizard knowing it. Harry

also worked the D.A. group slightly harder. His work with Tonks showed him how many small things they could all learn that could be the difference between surviving and not. Only Hermione seemed unfazed by all the stress of class and D.A.

Kingsley showed up at a D.A. meeting early February and caused everyone to get excited by what they could learn this time from him. "You have all been learning a lot about hexes, shields and counters, but you haven't really duelled. Professor Dumbledore suggested I oversee a few classes where we could have some actual duels in a controlled environment to make sure no one was seriously hurt." Everyone in the class grew very excited at this. "I don't think we have to worry about anyone in here intentionally hurting each other, but sometimes things happen in a duel."

Kingsley paired people off and watched their technique. After each match, he would suggest things and move people around. Harry had been especially impressed by two people, Blaise and Neville. Blaise turned out to be very good at dueling. She never seemed to hesitate and chose her spells well. Neville seemed to choose his spells well and they were quite powerful; however his slight hesitation before casting caused him to lose many matches.

After the class, everyone seemed pleased with how it went. "You were really good Blaise," Harry said walking out of the room with her.

"But I lost to a Gryffindor," she raised her hand like she choked.

"Well I've had a bit more practice," Harry joked back. "Still, you beat everybody else."

Blaise seemed to be thinking of something and then said, "We had a decent time at the ball, right?" Harry nodded. "Well next week is Valentine's Day and I'm sure there will be a Hogsmeade trip unless something else bad happens. Interested in spending the day with me as friends?"

Harry hesitated for a second, remembering last year. Blaise must have expected this so she quickly added, "I promise we won't go to that tea shop and I won't cry, not even once." Now Blaise was smiling, teasing Harry.

"Ok as long as there's no crying," Harry joked back.

After the Hogsmeade trip was announced next week, Harry noticed Ron fidgeting more around him that night. "What's up Ron?"

"Well, you know that this weekend is Valentine's Day, right?" Ron asked and Harry nodded. "Well, would you mind if...you know..."

"Why don't you and Hermione go by yourselves? I can handle myself," Harry quickly interrupted, guessing his friend's concern.

Ron finally let out a breath and said, "Yeah, thanks mate. Are you going at all?"

"Blaise asked me," Harry said and saw the look on Ron's face so he added, "As friends, that's all. She's not popular with the Slytherins so we're just going to hang out."

"So no hope for you and Ginny?" Ron asked.

"She seems happy with that Hufflepuff guy," Harry said.

"I think his name's Scott or something like that," Ron added sounding proud he knew the name.

Harry found walking around Hogsmeade with Blaise to be really nice and relaxing. He missed Ron and Hermione of course but Blaise was funny and there wasn't any pressure of being on a date. She had tried to drag him into the shop where Cho cried last year and when Harry wouldn't go she faked starting to cry. There had been a couple times where they were about to end up someplace but saw Ron and Hermione so they continued on, wanting to give them time to be alone. Harry also avoided places he thought he might see Ginny and Scott, not wanting to feel jealous of them.

When it was about time to return, Ron and Hermione caught up to Harry and Blaise to catch a carriage back together. Harry noticed that Ginny and Scott weren't too far behind and felt a slight pain in his stomach. They were in a group waiting on the next set of carriages when they heard, "Heard you didn't get lucky after the ball scarhead. Trying to have another go?" Malfoy and his cronies had just walked up.

Blaise squeezed Harry's arm and said, "Don't say anything."

"You're so pathetic Potter. She's a sure thing and even then you couldn't get any," Malfoy said but before the smirk fully filled his face, Harry had pulled out his wand and muttered a hex. People jumped back as a bright red flame shot at the now terrified Slytherin. The heat from the flame was clearly felt, but it didn't strike Malfoy, instead wrapped around his body like a rope, an inch from his skin.

Malfoy opened his eyes and yelled, "What is this?" He started to move but as soon as his skin got any closer to the flame he felt the heat. "Get this off! I can't move!"

Ron was staring at Harry, "That's brilliant! You've got to show me that one."

"We had a deal, no hexing Slytherins," Blaise said, clearly angry.

Many students had now gathered and were laughing at Malfoy. His friends were trying to figure out what to do but couldn't approach the flames. "I thought the deal was for the ball," Harry said honestly believing that.

"It was supposed to be all the time," Blaise angrily said. "I wanted to handle him."

"Fine!" Harry yelled. "I suppose you think I'm acting like an older brother as well." Harry gave Ginny an angry look before he brushed by some students to get in the next carriage.

Ron pulled Hermione into the carriage after Harry. "What about Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"Who cares!" Ron replied. "Maybe if I hit him with a jelly-legs curse he'll roast himself."

"Ron!" Hermione snarled and then turned to Harry and asked, "Will that wear off?"

"Don't know, it's the first time I tried it," Harry admitted. "I'm sure someone can figure it out."

"Where did you learn that Harry? I've never seen it before," Hermione asked.

Harry didn't want to tell them all that Tonks had been teaching him spells like that so he just said, "I do read you know."

"You've got to teach me that," Ron begged drawing an angry scow from Hermione.

Harry was walking back to the common room after studying in the library later that evening when Professor Snape confronted him at the top of the stairs. "Attacking a student in Hogsmeade, let's see that's fifty points and detention," the Professor coldly said. Harry knew Snape wanted to provoke him into an angry reply but he held his comments. "Now where did you learn that spell? If it was from an restricted book we may just increase your punishment."

"I don't remember....sir," Harry replied, glaring back at the Potions Master.

"Is that so Potter? You don't remember do you?" Snape asked with a sly smile.

"Well sir, sometimes things just pop into my head. You know like Voldemort meeting with Death Eaters and things," Harry replied barely able to hold his anger.

Snape's smile twitched and quickly became a scowl. "There are other ways to find out what I want to know," the now smirking face of Professor Snape said. The Professor quickly raised his wand and said the spell.

It only took a few seconds before Harry realized Snape was trying to look into his thoughts. Harry was just about to shut him out when he heard a somewhat familiar voice in his head say, "show him his own." Somehow Harry knew exactly what the voice meant and tried nudging Snape's probing to the thoughts Harry wanted him to see. Just as they were about there, the voice said, "hold him in it."

With a final nudge, Harry saw the visions and could tell Snape was there as well. Quick flashes of students at Hogwarts. Snape hanging upside down with his dirty grey underpants showing. Snivellus...Snivellus... Harry could feel the probe trying to get out but was able to keep pushing it back. Suddenly he saw a very young version of Snape in front of a man being told he is worthless... There were others and then the sequence started again. Strangely Harry felt a sudden sense of power and actual enjoyment at knowing what was happening. A sudden jolt snapped him back to reality when he heard a booming voice, "Enough!"

Chapter 12

After blinking his eyes, he saw the form of Professor Snape backed up against the wall, clutching the blocks for support. Turning he saw Professor Dumbledore with a very concerned look on his face. "You will both accompany me to my office at once," the man said before turning around and striding off. Harry followed quickly, not caring if Snape was behind or not. Before reaching the gargoyle, Snape passed Harry to walk just behind the Headmaster. After finally reaching the office and closing the door, Professor Dumbledore moved behind his desk and calmly asked, "What exactly was going on?"

Snape instantly spoke, not giving Harry a chance, "Mr. Potter viciously attacked a student from my house in Hogsmeade today. I gave him detention, deducted house points and asked where he learned such a dangerous spell. When he wouldn't answer truthfully, I attempted to find out myself."

"By probing his mind?" Dumbledore knowingly asked.

"Potter rarely tells the truth Headmaster," Snape said. "There was no other way to get the information."

The Headmaster studied Professor Snape for a moment and then turned to Harry and asked, "Could you also tell me what happened Harry?"

"Yes sir. Well Malfoy said some horrible things about Blaise and I guess I over reacted and did use a bind spell on him, but that's all," Harry said.

"It was flaming ropes. He couldn't move without getting burned," Snape spat.

"Yes sir. But if he didn't move, he wouldn't feel anything," Harry said glaring at Snape. "Then when I was heading back to the common room this evening, Professor Snape took points and gave me detention for using magic in Hogsmeade." Harry took a breath and said, "Then when I said I didn't remember where I learned the spell, I felt him using Legilimency to probe my mind."

"However," Dumbledore said, "what I came across was not Professor Snape simply probing your mind, he seemed to be in some distress." Harry could see Snape tense up at this.

"I've made enough progress with Occlumency to be able to redirect simple probing so I tried that," Harry said. Harry could see Dumbledore waiting for more so he told the truth. "I don't know how it happened sir, but it was like I heard a voice telling me what thoughts to push him to. Then the voice said to hold him. I really don't know how I did it."

"Did you recognize this voice Harry?" Dumbledore asked seeming to believe Harry.

"It seemed familiar but I couldn't place it," Harry replied.

"Headmaster," Snape quickly said. "I don't know where Potter learned this, but clearly it is dangerous...."

"It wouldn't have been dangerous Severus," Dumbledore calmly said, "if you hadn't tried to perform Legilimency on him. Using magic against another student in Hogsmeade is indeed against the rules and as you have said you punished him, he will serve that punishment." Dumbledore now looked at Harry and said, "Please try to refrain from confronting other students Harry. Also, be very wary of trusting unknown voices in your head."

"Yes sir," Harry said. Harry quickly turned and left the office, feeling very lucky that nothing else happened.

Back in Dumbledore's office, Snape was mad. "Headmaster, that boy attacked one of my students and you witnessed his attack on me as well. He must be punished."

"You did punish him for the only rule he broke Severus," Dumbledore said. "I'm sure you are well aware that if he can master the spell he used on Mr. Malfoy than if he had really wanted to inflict pain he could have easily done so." Snape grimaced but Dumbledore continued; "Now I also believe you understand that if Mr. Potter did indeed prohibit you from severing your probe of his mind that he was also capable of inflicting severe damage to you as well. Though I do not think he is aware of that."

"That boy is dangerous Headmaster," Snape spat.

"For our sake Severus," Dumbledore said rising and looking out the window, "let us hope that is indeed true when the time comes. You would do well to understand what it would mean if he is unable to fulfill the prophecy. A few thoughts to the greater good would be advisable."

Snape snarled and left the office.

Harry entered the common room and was once again congratulated by everyone for his hex on Malfoy. He walked straight to where Ron, Hermione and Ginny were and sat down next to Ron, furthest away from Ginny. "That was still brilliant," Ron said happily, savoring the memory of Malfoy wrapped in flaming ropes.

"Yeah well Snape just gave me the news. Fifty points and detention," Harry said.

"That slimy git!" Ron exclaimed.

"We really needed those points Harry," Hermione scolded.

"Just answer a couple more questions Hermione. You can earn that many in a couple classes," Harry exclaimed causing Hermione to soften her attitude a bit at the compliment.

Harry went to sleep that night, still thinking about that voice in his head. He knew who it sounded like but couldn't explain why. When he woke up the next morning, he was actually disappointed he didn't have another dream about his godfather to see if his suspicion was correct.

Kingsley came to the next D.A.meeting again since he wanted to continue giving pointers in dueling. After watching everyone review he got their attention. "Ok, as some of you have unfortunately seen, dark wizards rarely fight fair. More often than not you will not fight them one-on-one so you need to at learn some basics about fighting as a team." Harry caught

Neville's eye and gave him a little nod since he and Neville were together for a lot of the fighting last year. "Ok, pair up with someone you feel comfortable with," Kingsley directed.

Neville walked purposely to Harry and asked, "Is it ok if I partner with you?"

Harry had actually thought of asking Blaise but knew all Neville needed was confidence so he quickly replied, "Of course. We'll show 'em Neville." Neville beamed after Harry said this.

Harry and Neville were one of the last teams to go and Harry felt some dread when they were paired to go against Ron and Hermione. Ron was good a strategy and Hermione knew an enormous amount of spells.

The duel was actually very close with both teams getting in good shots and also deflecting some curses that would have ended it much sooner. Neville had even successfully executed the Protego Truan spell after Harry hit Hermione with a stunner and paused briefly to make sure she was ok. In this lapse, Ron had sent his own stunner but Neville saw it coming and cast the shield charm to protect Harry. Things got fierce after that but finally, Neville hit Ron with a Petrificus Totalus just as Harry got another stunner off on Hermione.

"We did it Harry," Neville said starting to give Harry a high-five. Before their hands touched, Harry felt an odd prickly sensation on the back of his neck and seemed to hear the voice in his head say 'Shield Now!'

Without hesitation Harry yelled 'Protego Duo' and a shimmer surrounded both he and Neville a second before a blast connected with it. Turning they saw Kingsley standing calmly pointing his wand at them. Kingsley sent another powerful spell that actually made both Harry and Neville stumble, but the shield held.

"What's he doing?" Neville asked.

"I think we're supposed to fight him," Harry said seeing the grin on Kingsley's face.

"But he's an Auror!" Neville exclaimed.

"Pretend he's a Death Eater Neville. We can take him," Harry said looking Neville directly in the face. This seemed to focus Neville and he raised his wand at Kingsley.

The duel quickly turned into a series of curses, counter-curses and shields with Kingsley keeping Harry and Neville at a severe disadvantage. At one point, Harry nearly tripped and this allowed Kingsley to connect with a spell that sent him flying backwards where he landed with a thud on the floor. Turning his full attention to Neville, Kingsley was able to get a stupefy to partially break through Neville's shield. Kingsley began to disarm Neville but Harry was barely able to get a shield around Neville before the spell hit. Harry felt the impact of Kingsley's curse against the shield and before he could recover, Kingsley performed Legilimency and forced his way into Harry's mind.

Harry stumbled a moment before his mind reacted to the intrusion and began pushing the probe out. As happened the last time, a comforting voice said 'pull it into your pain'. Confused, Harry quit pushing on the probe and felt it go deeper into his thoughts. Again the voice said 'pull it into your pain'. Harry pushed the Auror's probe into memories that he always tried to keep hidden far away.

Suddenly Kingsley's body became rigid and Harry collapsed to his knees as visions he dreaded flooded his mind. The cupboard door shutting, leaving him in total darkness. His mother pleading with Voldemort. Sirius falling through the veil.

Neville had been able to recover from the partially effective spell and after a moment of confusion at seeing both Kingsley and Harry acting so strangely, he sent his own stunner at the Auror causing both Kingsley and Harry to cry out before they collapsed unconscious onto the floor.

Harry woke to a familiar smell the next morning but didn't know exactly how he got there. "Ah I see you've chosen to wake up," Dumbledore said.

Pulling on his glasses, Harry's vision reconfirmed his presence in the Hospital Ward and he saw the Headmaster standing at the foot of his bed. "What happened sir?" Harry asked.

"It seems you pulled Kingsley's mind into some very painful memories and trapped him there," Dumbledore said sounding concerned.

"But how? Is he ok? How could I do that?" Harry asked, now concerned himself.

"He is fine, just a bit unnerved by what he saw. I hoped you could tell me how this happened. I'm assuming it is the same as with Professor Snape?" Dumbledore questioned.

"I guess," Harry said thinking back. "Right after Neville and I beat Ron and Hermione, something seemed to warn me to put up a shield and Kingsley had tried to curse us. Then when he entered my mind it was the same voice telling me what to do. I didn't want to see those things. Then I just remember a lot of pain before waking up," Harry admitted, rubbing his head.

"That would go along with what Kingsley said and also what I gathered," Dumbledore said as though he was still thinking. "I cannot say what you are hearing, but would suggest you try to keep control of what it is telling you."

"Yes sir, I'll try," Harry said but didn't really know how.

Soon after the Headmaster left, his friends had been allowed in to see him. Ginny was the fastest to his bed and hugged him saying, "Oh Harry, we were so worried. I'm so sorry I said those horrible things to you. I don't really think that way."

Harry looked to Ron and Hermione for help but Hermione was just smiling and Ron was shaking his head. "It's ok Ginny," Harry said. "Let's just forget any of that ever happened. I acted pretty stupid as well."

"Really?" the girl looked up not believing Harry could just forgive her that easy.

"Really," Harry reassured her. "I mean Ron's forgiven me for worse and you're a good friend as well so I can do it to." Harry smiled brightly but part of his assurance didn't make Ginny feel totally better.

"Getting out of here soon?" Ron asked trying to move Ginny off a bit.

"Should be anytime," Harry said.

"What happened Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry told them what happened but left out the little voice. He knew from past experience that they wouldn't think it was a good thing. Madame Pomphrey came in soon after he finished telling them what happened and gave him clearance to leave. His friends waited while he changed and they all left together.

That night, Harry thought long and hard about what had happened with Professor Snape and with Kingsley. He remembered how Snape looked once Dumbledore had broken the connection. Harry also shivered remembering back to how it felt to have his mind taken over by Voldemort last year and wondered if it was similar. Harry drifted off to sleep without practicing Occlumency again, but instead of having a dream, he was woken up by a terrible pain in his scar. Clutching his head and trying not to make a sound, he waited until it subsided. Thinking back to what he sensed during this, he realized that Voldemort was again very happy about something. He sensed apprehension but also joy. Harry decided not to tell anyone about this since they would just say he wasn't working hard enough at Occlumency.

Hermione and Ginny quickly noticed Harry looked tired in the morning but he assured them it was just leftover from what happened with Kingsley. Ron however only cared that he got plenty of sleep for their final Quidditch match with Ravenclaw that weekend. Most of the team had been loudly complaining about how obsessed Ron was with the match but Harry, being the only member of the team to play for Oliver Wood thought Ron still had a ways to go before approaching Wood's obsession level.

Harry was startled by his first sight when he opened his curtains the morning of the match. Ron was sitting, fully dressed on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands. "What's wrong Ron?" Harry asked and even this didn't cause Ron to look up.

"I'm going to be sick for sure," Ron groaned.

"It's just another match. You've been here before," Harry said lightheartedly.

"It's for the cup Harry!" Ron exclaimed. "We have to win it."

"You weren't this bad last year. What's the deal?"

"It's different this year," Ron said. "Last year we just lucked into it."

"You finished good last year. This year is no different. You're playing great," Harry said, hoping to snap Ron out of this.

"But you're playing this year," Ron admitted looking up at his friend.

"You think I'm going to lose it for you?" Harry exclaimed, not believing Ron would think that.

"What? No, of course not," Ron suddenly said. "You've always won the cup when you've played. I don't want you to lose just because I'm coaching. What with everything else you've got going, I just want to make sure we win."

Now Harry was stunned, not exactly believing Ron worried about this. "Ron," Harry firmly said, "I want to win too, but if we don't I think you'll take it harder than I would. I'm not going to go off the deep end if we lose, trust me."

"I know," Ron said. "I don't know why I'm worried so much."

"Yeah, well quit worrying or I'll tell Hermione some of the things you say about her in your sleep," Harry joked.

"What! I don't... You wouldn't!" Ron exclaimed now standing up.

"Yeah well just make sure we win and you'll never know," Harry said before heading off to the shower.

The whole team was quiet at breakfast which made Harry laugh. None of them seemed to remember that this was close to the same team that won last year and they had already beaten Slytherin. Losing to any other house wouldn't be so bad as long as it wasn't Slytherin. Harry noticed the people across the table from him give an odd look and then suddenly he heard, "Good luck today Harry." Cho had come up behind him.

Harry turned and after a second of confusion said, "Oh. You too Cho. Good luck."

"It's the last time we'll play each other you know," she said smiling.

"I guess it is," Harry replied not having considered that before.

"Yeah well don't blink because Harry's going to end it quickly," Ron sarcastically said.

"Ron!" Hermione quickly yelled at him.

"Well...Anyway I just wanted to say good luck," Cho stumbled getting this out.

"Thanks Cho, you too," Harry replied before turning around and shaking his head at his total lack of understanding of girls.

It worked out that Ravenclaw was currently in second place for the Quidditch cup and if they won by more than 200 points, they would overtake Gryffindor and win the cup. This was a very long shot but had been done in the past so there was still a great turnout for the match. Slytherin had sided with Ravenclaw and rooted against Gryffindor. In the waiting room, Ron hadn't been able to give much of a pep talk, he simply said, "I really want to win the cup." But everyone seemed to realize how important it was to their captain and agreed that they would win.

After being announced, Harry and Cho quickly greeted each other before the Snitch and Quaffle were released. Harry glanced around the stands and was surprised to see Blaise sitting next to Hermione and the two girls seemed to be having a nice conversation. Once the match started, Harry quickly forgot other people even existed. His mind was on one thing, finding and catching the snitch. It didn't matter to him where his rival was, he had confidence he could get to the golden object faster than she could. The match seemed to go on for quite a while without any sign of the snitch and the score was now 110-90 with Gryffindor in the lead. Harry could see Ron getting annoyed but the captain also knew the snitch hadn't shown

itself. Over the past few minutes, Harry's scar began to throb and he silently hoped that it didn't become overwhelming as that could give Cho the advantage she needed.

Gryffindor had just scored again and Ravenclaw began a run when a small flash of gold caught Harry's eye just below the chaser with the Quaffle as the girl flew towards him. Harry leaned forward and also felt Cho who was closer than he expected to him do the same. Both seekers were now on a course that would take them very close to the three chasers who were heading directly at them. The Snitch seemed to dart between whichever chaser had the Quaffle. Harry picked the chaser in the middle and flattened out onto his Firebolt, trying to get every ounce of speed he could. Now the chasers realized the seekers weren't going to change direction and the one on the left with the Quaffle tried to pass to the one on the right. Cho had just opted for safety and pulled up a bit but Harry headed directly for the middle chaser whose eyes were now as wide as saucers. The Quaffle passed directly behind the middle chaser's head as Harry reached out, looking to the middle chaser like he was trying to grab his face. Harry had to roll onto his left side slightly so not to crash his broom into the chaser and felt the back of his hand brush the chaser's hair as he clamped down on the Snitch that was just trailing the Quaffle that had gone by. Finishing the roll and narrowly avoided a collision, Harry thrust his hand into the air showing his teammates that they had just won the match.

The team was quickly engulfed by hugs from each other and soon from the other Gryffindors. Harry's scar had still been throbbing and he maneuvered himself out of the center of the crowd of cheering students to try and get some fresh air. "Thanks for beating her. I couldn't have handled that girl winning," Blaise said as she confidently strode up to Harry.

Harry noticed she didn't look mad so he simply said, "Thanks Blaise. I was surprised you were sitting on our side."

"That just shows you should never try to figure me out," she replied with a smile. "Listen, I want to apologize for getting mad at you. Slytherin is my house and I just don't like anyone else messing with us. Even if one of us does something that deserves it. I would have dealt with him," Blaise explained.

"I can understand that," Harry said realizing how she felt. "I really thought our deal was only for the ball but should have at least said something. I'm sorry I yelled, it just reminded me of something else."

"You mean when the little red-head went off on you after our match," Blaise said with a teasing grin. "I remember these things. Are we ok?"

"We're good. Thanks for coming over," Harry genuinely said.

"Well, I couldn't lose my token Gryffindor friend now could I?" she said with a wave as she headed back to the other Slytherins.

"Oi Mate!" Ron yelled. "Get cleaned up, it's time for a party." Ron was being drug along by Seamus and Terry since this was their first season.

Harry was one of the last ones back to the common room and the party was already well under way. It was noisy but seemed subdued without Fred and George Weasley to keep everyone on their toes. Harry had his butterbeer but really wasn't feeling like partying since

his scar hadn't quit hurting. The rest of the team and especially Ron were celebrating so much that they didn't even notice when he slipped over to the edge of the room so he could just watch without moving much. However, this action didn't escape being noticed by his other best friend. "Feeling all right Harry?" Hermione asked with a concerned look.

Harry furrowed his brow and said, "Just a headache, but it's not that bad. Getting knocked around with that lot doesn't help though."

"Is it really a headache or...you know?" Hermione asked thinking it was something a bit more than he was letting on.

Harry nodded, letting Hermione know it was his scar and said, "Started hurting about half way through the match. Hasn't gotten worse though." Harry watched Ron spin Lavender around and said, "You should watch your boyfriend. Quidditch captains are in high demand."

Hermione laughed and said, "Maybe but Ron's too dense to realize it." She watched Ron for a minute and just shook her head and said, "I should keep him from making too much of a fool out of himself."

Harry watched for a bit more and then felt a sudden shot of pain in his scar. Not wanting to spoil the party, he tried to make his way to the exit. Before reaching it, the pain increased and he put both hands up to his head but quickly moved one to the wall to steady himself as he finally got out of the room. Once on the other side, there was another surge of pain and he collapsed onto the floor.

Back at the party, it was Ron who had seen the last few seconds of Harry's exit from the common room and even with all the commotion and everyone still congratulating him, he suddenly became very serious and Hermione instantly knew something was wrong. Ron looked at her and the two of them quickly went after Harry. Ginny noticed their movements and detached herself from the group as well. Ron was the first to see Harry lying on the floor outside of the portrait.

"Harry!" he exclaimed as he made it to his friend who was tossing on the floor with both hands over his scar.

Hermione grabbed his shoulders and said, "Harry, can you hear us?" Hermione quickly turned to Ginny and said, "Get Professor McGonagall!" Ginny didn't hesitate and ran down the hall.

Before she got back, Harry quit thrashing and his eyes flashed open showing sheer terror. "You ok mate?" Ron quickly asked. Harry just nodded and rubbed his scar.

"What was it Harry? Did you see something?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded and said, "Durmstrang."

Ron and Hermione looked between each other just as Ginny and Professor McGonagall arrived. "Are you all right Mr. Potter?" McGonagall quickly asked.

Harry who was sitting against the wall now snapped to attention and said, "He's attacking Durmstrang! That's why he's been so happy!"

"Are you sure?" McGonagall asked.

"Positive," Harry assured her.

"Please go see Madame Pomphrey, I'll go directly to the Headmaster," the Professor said before she hurried off down the hall.

"Are you really ok Harry?" Ginny asked.

"I'm fine. I can't believe he's attacking a school," Harry said shaking his head.

"C'mon Harry we'll go see Madame Pomphrey with you," Ginny said.

"I don't need to go there. It stopped hurting now," Harry firmly said. "I want to know what's going on."

"Harry, we can't just go barging in," Hermione said. "What did you mean about him being happy?"

"Well my scar's been waking me up a few nights and I can tell he's been apprehensive but really happy. He must have been planning this," Harry said.

"Why didn't you tell someone?" Hermione demanded.

"Tell them what Hermione? Should I run to Dumbledore and say 'My scar hurt and Voldemort's happy.'" Harry snapped.

The four of them returned to the common room but didn't really rejoin the party, instead they stayed in their small group talking about what they thought would happen. The other students realized something was up but knew from past experience that the trio somehow knew things and that they would never tell.

Harry didn't even practice Occlumency that night and actually hoped to have a dream so he knew what really happened. It wasn't to be as once he finally fell asleep, nothing happened to wake him up until Ron did the next morning. The two waited for Hermione and Ginny before going down for breakfast.

None of the students seemed to be acting any differently but it wasn't difficult to tell something was wrong once you glanced at the teacher's table. Every teacher had a look that reminded Harry of when the Chamber of Secrets had been opened and they were all whispering to each other. Finally when it seemed like most of the students had arrived for breakfast Professor Dumbledore got everyone's attention. "Students," Dumbledore said as everyone looked at him. "There was an incident last night that may be reported in the papers today and I want to tell you what we know. There was an attack on our sister wizarding school Durmstrang last night." The mumbling started within the student groups. "The attack included some of the Dememtors that have left Azkaban as well as some of Voldemort's supporters. In fact the attack was led by Voldemort himself." Now there where many gasps and whispers. Harry just hung his head and his friends kept glancing between him and the Headmaster.

"The attack was a surprise and resulted in three teachers and twelve students losing their lives and many more injured," Dumbledore sadly said having everyone's attention. "Help arrived and the attackers were turned back before any more could be injured. I do not expect anything like that to happen here but want to assure you that we are better defended and well prepared in case it does. Please be assured we are doing everything in our power to keep you as safe as possible. I hope you understand the need to cancel all Hogsmeade visits for the rest of the year." Surprisingly, there wasn't much objection to this. "Now it seems a secondary reason for this attack was to draw attention away from Azkaban where other Voldemort supporters assisted in breaking out six convicted Death Eaters. The Ministry is doing all they can to recapture those escaped convicts."

Harry was just pushing his food around on his plate, not eating while his friends cast concerned glances at him. "Malfoy's looking awful cocky," Ron snarled. "I bet his dad is one of the one's who escaped."

The news of the escape did surprise Harry, he hadn't been expecting that. He was silently thinking about what had happened. He couldn't believe a school full of students was actually attacked. The friends were sitting quietly, all lost in their own thoughts when the Headmaster appeared behind them. "Would you four join me for a moment," he said without the normal twinkle in his eyes.

They didn't bother going to the Headmaster's office, he simply led them into a vacant classroom before turning to look directly at each of them. The Headmaster appeared very tired at this moment but calmly said, "Your warning most assuredly saved lives Harry. I sent word immediately to sources in their area and they went to help," Dumbledore continued.

"But why Durmstrang?" Harry asked. "I mean aren't they more dark arts than Beauxbatons or us?"

"They're not dark arts Harry," Dumbledore corrected him. "It is more like an entire school of Slytherin House. They just take a different approach to teaching. However I think this was a warning to all schools and punishment for some at Durmstrang trying to defy him."

"So, some of the teachers there refused to join him and he attacked their school?" Harry asked, almost unable to believe this.

"That is my guess," Dumbledore agreed.

Harry shook his head and asked, "Isn't there anything we can do? Can't you teach me something and then get me near him? I can't stand this."

"Harry no!" Hermione exclaimed.

Dumbledore sat on the edge of one of the desks and said, "Harry trust me when I say that on this topic I do understand exactly how you feel. You may be the one destined to destroy him, but I do have the power to stop some of these attacks if I were there. I struggle with the exact same things."

"How do you handle it sir? Every time I hear of an attack, I know that if I wasn't here, playing Quidditch and studying for N.E.W.T.s, maybe he could be stopped," Harry sadly said.

"It would serve nothing to confront him without a plan and a reasonable chance of winning Harry. I'm sure you realize that," Dumbledore said and saw Harry nod. "You can't hold yourself responsible for things such as this. There are too many things out of our control."

"So I just have to deal with it then," Harry said not as a question.

"I said this last year and I hope you react better this time, but your greatest strength is that you care so much. I really understand how painful that is to hear but one day I hope you'll realize the truth in it," Dumbledore said and was glad that Harry didn't react negatively this time. The four friends left the room silently.

"There's nothing you can do yet Harry," Hermione said.

"Don't beat yourself up so much," Ron added.

"C'mon Harry, it'll be ok," Ginny softly said.

"We've got to hurry if we're going to make first period," Hermione announced.

"You all go ahead, I'm going up to my room," Harry gloomily said.

"Harry, tests are coming up before long," Hermione informed him.

"Does it really matter Hermione?" Harry solemnly said as he headed back to the common room.

"This isn't good," Ron said, the worry evident in his voice.

"C'mon Ron, we'll talk after class," Hermione said.

"He'll be ok won't he?" Ginny asked.

"Course he will Ginny. We'll make sure of it," Ron added making his sister feel better.

Harry did go to his room, but only to grab his invisibility cloak, and once he was safely concealed beneath that, he made his way to the owlery. Harry opened the door slowly, not knowing if anyone would be in the room. Still under the cloak, he made his way to the far wall and began to look for his snowy owl. Before he spotted her, he heard a rustle followed by a familiar hoot and saw Hedwig sitting on a ledge near him. He removed his cloak and said, "Are you like Mad-Eye? Can you see through this thing?" Hedwig merely cocked her head and looked at him with her big eyes. "Haven't had much work for you this year girl," Harry said as he moved her to his knee. "I wish I could write him where he is."

Sitting there stroking Hedwig made Harry very relaxed and he found himself thinking hard about all things that had happened this year. How he said those things about not taking Potions again. Ginny yelling at him at the Quidditch match. Ginny yelling before the Holiday Ball. Cursing Malfoy. The look of Professor Snape after he tried Legilimency on him. What happened with Kingsley when he tried it as well. "I wish I could think of some way to stop in him girl," Harry said out loud drawing a few clicks from his owl.

Harry had been sitting there running every encounter with Voldemort and all of the events of the year through his mind over and over. "There has to be something," he softly said. "If I could just fi....," he was absent-mindedly saying when suddenly an idea came into his mind. His hand stopped petting Hedwig as his eyes flicked around, not focusing on anything, just re-running the thought through his head. "Dumbledore said he was trapped...." Harry said to no one but himself. "They said his body didn't move the whole time..." Harry quickly stood up, forgetting Hedwig was on his knee and the large owl cuffed him with a wing as she made her way to a ledge. Harry began thinking to himself. Was Snape the same way? Dumbledore said it was the same as Snape. He's supposed to be an expert. Would it be like Kingsley? No, more like Snape. If he's trapped, I could do it.

Harry heard commotion outside and saw students beginning to fill the common areas so he thought it must be supper time. "I better go find Ron girl," Harry said to Hedwig. "If I don't, they'll send someone from the Order to hunt me down. Thanks for listening," Harry said as he left the owlery with a lot to think about. He made it back to the common room before Ron and Hermione got there and he could tell they were both relieved that he was actually there. The look he saw them give each other clearly showed him they had expected him to be someplace else.

Harry was too wrapped up in his own thoughts during supper to notice the looks his friends exchanged between themselves. He wasn't aware that every time Hermione started to say something, Ron would give her a look that caused her to rethink what she was going to say. That evening in the common room was pretty much the same. Harry acted like he was studying but Hermione saw that the pages rarely turned in the book he was reading and his eyes had a far-off look to them.

Once in bed, Harry practiced Occlumency but a bit differently this time. Instead of focusing on Hedwig sleeping, he focused on the sitting alone in a room. If Voldemort did indeed try to get information from Harry while he was asleep, Harry wanted the wizard to get the idea that Harry was spending time alone. In the morning, Harry didn't have a good feeling one way or the other if his plan had started to come together.

Hermione and Ginny quickly picked up on how closed off Harry had become over the next couple days. "He's getting worse Ron," Hermione said as they watched Harry turn his book without really looking at it. "We've got to say something," she added.

"I don't think we should push him Hermione," Ron said. "We've got tests coming up and maybe he's just worried about those as well."

"Well I'm not just going to sit here," Ginny stated before getting up and heading directly to Harry. She sat down next to him, startling him out of his thoughts. "Want to study together?" she asked, not wanting to jump into her real questions.

Harry quickly smiled and then remembered his previous thoughts and became serious again as he said, "I should really work on this alone." Ginny's expression fell and Harry continued, "Since you both are about to take your O.W.L.s, why don't you see if Scott can help? Hermione says he's pretty smart."

"Oh," Ginny said sounding a bit annoyed. "Fine, I'll just do that." She quickly stood up and walked away, not seeing the grimace on Harry's face. Hermione however did notice his reaction to Ginny walking away upset.

Harry told Ron and Hermione that he was going up to bed and again, focused on sitting alone in a room before trying to fall asleep. This night he had the impression that his thoughts were being pushed to try and find out more about the building but before this happened, another dream suddenly took over. Harry suddenly was watching Sirius walking out of the kitchen at Grimmauld Place scowling. Looking over his shoulder, Harry saw other members of the Order begin to vanish and saw Snape give a sneer as he watched Sirius walk away. Before he could see where Sirius went, he woke up and realized it was almost time to get up anyway. Harry knew this dream of Sirius could not have been something he witnessed.

The next four days went the same, but each night Harry's thoughts of being alone in the room were pushed further and further out until the building was almost recognizable. However, before the full location was revealed, he always was interrupted by a dream of his godfather in a situation where the man clearly wasn't happy. Harry just brushed these off to the stress of being so close to showing the location of the room.

Harry was only saved from Hermione's questioning when the Professors all reminded everyone that tests were coming up in a couple days. She became almost as quiet and stressed as Harry after this. Hermione and Ron had been sniping at each other in the common room one night and Ginny finally yelled that she couldn't study and stormed out. Harry quickly said their arguing was too much and retreated to his room.

The dream started like the past few with Harry sitting alone in a room, reading his book. His thoughts were on enjoying the time alone so he could study. There was a gentle nudge and the body in his thoughts got up and began to walk to the door. The dream Harry opened the door and stepped outside, but instead of the dream ending at this point, things began to get very clear and the surroundings were revealed. It was obvious from the environment that the building Harry had been in was the Shrieking Shack. Harry suddenly snapped awake with his scar burning. The emotion Harry felt made his stomach turn, he knew Voldemort was very happy.

Chapter 13

Harry got up the next morning after realizing Voldemort had seen the final bit of information when the evil wizard had entered Harry's mind. This meant that Harry had to choose whether to go through with his plan or not. If he didn't, Voldemort may realize what had happened and not be so bold in probing Harry's thoughts again, but if he did continue with the plan and fail, well he didn't really want to think about that. Resolving himself to the fact that he would indeed continue with his plan, he quickly dressed, needing to find his friends to make sure nothing got in the way.

He was still lost in thought, trying to make sure he at least had a chance of succeeding when he sat down next to Ron at the Gryffindor table. Hermione and Ron looked at each other intently, knowing something was still wrong with Harry. Even Ginny who was still annoyed with the way Harry had been treating her could tell something wasn't right.

"Didn't know if you'd get up for class or not mate," Ron said, trying to gauge his friend's mood.

Harry raised his head and looked between Ron, Hermione and Ginny, pausing the longest on Ginny. 'This is why I have to do this,' he thought to himself. This resolve lifted his spirits a bit as he realized how important they were to him. Breathing deeply, letting this fact sink in, his expression brightened as he said, "Well you should have thrown something at me you dolt." Harry smiled to make sure Ron knew he was kidding.

"Oh Hermione," Harry continued, "Everyone knows about the D.A. meeting tonight don't they?"

"Of course Harry," Hermione said, still wary of Harry's sudden mood change. "Why?"

"Well, I haven't been sleeping well so I've been reading and found a couple new things I think we should try out," he said taking a bit of toast. Then he looked at Ginny and even though he could tell she was a bit cross at him, he smiled and said, "You'll be there won't you Ginny?"

Ginny thought he almost sounded too cheerful when he asked this but she said, "Of course I'll be there." Looking at the time she said, "I've got to get going. See you later."

Harry again looked intently at her and said, "Goodbye Gin." This caused her to stop and stare at him for a minute before turning to leave.

Just then Ron said, "Damn, I forgot my book. I'll meet you two in class." He quickly got up and hurried out of the Great Hall leaving Hermione and Harry together.

"Is there something wrong Harry," Hermione asked. She was always the one that knew him best.

"I'm just getting tired of not sleeping well, but even Occlumency doesn't stop my scar from hurting," he replied with a shrug.

"I guess we should get to class. You remember that tests start tomorrow," Hermione said still judging Harry's reactions.

"How could I not remember?" Harry joked as the two walked out of the room. Hermione noticed Harry looking around more than usual and also that he seemed to smile more during this walk. She thought about asking him about it but didn't want to bring down whatever was helping his mood.

Before getting to the final corridor for class, Harry grabbed her arm. "What Harry? We can't be late."

Harry sighed and said, "I just wanted to tell you something." Harry briefly paused and said, "Thanks for everything you've done for me over the past six years. You're the best friend I could have ever asked for."

Hermione was obviously shocked. Harry almost never said things like this. "Um... Thanks Harry. You've been a great friend too. Why are you saying this now?"

"Oh, I've just been thinking that you've all put up with me being in bad moods so often and I never tell you how much you all help. C'mon let's get to class," he said with a final tug that brought them to the door.

Ron was already there and they sat next to him, but Hermione kept watching Harry closely for the rest of the class and saw that he suddenly seemed content but didn't seem to be paying attention. After class, the rest of the day seemed rushed and she made a mental note to talk to him about this after the D.A. meeting this evening.

Hermione had gone with Ginny to study in the Library and was going to meet Ron and Harry in the Room of Requirement which left the two boys alone in the common room where, instead of studying, Harry suggested they played chess before the meeting. This time it was very close, but as usual Ron won. "You're getting much better Harry," Ron said proudly.

"All thanks to your coaching," Harry happily said.

"Blimey," Ron exclaimed, "We're going to be late for the meeting. Hermione will skin you."

"Oh man," Harry said. "I need to get a couple books. You go ahead and tell her what I'm doing so she doesn't get too mad."

"Ok," Ron said eyeing Harry carefully. "You're coming straight there aren't you?"

"Where else would I go?" Harry replied. "Get going."

"See you in a minute," Ron said turning to leave.

"Oh Ron," Harry said causing his friend to turn. "You know...Thanks for being such a good friend and everything."

"What? Sure...Get your book before Hermione comes after you," Ron said sounding confused as he turned back and dashed out.

Harry slowly went to his room and sat down on the bed. 'Last chance to back out,' he thought out loud. Looking around, he tried to take in the comfort of the dorm. After a few minutes he

shook himself and thought, 'Now or never.' Standing, he dashed out of the dorm and through the portrait, but instead of turning toward the meeting room, he headed to the Entrance Hall, hoping to not be stopped.

Ron was a bit winded as he entered the Room of Requirement to see an annoyed Hermione Granger standing with Ginny. Cho had also just asked Hermione where Harry was so she was standing nearby as well. "Where HAVE you been?" Hermione said, sounding frighteningly like his mother.

"Playing chess, sorry," he got out between breaths.

"Where's Harry?" Ginny asked casually.

"Forgot a couple books," Ron answered and then turned to Hermione. "He's acting a bit queer if you ask me."

This triggered something in Hermione. "What? How do you mean?"

Ron recounted the story of how Harry had thanked him for being such a good friend. "You know, he was a bit odd this morning as well," Ginny added. "The way he said goodbye when I was leaving breakfast kind of gave me the chills."

"You know, he thanked me for being a good friend as well, just before first period," Hermione said, obviously turning something over in her head.

Suddenly she and Ron seemed to think of something at the same time because their heads snapped up and they stared at each other. "You don't think?" Hermione said.

"No! He wouldn't. Would he?" Ron asked.

"What? What's going on?" Ginny demanded.

"Class is cancelled!" Hermione yelled. "Let's go to his room," she added dragging Ron, both of them ignoring the questions from the other members.

"I'm coming too," Ginny said.

"Me too," Cho announced.

"I don't have time to argue," Hermione said sternly as she began to run down the hall, not saying anything else.

When the four of them came into the common room there were protests that a Ravenclaw had come in but Ron just yelled, "Where's Harry?"

No one answered so they continued up to his room and burst through the door. "He's not here?" Ron yelled.

"What's wrong?" Ginny pleaded.

Ron shook his head at Hermione who got a gleam in her eye and said, "Ron! The map!"

"What map?" Cho demanded.

"Harry's map of Hogwarts," Ginny replied. Of course this meant nothing to Cho who had never seen it.

'I solemnly swear I am up to no good.' Ron said, tapping the parchment with his wand. It quickly filled in.

"Is that what I think it is?" Cho asked, sounding amazed.

"There he is!" Hermione said. "He's by the Whomping Willow."

"He's gone," Ron added. "Must have just gone under." He stared at Hermione and said, "He's doing something stupid isn't he?"

"What's he doing?" Cho demanded.

Hermione glanced in his trunk and said, "His Invisibility cloak is still here so he's not trying to hide."

"His what?" Cho asked.

"Hermione! What's he doing?" Ginny asked, now very worried.

She looked hard at Ron and said, "I think Harry's gone off to fight Voldemort."

"What did you say?" Cho asked, clearly thinking she heard wrong.

"Ok, someone has to tell Dumbledore," Hermione announced. She looked at Ron who nodded and then added, "Ron and I are going after him."

"You're not going without me!" Ginny firmly added.

Cho however wasn't so anxious. Hermione realized this and said, "Cho. Go to Professor Dumbledore. Tell him we think Harry has gone to fight Voldemort. I think he's going to the Shrieking Shack."

"But he won't believe me?" Cho said.

"Oh, he'll believe you," Ron firmly said. "Ginny you don't have to come," Ron added in a concerned, but not demanding voice.

"There's no way you can stop me," she replied. "C'mon we've got to help him." The four of them ran out and Cho, still shaking her head turned towards the Headmaster's office while the other ones went after Harry.

Harry slowly opened the door that led into the Shrieking Shack and after checking for sounds, climbed through. He went to the next room, seeing it much the same as the time he met his godfather here. 'Fitting' Harry thought. He paced for a few minutes before sitting on the bed to wait. He felt strongly that Voldemort would come after sensing the evil wizard's feelings that morning. His scar had burned badly but he knew it was because Voldemort was happy.

A slight scuffing sound snapped Harry back to attention. He backed against the wall and pointed his wand at the door to the room. He saw the door slowly open and was just about to say a spell when he heard someone whisper, "Harry? Are you in here?"

"Hermione?" Harry said aloud, causing the three friends to burst into the room.

"What are you doing here Harry?" Hermione angrily said.

Panic suddenly set in for Harry. "You've got to get out of here now!" he exclaimed, not knowing when Voldemort would show up.

"We're not leaving you mate," Ron said in a tone that clearly made Harry feel that his friend didn't understand how bad this could get.

"Ok, fine. We'll all go. We just have to go now!" Harry said and started to make for the door when it slammed shut.

Ropes seemed to spring out of nowhere and his three friends were quickly bound, unable to move. Harry's scar started burning as the door slowly swung open revealing a tall, thin, hooded wizard with white face and glowing red slits for eyes. "We meet again Harry," Voldemort said sounding like he was relishing what was to come. Even though they were terrified, somehow his friends kept themselves from screaming. "I expected you to be alone Harry. However this turned out so much better." The wizard stepped into the room. "Now we can leave a witness to your death. That will be so much better, leaving no doubt to the fact that I did it."

"Let them go, I'll go wherever you want," Harry said, trying to think of anything to get his friends out.

"No Harry!" Hermione yelled.

"What have we here?" Voldemort said with his icy voice. "Two pure-bloods and a mudblood. Well, we know who won't live to be the witness, don't we?"

Harry suddenly hurled a curse at Voldemort who blocked it casually. "You really should have joined me Harry. We could have done extraordinary things. Even now, with no hope for survival you continue to fight."

Harry could feel Voldemort begin to probe his mind, but quickly shut him out. "Oh! Don't want me in there do you?" The wizard glanced to the bound students and after a second said, "So, we have your two best friends, and his younger sister. I have a wonderful idea."

"Let them go!" Harry demanded.

"How about this," Voldemort continued. "You watch me kill your friends and then you can follow knowing you caused this to happen." Harry saw Voldemort glance at Ginny

"Harry!" Ginny screamed.

Voldemort flicked his wand at Ginny, causing a red flash to sail toward her.

Harry quickly cast the trust shield spell which was quicker than the other curse, causing a bright golden glow to surround Ginny and deflect Voldemort's curse off, through the wall.

Voldemort instantly turned and yelled 'Crucio' at Harry who fell to the ground, twitching in pain. Feeling like ever muscle was about to explode, he cried out. Suddenly he felt Voldemort trying to get into his mind but as he was attempting to stand and also push the other wizard out of his mind, he caught Ginny's gaze and his mental wall temporarily crumbled.

The next second, the probing stopped, but was replaced by a terrifying laugh. "Well well, this is a very useful bit of information Harry. How did you keep this from me for so long?"

Harry's anger flared and he yelled 'Reducto' and a brilliant red light flashed at Voldemort who only barely got a shield up. There was a loud gong sound as the spell was deflected up and through the ceiling.

"Impressive Harry, very impressive. However, I have other things to deal with first. You must feel very special to hold such an important place in The-Boy-Who-Lived's heart," Voldemort said looking directly into Ginny's eyes. Suddenly another evil laugh. "She doesn't know!" Voldemort exclaimed, looking at Harry. Voldemort stepped closer to Ginny. "You don't know how he feels do you?" Voldemort again said to Ginny who looked both terrified and confused.

Voldemort began speaking as though he was enjoying every second, "There will a witness to the death of Harry Potter. The brother of the girl who holds Harry Potter's heart. And, I have another memory to send you out of this world with Harry. Instead of watching your friends die, I think you should be the one to kill them."

"That's not going to happen," Harry confidently said.

"Oh, I think it will," Voldemort replied, sounding confident as well. "First you'll kill the one you desire, then you'll kill the mudblood and then, your best friend can tell the world how you were killed after taking the lives of the two women he loved."

"You're insane," Harry yelled. "I'll never hurt them."

"Say goodbye to your friends Harry," Voldemort coolly said. Suddenly Voldemort's body became very rigid and Harry screamed in pain. It was the pain he had only felt one time before. That time, he begged for death to take him, but this time he had hoped it would happen but still wasn't totally prepared for the intensity of the pain.

Harry walked toward his friends slowly raising his wand. His eyes that had been so much a part of who he was were now no longer the soothing green, instead they were bright red, open only as slits. He could not hear the screams of his friends and was only vaguely aware of their mouths moving. The voice coming from his mouth was icy and terrifying, "Yes, scream. You see what Harry Potter has brought you? You chose to be his friends and now you will reap your rewards. Fitting you should find out how much he cares for you just before you die at his hands."

The wand that had at one time or another saved the three students was now pointed at the youngest one with an entirely different purpose. Ginny was staring down the end of this wand, knowing in her mind that her life was over. No longer screaming, she stared into the face of the boy she had dreamt about most of her life. No, that was no longer true. This face was not

the comforting face she had seen so many times in her sleep. She did not blame her Harry for any of this. Taking a deep breath she softly said, "It's not your fault Harry. I know you wouldn't do this. I don't blame you."

Something inside of Harry opened up at this. Some small part of him that still realized who he was saw the girl in front of him and realized what she said. This small opening in his head caused a familiar voice to appear in his head. 'Pull him in.' As had happened before, Harry understood and focused on how he felt about Ginny and in fact all of his friends.

The threatening image of Harry with red eyes suddenly stumbled a bit, his arm began trembling. However, just as suddenly, Harry stood up confidently again and his arm was once again firm and pointing at Ginny. Then, a slight twitch of his head, followed by a scream of pain and Harry stumbled back a few steps. The arm that was pointed menacingly at the young girl was now bending, slowly but it was moving.

Unable to move her gaze from his face, Ginny saw his eyes flicker. The red seeming to fade. Harry's face was grimaced in pain, but his wand was now pointing directly at his own chest. A voice came out of his mouth, not sounding like Harry, but also not sounding like Voldemort. 'Avada'...

Ginny screamed out, realizing what was happening, "Harry!"

Harry's curse continued, "Keda..."

Suddenly the door to the room flew open and Harry was blown across the room screaming, "Nooooooo!"

The stiff body of Lord Voldemort suddenly gave a shudder and vanished. The students all turned to see Professor Dumbledore swiftly entering the room. "Is everyone all right?" the Headmaster asked canceling the spell binding the students, before moving to Harry's body which was now in a lump on the floor.

"Professor!" Hermione exclaimed. "He...Voldemort was just about to kill Harry."

"Is he going to be ok?" Ginny asked.

"He will recover Miss Weasley," Dumbledore said. "I do not believe Voldemort was in control of Harry when I arrived Miss Granger."

"What?" Ron said. "Of course he was he just about used the killing curse on Harry!"

"We can discuss this more once we are back," Dumbledore said as a red flash entered the room. "Please tell her he is coming," Dumbledore softly said to Fawkes, who vanished in another flash of light. Dumbledore placed a small object on Harry's chest and tapped it with his wand. The next second, Harry's body vanished. "I'm afraid we will have to return via the passageway."

As soon as they were in the passageway, Dumbledore said, "I would have thought Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley would have had enough of this passage after your third year."

Most students were already in their common rooms by the time they arrived back in the castle, so they were able to reach the Headmaster's office quickly. Cho was waiting for them when they arrived. "What happened?" Cho pleaded and then realized someone was missing. "Where's Harry?"

Dumbledore put up a hand to quiet the girl and said, "Harry is in Madame Pomphrey's care. He should make a full recovery." Dumbledore stroked Fawkes before sitting down behind his desk, motioning the students to sit as well. "Miss Chang explained how you all decided to follow Harry out of the castle tonight. Can you tell me what happened when you caught up to him? Miss Granger."

Hermione went on to tell everything easily until the time Voldemort showed up. She stumbled a bit here. "He was worse than I ever imagined. I'll never sleep the same again," she said with a shudder.

"But Harry's already had to face him before," Ginny sadly said.

"Now I know why he has nightmares," Ron softly said with a shudder.

Hermione continued until the point where Voldemort possessed Harry. Then Ginny took over the story. At the end, Hermione said, "See, Voldemort changed his mind and was just going to kill Harry."

"I do not believe to be the case Miss Granger," Dumbledore sadly said. "I could tell Voldemort was not in control when I entered. That was Harry."

"But he was going to use the killing curse on himself then?" Ginny said.

"Yes, he was," Dumbledore sadly said. "He obviously had Voldemort trapped inside his mind. He was going to sacrifice himself in the hope of destroying Lord Voldemort."

The students sat in silence for a minute until Hermione asked, "Would it have worked?"

"Possibly," Dumbledore said cocking his head. "However I was not willing to sacrifice Harry in the hope of stopping Voldemort," Dumbledore added. "I hope you agree that was the correct choice?"

"Yes," three of the students said quickly. Then they turned to Cho who hadn't said anything. "Cho?" Ginny said surprisingly. "You think that was wrong?"

"I don't know?" Cho answered, clearly bothered by the events. "If it would have stopped him, I don't know."

Ron started to say something but Dumbledore stopped him. "It was my choice and I am comfortable with the one made. You all showed tremendous courage and loyalty in going after Harry. I had been concerned with the negative feelings he had been carrying around for some time now, but his compassion for all of you obviously pulled him through. I don't know many wizards that could overpower Voldemort once he had a firm grip on their mind."

They all sat in silence for a moment before Dumbledore said, "You may all leave and please do not discuss the events of tonight with anyone."

When the five students reached a point where they needed to split up to reach their respective common rooms, Cho surprised them all by saying. "I can't believe how you all handled that. No one in my house could have dealt with that." After an uncomfortable pause she asked, "He'll be ok, won't he?"

"Of course he will," Ron quickly said. "Harry always comes through."

The three Gryffindors looked at each other, trying to make the other believe what Ron just said. The rest of the trip to the common room was in silence. There were only a couple people still awake so the three made their way to one of the back couches and sat just looking at the floor for a few minutes.

"We actually came face-to-face with V..You-Know-Who," Ron said with a shudder.

"Ron, you've seen him and gotten away. You should start using his name," Hermione scolded, although not in a mean voice.

"I know, I know," Ron said. "V..Vol...Vol... Damn!"

"Voldemort Ron! Voldemort!" Ginny exclaimed. "He did this to all of us. He did this to Harry! Go get his cloak, I'm going to see him," Ginny demanded.

Chapter 14

Ron started to argue, but saw his sister had the face that said her mind was made up so he just said, "Fine, but don't get caught." Ron quickly ran up to the dorm and pulled out Harry's invisibility cloak.

"Be careful Ginny," Hermione said, drawing a surprised look from Ron for not trying to talk the younger girl out of going.

Ginny quickly made her way to the hospital wing and silently into the room where Harry was sleeping. She moved next to his bed and just looked at him. She saw him twitching and thought 'Even in his sleep he can't have any peace.' She softly stroked his face and after only a couple seconds, Harry's twitching stopped and he seemed to relax much more. Sighing, Ginny whispered, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Sometime later Ginny made her way back to the common room, planning on talking about all of this with Hermione when she heard her and Ron talking. Ginny stopped when Ron said something that caught her attention.

"What do you think You-Know-Who meant when he said Ginny held a special place in Harry's heart?" Ron softly asked.

"Isn't it obvious Ron?" Hermione sadly replied.

"If it was I wouldn't have asked."

"He loves her Ron. Harry loves Ginny," Hermione plainly said. This was the same conclusion Ginny had come to herself, but hearing it stated so plainly made it seem so real. Harry Potter, the boy she had a crush on forever and the boy she had really loved with all her heart for over two years loved her. She had always thought he just saw her as Ron's little sister, but he actually saw her as something much more.

"No way!" Ron replied and Ginny snapped back, eager to listen. "I mean when she started dating that Hufflepuff git this year he told her he was glad she was happy."

"Of course he said that Ron," Hermione said, irritated at having to explain feelings to her boyfriend. "He wants Ginny to be happy, but not with him."

"What? That's daft!" Ron exclaimed.

"Don't you know your best friend at all," Hermione snapped. "He doesn't want her to get hurt. He knew if Voldemort found out his feelings for her, it would make her more of a target. Even if it didn't, he's afraid of how much it would hurt her if he died in one of these attacks."

"Bloody Hell," Ron said sinking back into the couch.

"Don't you think that's a bit stupid," Ginny angrily said, not hiding that she had heard everything. "Even if he never dated me it would still kill me if something happened to him."

Hermione can see the anguish in her friend's eyes and said, "I know Ginny, I feel the same way. But you know Harry. He doesn't have anything to base these kinds of things on. I mean he's still surprised when we remember his birthday. He was raised to believe no one could ever love him."

Ginny thought of this and began crying more openly. "I'm going to tell him tomorrow. He can't do this."

"Ginny, no!" Hermione pleaded. "It's too much right now. He just tried to sacrifice himself for us. We can't add to whatever he's feeling. I can't even imagine what he's going through."

"But Hermione," Ginny said through her tears, "I want him to know. I want to be with him, to help him."

"Listen Ginny. He still has tests and you have O.W.L.s. There's no hurry, he'll be at the Burrow this summer, and you'll have time without rushing anything. You'll have a chance to talk to him then."

"Well, what do we do?" Ron asked.

"We'll just be there for him," Hermione firmly stated. "Try to act normally around him until he brings things up. He'll talk when he's ready."

Harry awoke early the next morning to an overwhelming feeling of being cheated. He had been so close to ending all of this and now it would start again. "I see you're awake," Dumbledore said, slowly striding to the bed.

Harry didn't know how to feel towards the Headmaster. He knew it had been him who stopped Harry from completing what he longed to do. "You are angry with me again," the Professor said more as a statement. Harry just glared. "Are you so sure it would have worked?"

"Either way, it would have been over," Harry replied coldly.

"For you yes. For everyone else, perhaps," Dumbledore replied. "Did you know that Aurors confronted at least twelve Death Eaters last night?" Harry looked interested but confused. "No? Well, it was a trap. Not a trap for us this time, a trap for them." Now Harry really looked confused. "It seemed a bit too easy and it turned out Voldemort set them up for two reasons. One because they had failed him too many times. Secondly to make sure the Order was busy. It nearly worked. If it hadn't been for a certain snowy owl acting very peculiar as I was about to leave, it would have succeeded. I allowed the rest of the Order to go on, but I remained and wasn't entirely surprised when Miss Chang demanded to see me."

Harry hung his head and said, "I was so close."

"Yes, but to what?" Dumbledore asked. "You may have succeeded and both of your goals would have been met. Voldemort may indeed have died and you would have seen Sirius and your parents. However, I'm not entirely convinced Voldemort would have been truly defeated by this. I believe the prophecy means one of you shall live." Harry just shrugged. "I had been concerned about something like this ever since your outburst with Professor Snape over the summer. I told you at the end of last year that your heart is what prevented Voldemort from

successfully possessing you at that time. Your heart full of love. But your growing hatred for Professor Snape masked that love didn't it?" The Professor studied Harry for a moment. "Well, something allowed your true heart to come through when it counted. You'll be happy to know that your friends are all well and are anxious to see you."

Harry sighed. "If they wouldn't have come, it would have been over."

"Yes, but then I am quite certain you would have failed. You were fighting him with the wrong emotions, his emotions and he would have most assuredly prevailed. If you are going to fight him, do it for the right reasons," Dumbledore said. "I think you will be allowed visitors after breakfast and understand Madame Pomphrey will let you leave by lunch."

"I don't want any visitors," Harry quickly said. "I want to be left alone."

"Harry, it does no good to shut them out," Dumbledore said but this wasn't what Harry wanted to hear.

"It does me good!" he quickly replied. "Can't I ever be in control of what happens to me?"

Dumbledore understood now. Harry resented his life being run by everyone else so he said, "Of course Harry. No visitors will be allowed. It is your choice."

The old wizard turned to leave but Harry said, "Thank you sir"

Feeling some of the weight lift from his heart, Dumbledore said, "You're welcome Harry. When the time comes, sacrifices may need to be made, but this is not that time." With that the man left Harry alone to deal with this as he chose.

It was around noon when Dumbledore returned to see Harry. "Madame Pomphrey says you may leave so you'll have time for lunch before returning to your tests. I understand it is in Defense so I have no doubt you will do well." Dumbledore looked intently at Harry and asked, "Is there anything you'd like to say?"

It always amazed Harry at how the Headmaster could read people. Harry had been thinking about something since the man left earlier today. He took a deep breath and said, "He has to be stopped before he gets more powerful. We have to do something soon."

Dumbledore didn't seem surprised at this but did sigh and say, "I had hoped it wouldn't be so soon when you said that. However you have never waited until I thought the time was right before being ready yourself. I can't give you details yet, but we will soon become more aggressive in going after him, and you will be involved."

Finally, Harry felt like he was going to be doing something other than acting alone. Dumbledore sensed his emotion and said, "It won't be easy or pleasant Harry. We will talk more this summer. Now, I believe you should go to lunch and then on to your test."

Harry snuck down to the kitchens so he could eat by himself. "Harry Potter sir!" Dobby came running over to him. "Dobby is hearing from the pictures that Harry Potter fought He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named again. Harry Potter is too brave. Too...."

"Dobby!" Harry exclaimed. "I'm just lucky. Professor Dumbledore saved me before I get hurt. Could I please get something to eat?"

"Of course! Dobby will get anything Harry Potter desires," the little house-elf squeaked before quickly getting Harry some lunch.

Harry ate slowly and then made his way to the classroom. He was quite early, but Professor Shackbolt was already there. "Harry! Good to see you up and about."

"Hello Professor. I really wasn't hurt or anything," Harry replied.

"Do you know, I've never personally seen him," Kingsley said, looking intently at Harry. "All my years as an Auror and I've never seen what he really looks like."

"You're not missing much," Harry said. "You've dealt with a lot of Death Eaters though."

"It's not quite the same now is it?" Kingsley said. Looking around to make sure no one else could hear he added, "I'd take the responsibility from you if I could."

"Thank you sir," Harry said. "I just want it over."

"Bet you do," Kingsley said just as the first students came in.

Ron and Hermione were some of the first into the room and sat down on either side of Harry. "Are you feeling ok?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked at Ron who also looked a bit worried. "I'm fine you guys. Don't worry." Harry said trying to smile. "Um... You know I'm sorry I got you guys involved again."

Hermione started to say something but Professor Shackbolt began talking at the same time so she wasn't able to get it out. This was just a written test with the practical part being held tomorrow. Harry was the first one done and had originally planned on quickly going off by himself but caught Ron's mouth for him to wait up so he sat there, pretending to still be working until Ron finished. Hermione gave Ron a pleading look so he and Harry decided to wait in the hall for her to finish.

Ron didn't really seem to know what to talk about so Harry asked about the Chudley Canons and smiled as Ron quickly perked up and proceeded to tell him in Hermione-like detail about their latest match. Finally Hermione came out looking pleased. "How do you think you did Ron?" Harry asked.

"Should have aced it," he confidently said. "I mean we've done everything on the test in D.A. for a while now."

Harry turned to Hermione and said, "I'd ask, but we know how you did. Perfect score no doubt."

Hermione looked proud but then suddenly got a serious look and said, "You didn't get us involved you know. It was our choice."

"Yeah mate, you can't take any of the heat for this one," Ron added. Harry started to argue but Ron loudly spoke up, "I think we have time for some wizard chess before supper. Are you up for it?"

Harry smiled and said, "If you think you can take me, you're on."

Hermione looked between the two of them, still amazed at how boys just glossed over everything. "But you both have to study later," she said as they walked to the common room.

As soon as they entered the common room, Ron announced, "I'll go get the set."

Once he disappeared up the stairs, Hermione gave Harry a strange look, but he quickly said, "I'd like to talk to you about something later." Hermione just nodded as Ron came back down with the chess set.

The two friends had been playing for a while and Hermione was sitting, ready a book when she heard, "Harry!" and saw Ginny engulf him in a tight hug causing everyone to look.

Harry was able to whisper, "Ginny, no one knows anything happened."

"Oh..I don't care," she said but did let go.

"But, it's really good to see you too," Harry said smiling brightly at her.

"Are you ok?" she asked as people started to look away.

"I'm fine Gin," Harry softly replied. "Don't worry about me."

That wasn't the right thing to say. Ginny got a slightly angry and hurt look so Harry quickly added, "But, thank you for asking."

Hermione came up and said, "C'mon Ginny. Let's go upstairs until supper."

"You two are coming to supper with us aren't you?" Harry asked before they got too far away.

"Of course we are," Ginny replied, now clearly smiling.

Ron and Harry didn't talk for most of the match, until Harry suddenly asked, "So, how did you know?"

Ron didn't look up from the board and said, "Something didn't seem right after you thanked me for being your friend. Then Hermione said you did the same thing to her."

"Oh," Harry replied as he finished his next move. "How did you find me?"

Ron told his knight to take Harry's bishop and simply said, "Map."

"Damn," Harry said, both in response to his bishop getting booted and to Ron's answer.

"You're totally mental. You know that don't you," Ron added.

"Seems I've heard that a few times," Harry said.

The girls came down just as Harry lost his second match. The four of them walked to the Great Hall, but before entering, Harry stopped them and asked, "Who knows?"

"Only Cho," Ron answered. Harry nodded but Ron continued, "Um...She thought Dumbledore shouldn't have stopped you."

The other three were watching him closely, and he wanted to say that he agreed but didn't really feel like getting into it now, so he said, "Oh."

They quickly found seats at the Gryffindor table and began eating when Ron, mouth still full of food said, "Wonder where Malfoy is?"

Ginny turned to Harry who was sitting right next to her and shrugged.

Suddenly Professor Dumbledore tapped on a glass, getting everyone's attentions. "There were a couple developments last night that have not been reported yet and I'd like you to hear the real story before reading rumors in the paper." Harry looked at Ron but he just shrugged. "First off," Dumbledore continued, "Voldemort sent some of his supporters into a trap last night. They were sent for a couple of reasons. First off, it was punishment for failing him in the past. This is how he treats those who choose to follow him. Aurors were allowed to use unforgiveable curses against the Death Eaters and the battle resulted in 10 of his supporters being killed. Thankfully, no Aurors were seriously injured."

Now Hermione, Ron and Ginny were looking at Harry who said, "I didn't know. Wonder if Lucius was one of them?"

Dumbledore's voice brought their attention back to him. "The second reason for this battle was to create a diversion that would tie up some of our resources. Now, what he needed a diversion for was that he was himself attempting to attack someone that he has been trying to get to since his return. However unknown to him, he was being led into a trap himself." There was some mumbling and Harry hung his head. "It seems some students from the D.A. group lured Voldemort into a trap in Hogsmeade in the hope of destroying him." Now the students were all looking around, mostly at Harry and his friends. "The students were nearly successful but Voldemort escaped at the last moment." Dumbledore paused while the students were openly questioning each other about this. "I am quite sure, this is the first time Voldemort has been lured into a trap and nearly defeated and the fact that fifth and sixth-year students did it is quite remarkable. He cannot feel very confident at this time and it shows that he is indeed vulnerable. I hold the students who accomplished this in the highest esteem."

Harry was thankful that none of them were singled out by name and was surprised Dumbledore had been so willing to say he was proud of them. After things settled down and people started talking about things amongst themselves, Sara, one of the girls in Ginny's class came over and said, "Ginny, can you help me study for our Transfiguration O.W.L.?"

Ginny looked at Harry but he quickly said, "Ginny it's important you get good grades. Go study." He saw the look of concern on her face so he added, "I'll be a good boy and stay in the castle."

"You better," she said as she got up to leave with Sarah.

After a few minutes Hermione said, "We should really study as well."

"Yeah, we did say we'd study later," Ron replied, surprising Harry by not complaining about studying.

After gathering their books, Harry sat in a chair, Ron and Hermione sat in one of the smaller couches and they all began looking over notes for their upcoming exams. Before long, Harry saw Hermione slide into Ron a bit as they got more comfortable. Harry was comforted by the site of his two best friends being together. After a while longer, Harry started to feel like a third wheel so he said, "I'm going to turn in early tonight. You two continue...ahh...studying." Harry smiled at his friends before turning to head up the stairs.

Suddenly he heard, "Wait up mate, I'll come as well."

Harry knew why Ron was doing this so he quickly turned around and said, "I'm just going to bed. Don't worry. Go back to snogging your girlfriend." Harry clearly smiled at this which relieved Ron of any responsibility to follow him upstairs.

Harry truly felt happy for his friends, even though he was jealous of not having what they did. They never made him feel uncomfortable or like they didn't want him around. Harry pulled his old photo album from his trunk and fell back onto his bed. Instinctively he flipped to the page that showed his godfather smiling back up at him. Lightly tracing the picture with his finger he whispered, "I almost had him Sirius. He would be gone and I could see you again. I was so close."

Sometime later, the door to the dorm slowly opened and his two friends walked in to make sure he was ok. They were both moved by the sight of him asleep with his hand still on the picture of his godfather. Hermione hugged Ron and whispered, "He can't take much more of this."

"He'll be ok Hermione. We'll help him," Ron said kissing her on the temple.

The next morning, there was a flurry of owls and then a lot of mumbling and looking around. "Ok, Hermione, what is it?" Harry asked her as she was making faces, reading the Daily Prophet. She read the article describing the report of students leading Voldemort into a trap. The article made it sound like such a good plan when Harry knew it was a feeble attempt to end his own pain. Another article also described the incident where the Death Eaters were led into a trap and killed. It turned out all of the captured Death Eaters from the Department of Mysteries attack had been there and were killed. This meant that Lucius Malfoy had been killed.

It took three days before Hermione got to talk to Harry. Harry had finally told Ginny that he would feel terrible if she did badly on her O.W.L.s because she spent so much time around him and Ron had gone to play chess with Seamus, probably at Hermione's request. Hermione and Harry were studying in the library when she asked, "Did you still want to talk?"

Harry thought for a moment and then calmly asked, "Did Ginny say anything about what she found out?"

"Well of course she did Harry. That was huge," Hermione said, sounding exasperated.

Harry groaned and ran his hands through his hair, messing it up even more.

Hermione continued by saying, "She needed to know."

Harry snapped his head up, "Why? She seems happy enough with that Hufflepuff bloke."

Hermione shook her head and sadly asked, "Do you want her to be happy enough or as happy as she could be?"

"I want what's best for her Hermione," Harry firmly stated.

"You should give her the choice," Hermione replied, just as firmly.

"But Hermione, you were in the Shrieking Shack. You know what I was about to do. I couldn't do that to her," Harry pleaded.

Hermione got a very determined look, grabbed his hand and said, "Come with me." She dragged him off to an unused classroom, quickly cast a Silencing Charm on the door and turned back to him looking quite menacing. "I wasn't going to talk about this yet but you brought it up." Hermione changed to a very angry voice, "Did you think about anyone other than yourself when you decided to do that?" Harry was shocked but began to get a bit angry. Before he could say anything, she continued, "Don't say anything! Do you have any idea what would have happened to Ginny, Mrs. Weasley, Ron and me if you had finished that spell? Do you? It would have killed us Harry!" She paused to see the pain in his face but continued, "You know how you felt when you saw Sirius die. Well, we've known you longer than you knew him so it would have hurt us more."

"It's not the same!" Harry snapped.

"It is too!" Hermione yelled. "We love you Harry, we all do. It would have hurt Ginny if you had died. It wouldn't matter if you two were dating or not. She loves you, even if you won't let her." Harry was obviously confused and Hermione knew it. "Harry, you're my family. It would kill me if you died. You know Mrs. Weasley thinks of you as her son. She would be just as hurt if you died as if Ron did. If Ginny falls in love with someone else because you won't let her in," Harry painfully flinched at this, "she would still be devastated if you got hurt. You can't change that."

Harry was rubbing his head now. Hermione softened her voice and said, "I know what getting rid of Voldemort would mean. It's not worth losing you."

"How can you say that?" Harry quickly asked. "Look how many he's killed."

"I know Harry, I know," Hermione responded, trying to comfort him. "I still don't think it's worth it. Professor Dumbledore didn't think so either."

"Yeah, but I say you aren't thinking with your head," Harry softly said.

Hermione sighed and said, "I don't want to argue with you about this. We were talking about Ginny. The fact is, it's not going to matter if you two are dating or not. I know that for a fact. Do you want to keep pushing her away or try to make her and yourself happy?"

Harry had a few restless nights of sleep thinking about what Hermione said but couldn't bring himself to any conclusions. The three friends were sitting outside, waiting for the final feast before summer holiday. Ginny just came out and plopped down between Hermione and Harry. "No more O.W.L.s," she merrily said.

"How do you think you did?" Harry asked.

"I think ok. No Hermione or anything but ok," she replied with a glance at her friend who was leaning back into her brother. She sighed and worked up the nerve to do something she had been thinking about for a week now, "Want to talk a walk Harry? Looks like these two could stand some time alone."

Harry suddenly felt trapped but saw the look of worry on Ginny's face and said, "Sure. It gets sickening having to watch then snog all the time."

"Don't hurry back," Ron joked before being hit by Hermione who studied the two as they walked away.

After walking along the lake for a while in silence, Harry said, "Wouldn't you rather spend time with the Hufflepuff guy? You may not see him for a while."

"Oh, I ditched him," Ginny calmly said.

"Oh," Harry replied. "He didn't do anything wrong did he?"

"No, it just wasn't right," she replied.

Harry sighed and stopped. Ginny realized this and turned to look at him, sensing the torment. "Ginny..." Harry started to say.

"I don't want to talk about it Harry," Ginny quickly replied, startling Harry. "I don't want to talk about what he said or anything like that. I just want to spend some time with you. Just us."

"Oh..Ok," Harry said and they kept walking.

"Let's talk when you come to the Burrow this summer. Until then just think. Things don't have to be so hard," she said soothingly.

The two walked for a while, threw stones at the giant squid and talked about nothing important until it was time for the feast. They found Ron and Hermione in the same spot and the four made their way to the Great Hall together. Dumbledore got everyone's attention and began speaking. "Another eventful year behind us. You will all be going back to a world that is being tested right now. Have faith that the current situation will pass, it always does. I have been extremely heartened this year by the interaction between all four houses and this gives me hope for the future."

"We have seen that our enemy is vulnerable and that fuels our hope. You will all be tested over the coming months. Remember those who have lived and died in the pursuit of what is right and good."

"I will miss those of you who will no longer return and hope that those of you who do will continue to find Hogwarts a place where you can grow and learn from one another. Remember, do what you can to help each other. Your greatest strengths are those around you." With a wave of his hands, the food appeared and the students began to dig in.

Harry went to bed early again without saying much to his friends. He was dreading going back to the Dursley's for any length of time. He was also very quiet on the train ride home, even declining chances to play exploding snap with Ron and Ginny. When they arrived at the station, Mrs. Weasley hugged him tight and said, "You won't be there long this year. We'll have you home soon."

Harry realized what she said and looked at her. She just nodded and hugged him again.

Hermione hugged him tightly and said, "Please don't do anything stupid before we see you again." She was only half kidding.

Harry smiled at this and replied, "I promise, nothing stupid."

Hermione made a "Hrmp" sound like she didn't exactly believe him.

"Only another month and then you can hex the Muggles if they mess with you," Ron said eagerly. "We hope to have you out by then."

Harry saw Vernon angrily shifting, waiting for him to finally get over so they could go. Ginny came up behind Harry and said, "It's going to be ok Harry."

Harry turned, smiled and said, "I guess so. You know I..."

Ginny smiled and said, "I know Harry. It doesn't have to be so hard. Just think about it will you?" She hugged him warmly and added, "And write."

"I will, I promise," Harry replied, meaning to answer both questions.

Harry slowly started walking towards his Uncle when he felt an arm around his shoulder. "Wotcher Harry!" Tonks cheerfully said.

"Tonks!" Harry replied, his mood brightening. "What are you doing? Going to threaten them again?"

"Well maybe, but that's not why I'm here," she replied. "I heard you about cheated me out of my chance at him."

"Oh, you heard about that," Harry said, his head falling.

"Heard about it! Everyone at the office is talking about it," she quickly said. "I told them they should yank you out of school and make you my partner and we'd go get him."

Harry looked stunned. "How did they take that?"

"I think some of them actually considered it," she laughed. "Promise me you'll try a different strategy next time. Then, once you're out of school, we'll be partners. Deal?"

"Really?" Harry happily said. "Deal. But what if that's the only way?"

"We've got a lot of things to try before we consider that," she said ruffling his hair. "Now let's go see your Uncle," she added with an evil grin.

Harry grinned all the way home after Tonks' little talk with his Uncle. This summer was starting off much better than he thought it would. Dumbledore promised to get him more involved, Tonks actually said she'd be his partner. He was finally feeling like progress was going to be made and he was going to be part of it.

** ** Author's note ** **

If you want the story to stay in canon, stop reading... What comes next is not something I see happening in any real book but since this is just my rambling I'm going with it.

I *may* continue this story in one of two ways. One from this point on or after the next few pages.

Thanks again for reading

** ** End of Author's note ** **

The weeks passed surprisingly quickly. Harry had been reading and re-reading the books Moody let him get and had been owling his friends as much as possible. Of course nothing specific could be discussed but they had found clever ways of saying what they wanted. True to his word, he consistently owed Ginny, never talking about feelings or anything, but it was still nice to have regular contact with her. This was the only thing that weighed on his mind since term ended. How would he handle Ginny now that his feelings were out in the open?

The week of his birthday, Harry was supposed to go to Mrs. Figg's house to meet someone. He assumed it was Lupin to discuss getting him away from the Dursley's. This had come up in some of his letters to his old Professor. Harry thought they wanted him out on his birthday so he wouldn't hex his Aunt and Uncle as soon as he was of age. Harry was surprised when not Lupin but Professor Dumbledore answered the door.

"Hello Harry," Dumbledore said with a smile.

"Professor!" Harry said. "What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing wrong at all Harry. I promised to talk to you this summer and now is the time to do just that," Dumbledore said motioning Harry to sit in a chair. Harry quickly sat down, eager to hear what was going on. "Do you remember saying that something had to be done and Voldemort needed to be stopped?"

"Of course! Have you thought of something we can do?" Harry asked, clearly excited.

"Yes Harry I have," Dumbledore responded. "However, it will mean sacrifices on both our parts and I wanted to ask if you were willing to join me."

"Yes!" Harry instantly said. "I'll help."

"Don't be so quick to answer Harry," Dumbledore said sounding very serious now. "If you agree, you will be doing more than helping; you will be an equal partner." Now Harry looked confused. Dumbledore spent the next three hours telling his plan to Harry and letting Harry think and ask questions, never hesitating to answer every single one.

Harry had been silent for over ten minutes and finally looked at the Headmaster with full resolve and said, "I still want to do it. If this is a chance, I want to do it."

"Very well Harry," Dumbledore said. "I can't tell you how much it pains me that we need to take these actions at this time, but all the same I am as proud of you as I have ever been of anyone. We will make the announcement after your birthday and will begin immediately thereafter. Please do not discuss this with anyone at all. You must realize how people will take this." Harry nodded. "Remus knows about this plan but other than those directly involved no one else does. He was very reluctant to even consider it but after your actions last year, he agrees that you would try on your own anyway."

"I can't believe we'll be doing this," Harry said.

"You have until we make the announcement at your birthday to change your mind, after that we are both committed," Dumbledore said placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You know of course that Sirius would insist on joining us if he were here. He would be worried but I'm sure he would want no one besides you next to him."

"Thank you sir," Harry said before heading back to the Dursleys. Harry couldn't believe what he was about to do. He felt terrified of the idea, sad at what it meant, and excited that it may work, all at the same time. He even didn't mind having his birthday party at Grimmauld Place, the place he swore he would never go again. He actually thought seeing it would reinforce why he was doing this.

Hermione had traveled to the Burrow and her and the Weasley's were ready to leave for Grimmauld Place when Ginny looked at the clock that showed the entire family. "Can we tell Harry what his present is?" she pleaded. Mr. & Mrs. Weasley had charmed another hand for their clock that had Harry's face on it. It was currently set to "trapped", which is how Mrs. Weasley considered Harry when he was at his Aunt and Uncle's house.

"We agreed it would be better to surprise him with it when he gets here," Molly replied beaming at the new hand.

When Harry arrived late in the afternoon, all of the Weasley's and Hermione were already there. They were all a bit surprised at how Harry looked when they saw him. Gone was the look of guilt and hopelessness that they had seen after most stretches with his Aunt and Uncle. Harry looked much older and very self assured.

After hugging Mrs. Weasley, she said, "You're looking better this year Harry. Have they been better to you?"

"They've been the same Mrs. Weasley. I'm just feeling better," Harry replied.

Hermione quickly hugged him next. "You're really looking good Harry. Did something happen that we don't know about?"

"Thanks Hermione," Harry laughed. "Nothing that I know happened. You're not worried about me now that I'm looking better are you?"

"You know girls Harry, you can't please them," Ron joked slapping him on the back.

"Harry better not know girls," Ginny quickly said before blushing. "I mean...Well, you know what I mean."

Harry hugged her and said, "I know what you mean and you're right, I'm still clueless."

They opened all of his presents and happily ate the food and cake having one of the most enjoyable times Harry could remember. He was talking to Ginny when Hermione pulled Ron to the side and said, "Something's up Ron."

"C'mon Hermione," Ron said. "You're worried when he's unhappy and now you're worried that he's happy. Why can't you give him a break?"

"It's not that," Hermione softly said. "Look at the others. Lupin looks really worried and seems worse when he looks at Harry. Harry's never been this content during the summer before."

"Well it can't be bad can it?" Ron replied. "Maybe Lupin's having girl problems."

Harry had been able to walk around the house alone after sneaking out of the kitchen while the others were still eating. He went to the room where the Black Family Tree was hanging and lightly traced the burn mark where Sirius' name should have been. He then turned to look out the window onto the Muggle street below. It was just beginning to get dark and only a few people were out. A movement drew his attention and he saw a young lady pulling on a rope. The other end of the rope was behind a truck so Harry couldn't see what it was attached to. The lady looked angry and began saying things. Suddenly, a large white poodle bounded up to the woman causing her to smile, scratch the dog behind the ears and continue down the street. Harry felt the chuckle start deep within and let himself laugh out loud at the thought of Sirius seeing this vision. Harry felt his resolve strengthen and he made his way back to the party.

Before long, members of the Order started arriving. Tonks chatted with Ginny and Hermione while Ron played chess with Harry. Hermione noticed that more members of the Order were here than she had ever seen at one time. "Tonks, why are there so many members here?"

"Beats me," she said but Hermione could detect a bit of hesitation. "Some really important meeting tonight. Dumbledore wanted everyone to make it."

Soon after Dumbledore showed up, he came to where Harry was standing with his friends. "I hope you are all enjoying the party?" They all said they were. "Harry, do you have a moment? I promise to return you directly." Harry nodded and then turned to follow the Headmaster into another room. He didn't know that all of his friends were watching warily. Hermione was the only one who noticed Lupin suddenly end his conversation and follow Harry.

"Well Harry, I wanted to make sure you were still ready to do this," Dumbledore simply said.

"Harry," Lupin quickly said. "You don't have to do this you know. We can keep going as we are."

"I know Remus," Harry said, still not used to using that name. "You were right when you thought that I'd do something anyway. I just can't sit around why this is going on. It's driving me crazy."

"Stubborn. You get that from Lily," he said, trying to joke but you could see the seriousness of this in his eyes.

"So you're sure?" Dumbledore asked.

"I've never been more sure of anything," Harry confidently said. "I'm scared, sad, and excited, but I know this is the right thing to do." The three walked back into the main room with Professor Dumbledore going straight to Mr. & Mrs. Weasley, Harry to his friends and Lupin just paced the floor.

"What did he want Harry?" Ron quickly asked. Even Hermione didn't scold him for being nosey.

"Just asking if I'm really ok. He's like you guys, wondering if I'm going to crack," Harry said with a smile but this didn't fool Hermione or Ginny.

Mrs. Weasley came over to the group. "There's going to be a meeting now so you three have to go home. Fred and George you two need to clear out as well."

The twins overheard this and complained. "But we're members," George stated.

"Junior members," Ginny teased.

"Yes, well Dumbledore insists this is for full members only, now get going so we can start," Mrs. Weasley demanded over more comments from the twins.

"Is Harry coming with us," Ron asked causing everyone to look at Molly.

She looked a bit flustered and said, "No. Dumbledore said Harry has to stay for this one. But, he'll be over directly after."

"You'll tell us when you get there won't you?" Ron pleaded at Harry.

"Course I will," Harry said, now trying to hide his sadness at what was to happen. Harry then did something that was very out of character for him, he hugged Ron.

Ron didn't know what to make of it and mumbled, "Um..See you later mate."

Hermione was now certain something was up. She hugged Harry and whispered, "I know something's going on. Is it bad?"

Harry was still hugging her when he said, "It's not stupid. Remember, you and Ron are my best friends."

She started to say something, convinced now more than ever that something wasn't right, but Harry let go and quickly turned to Ginny. He pulled her a few steps away, not caring what the others thought and said, "Um...Ginny." She was looking directly into his eyes, sensing herself that something was going on. "You know what he said that night?" She nodded. "It was true. Please remember that I want you to be happy and safe more than anything."

Ginny hugged him tightly and said, "I don't know what's going on but you better explain it to me when you get to the Burrow."

"I will Gin, I promise," Harry said now fighting hard to hold back his emotions.

Mrs. Weasley and all of her children were looking at him very oddly but she made the children grasp the portkey and she activated it. Before they turned to go back into the main room, Harry stopped her and said, "Mrs. Weasley, I've never properly thanked you for everything you've done for me. You've treated me better than anyone in my life. Thank you." Harry instigated the hug this time and it shocked the woman.

"You're just like my son Harry," she said realizing whatever was going to happen couldn't be good.

The two entered the room and the first thing Harry heard was, "What's Potter doing in this meeting?" Snape was glaring at him.

Dumbledore spoke up. "You all are aware of what happened between Harry and Voldemort a couple months ago. Voldemort was quite unnerved by this and many of his supporters could tell. When the story ran in the Daily Prophet, there began to be dissention within his supporters and he has yet to silence it. We have stepped up our actions against him and have made some progress. I feel that now is the time to press our position."

Lupin stood up and started pacing but Dumbledore continued, "Three of our members are going to actively go after Voldemort with the intent of finally stopping him." The members began shifting in their seats.

"Excuse me Headmaster," Snape said. "Wouldn't it be prudent to not discuss our direct plans in front of non-members?" The potions master glared at Harry.

Dumbledore shook his head slightly. "Nymphadora Tonks, myself and Harry Potter will leave immediately after this meeting with the intent of finding a way to destroy Lord Voldemort."

"You can't be serious?" Snape bellowed.

"You can't make Harry go!" Mrs. Weasley yelled. Everyone else had begun to mumble as well.

Dumbledore held up his hands and said, "Severus, I am indeed serious. Molly, I am not forcing Harry to go. It was in fact his comments that set this plan into motion. He chose to come."

"But he's just a boy!" she exclaimed again.

"Yes Molly he is," Dumbledore agreed. "He is a boy that was within seconds of willingly sacrificing his own life trying to defeat Voldemort. If I had been a moment later, he would be dead and there is a chance Lord Voldemort would be as well."

"What? The story never said anything like that," she said, staring at Harry. Only Lupin and Tonks had been told the whole story.

"Yes, the full story was not told to the Daily Prophet," Dumbledore added. "Harry indeed had Lord Voldemort trapped within his mind and had nearly completed the killing curse on himself when I stopped him, allowing Voldemort to escape. I was not willing to sacrifice Harry then, and I am not willing to sacrifice him now."

Snape was looking at Harry with an entirely different expression. Obviously he hadn't heard the real story either. Dumbledore continued, "I assure you I will watch over him to the best of my abilities but we are indeed going to do this. Minerva McGonagall will be acting Headmaster in my absence. Remus Lupin and Kingsley Shacklebolt will take over running the Order. Harry will not return for his seventh year at Hogwarts, we will deal with any issues that causes after Voldemort is defeated." Dumbledore paused and said, "Harry, is there anything you'd like to say."

Harry thought before standing up and saying, "I don't know how we're going to do this, but I trust Professor Dumbledore. I don't want to die, but I can't stand living like I have been." Harry looked at Mrs. Weasley and saw the tears flowing before she turned to leave the room. Harry quickly followed.

"Please don't cry Mrs. Weasley," Harry said when he got to her.

She turned and hugged him tightly. "You don't have to do this Harry. You can stay with us, we'll keep you safe. You never have to see those Muggles again."

Harry decided to tell her what Voldemort found out. "Mrs. Weasley, Voldemort found out something about me the last time. He had just done the Cruciatius curse on me and I wasn't quick enough to block his Legilimecy. He found out that I really care for Ginny."

"What?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "Well of course you care for Ginny."

"He found out I really care for her," Harry said and then found the courage to say it correctly. "I love her Mrs. Weasley. I have for a while. He knows that now and was going to make me kill her. I can't let anything happen to her or any of you."

The woman hugged him again. "Please change your mind Harry. We can keep her safe." Mrs. Weasley was crying heavily just as Mr. Weasley and Professor Dumbledore came in.

"We have to leave Harry," Dumbledore softly said. "I'll do my best Molly."

Professor Lupin gave Harry a hug and said, "Your parents and Sirius would be very proud of you. I am as well. Please be safe."

"Thanks for everything Professor," Harry said.

"Ready Harry," Tonks said, no trace of her usual joking tones.

Harry took one last look and again saw Snape watching from the doorway with the same odd expression. "Ready." Dumbledore held out the portkey and when the three of them took it, they vanished.

When Ron, Hermione and Ginny arrived at the Burrow Hermione instantly started talking, "Something big is going on and it involves Harry."

"Yes, he never talks about feelings like that," Ginny agreed.

"The last time he did..." Ron said. "You don't think?"

Hermione thought and said, "I asked him if it was bad when we were hugging and all he said was that it wasn't stupid."

"Professor Dumbledore is there, he won't let Harry do anything," Ron said, trying to convince himself.

"He's doing something dangerous, I know he is," Ginny said as she sat down.

Later, the three were sitting in the living room still trying to figure out what could be happening when Bill and Charlie appeared in the kitchen. Ginny was the first one to them and saw the very worried looks on their faces. "What's Harry doing?" she demanded, "We know something's going on."

The two older brothers looked at each other, knowing that their little sister always had a thing for Harry. Bill hugged her and said, "They won't let us say. Mum will be here in a bit."

For the next few minutes, Ron and Ginny tried to get information out of either Bill or Charlie but weren't successful. Things were getting kind of heated when the sudden appearance of Mr. & Mrs. Weasley made everyone stop. Ron couldn't remember seeing his mother in such a state. Mr. Weasley helped her to a chair where she sat sobbing almost uncontrollably. Ginny hugged her mom and asked, "Mummy are you ok?"

Mr. Weasley who was holding together better spoke up. "Children, I'll tell you as much as we're allowed but you cannot so much as breath a word of this to anyone." The man paused to breathe and said, "Dumbledore has appointed Professor McGonagall as temporary Headmistress of Hogwarts as he will not be returning this year. Harry will not be coming to the Burrow nor returning to Hogwarts this year. Dumbledore, Tonks and Harry have left on a mission to find and destroy Lord Voldemort."

"What?" the three younger children all said at once. At that same time, the clock made a sound and the hand with Harry's face moved and was now pointing to "war".

Chapter 15

It was early in the morning as Molly Weasley stood alone in the kitchen of the Burrow beginning to get things together for the family's breakfast. The time before the others woke up was her only time to let her true emotions show. Alone in her kitchen she let the tears come as they may, and in the two years since the official war started, they came quite often. She worried so much about her children. Bill, Charlie, Fred and George were all official members of the Order now. Bill and Charlie were regularly out on special protection assignments and she worried constantly when they were gone. Fred and George mainly developed devices the others could use so they weren't directly involved in the fighting, but as soon as word got out they were helping the cause; they started receiving threats from Death Eaters. Percy had gotten back in the good graces of the Minister of Magic and was once again the assistant to the Deputy Minister. She worried about him, not so much for his safety but how his allegiance to the current Minister would continue to pull him further away from the rest of the family.

Mrs. Weasley also worried about her youngest son. Ron had entered Auror training directly after graduating Hogwarts along with one of his best friends Hermione Granger. Molly had been happy when Ron and Hermione dated, but was very much relieved when they both decided they were better suited to just being friends. Molly hated that Ron and Hermione both were working as hard as they could so they could directly join the fight against Voldemort's rise. Her youngest girl Ginny had just graduated this year and started training to be a healer at St. Mungo's Hospital. Molly was thankful that the young girl hadn't chosen to follow in her brother's footsteps and join in the fighting.

Molly glanced at her magical clock on the wall that showed the current location of all of her children. All the faces were pointing to home even though that meant various locations, except for one. Each face had distinctive flaming red hair except one, and it had raven black hair. The boy she considered as one of her own was currently pointing to 'War'. Harry Potter's hand on the clock had either been on War or Mortal Peril since he left with Professor Dumbledore and Nymphadora Tonks almost two years ago to find a way to defeat Lord Voldemort for good. As thankful as Molly was that all of the red-haired faces were safely at 'Home', she couldn't keep the tears from falling at the thought of what the other boy was going through.

Harry hadn't contacted anyone since leaving that night after his birthday party. There had been times when people thought they saw him in various places but these were usually written off as hopeful thinking. The only time they were all fairly certain Harry had been around was just before the Holidays this year. Bill had been stationed with a group of people that was going to help protect Beauxbatons from an attack that was reported to be imminent. He was sitting in camp one night when three hooded figures casually walked directly into their camp, causing everyone to wonder about them. When the three passed where Bill was sitting, the figure in the middle stopped and seemed to stare at him for a second. Bill felt something strangely familiar about the figure but before he could place the feeling, the third figure nudged the other one and they continued to the far side of the camp where they sat close together, speaking only in whispers.

That night, there had been a surprise attack on their camp and in the midst of all the confusion, Bill was hit by a large limb and knocked down, unable to move. He looked up to see the mask of a Death Eater looming above him and truly thought that would be the last thing he saw. Suddenly, the Death Eater was blasted away and one of the hooded figures

came to him and said, "You're going to be ok." The figure placed a small piece of parchment into Bill's hand before Bill passed out. When Bill woke the next day in St. Mungos with Mr. & Mrs. Weasley at his side, he noticed the crumpled parchment on the stand next to his bed. Opening the note he saw that it simply said:

Tell the others I'm fine. H.

Molly Weasley had taken that piece of parchment and carried it with her from that moment on.

Hermione had been equally worried about Harry, and in some ways even more so. She still lived with her parents while she was finishing training to be an Auror but spent a great deal of time at the Weasley's studying with Ron or just worrying with Mrs. Weasley. She had been furious with Harry when he left with Dumbledore after his birthday party, but quickly progressed to worrying almost constantly about him. She liked being at the Weasley's where the clock on the wall at least would let her know he wasn't in Mortal Peril. Her breakup with Ron had gone surprisingly well. Neither of them could pinpoint when it happened exactly. One day, they both realized that they had just been acting as best friends for the past couple months and both seemed much happier with that label so their relationship just went back to that. Ron had actually gone out with Lavender Brown a couple times since graduation but Hermione had been focused on her training.

Harry had sent Hedwig to stay with Ginny when he left but Hedwig decided to stay with Hermione instead, irritating Ginny. Hermione liked having the owl around since she was very useful, but also because she sensed how much the owl loved Harry. It was almost like having her own magical clock because she could see Hedwig become nervous on some days and when she asked Ron about this he would say that Harry's hand on the clock had been on Mortal Peril at the same time.

It was July 30th and Hermione was going to spend the next couple days at the Burrow with Ron and his family. Other than the Holidays, this was an emotional time for the family since it was Harry's birthday and the anniversary of when they had last seen him. It really bothered Ron that there wasn't anything he could do to help his friend. It was all Hermione could do after Harry left to keep Ron from storming off to try and find his friend. Hermione would have liked to do that as well, but without any plan or clues, she knew it would be a hopeless task.

Hermione was staying in the twin's old room which Mrs. Weasley had done a thorough job of cleaning. Bill happened to be in Percy's old room since he had just come back from another assignment and wanted to be close to the family for a while. She couldn't really room with Ginny anymore. Ginny had taken Harry's departure quite differently and things between Ginny, Ron and Hermione had been very strained ever since. Hermione had to keep reminding Ron that she was his little sister and had her own way of dealing with things. Hermione couldn't relate to Ginny's actions either and this caused the two to drift apart.

Ron and Hermione had stayed up late with Bill, listening to his latest stories from his last mission. They tended to get into long discussion on what they thought Dumbledore, Tonks and Harry were currently doing and this seemed to make Ron and Hermione feel much better. They all finally trudged up to bed knowing that Ron and Hermione had to get up early to continue training in the morning.

Hermione's alarm had just gone off when she saw Hedwig fly through the window looking very agitated. "What's up girl?" Hermione asked but Hedwig wouldn't sit still long enough for Hermione to pet her. The owl would fly around the room and then out the window, only to return the next moment. Hermione got a queasy feeling in her stomach but headed to take a quick shower before getting ready for training. While she was getting dressed, she thought she heard some commotion from downstairs. When she reached the bottom, she heard Mrs. Weasley and Ginny in an argument.

"I'm sick of that damn clock!" Ginny exclaimed. "I wish you would have never put his face on it!"

"Don't you ever say that Ginny," Mrs. Weasley scolded. "He's as much a member of this family as anyone else."

"Yeah, then why isn't he here?" Ginny spat back.

Hermione entered the kitchen just in time to see Mr. Weasley kiss his wife and say, "I'm going to the office early, I'll try to find out what's going on." With a pop, Arthur vanished. Hermione looked at the clock and saw that Harry's had was indeed pointing to "Mortal Peril."

Bill had just come downstairs and was closely followed by Ron when they heard a pop and saw Mr. Weasley standing back in the kitchen with a very confused look. "Can't get in," he said.

"What's wrong dear?" Molly asked.

"Can't get into the Ministry building. It just spits you right back out," Mr. Weasley said. He was about to say something else when the head of Kingsley Shacklebolt appeared in the fireplace.

"Arthur!" Kingsley said with urgency.

"I'm here Kingsley, what's going on?" Mr. Weasley said as he stepped in front of the fire.

"He's in the Ministry building Arthur and Dumbledore's there as well! No one can get in at all," Kingsley said, speaking very fast for him.

"You-Know-Who's there!" Ron exclaimed.

"What do you need us to do?" Arthur asked with Bill coming to stand right behind him.

"You and Bill see if you can find some way into the building," Kingsley quickly said and then noticed Ron. "There's no training today so I want Ron and Hermione to stay away from the building."

"Forget that!" Ron exclaimed. "If Dumbledore's there than Harry is as well and I'm going."

"That's an order Ron," Kingsley calmly said. "As soon as we have any hard info, we'll let you know but you two stay away for now."

Ron started to argue but Hermione grabbed his arm and pulled him into the kitchen. "Ron, that's still our boss. We've got to do what he says."

"I don't care who it is Hermione. We finally know where Harry's at and I want to help," Ron pleaded.

"So do I Ron," Hermione said soothingly. "But if they can't get in, then neither could we. We'll be ready to go as soon as we can. At least we know where he's at now."

When Bill and Arthur Weasley arrived outside of the Ministry building, they were surprised by the number of people already around. Many Ministry workers were standing, wondering what was going on. Reporters from the Daily Prophet arrived soon after and tried to get any information they could from the bystanders. Colin Creevy who had quickly become one of their best photographers right after graduation quickly began trying to find some way into the building. His Gryffindor courage came out soon after his first professional assignments when he had gotten the first pictures of a Death Eater attack and he intended to get the first ones of this situation as well.

Inside the building, Dumbledore, Tonks and Harry had split up after Dumbledore cast wards to prevent anyone from Apparating in or out. They know Voldemort and Bellatrix LeStrange were inside but didn't know if any more Death Eaters were there as well.

Harry heard the sound of a spell and then the sick laugh of Bellatrix and quickly bounded down the hallway. Now he heard Tonks shouting spells of her own as Bellatrix countered them. There was a painful scream and Harry rounded the corner and stepped into the Death Room just as Bellatrix was beginning to use the killing curse on Tonks who was dazed on the floor.

Bellatrix just looked up as Harry's spell hit her flat in the chest. The evil woman looked amazed and stumbled backwards, just as Sirius had done three years before. "Oh no you don't!" Harry yelled as he summoned Bellatrix before she could fall through the veil. "There's no way you're going where Sirius is." The woman dropped to the floor with a thud.

Harry quickly stepped over to Tonks. "Are you ok?" he asked.

Tonks was bleeding from her head and her wrist seemed to be at an odd angle. "I'll be fine, we've got to get to..." The woman was cutoff by a blood curdling scream from Harry. Tonks saw Bellatrix raise a bloody knife and quickly screamed "Reducto" and blasted a whole clear through the Death Eater.

Harry was clutching his side as Tonks pulled him around to see a gash from just behind his left shoulder, all the way to his waist. "Damn her," she said as she cast the charms to stop the bleeding. "That's the best I can do Harry. You know what that knife was don't you?"

"I know. I should have let her go through the veil," he said, still in pain.

"This could be our last chance," Tonks defiantly said. "Go finish this, I'll be ok."

Harry nodded and ran out of the room leaving Tonks clutching her arm. Harry finally made it back to the lobby of the Ministry of Magic to where the fountain showing a Centaur, House-Elf and Goblin looking up longingly at the larger statue of a wizard. He had hoped to find

Professor Dumbledore along the way but was disappointed when he entered the lobby and found it empty. Harry stood clutching his side where the knife had cut him looking around at the pristine setting of the lobby remembering the last time he was in this location.

His flashback was interrupted by the cold high-pitched voice of Voldemort saying, "So this is it Harry." Harry spun around with his wand drawn to face the evil wizard. "It seems we are the only two left and it is time for you to realize your own mortality." Harry glanced around hoping to see Professor Dumbledore but saw nothing else. He ran through the plan Dumbledore had setup for them to pull off but couldn't help but think this would be the last thing he would ever see.

Harry began circling, trying to make himself a moving target for whenever Voldemort launched his first curse. He knew from experience how quick and powerful the wizard's curses were. The next moment Voldemort launched the first curse and Harry barely rolled out of the way before attempting to respond with a curse of his own. Voldemort casually blocked his response and laughed. "Have you learned nothing since the last time we met? I would have expected more from you Harry."

While Voldemort was talking, Harry got off another curse that did make Voldemort move to the side to dodge. Instantly Voldemort responded with a red flash coming from his wand. Harry just got behind a column when the curse went streaking by. The next second, something hit the column and Harry was thrown back against the wall. Clutching his still sore side, he barely got a shield up and deflected Voldemort's next curse. "I see Bellatrix got to you Harry," Voldemort said with obvious enjoyment. "It's a pity you won't last long enough to feel the effects of the blade. If Dumbledore hadn't locked us in here you could have survived a bit longer."

Harry jumped out and sent a curse at the wizard who had to quickly move to the side in order to dodge it. This step caused Voldemort to end up in the center of the fountain which is what Harry had been hoping would happen. Dumbledore had given him a spell to use that required Voldemort to be standing in that spot to perform.

Harry not stepped out into the open to face Voldemort knowing that the next curse by either of them would finish this and complete the prophecy. He felt as calm as he could ever remember and when he saw the look of confusion on Voldemort's eerie face his confidence soared. "You're right Tom, this is it," Harry calmly said, still holding his wand firmly. Harry saw Voldemort give a confident smile and quickly started to say the spell Dumbledore had taught him, "Diffendiu Aqua Deema," Harry firmly said and a blue light shot out of his wand at Voldemort.

At first nothing happened and Voldemort began to laugh and Harry saw his mouth start to form a spell, but suddenly the evil wizard got a very peculiar look in his eyes. The evil wizard tried to move his wand but it was frozen in place by the blue beam. Harry concentrated with all of his might on maintaining the spell. Harry felt the drain upon his magic reserves that maintain the spell was placing on him. He saw Voldemort trying to mutter spells and could see the blue light starting to fade. Redoubling his concentration he was able to restore the brilliance to the spell but knew he couldn't maintain it for much longer. Voldemort's wand began to glow with an eerie red glow and the evil wizard's face seemed to be screwed up in desperation.

Harry felt the limits of his magic being tested and knew he was about to falter when he saw Professor Dumbledore appear off to the side of Voldemort. Instantly he felt better, knowing that Dumbledore would say the final spells to finish Voldemort for good. His confidence suddenly took a hit when he saw Dumbledore point his wand at him and quickly say a spell. A blinding white light flew out of Dumbledore's wand and hit Harry in the middle of the chest. Instantly, Harry thought he would explode from the amount of magical energy surging through his body. The only thing that had felt this overwhelming was when Voldemort had briefly possessed him two years before in this very spot.

Harry now found he couldn't stop the spell he was casting on Voldemort at all. He saw through his tightly squinted eyes that Voldemort's wand was now glowing much brighter red. The wand began to smoke as Harry fought to maintain consciousness, not knowing what Dumbledore was doing to him or what it was in turn doing to Voldemort. Harry knew he couldn't take the amount of magic flowing through him much longer and just as he thought he would finally split, he saw Voldemort's wand burst into flames and heard the wizard cry out in pain. The white light from Dumbledore's wand vanished at the same time as Harry's blue curse did and Voldemort collapsed onto the ground. Harry quickly caught his breath and stumbled over to the evil wizard's body with his wand firmly prepared to cast the killing curse if necessary. However when he reached the body, he saw that Voldemort's eyes were no longer red, they were now pale white and his body was cold. As far as Harry could tell, Voldemort was dead.

"You were cut," Dumbledore weakly said, getting Harry's attention.

Harry ran to where Dumbledore lay and knelt down at his side. "You'll be ok sir. We'll get you help," Harry said with desperation.

"I'm sorry for failing you Harry," Dumbledore said as barely more than a whisper. "I should have stopped her."

"It was my fault. I stopped her from falling through the veil. It doesn't matter now that Voldemort's gone," Harry said trying to lift the spirits of the person he felt closest too. "Now, we'll get you some help."

"You remember after your sixth year when I said there may be a time when sacrifices needed to be made?" Dumbledore weakly asked and Harry nodded. "Well this was the time and the sacrifice was mine. I've stayed alive all these years with magical help but as I'm sure you've realized that was just transferred to you to guarantee his destruction. You had to be the one to destroy him but as long as I didn't use magic directly on him, the prophecy could be fulfilled."

"Tell me how to give it back sir!" Harry exclaimed. "I know what's going to happen to me anyway."

"It can't be done Harry," Dumbledore said having trouble breathing now. "You were like a son to me Harry and I'm very proud...of...you," the words came out with the last breath the old wizard would ever take.

Harry clutched the man into his chest and wailed, "No!" Harry had never cried this openly before, unable to stem the flow of tears at this loss. "You can't leave me, you just can't!" he exclaimed.

Harry hadn't heard Tonks come into the room but he didn't jump when she knelt down and put her hand on his shoulder. "He did this for everyone Harry, he knew it was going to come to this," she calmly said.

"You knew!" Harry exclaimed. "You knew he was going to sacrifice himself!"

"It was his choice Harry. He wanted to do everything he could to make sure we were all safe," she said with her own tears falling. She looked at the lifeless body of Professor Dumbledore and then to Harry who had been a rock these past years and couldn't handle seeing him in such a state.

Harry was still cradling Dumbledore's lifeless body and Tonks was trying to comfort Harry, so neither of them heard the approaching footsteps and didn't notice people around until the flash of the camera startled them. Harry was too distraught to do anything but Tonks knew she had to get him away from the reporters until he could collect himself. "Harry, you can't do anything for him. You need to get out of here before more people show up." Harry looked up but didn't seem to be moving. "Take the knife Harry. We can't let them know what happened to you. You're their hope right now."

Harry shook his head but then saw the flood of people coming through the entrance and began to panic himself. "Take the knife and go Harry!" Tonks exclaimed. "I'll handle this and then we'll talk later. They can't know!" Just before the Minister and Mr. Weasley had gotten to their location, Harry grabbed the knife and Disapparated away.

News spread fast that day and a special afternoon edition of the Daily Prophet made it official as far as most of the English Wizarding Community was concerned:

He's Done it Again!

The Boy-Who-Lived Kills He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!

<there was a picture showing Harry cradling Professor Dumbledore's lifeless body in his arms and crying openly. Over his shoulder you could see the disgusting body of Voldemort looking very dead as well.>

Harry Potter, along with Albus Dumbledore and Nymphadora Tonks lured The Dark Lord into the Ministry Building early this morning and in a battle that left Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange dead, Dumbledore and Tonks were able to support Harry Potter when he cast the spell destroying all magic within The Dark Lord. Without his magic, The Dark Lord could no longer cause his cursed body to stay alive. Nymphadora Tonks was injured and Albus Dumbledore died during the final few seconds of the struggle. Harry Potter left the scene before anyone could get his reaction to finally destroying He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named once and for all.

We are sure we speak for all the community when we say that we are very grateful to those three and especially to Harry Potter for all they have done for our world. Please come back Harry, we want to applaud you.

But Harry didn't come back. The Weasleys along with Hermione were especially hard on Tonks for not disclosing where Harry was. "You can't understand what he's going through!" Tonks exclaimed. "He wants to be alone."

"We just want to help him," Molly insisted. "He needs us now!"

Tonks sighed and said for the fifth time, "I can't argue with that Molly but he made me promise and I will *never* betray Harry."

"Fine!" Ron spat out. "We'll find him on our own you know!" Hermione stood shoulder to shoulder with Ron.

"No you won't," Tonks said with authority. "Harry's the best at concealment, even better than me and I'm a Metamorphmagus. If he doesn't want to be found, you won't find him, I'll promise you that."

Over the next week, articles about Harry were on the front page of the Prophet each day. Some with headlines like: "***Where's Harry?***" and "***Please come back!***" All of the Weasleys became irritated at these articles but did feel the same way themselves.

The memorial for Professor Dumbledore was held exactly one week after "The Final Battle" as it was now being called. It was going to be a private affair but for someone like Professor Dumbledore, that still meant that over a hundred 'very important' people were to attend. Minerva McGonagall made sure that all of the Weasleys along with Hermione Granger were invited as well, however their seats weren't in the prime spot since so many people in the Ministry wanted to attend and show their support for the fallen wizard. McGonagall spoke gruffly when she talked about this, knowing that most of those people in the Ministry only wanted to increase their political standing by showing support.

"He has to come back for this Hermione," Ron assured her. "Once we see him, he'll want us around."

"Are you sure Ron?" Hermione asked. "We really don't know what all he's been through since he left."

"I'm sure Hermione," Ron said without hesitation and this did make Hermione feel better.

"I just need to see him Ron," Hermione said softly. Ron felt no jealousy having fully agreed to the breakup with Hermione. They were only very good friends and in fact he felt the same way but would never voice it like that, not even to Hermione.

"I know Hermione, I really do," Ron comforted her.

Ron and Hermione arrived at the memorial before almost anyone else and were instantly let in by Professor McGonagall who informed them that she had not heard from Harry and didn't know if he would be there or not. After more people started arriving, Ron noticed Tonks arrive and sit at the end of the front row next to an aged wizard who looked very sad. "Let's make her tell us where he is," Ron angrily said to Hermione.

"Not here Ron!" Hermione snapped. "This is for Professor Dumbledore." The two became more depressed when the service started without any sign of Harry. After many people spoke about all the great things Dumbledore did over his life, many thought the service was over until the Minister of Magic; Cornelius Fudge stood up and whispered something to Professor McGonagall who didn't look happy about it at all.

Fudge approached a podium and said, "I join all of you in saluting the life of Albus Dumbledore. I have always had the utmost respect for the man and his actions." At this, many in the audience gave a low mumble and all of the Weasley's glared at the man knowing he was just trying to gain some of his influence back. "The Ministry assisted as much as we could with their efforts and only wish we had known about the Final Battle earlier so we could have provided more support. I would like to announce that exactly one week from today, there will be an award ceremony where Dumbledore, Tonks and Harry Potter will all receive The Order of Merlin-First Class for their tireless efforts to protect our community. Dumbledore will be the first in history to receive this award twice." There was thunderous applause, mainly from other people in the Ministry who wanted to be seen as doing anything for Dumbledore. The attendees that were in the Order of the Phoenix however were only half-heartedly clapping knowing why the Minister was doing this.

Hermione noticed the elderly wizard sitting next to Tonks get into an animated discussion with her about something. He looked very angry and Hermione wished she could hear what they were saying. Hermione nudged Ron and pointed for him to watch the exchange. Finally, Tonks poked the old man in the chest far harder than Hermione would have thought appropriate for such an old man, but the wizard didn't even flinch. Tonks then grabbed his shoulders and pushed him towards Professor McGonagall who was also watching the exchange with a strange expression.

The old man slowly made his way to the corner where Professor McGonagall was standing and began to whisper something to her. McGonagall's face took on a very shocked expression and then she did something Hermione had never seen her do before, she embraced the old man into a very tight hug. Then it clicked with Hermione. She remembered what Tonks had said about Harry being a master at concealment. "Ron!" Hermione exclaimed. "That's him! That's Harry!" she said pointing to the old man again.

Hermione grabbed his arm and began to pull him through the crowd as Ron said, "Are you sure?"

"Positive!" she replied still pulling him roughly through the crowd of people. When they finally broke through the other side, they were met with the sight of Tonks and Professor McGonagall standing alone in the corner talking with both of them looking happier than either should be after a memorial service.

"Where is he?" Hermione demanded. "I know that old man was him. Where did he go?"

"Keep your voice down Miss Granger!" McGonagall snapped as she looked around nervously. "Now, what are you going on about?" she asked looking guilty.

"I know that was Harry," Hermione whispered but sounded very agitated. "Tonks said he was an expert at that stuff. Where did he go?"

"You tell us or I'll start calling out that he was here," Ron threatened.

"Don't you dare Ron!" Tonks said. "He doesn't want to be found. You can't imagine how this is for him."

"Can't I?" Hermione snapped. "I loved Professor Dumbledore too! Harry's one of my best friends and is a part of me. I haven't seen him in over two years. It's killing me."

Both Tonks and McGonagall sighed deeply and Ron put his arm around Hermione's shoulder for comfort. Tonks finally took a deep breath and said, "I do understand Hermione. I think it would do him good to see both of you but it is his choice." Hermione started to say something but Tonks stopped her. "You think you have some idea of what he went through and what he is going through now, but believe me when I say that you really have no clue how bad things are for him. When you do see him don't push it, let him decide when to talk."

"How is he though?" Hermione asked, desperate for any information.

"Better than I would be," Tonks said.

"But you were there too," Ron said, sounding confused.

Tonks shook her head and said, "It was bad enough for me, but no way near to how it was for Harry. He knew the responsibility was his all the time, and then to watch Dumbledore die in his arms. It just hit him hard."

Ron and Hermione both knew Tonks was right but that didn't help the fact that they both wanted to see their best friend again and would do nearly anything to make that happen.

At the award ceremony, Hermione had hoped to get more information about Harry and had even hoped that he may show up but there was no sign of him and Tonks wouldn't say anything more than she already had.

The months passed without any word and Hermione began to get angrier with Harry. She and Ron would often sit after their Auror training and talk about things over a drink. They both kept bringing up reasons to be mad at their friend but also both knew they would forget everything in a second if he were around.

Christmas was coming up in two weeks and as usual, Hermione planned to spend the time with her parents and then visit the Burrow on Christmas day. She had just gotten home from her last day of Auror training before the Holiday break and was starting to fix herself something for supper when there was a tap on her window. Turning toward the window, Hermione's heart almost stopped when she saw the large snowy owl sitting patiently on the ledge. Hermione dropped everything she was doing and ran to the window, throwing it up. "Hedwig!" she exclaimed as the owl nuzzled into her hand and stuck out her leg to show Hermione the note. Hermione quickly untied the note and felt happier than she could remember when she read it.

Hermione

If you happen to have some time, I'd really like to talk. Tonight, Tomorrow or whenever you have the time is fine with me, I'll be here. Don't mention this to anyone else yet.

Miss you.

H.

p.s. I'm on the floo. 'Haven'

Hermione smiled brightly and said, "Oh thank you Hedwig!" Leaving everything out on the counter, she quickly stepped to the fireplace, threw in the powder and confidently said, "Haven!"

Chapter 16

After a moment of swirling around, Hermione was trying to regain her sense of balance when she heard, "My god you're fast!"

Without even focusing, she threw herself and the shape in front of her and engulfed him into a tight hug as the tears began to flow freely down her face. The arms hugged her back tightly and the voice said, "Come on Hermione, I didn't even get a chance to look at you yet."

Without lifting her head she said, "Oh, I've missed you so much! Why did you stay away from us?"

"I've missed you too," Harry calmly said. "I just needed to figure some things out first. Don't be upset, you know I can't stand to see you cry."

She pulled back enough to look him in the face and saw him looking more peaceful than she ever remembered. There was only a trace of sadness and she knew that was because he felt he had made her cry. "I'm not upset, I'm just so happy to see you," she got out as she pushed back from him.

"You look good Hermione," Harry said with a bright smile.

"So do you. My goodness you've grown," she replied noticing how he was at least six inches taller now than the last time she saw him. He also held himself more confidently.

"Guess I was a late bloomer," he joked back. "Would you like a drink?"

She nodded and asked, "Are you really ok? We were worried."

Harry didn't answer while he poured them both some tea. Hermione took the time to look around the flat. It was large and very open with big windows looking out over a small park and then to the city beyond. It was very sparsely decorated but felt comfortable nonetheless. There was a large TV and other than a glass cabinet where she saw his invisibility cloak and sneak-o-scope, it looked just like a Muggle flat. "This is a nice place," she said turning around to find him directly behind her.

He handed her the glass and said, "Better than the cupboard under the stairs. C'mon let's sit down."

Harry led her to an area with a couch and a few chairs and she sat down on the couch but just as Harry was going to sit in the chair next to the couch, she said, "Sit here please?" Hermione patted the spot next to her.

Without hesitation, Harry sat next to her and she quickly put her hand on his arm. "I'm not going anywhere Hermione, you don't need to keep hold of me," he joked with her.

"I'm sorry; I just haven't seen you for so long. Does it bother you?" she sheepishly asked.

"Not at all, as long as you're not doing it because you're worried. But I don't want Ron to get jealous or anything if he found out you were touching me so much," Harry said with a laugh.

"Oh, well we're not a couple anymore," Hermione said without any pain in her voice.

"Really? What happened? I mean you don't have to tell me if you don't want to," Harry quickly added.

"It's ok," Hermione said. "Nothing bad happened; we just seemed to be better suited as best friends. We're really fine now, we hang out quite often. Just like old times...well except that you weren't there."

"Well, as long as you two are really happy, that's all that matters," Harry said looking at her trying to figure out if she was being honest about it.

"So, where have you been? Why did you stay away?" she asked intently.

She saw a brief flicker of pain dart through his eyes but he just asked, "Is it ok if we don't talk about that just yet? I know I owe you an explanation and everything but I'm really desperate to hear all about you and Ron and what's been going on."

"Oh...That's fine, but you know you can tell me anything don't you?" Hermione asked squeezing his arm.

"I know, and I promise I will," he reassured her.

"Well, we're all fine and everything. Ron's doing great in Auror training. I think they'll make him a team leader since he's so good at strategy," Hermione said beaming. "After...you know...it wasn't as important to have so many active Aurors so I switched to be in their research team. That's a better fit for me anyway since I'll have access to all kinds of books that they don't have even in the restricted section at school."

Harry laughed and knew that would be a dream for Hermione. "I'm glad to hear that. So how is everyone else?" he asked with a tone that told Hermione exactly what he was asking. This wasn't something she really wanted to tell him since he was in such a good mood but she also didn't want to keep anything from him.

"Ginny's fine as well. She's going to be a healer at St. Mungo's," Hermione said trying to gauge his reaction.

He seemed to squirm a bit and then ask, "Does she...well you know..."

Hermione knew she had to be the one to tell him. "She took your leaving really hard Harry," Hermione added with extra pressure on his arm. "She got really angry with you for leaving like that."

"I had to Hermione!" Harry exclaimed. "It was our best chance to stop him!"

"I know Harry, I really do but it was still hard for all of us. We couldn't say goodbye and didn't know from day to day what was happening. And then Mrs. Weasley's clock kept showing you pointing to 'Mortal Peril'...it was hard.

"Clock? What about the clock?" Harry asked totally confused.

"Oh, that's right you never knew," she remembered. "For your birthday present that year Mr. & Mrs. Weasley charmed another hand for their clock with your face on it."

Harry realized what this meant. Each time he was in serious danger it had gone to Mortal Peril. "I never knew," he said, lowering his face to his hands.

"I know," Hermione said rubbing his back. "It's pointing to 'safe' now. Well anyway Ginny was furious with you and swore she would never have anything to do with you again," Hermione said as soothingly as she could but could tell Harry felt bad. "Once we got back to school, she kind of started seeing Dean." Harry sat straight up at this but Hermione continued, "They're still a couple. I'm sorry."

Harry's reaction wasn't exactly what Hermione had expected. "Really?" he said with more happiness than she would have thought. "I mean, it's terrible that she went through so much pain and all but it's best that she hooked up with Dean."

"What?" Hermione said. "I can't believe you're saying this. Just before you left you told her that Voldemort was right and you cared for her."

"I know," Harry said sounding upset. "But that was over two years ago. I'm not the same person I was then." Harry paused and then said, "I mean I still care for her but not like that. I wasn't even seventeen, and had never had a girlfriend, what the hell did I know?" Harry actually smiled and said, "I've been so worried about how I was going to break this to her."

"I was dreading telling you this after everything else you went through," Hermione admitted.

"I can't thank you enough for doing it. This is like a huge weight being lifted," Harry said giving her a quick hug.

"You know I figured out you were at the memorial," Hermione said with some hesitation at bringing up the memorial.

"Yeah, Tonks told me," Harry admitted without any sadness of the topic. "She actually gave me a hard time about it. I'm supposed to be great at concealment and you saw through it right away. That annoyed me," he added with a smile.

Hermione beamed and said, "I don't think anyone else would have but it just fit when I saw you with Tonks and how you acted. I wish you would have stayed."

"I know, I said I'm sorry," Harry said putting his hands up. "I'll make it up to you guys. Whatever you want."

"Ok, let's get Ron and sit around all night catching up," Hermione offered.

"Fine by me," Harry quickly said, surprising Hermione.

Hermione got up and went to the fire, threw in some powder and said, "Calling Ronald Weasley"

A second later, Ron's head appeared and said, "What do you want Hermione, I need to eat!"

Harry who was standing off to the side chuckled at this. "Are you alone?" Hermione asked.

"Yes Hermione, now get talking, I'm hungry," Ron replied.

"Well Ron, if you and your stomach can wait a bit, I was wondering if you'd like to come and see Harry?"

"What do you mean my stomach....What did you say? Harry?" Ron asked and Harry continued to laugh.

Hermione started to reply but Harry stepped next to her and he saw Ron's eyes grow wide. Harry quickly said, "Ron my place is called 'Haven'. You've got five minutes to get here or we're shutting off the floo and will carry on without you."

Harry waved his wand and the flames died down. They both stepped back which was a good thing because a few seconds later, the body of their friend stepped out of the fire, eyes still wide. "I say he was faster Hermione," Harry laughed as he extended a hand to shake.

Ron had other ideas and pulled him into a brotherly hug. "Where the hell have you been you stupid prat!" Ron said while grinning broadly.

"Good to see you too Ron," Harry said and then they both felt themselves being wrapped by Hermione's arms. They were all relishing in the feeling of having all of both of their best friends together again.

"I don't suppose you're ready to tell us anything yet?" Ron asked as he looked Harry over. Harry shook his head and Ron rolled his eyes. "Never changes does he?" he said to Hermione. Ron surveyed the room and said, "Nice place... very muggle."

"I suppose I should feed you before you start whining," Harry joked and moved to the kitchen. "Make yourself at home. I don't have that much variety here, did you want something special to eat?" Harry asked.

Hermione just shook her head and smiled as Ron looked around, "Whatever, just food." Hermione continued to just watch Harry and noticed how comfortable he seemed. Hermione had never really known Harry to be at ease like this but there was some small part of her that felt something wasn't quite right. She shook her head thinking that it was just everything that had happened to him but couldn't get the feeling out of the back of her mind.

"Oy! What do you need with four bedrooms?" Ron exclaimed from down the hall.

"Well, Hedwig needs her own place," Harry said as gathered the ingredients for supper, "and then mine. I really didn't think about it, I liked the location."

"Me too Harry," Hermione added now looking out the windows.

Ron came back in and noticed the large ornate knife encrusted with jewels on the large television. "What do you have a knife like this for?" he asked as he started to reach for the knife sitting in a stand on the television.

Before Hermione knew what happened, Harry disappeared from the kitchen and appeared in front of Ron and grabbed his hand before he could touch the knife and she saw the terror in Harry's eyes. "Don't touch it!" Harry loudly said.

"Blimey mate!" Ron exclaimed in shock. "I wasn't going to break it."

"It's not that," Harry said sounding very nervous. "It's a cursed blade. The Blade of Annamal. If it draws your blood, you only have a year to live."

Hermione gasped and Ron yelled, "Then why the hell do you have something like that out!"

"I'm not used to people being around Ron," Harry quickly replied. "I kept a lot of items from the war that make me remember things I need to. Just don't touch it ok?" Harry said and went back to the kitchen.

"So what happens, do you just keel over or what?" Ron asked still looking at the knife.

"That'd be nice," Harry muttered but then calmly said, "After a year, your blood begins to heat up and then starts to boil." Now Ron and Hermione were looking aghast at him but he continued, "Then you kind of just melt from the inside out." He didn't look up from pouring more drinks for his friends.

Hermione watched the exchange and then looked closely at the knife. She was interrupted by Ron saying, "Well then at least turn the bloody television on and take my mind off that thought."

"Hermione, can you help our Muggle-Challenged friend out," Harry said with his mood lightening.

The friends caught Harry up on things that had been happening while he finished cooking and also during the meal. They had finished eating and were sitting on the couch when Ron got a serious look. "You know you've got to go see Mum," Ron said. "She's having kittens not knowing anything about you."

"I know," Harry cautiously replied.

"Did Hermione tell you about...um...Ginny?" Ron sheepishly said.

"Yes, she told me," Harry quickly replied. "It's for the best, trust me," Harry confidently said and then saw Hermione give Ron a look that told him to drop it. It still amazed Harry that they could tell so much about each other from little looks.

"Come over for the Holidays," Ron quickly said. "You know mum'll make you stay for a few days so she can mother you," he joked.

Harry looked pleadingly at Hermione who rolled her eyes and said, "I was only going to go for Christmas day but it would be like old times to stay a couple days."

"Brilliant!" Ron exclaimed. "I'll just tell her that Hermione is coming and then you just show up. This will make her Holiday."

Hermione had come over every evening for supper until she went to her parents for a couple days before traveling to the Burrow. On her last evening at Harry's, the two were sitting on the couch where Hermione still wanted to have contact with him and she asked, "So, how are you going to handle Ginny?"

Harry didn't think long and then said, "I've actually been thinking about that. At first I was just relieved that I wouldn't have to break off with her but now I'm a bit annoyed that she did that. I guess I'll just handle it like we were both Gryffindors, nothing more."

"That's not how I'd handle it," Hermione offered.

"True, but I've learned to live with my faults and know I could never be as perfect as you," Harry joked back.

On the afternoon before Christmas, Harry apparated to the end of the lane leading up to the Burrow. Hermione was supposed to already be there and Ron had said that the rest of the kids were only coming for Christmas day so there shouldn't be many people at the Burrow when he first got there. It was cold and there was already snow on the ground so Harry quickly cast a warming charm and slowly walked up the lane, remembering all the good times he had at the Burrow.

When he got to the door he heard Mrs. Weasley yell, "Ronald Weasley you quit giving Hermione so much grief or she won't want to come back." This made Harry smile brightly as he knocked on the door.

Harry saw the door knob turn and as soon as it was pulled open he said, "Hello Mrs. Weasley."

The woman's eyes got huge and she exclaimed, "My dear lord!" as she engulfed him into a bone crushing hug. She didn't let up at all as she said, "You're back, you're really back!"

"I'm back," Harry said hugging the woman in return. "I've missed you all terribly."

She pulled him inside, not bothering to wipe the tears and again hugged him. "Are you ok? Did the others know?" she said as the tears continued to flow.

Harry nodded his head and she looked behind her to see Ron and Hermione beaming in the doorway. "We wanted to surprise you mum!" Ron said.

"Oh I just can't believe it," she said looking him over. "All my children will be back this year. Oh, thank Merlin."

"All?" Harry questioned, looking at Ron. He didn't know Percy had gotten back on speaking terms with the rest of the family.

"Oh, the git will make an appearance Christmas day for a few minutes. Then Bill and Fred will chuck him back out," Ron laughed.

"You will be staying here for a few days won't you?" Molly asked with a pleading look.

"As long as I'm no trouble, I'd love to," Harry replied feeling more at home than he had in a long, long time.

"Trouble? My dear boy nothing would make me happier," she said as she quickly rummaged through a cupboard and pulled out two wrapped presents. "You missed two years here, but I saved your presents," she said, handing him the packages.

"Thank you!" Harry said blushing and saw the snickers from Ron and Hermione looking like she could cry.

"You go put those up in the twins old room. Hermione is staying in Percy's. Oh, I've got so much to do," Molly said sounding very cheerful.

The three friends were in the living room later that afternoon when they heard the door open. "Molly, I'm home" came the voice of Arthur Weasley.

"Oh Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, "Isn't it just wonderful?"

"You're in a jolly mood dear," Mr. Weasley said. "What brought this on?"

"It's been so long since all the children would be here for the Holiday," Mrs. Weasley cheerfully replied as she continued to busy herself.

"But dear," Arthur said, "they were all here last year as well."

"Not all of them," Molly said as she led directed her husband's attention to the clock on the wall where he saw Harry's hand pointing to 'Home'.

Harry had to sit next to Mrs. Weasley for the meal and she was just like Hermione, continuing to lean over just to touch his arm or rub his back. Ron kept snickering at this but it really didn't embarrass Harry much. Molly also kept pushing more food onto Harry's plate.

"Mum!" Ron exclaimed. "You're going to make him sick. It's not like when we were in school, he's been eating fine."

"Well yes but he hasn't had home cooked food now has he," Molly quickly responded. Seeing that Harry had indeed stopped eating, she said, "Did you try on your jumpers Harry? I went up and enlarged them a bit while you were outside. I didn't expect you to grow so much."

"Um...No, I haven't tried them on yet," Harry said and then saw Hermione nod her head toward the stairs. Harry knew she expected him to go try them on. "Why don't I go put one on right now?"

"Oh, would you?" Molly asked.

"Told you she'd mother you to death," Ron said before being hit on the shoulder by his mother.

Harry made his way up to his room and looked at the jumper. It was a dark green with a golden letter H on the front. He held it up and looked around the room, letting the feeling of content flow across him. He hadn't felt so peaceful in a long time. Shaking out of this, he

pulled off his current shirt and took the jumper over to the mirror. The angle he stood made the scar on his side stand out in the light from the room. Absent mindedly he raised his left arm and then traced the outline of the scar from behind his left shoulder down to his waistband on the side. He let his mind wander to the events that caused him to receive this car.

Harry was still thinking about that when he heard Mrs. Weasley exclaim, "Dear Lord!" She had just come to the door but moved quickly to Harry's side. He hadn't wanted anyone to see the scar and silently cursed himself. "What in Merlin's name happened?" Molly asked.

Before she could answer, Harry heard another gasp and then "Blimey mate!" Now Ron and Hermione were at the door as well.

Before he could say anything, Mrs. Weasley said, "Well, we'll just go get that removed next week. I don't suppose you had proper care at the time." Molly was examining the scar closely.

"Why didn't you get that taken care of before now?" Hermione asked, looking very concerned.

"I tried," Harry admitted. "I saw quite a few people about it, but there's no way to get rid of it."

Now Hermione stepped closer to examine the scar. Harry started to pull on the new jumper but Hermione stopped him. "We can try again Harry," Molly said. "Arthur will find someone."

"That's ok Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, finally pulling the new jumper down, covering the scar. "Kingsley put me in contact with some of the best people but it won't go away. It's ok, really."

Now Hermione seemed to realize something and looked up at Harry with a very pained expression. Harry knew what she wanted to ask so he barely nodded his head at her with an equally sad expression. The three were still watching Harry closely when Hermione suddenly put her hand to her mouth and nervously said, "I'm sorry but I just remembered something I had to do at home." She quickly turned leaving Ron and Mrs. Weasley stunned and added as she walked out, "Thank you for inviting me Mrs. Weasley but I really have to go."

As she hurried out the door, Ron yelled, "Hermione! What's wrong?" Before Ron could catch her, Hermione had Disapparated leaving Ron stunned. He turned back to Harry and said, "What's with her? She's seen you hurt before."

"That was very queer," Molly said looking strangely at Harry.

"Well you know Hermione," Harry said hoping to change the subject, "when she gets an idea to do something, there's no stopping her. Maybe she'll be back tomorrow."

"I guess so," Ron said walking out of the room still shaking his head.

Harry and Ron sat around the rest of the evening playing chess and talking with Mr. & Mrs. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley kept trying to make sure Harry was taking care of himself. "Are you sure you won't just move back in here dear?" Molly asked looking at Harry.

Ron rolled his eyes and tried to contain a laugh while Harry just said, "Thank you for the offer Mrs. Weasley but I've got a decent place of my own."

"Yeah mom, it's a big Muggle apartment overlooking a park. Harry's living just like a Muggle now," Ron said smirking. Harry now gave Ron a glare, knowing Ron was just trying to wind his mom up.

"A Muggle!" Molly exclaimed. "No Harry dear, after everything you've done you cannot go around taking care of yourself like a Muggle. Now you just move in here and I'll take care of everything for you."

Ron was doing all he could to hold back his laughs and even Mr. Weasley was looking like he was about to burst as well but Harry calmly said, "Thanks for the offer, but right now it's best if I just do things on my own. You know I've never really had the chance to just be on my own before."

"Yes well I suppose if that's what you really want," she said sounding disappointed.

Harry quickly added, "But, if I'm ever stuck with something or just can't do it myself, I promise to pop over if you don't think it would be too much trouble."

"Trouble?" Molly said beaming. "You'll never be trouble for me dear. You come over any time."

After a bit more talking, everyone seemed to be getting tired and all went to bed. It didn't take Harry long to realize he couldn't sleep. His mind was stuck on Hermione and how he was going to deal with her knowing about the scar. He waited until he knew the others would be asleep and then made his way back downstairs where he went outside and sat in the swing and stared out into the dark.

Inside, there was a soft 'pop' and the youngest Weasley appeared in the kitchen of the Burrow. Ginny had just gotten home from spending time with Dean Thomas since he wouldn't be able to come over for Christmas. His parents insisted that he stay around his family for the entire day. She was about to make her way up to her bed when she heard the faint squeak of the swing outside. Not knowing who would still be up at this hour she quietly poked her head outside and was shocked by the image of a dark-haired boy sitting alone on the swing. Knowing exactly who it was, she flung the door open, causing Harry to jump up and she engulfed him in a tight hug. "Harry!" Ginny exclaimed.

For a second, Harry hugged her back tightly and then remembered the current situation with her and just patted her on the back before letting his arms fall. She seemed surprised and said, "How long have you been back? It's so good to see you."

Harry stepped back and was surprised by his emotions. When Hermione told him about Ginny seeing Dean, he was relieved but right now he felt hurt by Ginny doing that to him so soon after he left to go fight. "I've been in London for a few months but just saw Ron and Hermione a couple weeks ago." Harry calmly said and then with an icy voice asked, "How's Dean?"

Chapter 17

Ginny had seen Harry angry before, but never at her and this wasn't the same as seeing him angry. She had never seen him hateful but that was what she was getting from him now and she realized he knew what she had done. She may have been prepared for this if she had any idea Harry would have been there but to have this situation suddenly upon her through her into a state of panic. "Um...well...I didn't...."

Harry stopped her by saying, "I really don't want to know. It's for the best anyway. I'm staying here for a couple days to make your mom happy but after that I don't really think you and I will have much to talk about." With that, Harry stepped around her and quickly made his way up to his room. Once upstairs he felt ashamed for the way he handled that and knew that with everything else going on it was the wrong thing to do but he hadn't expected the feelings to swell up in him like that.

Ginny stood there stunned by the whole thing. The last thing she expected when she got home was to see Harry who had been gone for over two and a half years. The sudden relief of seeing him alive and in front of her had caused her to forget everything that had happened over that time and she instinctively hugged him. But the next minute, his reaction brought her back to the present and now she didn't know exactly what to do.

She had felt so hurt when Harry left without saying anything to anyone. She hurt more than she could have ever thought possible when her father had told them what Harry was going off to do. She had moped around the house all summer snapping at anyone who told her to cheer up and try to get on with things. By the time school started, she had convinced herself that Harry must not have really cared for her if he was willing to just run off like that without so much as an explanation. So when Dean Thomas did start talking to her, she had responded in an attempt to get back at Harry but that quickly fell into a routine and before she knew it, she and Dean were a couple and Harry was still gone. Dean was there for her and after a few months, she had convinced herself that she had indeed gotten over Harry. By the middle of term, she was actively flaunting her relationship with Dean much to the dismay of her brother and Hermione who couldn't forgive her for doing that to Harry.

Over the next year, things didn't get any better between her and Ron, and had deteriorated drastically with Hermione who was the most protective of Harry. Ginny was actually glad when Ron and Hermione officially broke up, thinking that would cause her relationship with her brother to get back on track. To her dismay, Ron and Hermione remained as close as ever, and never wavered in their protectiveness of Harry. This was the first time that Ginny could remember where she was not looking forward to Christmas at the Burrow. As much as she wanted to blame Harry for how she felt right now, she just couldn't do it.

Harry lay in bed for many hours that night, silently berating himself for being so hateful to Ginny when he was in fact glad she had moved on. If only she would have moved on slowly, after giving him a chance he would be fine. At least that's what he told himself. After promising himself to act better around her from now on, he then started worrying about Hermione and how she was taking to the discovery she made earlier. Harry hadn't convinced himself that he was going to tell anyone about it and now that choice had been taken away. He fell asleep some time later, still pondering this issue.

Surprisingly with all the turmoil in his head, Harry slept soundly until a loud 'crack' woke him up. "Welcome back my boy!" George bellowed. "Get up mate, you're holding up the festivities!" Fred added.

"What ever happened to privacy?" Harry groaned and tried to pull the blanket over his head.

"Mum's going crazy down there telling everyone how good you look and she told us to get you down there," George replied.

"Yeah, Ronnie actually refused to wake you. But since he's known you've been back for a bit it's no big deal to him," Fred said.

"Yes, we're very wounded you kept away from us you know," George said with a malicious smile.

"However..." Fred added, "if you get your sorry bum downstairs in the next ten minutes we'll give you a holiday reprieve from any retribution." With that and another 'crack', the twins vanished from Harry's room.

Harry rolled over actually laughing and feeling more at home than he could ever remember. He quickly jumped into the shower and got cleaned up before heading downstairs. Mrs. Weasley was waiting expectantly at the bottom. "Happy Christmas Harry dear!" she exclaimed hugging him again.

"She wouldn't let us even start touching the presents until you got down here," Ron laughed as he grabbed the first of his presents. Harry spent the next few minutes greeting the rest of the family. He especially liked greeting Bill since the last time Harry had seen that particular Weasley, he had been injured and was being stretchered off after a battle.

Finally Harry turned and came face to face with Ginny again. He noticed everyone else had gotten very quiet and was watching the exchange. Only Ron knew that Harry had already been told about Ginny dating Dean. Quickly Harry gave her a light hug and said, "Happy Christmas." Ginny seemed to want to hug a moment longer but Harry was already backing away before he finished saying the words causing the other Weasleys to give each other glances. Mrs. Weasley however directed everyone to begin opening presents and Harry moved to the other side of the room near Ron.

Harry was looking at his jumper when Fred leaned over and said, "We didn't know you'd be here mate. Come to the store later and pick out whatever you want."

"I'll do that," Harry gratefully replied.

Fred got a more serious expression and whispered, "Guess you know about our little sister and that bloke?" Harry nodded. "Sorry about that mate. Ron filled us in on what happened."

"It's really ok," Harry whispered back. "That was a long time ago." Harry smiled after this, trying to make sure Fred knew he was being honest.

After a couple hours of everyone looking at all the presents, they were all sitting in the living room when they heard a 'pop' in the kitchen and saw Percy walk in with a strained look on his

face. Mrs. Weasley was the only one to jump up and hug him. "Happy Christmas dear," she said during the hug.

Harry saw Percy and Mrs. Weasley speaking quietly and also saw the other Weasley children looking quite menacing at Percy. Ginny was the only other one to get up and greet Percy at the doorway. Percy then moved near Mr. Weasley and shook his hand and began a conversation with his father. The other boys were ignoring him and had gone back to their own conversations.

Harry was trying to watch the interaction between everyone when he saw Percy finally realize he was here and say, "My dear Lord! You're...what...how..."

Percy was near the top of the list of people Harry couldn't stand so Harry coldly said, "Happy Christmas Percy," and then tried to turn back to his conversation with Ron.

Percy however wasn't to be deterred. "You're back! The Minister will be so pleased," he said almost bouncing. "You must come to the Ministry! Let me set something up..."

The next second Harry was stunned when Bill jumped up, got right in Percy's face and firmly said, "Don't screw with him Percy!"

Percy was too excited to be scared and exclaimed, "But he has to come back! He's what everyone wants to see!"

Next Fred and George were next to Bill with Ron not far behind, "I think it's time dear brother," Fred icily said. "For you to be on your way," George added. Ron followed with, "Before we lose our holiday cheer."

Percy now backed up realizing his brothers were very serious. Mrs. Weasley led him into the kitchen before returning by herself. She looked very sad when she came back and Harry couldn't stand the silence so he said, "I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have stayed."

"Nonsense dear," Molly said.

"Yeah mate," Ron said with an amused tone, "that's only about five minutes less than we can normally stand him."

The rest of the boys started laughing but Molly scolded him with, "Ronald!"

After another hour, Fred gave a curious look and loudly asked, "Where's Hermione? I can't believe she'd miss this."

"Good point brother," George said. "She knows you're back doesn't she?"

Ron beat Harry with an answer by saying, "Oh, she knows. Harry's got a new scar and when Hermione saw it she got all worked up and said she had to go. Bit queer actually." Ron looked at Harry and added, "I tried to floo her this morning but her parents said she was sleeping in and wasn't feeling well."

"Maybe she'll come over later when she's feeling better," Harry offered, knowing that probably wouldn't happen.

The rest of the day went surprisingly well with Harry being enthralled by stories from Bill and Charlie and entertained by the antics of the twins. Ron also did everything he could to keep the mood away from war stories. Harry was also able to keep a good distance between himself and Ginny as she was as uncomfortable as he was with the situation at the moment.

Later that evening Harry heard a couple people calling for Arthur Weasley in the floo and when he saw Mrs. Weasley come in looking irritated he asked if there was a problem. "It seems word is out that you're here and some Ministry officials want to speak with you," she angrily said. "Don't worry dear, we're trying to keep them away."

"Bloody gits!" Ron exclaimed. "Just wanting to ride his coat tails back into everyone's good graces."

Harry thought for a second and said, "Maybe I'll just head home." He was interrupted by many protests but firmly said, "It'll die down soon. I should go check on Hermione as well."

"Want me to come?" Ron quickly asked.

"No, you stay with your family," Harry said with a smile. "Hermione will probably just want to sit around reading anyway," he joked. After saying his goodbyes and being loaded down with food from Mrs. Weasley, Harry made his way back to his flat. He was instantly shocked to see some boxes in the kitchen and sound coming from the back bedroom. Quietly, he sat the food down and made his way to the source of the sound with his wand out. Leaning around the corner he saw Hermione, hanging some clothes in the empty closet. "Hermione!" he exclaimed causing her to jump and drop the clothes she was holding.

"Merlin's beard Harry! You scared me," she exclaimed and quickly picked up the clothes and continued hanging them up without an explanation.

"Um...What exactly are you doing?" Harry asked sounding totally lost.

"Moving in of course," she calmly replied and picked up more clothes off the bed. "Could you get that big box in Hedwig's room for me?"

Still confused, Harry absentmindedly leaned into Hedwig's room and summoned the large box. "Did we talk about you moving in?" Harry asked thinking he had missed something.

"No," Hermione curtly replied and went back to her task.

"Don't you think we should have?" Harry asked.

Hermione stopped after hanging the clothes that were still in her hand and stepped directly in front of Harry with an expression he couldn't figure out. He was about to say something when she got a look that very much reminded him of Professor McGonagall and poked him in the chest and said, "Don't you think we should have talked about what's going on with you? Were you even going to tell us?" Hermione was now making Harry back out of the room with her constant poking. "Or were you just going to disappear again? Do you ever think about anyone else's feelings?"

That last statement hurt Harry and he quit backing up. "Yes Hermione all I seem to think about is other people's feelings," Harry said with such conviction that it stopped Hermione in her tracks.

"Well you have a lot to learn about feelings Harry," Hermione continued. "And, I figure if you can be so selfish, then so can I. I'm moving in."

"Selfish!" Harry exclaimed as he turned and stormed back into the living room. "The one selfish thing I've done is to contact you and look how that's turning out! I know what's happening to me and I couldn't stand not to see you and Ron again before it happens. That's the only selfish thing I've done."

Hermione had walked up behind him and softly said, "No Harry it's not." She turned him around to face her and continued, "You just don't get the whole feeling thing. You hurt us when you just left without giving us a chance to say goodbye. You hurt us bad. We are your best friends and should have at least been given the opportunity to say goodbye to you." Harry started to protest but she put a hand over his mouth. "Think about it. Wouldn't you have liked to have even a few minutes with Sirius before you lost him? Wouldn't you?" Harry now looked very hurt. "We didn't know if we'd ever see you again and never had the chance to say goodbye. We deserve that chance Harry; it was selfish to take that away from us and I won't let you do it again."

Harry pulled her into a tight hug and the two just stood there, Hermione with her face pressed into his chest and Harry with his head lightly touching Hermione's. After a long while Harry softly said, "I'm sorry, I never knew."

Hermione stepped back and whipped her eyes. "Yes, well Ron and I cut you some slack since we knew how you were."

"Thanks," Harry said jokingly. "Now," he added looking at her seriously, "what's going on with you moving in?"

"Just that," Hermione confidently said. "I'm moving in. End of story. If this is really going to happen to you, I want to spend as much time around you as I can. I promise I won't keep bringing it up and will do my best to stay upbeat but I'm moving in."

Harry thought for a moment and said, "I suppose you've already read up on what's going to happen?" Hermione nodded. "I'm leaving when I start to feel it," Harry firmly said and then stopped Hermione before she could protest. "End of discussion! I'll stay until I'm sure it's happening and then I'm gone. I don't want to go thinking the last memory you and Ron have of me will be when it's happening."

"You can't be alone!" Hermione exclaimed.

"I won't be," Harry assured her. "Hedwig at least will be there."

"I can't promise I won't try to talk you out of that when the time comes," Hermione said.

"Fine," Harry replied and then asked, "What are you going to tell Ron?"

"You should tell him what's going to happen," Hermione stated.

"I will, just not yet. You know how he is, everything will be 'Bloody Hell Mate'," Harry said causing Hermione to chuckle.

"Ok, but you will tell him before it happens," she stated. Harry nodded. "Then we'll just tell him that I'm moving in because I don't trust you not to disappear again. That's pretty much the truth anyway."

Harry helped Hermione move the rest of her stuff in and the next day she decided to break the news to Ron so she called him on the floo and told him to come to Harry's. He arrived and didn't notice anything different about the flat and began questioning Hermione about her disappearance. Then he turned to Harry and said, "Good thing you left. The floo didn't stop for hours and the Minister himself came over demanding to see you." Ron laughed and said, "I thought mum was going to hex him right in the kitchen before he left." Now Ron looked around and asked, "I don't remember it looking so girly before."

Harry's eyes got huge and then he glared at Hermione who quickly said, "Well that's because I moved in." Ron looked shocked and before he could respond Hermione added, "You didn't think I was going to take the chance on him sneaking away now did you?"

Ron looked at her for a second and then calmly said, "Good point." He turned to Harry and added, "Maybe staying at the Burrow would have been better for you." Harry laughed drawing a glare from Hermione.

Not surprisingly, things fell into a very good routine and Harry was actually able to forget what was going to happen to him. Ron came over often and the three of them went out and did things in the Muggle world very often to the delight of Ron who never got tired of seeing how Muggles accomplished the simplest things. They visited the Burrow on many occasions when Harry was assured Percy wouldn't be around and also tried to make it when Ginny was out.

Harry and Hermione lived together without incident and for the first time, Harry really felt good about almost everything in his life which was precisely what Hermione had wanted when she moved in. Hermione however was becoming more and more bothered by what was going to happen to Harry. She tried not to show it but when the two of them were sitting alone sometimes, she couldn't help it. Harry didn't get angry with her for becoming emotional because he too felt that way but had resolved himself to what was coming.

During February, Hermione started becoming more distant and seemed to be really focusing on something. Harry and Ron had both been trying to get her to tell them what it was but Hermione refused. One Saturday night, Ron had a date and that left Hermione and Harry alone at the flat. Hermione had been very quiet throughout the day and Harry had planned on not bothering her after supper. The two were sitting on the couch, watching television when Hermione turned it off and faced Harry with a very serious look on her face. "I need to talk to you Harry," she firmly said.

Harry immediately got worried. Nothing good ever started like that. He turned and hesitantly said, "Ok."

"You know how I say you've always been selfish with your feelings?" she asked and Harry nodded trying to figure out where this was going. "Well, I want to ask you something that is very selfish."

"I'd do anything for you Hermione, you know that," Harry quickly said.

"Yes, well hear me out," she said, now sounding unsure. "First of all, I'm asking this completely for myself. I've been thinking for a while and decided this is something I want more than anything else in the world."

"Ok," Harry tentatively said.

Hermione took a deep breath and said, "Harry, I want to have your baby."

Harry just stared at her with his deep green eyes wide and jaw hanging. "Did you hear me Harry?" Hermione asked. "I want to have your baby."

Harry looked around like he was expecting something and then got a big grin as he said, "This is a joke isn't it? The twins are here somewhere."

Hermione actually chuckled and said, "No Harry, I'm serious." He looked at her and she slightly nodded her head.

"You can't be!" he said standing up. "That's insane."

Hermione jumped up and grabbed his hand. "No Harry it's not. Listen to me," she pleaded. Harry was too stunned to say anything so Hermione continued, "I don't think I ever realized before how much a part of my life you are. When you left it was like a huge part of me was ripped away. I just couldn't imagine living in the world without you. The only thing that made it bearable was that we knew you were alive." Harry started to say something but she stopped him. "Let me finish," she quickly said. "When I left the Burrow, I actually came here." Harry looked shocked; she had said she was going to her parents. Hermione sat down and sadly said, "I took the knife and was going to cut myself."

"What!" Harry exclaimed as he grabbed her arms and pulled up her sleeves. "You didn't did you?"

Hermione grabbed his hands and said, "No Harry I didn't. I knew you'd blame yourself if I did and I couldn't put you through that, but that's the only reason I didn't." Hermione began to cry and Harry pulled her into a hug. "I still feel the same way. I don't want to go on in this world without you in it. I just can't imagine."

"But what does this have to do with a baby?" Harry asked.

"That's what I've been thinking about," Hermione said, now looking intently at him. "I know you won't be here but if we have a baby, then some part of you will be and that will be enough for me. Don't you see?"

"No Hermione I don't see," Harry said. "You haven't thought this through. You're just trying to do this for me."

"No!" Hermione exclaimed standing up quickly. In a very determined voice she said, "This is for me! It's what I want! Honestly Harry, I've thought this through. I want this more than anything. Please?"

Harry was stunned and for once thought he was being the reasonable one when he said, "Listen to me Hermione, just listen. You've got your whole life ahead of you. You'll fall in love and have kids with someone. You don't want to be a single mother adding worries to your life."

"Harry," she calmly said taking his hands again. "I know I've got my whole life, but it won't be worth anything if you're not a part of it. I can do this and having a child won't keep me from anything in the future. Not if it is meant to be." She patted his hand and said, "I want this Harry. For me, I really do."

Harry thought for a minute and said, "You can't expect an answer right now can you?"

"No," she quickly said now smiling. "However, sometimes these things take a bit so you shouldn't take too long."

"Um...ok," Harry muttered. "I'm going to bed."

Hermione hugged him and said, "Please think hard about it. I know what I'm doing."

"This is the first time I'm not actually sure you do," Harry said before going to his room and trying to think.

Without sleeping much, Harry had been able to make a decision. After showering, he came to the kitchen to see Hermione at the table looking at him intently. "I suppose you expect an answer now," he said with a slight smile.

She took this as a good sign and said, "I won't sleep until you do give me one."

"Yeah, well I may never sleep again," he replied before becoming serious. "Ok, I have some conditions."

"Conditions?" she exclaimed and Harry put up his hands to quiet her.

"Yes, conditions," he calmly said. "First you promise me that you're doing this only to make you happy, not to make me happy."

"I promise!" she exclaimed. "I want this for me."

"Second, that if this happens, you won't stop yourself from finding someone that makes you happy when I'm gone."

"I promise," she said becoming more excited.

"It can't be a Malfoy," Harry flatly stated.

Hermione shook with disgust and said, "No problems there."

"Next, no matter if it's a boy or girl you get them flying lessons as soon as they possibly can," he said looking very serious.

"Harry! I'm not a good flier," she added.

"That's why I said lessons," he stated. "Get one of the twins or Ron or hire someone but I want him or her flying as soon as possible."

"Fine, I promise," she said shaking her head.

"Ok, now the big one," he said and she got worried. "Marry me," he said looking intently at her.

"Marry you? Harry you don't have to do that. I didn't mean for you to have to do that," she said looking worried.

"I insist," he said and added, "Hear me out." Hermione stayed quiet and Harry said, "It will make the transfer of my assets easier. You know my parents did ok and then Sirius left me his inheritance and then the Ministry decided to 'award' me with the Order of Merlin which came with a big chunk." Harry paused and then said, "Secondly, I don't really care what everyone else thinks but it will make it easier to explain things to the baby when he or she grows up. No one will think that we had some torrid drunken affair that left you pregnant." Harry watched her and she actually blushed at this. She didn't say anything for a minute so he asked, "Well?"

"You don't have to marry me Harry," she said. "I don't care what anyone else thinks but you do make some good points. You really did think about this didn't you?" Hermione studied him and then got a playful look in her eyes. "Fine, I agree to your terms. I'll marry you and you give me a baby," she said before hugging him tightly.

"This is going to be so strange," Harry said.

"Yes well it will be interesting for a while I suppose," Hermione said now thinking about what was going to be necessary for this to happen. "What kind of wedding do you want? We need to do it soon. This could take a while."

"My gosh Hermione," Harry said. "You're not going to treat me like a piece of meat are you?"

She blushed brightly and said, "Oh, of course not but we have to make sure we have enough time. Just in case." She thought for a moment and said, "I want a small private Muggle wedding. I'll have to invite my parents of course," she said thinking out loud as she began to pace. "I suppose you'll want Mr. & Mrs. Weasley there. Professor Lupin of course. Ron will be the best man and I used to think Ginny....but definitely not anymore...Tonks! Tonks will work."

Harry just stood back and watched her plan the whole thing out amazed that she was so far along. Suddenly she stopped and said, "Ok, we'll do it the first Saturday in March. I'll find the church. I'll tell my parents and then we can both go talk to them. You tell Professor Lupin and Mr. & Mrs. Weasley. We should tell Ron first...definitely. That will be interesting." She stopped pacing and went to the fireplace, threw in some powder and said, "Ronald Weasley!"

A few moments later Ron's messy head appeared and he said, "What do you want Hermione? It's too early for this."

"Did your latest woman sleep over?" she calmly asked.

"Would I have answered the floo if she was still here?" he replied shaking his head. Harry was thoroughly enjoying this exchange between his two friends.

"Well get over here, we've got some huge news," she said.

"Can't it wait Hermione?" he asked, still sounding tired.

"Do you want to be Harry's best man in his wedding or not?" she asked before cutting off the floo.

"You're evil at that!" Harry said smiling at her.

A moment later a much disheveled Ron Weasley stepped out of the fire with his shirt on backwards and no shoes. "Best man? What's going on?" Ron asked.

Before Harry could answer, Hermione stepped up and said, "Listen Ron, we've got two huge things to tell you. No one can know about either of them. Got it?" Ron looked at Harry who also looked surprised. He didn't know they were telling Ron about his condition right now.

"Hermione," Harry tentatively said. "Two things?"

"Yes Harry, two," she firmly said.

"Sit down Ron," she said and Ron took a seat in a large chair.

For the next hour, Hermione did most of the talking and first explained that Harry was cut with the knife and was dying. Ron almost seemed calmed down from that news and then she told him about them getting married. This sent him off on another rant about her not knowing what she was doing. Harry just added a couple "uh...huhs and sure" whenever Hermione gave him a look but stayed out of most of it.

Finally Ron stopped and just kept looking between Harry and Hermione then finally said, "Ok, let me get this straight. Harry's going to die sometime after his birthday." Harry and Hermione nodded. "So you want to have his baby so you can cling to some fantasy that he's still around?"

Hermione didn't seem bothered by this at all, she confidently said, "Yes Ron that's exactly how it is."

Ron turned to Harry and said, "And you?"

"I tried to talk her out of it Ron," Harry quickly said.

"Yeah, I know how that is," Ron replied. "Not much hope of that once she's gotten her mind made up." Hermione actually smiled at this. "People are going to go ballistic," he said.

"No one can know," Harry firmly said. "Once the wedding is over, I don't care if people know about that or not but no one can know what's happening to me until I'm gone. No one."

"Fine," Ron said. "I suppose it's only because Hermione found out that you're even letting us know. Bloody Hell mate," Ron said causing Harry and Hermione to laugh out loud.

Chapter 18

Harry went to tell Remus Lupin and Hermione went to tell her parents. Surprisingly, both of them weren't as against the idea as they had planned. Hermione told her parents about Harry dying and Lupin already knew. Her parents tried to point out all of the negative things about raising a child by herself but Hermione had counters to almost every argument.

Ron had setup a time that Harry could come to the Burrow when only his parents would be at home. Harry was dreading this but didn't have time to beat around the bush. After a nice lunch Harry decided the time wouldn't get any better. "I'd like to talk to both of you for a minute," Harry said before either could get up from the table. "What I'm going to tell you is only known by a couple people and it has to stay that way," he said seriously causing both adults to become worried. "Now, the reasons for what I'm going to do will become apparent later this year but for right now you have to trust that I know what I'm doing." Harry paused and said, "On the first Saturday in March, I'm getting married and would like you two to attend."

Molly jumped up and hugged him which Harry wasn't expecting. "Oh Harry dear, I'm so happy! I had no idea you were dating someone so seriously."

Harry extracted himself and said, "Well, that's just the thing." Molly became less excited and Harry added, "I'm marrying Hermione."

The two adults were silent for a second and then Mrs. Weasley said, "I didn't know you two were..."

"Well it is very sudden," Harry hesitantly said.

"You're not?....she's not?...is she?" Molly asked.

"No Mrs. Weasley she's not and we haven't," Harry added knowing what she was worried about. "You'll understand everything later, I promise. But for now, you can't tell anyone. Only her parents, Ron, Professor Lupin and you two will be there."

Mr. Weasley spoke up, "Don't worry Harry, we won't say anything and will be proud to be there with you."

Over the next week, Hermione was busying herself with small wedding issues. She had already found a very nice dress, even though Harry hadn't seen it. Once it was decided, she had done everything by the bride's book. She even told Harry that he had to leave the flat the night before the wedding but before leaving, Harry sat her down for a small talk.

"Listen Hermione," Harry said. "You've never asked about how much money I have or anything but I want to tell you a few things."

"Oh Harry," she said. "I don't care about that. I have a good job."

"I know but listen," he said. "This all goes to you being happy when I'm gone. You will have enough that if you decide to take time off with the baby you can easily do it. In fact you could take the rest of your life off." Her eyes got wide never having considered this before. "You may decide later to do something that doesn't pay well but you really enjoy and you'll be able

to do that. I know you would never do this but if you never wanted to work again, you could. I expect you won't want to be away from work for much time at all and that's fine, whatever you want. I just want you to know that you have the option to do anything you want. Whatever is best for you and the baby is what I want."

She looked at him warmly and said, "Thank you Harry. You know I don't know exactly what we have together but I do love you and this is what I want."

Harry sighed and smiled brightly before replying, "I know how you feel. I love you more than anything in this world. I'd do anything for you." Harry kissed her on the cheek before standing to leave.

Hermione stopped him and said, "You know that tomorrow we'll be doing more than kissing on the cheek?" Harry blushed and nodded. "Well then I think this is appropriate," she said before pulling him into a deep kiss. It took a second before Harry responded but when he did it was the most natural thing on earth to him. The two parted some time later both feeling quite flushed.

"See you at the church Hermione," Harry said before leaving.

"Um...church," she absentmindedly said.

Harry stayed at a Muggle hotel and was already dressed when Ron came over. "Did you take care of that thing Ron?" Harry asked.

"Yep," he said with a laugh. "Little bloke doesn't have a clue who it's for."

The two went to a small white church in the country. It overlooked a large field where they could see horses in the distance. Since it was such a nice day, the ceremony was going to be outside on the top of a small hill. Harry saw the car arrive carrying Hermione's parents and knew the others were already there. "Better tell Colin what's going on now," Harry said and Ron left.

After an hour, Colin Creevy and Ron came to where Harry was standing with Professor Lupin and Mr. Weasley. "Hi'ya Harry!" Colin announced. "I can't believe you're getting married! I can't believe I'm taking the pictures."

Harry laughed and said, "Hi Colin. I really appreciate you taking care of this. Remember, no one sees the pictures but us. Ron will tell you which one you can give to the Prophet."

"Oh I know," Colin said with a strained look at Ron. "Ron told me what would happen if anyone got one of them before you wanted them too." Ron raised his eyebrows and smiled.

Ron turned to Harry and said, "This is it mate. I still say you're mental. You would've thought I'd be used to it by now." Ron grabbed his friend's shoulder and let him to the front of the church.

Harry stood at the front of the Church with Ron next to him and surveyed the few guests in attendance. Professor Lupin had a very strained look on his face but gave Harry a smile when their eyes met. Mr. Weasley looked genuinely pleased but Harry assumed this was as much the result of seeing a Muggle wedding and being around so many Muggle items. Mrs.

Weasley was already tearing up and Harry assumed this wouldn't stop until after the ceremony. Hermione's parents seemed content and gave him a very warm smile when he met their eyes and Harry returned their smile. Hermione's father soon got up and walked to the back of the church and Harry knew it wouldn't be much longer now.

Father Barone nodded to the organist who began to play a soft melody and the next moment Tonks came walking down the aisle. Harry was surprised to see her dressed in a very frilly off-white dress. Harry had never seen her dressed in anything other than t-shirts or robes and was quite shocked at how different she looked. She smiled brightly at Harry as she stepped to the left side of the aisle.

The next minute, the organist changed and started to play the Wedding Song and everyone turned to watch Hermione and her father walk down the aisle. She was dressed in a very traditional white Muggle wedding dress and was smiling as brightly as Harry had ever seen. This lifted his spirits since she seemed to be genuinely happy that this was happening. At the sight of her, Hermione's mother began tearing up and dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

When they reached the front of the church, Mr. Granger lifted Hermione's veil and kissed her cheek and then turned to Harry and shook his hand before pulling him into a hug. This was the first time Mr. Granger had ever hugged Harry. When he turned to leave, Harry caught Hermione's eye and saw her mouth 'Thank You.'

The ceremony was short and without any incidents. The two exchanged rings and then when the Father told Harry he could kiss the bride, there was open crying from both Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Granger but then everyone began clapping as the Father announced Mr. & Mrs. Harry Potter. Harry and Hermione had already agreed that she would go by Hermione Granger-Potter to make sure she kept her own identity.

They then spent the next hour with Colin taking pictures of the group and suggesting many different situations. Colin also took some with a Muggle camera so that the Grangers could send to relatives.

They then went to a small Muggle restaurant in the small town to have a reception. Now everyone seemed to be in a very good mood and Harry spent most of the time talking to the Grangers. He never knew what Hermione told them about the situation but then never brought up why things happened so fast between him and their daughter. Immediately after the reception, Harry and Hermione left for their week long honeymoon on the Greek island of Santorini.

The Weasley's and Ron returned to the Burrow with Tonks and Remus Lupin to continue their small celebration of the wedding. When they arrived Ginny and the twins were there waiting. "Where have you been dressed like that?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah!" George exclaimed. "That's pretty fancy Muggle wear," Fred added.

Mrs. Weasley hesitated but Remus said, "It'll be common knowledge tomorrow Molly."

Mrs. Weasley smiled brightly at this and said, "We've been to a Muggle wedding!"

"Bet dad loved that," George joked. "What Muggle do you know that would have invited all of you?" Fred asked.

"Hermione," Tonks said hoping to keep the suspense up a bit.

"Hermione!" Ginny exclaimed. "I didn't know she was engaged. Who'd she marry?"

"Someone she's known for a while now," Ron said joining Tonks in winding everyone up.

Lupin decided to end the other's suspense and said, "Hermione and Harry just got married."

Ginny and the twins were speechless as their jaws dropped. Finally George said, "Harry? Our Harry?" "The Boy-Who-Lived Harry?" Fred asked.

"The one in the same boys," Mr. Weasley said. "Fascinating thing Muggle weddings. Nothing flying around or anything."

Mrs. Weasley was studying Ginny who couldn't seem to grasp what had happened. "Are you ok dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Um...sure...Harry really married Hermione?" Ginny muttered and her mother nodded. After a moment she turned to Ron and said, "You knew about this?"

Ron was torn between feeling sorry for his little sister and slightly good that she was feeling odd since she had dropped Harry for Dean. "Yeah but I was shocked as well when they told me. It's what they want though so I'm happy."

Ginny left the others to their celebration and went to walk around Diagon Alley alone.

On the island of Santorini, the newlyweds had just finished a private meal and returned to their room both feeling very anxious. Harry really sensed that Hermione was nervous and said, "You know Hermione that if you want to wait on this, it's ok with me."

"I don't want to wait!" Hermione exclaimed. "It's just going to be awkward at first but it's what I want." She hugged him and kissed him deeply. "I promise, it's what I really want. I have no doubts about this."

This made Harry feel much better and he kissed her deeply before she said, "I'm going to go freshen up a bit and then we'll see how this goes." Harry blushed at knowing what was about to happen.

Harry woke up to a very strange feeling the next morning. There was a weight across his chest and legs and he was feeling a tickling sensation under his nose. Blinking, he saw the mass of hair across his upper chest and realized Hermione was lying half over him. He smiled as he recalled the events of late last night. What had started off awkwardly for the first few moments quickly changed to feeling very comfortable and natural to them both. The two actually ended up making love three times before giving in to exhaustion and falling asleep in each others arms.

Harry felt Hermione stir and when she lifted her head he said, "Good morning wife."

Hermione smiled, sighed and lightly kissed his lips. "Good morning husband," she said with a smile. Lifting herself up to look directly into his eyes, she got serious and said, "Thank you Harry."

Harry knew what she meant and said, "I'm still not sure you were thinking clearly when you suggested this but I can't remember ever being happier than I am now so I should be thanking you."

Hermione laid her head back on Harry's chest and after a few minutes, Harry could tell his chest was getting damp and realized she was crying. "What's wrong Hermione? Did I do something?"

Hermione sniffed and said, "No, you didn't do anything. I just started thinking about what's going to happen to you. I'm sorry. I promised I wouldn't bring it up."

Harry had also been trying to keep thoughts of what was to come out of his mind so he lightly rubbed her back and said, "It's ok Hermione. I've accepted what's going to happen. Before I didn't think it would be that bad since I hadn't been happy in a long time but now I'm dreading it. I'm not afraid or anything it's just that being back around you and Ron has been pretty great. This is why I thought about staying away."

Hermione quickly leaned up and said, "No! It's better you came back. I don't know how I would have handled it if you had died without use seeing you again. You really don't know how much it tore me up when we didn't know anything about you."

After a couple minutes of silence Harry said, "So do you want to go sightseeing today? Or maybe go find a museum or something?"

Hermione seemed to be thinking and then said, "Maybe later but right now I think you should get back to your end of the bargain and work on giving me a baby."

"Hermione!" Harry exclaimed. "Are you going to regret doing this if you aren't pregnant before it happens?"

"No I won't regret it," she said hitting him. "However I expect you to do everything in your power to help it along. I've already been taking a fertility potion so that should increase the odds."

Harry laughed and said, "You're amazing you know that."

The next day back in England the Daily Prophet headline read:

The Boy-Who-Lived Weds Longtime Friend

Harry Potter who recently defeated The Dark Lord for the final time was wed to Miss Hermione Granger yesterday in a small Muggle ceremony on the outskirts of Northshire. Harry and Miss Granger were close friends since they both started Hogwarts together. Their other good friend Ronald Weasley was the Best Man and Nymphadora Tonks who teamed with Potter and Albus Dumbledore in the defeat of the Dark Lord was the Maid of Honor.

Harry has not been seen in public since The Final Battle so we are sure it will come as quite a shock to everyone in the Wizarding Community that he has gotten married. The couple is on a honeymoon in an undisclosed location and then will be living at Harry's residence which is still unknown to all our sources.

We at the Prophet wish the couple the best of luck and hope that Harry can finally find some peace and happiness after everything he has been put through.

The only photograph of the wedding was supplied by former Gryffindor Colin Creevy

<Photo of the wedding party with Harry and Hermione leaning in to kiss each other>

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The moment after the Prophet arrived, the Burrow was non-stop activity. The floo was constantly active with people wanting details and wishing to send gifts and well wishes to the couple. The Minister of Magic had personally come to the Burrow demanding to know why he wasn't invited to the ceremony. Mrs. Weasley had to be restrained by her husband from hexing the Minister on the spot. Later in the day, Ron, Remus Lupin and Tonks had all come over to take some of the pressure off of Mrs. Weasley.

"Can't they just leave him alone!" she exclaimed after the fifth reporter tried to enter the Burrow from the floo.

Lupin felt bad for how irritated Mrs. Weasley was becoming and said, "Let me handle the floo for a while Molly. We can get it shut down for a while if you want."

It took a couple days but things did quiet down at the Burrow especially after two reporters were stunned after entering the home late one evening. Ron and Bill had been playing chess when the two strange people appeared from the floo and before they could say anything the two Weasley boys had them stunned and then shoved them back into the floo sending them into a very seedy part of Knockturn Alley.

Ron was receiving an unexpected bonus from being in the wedding. The witch he was currently dating really liked all the extra attention Ron attracted when they were out and was being especially nice to him. Ron thought it was only fair after being Harry's sidekick for so long to get a little special treatment out of it. Ron flatly refused however to take her to Harry's or to promise to introduce her. Ron still found himself thinking about the future and what he and Harry would be doing but would catch himself and remember that Harry wouldn't be around that much longer. That thought just seemed so bizarre to Ron. After everything that Harry went through he was just supposed to die in about four months. All because he got cut by some stupid knife. When he was around Harry, his friend acted like nothing was wrong and that in turn made Ron forget what was going to happen. Only when Ron was alone did the reality of what the near future was bringing sink in and only then did he allow himself to wallow in the sadness.

Harry and Hermione arrived home after a week spent without worries. A week where they didn't talk about the future or allow it to intrude on their moment of happiness. "Well back to the real world," Harry said as he summoned the luggage back into the bedroom. "Now the reality of having me as a husband will start," he joked.

"Yes well not quite reality yet," Hermione firmly said. "I'm going to make Kingsley give me a few months leave so we can spend as much time together as possible," she said and blinked her eyes to keep any tears from forming.

Harry came up and hugged her from behind and said, "I told you that you didn't think this through enough. I should have just stayed away."

Hermione wheeled around and angrily said, "No you shouldn't have! I have no doubts about what we're doing and I'm trying to stay upbeat about everything but it's just hard." She allowed him to hug her again and then said, "I don't mean to be like this but sometimes it just seems so unfair."

"I know Hermione, I know," Harry softly said. "I wish you could cheer up. I've never been happier in my life and will gladly take whatever time I have with you and Ron."

"That's better," Hermione said. "Now let's see what this note is," she added as she picked up a note that was from Ron. Hermione laughed as she read it and then said, "Ron says his mom is going mad with all the people wanting information about you. He says we need to go over there and get all the gifts and notes that people have sent us."

"Now you're going to get a little taste of the weirdness of my life," Harry joked.

"Yes but we're staying away from all of that," she firmly said. "I don't want us to deal with any hassles. You have to focus on keeping your end of the bargain."

"Hermione give me a rest!" Harry exclaimed. "I'm doing the best I can."

"Yes well if things haven't happened by July you're going to a doctor and making a donation so I can keep trying," she added as Harry's eyes got huge.

"I don't think I could do that," Harry quickly said realizing what it would take.

"Well then you better concentrate on doing it the natural way because that was our deal," she said as she began to unpack.

The next few months seemed to fly by for Harry. He and Hermione spent most of their time together and they often took small weekend trips with Ron to Muggle parts of Europe. It was like they all had dreamed of, the three friends doing things together and enjoying life. However there was always the little itch in the back of their minds that they were just barely able to keep up the act, none of them wanting to be the first to break down with the weight of what was coming.

By the end of June, Harry was getting very anxious about two things, his commitment to Hermione and his birthday. Hermione hadn't said she was pregnant yet and Harry became stressed about this and his birthday would be the one year anniversary of being cut and he didn't know exactly how things would progress after that point. He began getting a little more withdrawn and started spending some time alone with Remus Lupin as well. Hermione hated to be away from him but knew he wanted some time alone with the only remaining friend of his father.

When July first rolled around, the friends had dropped all pretense of everything being fine and were now openly talking about how they would miss Harry when he was gone. Ron still joked enough about Harry having to go to the fertility clinic to make a donation if Hermione didn't become pregnant soon. Hermione however was very quiet on that subject and Harry assumed it was because she didn't want to add to his concerns.

Late one night after Ron had left, Hermione sat next to Harry and said, "We need to talk."

"I've been trying Hermione!" Harry exclaimed assuming she wanted to bring up the donation. "I don't know if I can go to one of those places," he added obviously squirming.

"You won't do it for me?" Hermione questioned looking hurt.

Harry gave her a pleading look and finally said, "Of course I will, but I won't enjoy it."

"Ok then," she said giving him a light kiss. "However, it doesn't seem like that will be necessary anymore."

Harry gave her a confused look and then it finally clicked, "Really? It worked? I mean we did it?"

Hermione chuckled and said, "Yes Harry we did it. You make it sound like we just passed a test or something."

"Are you still ok with this happening?" he tentatively asked.

Hermione whacked him on the arm and said, "Of course I'm ok with it. Merlin Harry you have no idea how important this is to me."

Harry hugged her tightly and said, "Thank you Hermione. I can't tell you how happy you've made me. You're the best."

Hermione had tears of happiness and as she wiped them she said, "I don't know how things would have been if you hadn't been cut but I have no regrets about doing this."

"I still say you're a bit mental but I learned long ago that I can't win an argument with you," he joked back. "How far along are you?"

"A little over two months," she said. "I wanted to be sure before I said anything."

The two spent the next two days totally alone and then invited Ron over to tell him. Ron was happy but also a bit disappointed that he couldn't continue to give Harry a hard time about being unable to perform.

Mrs. Weasley insisted on having a birthday party for Harry and as much as he and Hermione tried to find an excuse for not going, but they realized it would be impossible. As the date got closer, Ron and Hermione became much more depressed but Harry had now resigned himself to what was happening and tried his best to keep the spirits of his friends up.

Harry spent the entire day before his birthday with Remus Lupin, making sure things were in order and just talking about the past. Ron and Hermione had decided to spend the day together

as well and both seemed to be more comfortable with the situation after talking things through again.

When Harry got home that night, Hermione had brought in food from his favorite restaurant and had a nice table setup for them. "You didn't have to go through any trouble Hermione," Harry said.

"I want tonight to be perfect," she said holding back her emotions.

Harry nodded as they sat down to eat. They were both very quiet during the meal and Harry again started feeling guilty for the pain he knew Hermione was feeling. After eating, they went to the couch where Hermione pulled him into a deep kiss.

After reluctantly ending the kiss Harry softly said, "Thank you for everything Hermione."

"Don't talk about it Harry," Hermione quickly said blinking rapidly. "Don't mention it anymore. I'm doing my best to keep it together. Just kiss me."

Harry obliged her and the two were quickly embracing on the couch until Hermione said, "C'mon let's go to the bedroom."

"What about the baby?" Harry asked.

"As long as you don't go too crazy we'll be fine," she said pulling his hand and leading him down the hall.

The two stayed in bed until almost noon the next day and then leisurely got ready before going to the Burrow late that afternoon. They arrived via floo and were luckily able to sneak off with Ron before everyone realized they were there. When the three reached the small paddock at the edge of the Burrow they sat down under a tree and Ron quickly asked, "So are you still feeling ok?"

"Yeah, maybe this thing is just a myth," Harry joked back knowing full well it wasn't. "It was my entire ruse to get Hermione into bed."

"Yes well you won't like the results if that turns out to be the case," she said trying to sound mean.

"When are you going to tell Mum about the baby?" Ron asked.

"Next month at the latest," Hermione quickly said. "I'll be showing a bit by then."

"It's still kind of weird you know," Ron added looking between Hermione and Harry. "My former girlfriend is having my best friend's baby. The Prophet will have a field day with this one."

Harry grimaced but Hermione turned to Ron and quickly said, "I'll handle the Prophet. It will be fine. You and I decided long before this that we were better suited as friends. We know the truth and that's all that matters."

After sitting around talking, the three made their way back to the Burrow where Remus Lupin, Tonks, the twins and Ginny with her date Dean were waiting. "We didn't know you were already here," George said. "Yes, very rude of the guest of honor keeping us waiting," Fred added.

"Shut it you dolts," Ron said as the three sat at the end of the table.

Remus Lupin noticed how Ron, Hermione and Harry stayed very tight during the birthday party and it brought a flash of pain at the thought of him no longer having friends like that. He knew that Ron and Hermione would be ok once Harry was gone since they had remained so close. He hated that he had thought Sirius was a traitor for twelve years after James and Lily had died and wondered how much easier things would have been if Sirius hadn't been suspected and the two could have leaned on each other for support. Knowing that Harry was going to be gone soon had at first been a devastating blow to Remus but he had the time to come to grips with the fact and had prepared himself as much as possible.

Tonks was having a harder time keeping her mood up today than she expected. She had been through so much pain with Harry while they were trying to defeat Voldemort that she thought she could deal with this as just another horror of the war but seeing Harry and his two friends together made her very sad for them. She promised herself that she would become closer to Hermione since Ron would be her main source for comfort in the coming months. Tonks wasn't totally surprised when she found out about Hermione wanting to have Harry's baby. In some way she fully understood the younger girl's fantasy of clinging onto some part of her best friend.

Mrs. Weasley had suspected something was up with Ron and his two friends for some time now. There seemed to be some secret they were keeping from everyone. This didn't really bother Mrs. Weasley much since she knew that Harry had probably confided some things that happened during the battle with them but she still wished she could help with his pain. Seeing the three of them together at the party confirmed that something indeed was going on. Even though they all kept up a good face, she could see something dark lingering just below the surface and wanted nothing more than to see if she could help but knew from experience that all three of them would not reveal anything until they all agreed on it.

Ginny could also tell something was different about the three. She had suspected they were keeping some big secret ever since she heard Harry and Hermione had gotten married. Something about this just didn't make sense to her. Harry and Hermione had always been very close but to get married so soon after his ordeal just didn't fit. She had never fully patched things up with Harry and since he had been so closed off to her since returning, she didn't feel able to do much.

Everyone had finished their first helping of cake when Hermione thought she saw Harry give a slight flinch but then he quickly looked normal so she didn't mention anything. The next moment Harry stood to say something. Since this was so out of character for him, everyone quickly became silent. "I just wanted to say thanks for all of this," he said gesturing to the food and presents. "You've all been great since I've been back and I can't tell you how much it has helped. Since then I've felt like I had a family for the first time in my life. Thanks." Harry raised his glass of juice and took a drink, instantly joined by everyone else and then he sat back down.

Hermione leaned in close and whispered, "That was nice. It meant a lot to Mrs. Weasley." Harry kind of blushed at this.

The twins quickly took over the conversations and kept everyone entertained while they ate even more cake. Hermione definitely saw Harry flinch and noticed a slightly strained look in his face and was just about to ask him about it when he turned and said, "Hermione do you and Ron want to take a quick walk with me?"

Hermione focused with all of her might not to cry and quickly stood up only slightly beaten by Ron who hadn't said anything. Harry turned to look at Professor Lupin and Tonks and gave them a slight nod before walking away with his friends.

Tonks stood and mumbled, "I need to check on something Molly. I'll be right back." The young woman quickly walked to the house and entered.

Remus Lupin could only watch Harry walk away and fight to control his own feelings. He knew this day would come and had prepared as much as he could but it was almost like watching his best friend from school leave. He thought that at least this time he was able to say goodbye properly. Deep inside he wanted nothing more than to leave and spend time alone but knew that Hermione and the others would want company when they found out.

Once the three friends got to the paddock Hermione turned Harry around and asked, "Is it happening?" Ron looked at his friend obviously concerned.

"I think so. It just feels weird right now," Harry said and turned to Ron. "Ron make sure she gets the baby flying lessons as soon as possible," Harry said trying to smile but seeing Ron start to tear up made that hard. "You'll be a great godfather you know," Harry added and then gave his best friend a hug.

Ron sniffed a bit and said, "I'll take care of her. We'll miss you mate." Ron quickly turned and walked a few feet away to give Hermione some privacy.

Hermione now had tears running down her face as she said, "I'm sorry Harry. I tried not to cry."

"It's ok Hermione I'm not doing much better," Harry said. "Thank you for everything. You gave me more than I deserved."

"Oh Harry," she said and hugged him tight. She felt Harry flinch again so she pulled back.

"I have to go," Harry said. "If it's nothing I'll be back soon."

"Do you really think it could be nothing?" she asked hopefully.

Harry didn't answer and lightly kissed her on the lips before he said, "I do love you Hermione," and vanished with a small pop.

Hermione dropped to the ground and began sobbing uncontrollably. Ron quickly came over and hugged her trying to keep his own tears in check. "I can't believe this is actually happening," she sobbed. "He's not coming back."

"We'll be ok Hermione," Ron said comforting her. "We'll have each other. We won't forget him."

It was over a half hour when the two came back to the table not even trying to hide their sorrow. Tonks was the first one up as she ran to hug Hermione. Lupin was there next and patted Ron on the shoulder. Now everyone else at the table started to move to the group with Mrs. Weasley their first. "What's happened? Where's Harry?"

Hermione sobbed and managed to get out, "I can't do this. Ron you tell it. Tell it all." Hermione ran inside and was quickly followed by Tonks.

Ron composed himself, took a deep breath and said, "Harry's gone."

"Gone? What do you mean gone?" George asked. "Yeah, why'd he leave the party?" Fred questioned.

Ron didn't seem to have the words so Remus Lupin said, "Harry's dying. He won't be back. He's known since he returned from the battle."

"What?" everyone who didn't know already exclaimed.

Lupin directed everyone back to the table and between him and Ron they spent the next hour explaining everything. On top of the shock of learning that Harry had left to die, the added news about Hermione being pregnant with Harry's baby had caused Mrs. Weasley to faint. Everyone present ended up staying at the Burrow that night trying to comfort each other and to answer all the questions.

Harry had apparated to his flat after leaving the Burrow and picked up the small satchel he had packed earlier. He hadn't told anyone about this part of his plan. He was indeed dying and felt the first symptoms but wasn't going to wait around to melt. He walked over to Hedwig who was looking at him intently with her large brown eyes and said, "Thanks for everything girl." Harry stroked her feathers. "I'm going to miss you terribly. Take care of Hermione for me will you?" The snowy owl hooted softly and nibbled Harry's fingers. Harry cast a disillusionment charm on himself, grabbed the cursed blade from the top of the television, put his invisibility cloak on and disappeared.

When Harry reappeared, he instantly felt another pang of pain and backed against the wall of the now familiar corridor. Making his way to the side, he slipped through the less obvious doorways that they had researched over a year before. Avoiding any area that may have people and after making many turns, he ended up in a circular room with seven doors. Softly he whispered, "Show me the death room." The room spun and ended with a door directly in front of him. Harry slowly opened the door and glanced in to make sure no one else was inside before stepping in and casting a locking charm on the door.

Slowly Harry approached the veil and heard the whispers coming from within. He walked completely around the softly ruffling cloth twice, looking for anything that may give him a clue to what was inside. Harry removed his cloak and cancelled the disillusionment charm before placing the cloak and the knife into his satchel. Harry raised his palm near the veil and could almost feel a soft breeze across his hand. Listening closely, he tried to make out anything in the whispers but nothing seemed familiar. Another stab of pain almost brought him to his knees and he knew it wouldn't be long now. He was startled to hear the door rattle

and then heard a voice on the other side mumbling something. Not wanting to be stopped when he was this close, Harry put the strap of the satchel over his shoulder, firmly grasped his wand in his right hand and said, "Sirius, I hope you're there." Harry knew that his next action would answer a question that had haunted him for over three years and with a final effort, Harry made a large step into the veil causing it to swing back before fluttering to its original position.

On February 14th, Ron Weasley was in the delivery room as his best friend gave a final groan and slumped back onto the hospital bed breathing rapidly. Hermione opened her eyes as her and Ron watched the doctor make some quick movements and then stand straight up with a blue blanket wrapped tightly around a very small baby. "It looks like you have a very healthy baby boy Mrs. Potter," the doctor said as he handed the bundle to Hermione.

Ron's eyes were huge but Hermione couldn't stop smiling as she held the tiny little person in her arm. She lightly ran a finger over the tufts of auburn hair and almost gasped as the little boy's eyes snapped open at the touch revealing a pair of brilliant green eyes. That moment Hermione knew she had a part of her back.

Her best friend's announcement made her realize he knew it as well. "Bloody Hell!"