Harry Potter and the New Identity
Chapter: 1

Author’s notes

I own none of the characters or places that appear in my story, and I make no money off of this. In fact, I’m probably losing money since I’m writing this while at work.

This story takes places over Harry Potter’s sixth and seventh years. There will be angst, rejection, kidnapping, battles, finding peace, and more battles. It’s also an H/Hr story, and though they won’t be together until the very end, there will be lots of good exposition on how they feel about each other along the way.

I hope you enjoy.

1. Summer

For most kids, summer was a time of fun and sun. With no school to worry about, most kids take advantage of their freedom to meet and play with their friends outside until nightfall, then returning home to a nice dinner with a loving family. Most kids dread the end of summer, for that signifies the start of another year of school.

Unfortunately for Harry Potter, he was not “most kids.” For you see, Harry Potter is a wizard, born with the ability to control magic and perform amazing feats. But, even against wizarding standards, Harry Potter was not “most kids.” After all, not many kids have a personal vendetta with the most evil wizard of his time.

On this particular day in July, Harry found himself once again in the Department of Mysteries. The final fight with the Death Eaters flashed through his mind: the despair he felt once he realized he was surrounded, with only Neville by his side; the relief he felt when the Order members rushed into the room, firing spells from their wands....

"Nooooo!" Harry screamed. Harry opened his eyes to look into the sneering face of Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, currently Harry’s tutor in Occlumency. Harry wished he had kept them closed.

"Better Potter," Snape observed, almost reluctantly, as he watched Harry pick himself up from the floor. "You were able to stop me from seeing the end. But you’ll need to improve considerably if you wish to keep the Dark Lord from knowing your thoughts."

Harry grimaced slightly, then set his face into a neutral expression. He promised himself he would control his anger, his hatred, towards the man in front of him. Harry simply nodded and returned to the chair facing Snape. Harry understood why Snape had to be his occlumency tutor. Not only was Snape the best qualified, Snape was also the only one who would happily pick away at Harry’s deepest fears and most painful memories, as Voldemort surely would. With Snape, Harry faced a true challenge and would be better prepared to face Voldemort. But just because he understood didn’t mean he had to like it.

"That will be all for today Potter. I will return next week for another lesson. Remember to clear your mind of thoughts before sleeping," Snape said, standing up. Harry followed Snape to the door of Number 4 Privet Drive and watched him walk away, covering the distance necessary that would allow him to apperate away.

Leaving King’s Cross Station at the end of the school year, Harry had hoped that this summer would be his best yet (considering his summers in the past, this would not be hard to accomplish). After the scare the Order put into his uncle, Harry expected a new level of freedom from his horrid relatives. He also expected that he would be kept informed about Voldemort’s activities, though maybe not as much as a full Order member, after Dumbledore’s revelations to him at the end of last year. Harry was, however, of two minds about returning to 12 Grimmauld Place; on the one hand, it would be nice to see his friends Ron, Hermione, Remus, and the other Order members again; but on the other hand, Harry dreaded
returning to Sirius’ home. It was hard enough not to think about what happened, what Harry caused to happen, while at the Dursley’s. It would be next to impossible not to if he were surrounded by things that would remind him of Sirius.

Unfortunately for Harry, much of what he expected would not come to pass. True, the Dursley’s have been studiously avoiding him; in fact, they practically ignored him, only calling him for meals. He wasn’t even forced to perform any of his usual chores. Normally this lack of interaction would have pleased Harry, but all his time alone only left him with his thoughts and memories as company. He would have preferred to be performing chores if nothing else to keep his mind off of Sirius.

His hopes of being kept informed by the Order were quickly squashed. The Order prevented all owls from reaching his home, supposedly to keep him safe from the possibility of cursed mail, as well as to avoid the deluge of mail, good and bad, that was caused by the Daily Prophet’s story on the return of Voldemort. This, of course, also prevented Harry from receiving any owls that contained any information about Voldemort, including the Daily Prophet. He still received letters from his friends, but these were passed along by hand through various Order members as they came to check up on him. Ron and Hermione’s letters were just as brief as last summer’s; either nothing was happening that they knew about, or Ron and Hermione were told to keep him in the dark again. None of the visiting Order members ever told him anything of importance, and he was somewhat hesitant to ask too much. Harry still felt guilty about what happened in Department of Mysteries despite reassurances by Tonks, Moody, and Remus that they had fully recovered and no one placed any blame on him in the least.

Harry found that his dilemma over returning to 12 Grimmauld Place was unnecessary; Harry would not be allowed to leave 4 Privet Drive until school started, and he wasn’t even allowed past the front lawn. The Order was especially worried for his safety after what happened at the Ministry and the Dementer attack of last year. So, in effect, Harry was trapped and alone, without any information about anything. It would have been worse then last year, if not for the weekly training sessions.

Almost immediately upon returning to the Dursley’s, Harry had been taking lessons with various members of the Order: occlumency with Snape, dueling with Moody, and metamorphagy with Tonks. By far occlumency was his least favorite, for not only was he forced to re-live his worst memories, but he also had to endure the scowling face and biting comments of Professor Snape. It almost wasn’t worth it, but Harry knew he needed to know the skill if he hoped to avoid another situation like last year.

The most tiring sessions were with Moody. He was initially disappointed that his lessons would not include learning more powerful and dangerous spells. After all, could Harry really expect to defeat Voldemort with stunning spells and a good jelly-legs jinx? Instead, his dueling lessons focused on improving his awareness, his speed, his reactions, and his endurance. Duelling was something Harry had some skill with, and as an added benefit the physical and mental activity often left him so tired that he was able to sleep without dreams.

But the most interesting and, for Harry, exciting sessions were with Tonks. Ever since he saw he changing her appearance, he had hoped for some similar skill to hide his famous scar. Harry had remembered incidents of his pre-Hogwarts magic; specifically, his ability to re-grow his hair after a horrid cutting by his Aunt Petunia. Wasn’t that similar to what Tonks could do? Maybe he was a metamorphagus as well! After bringing up the subject with Tonks, she began testing him for the in-born talent, and to his great pleasure, Harry found he was born ability to change his appearance. This somewhat lessened his disappointment when he found that he wasn’t an Animagus, like his father and godfather before him. Harry was progressing as a metamorphagus quite nicely, able to alter many of his features. However, the goal of hiding his scar still eluded him, but he had high hopes.

Harry’s birthday had come and gone without fanfare. He received various gifts from the Weasleys, Hermione, and Order members, passed along by Remus. Although he appreciated every single gift, he wished he could spend his birthday with his friends, rather than with his overweight cousin watching television.

Harry sighed as he climbed the stairs towards his small bedroom, ignoring the anxious and slightly fearful looks on the faces of his relatives. Trying to clear his mind of thoughts, Harry climbed into bed, hoping for a night without dreams.
Chapter: 2

2. OWLs and Broom Rides

The next day during breakfast, an owl swooped in through an open window and settled on the table. It was the first owl Harry had seen all summer. It approached Harry and held its leg out, offering a letter bearing the official Hogwarts seal. Vernon glared at the owl and turned a rather lovely shade of purple, the muscles about his jaw flexing. It was clear to Harry that Uncle Vernon was ready to explode about the owl, but it was equally clear he was holding himself in, afraid that if he did, Harry might tell the one of those people, maybe even the one with the creepy eyeball who came by every now and then.

Harry took the letter from the owl and politely fed it a piece of bacon from his plate. As the owl flapped its wings and flew away, Harry opened the letter.

Dear Mr. Potter

We are pleased to present your results from the Ordinary Wizarding Level tests. Based on your performance, a listing of the classes you are eligible to attend and related books is enclosed. Please respond with your class selections by August 25

Your results are as follows...

For the first time since the summer started, since his last game of Quidditch, in fact, Harry was thrilled! Ten OWLS! He also qualified for the classes needed to be an Auror, and even the thought of more potions with Snape didn't lessen his happiness. The only disappointment he felt was at not being named a prefect, but after last year he wasn't expecting it.

Looking up at the rest of his relatives, Harry quickly realized there was no one to share his happiness with. The Dursley's could care less; he would probably anger them if he mentioned anything about his school or life in general, especially any of his accomplishments. He didn't have any lessons scheduled with Tonks or Moody for a couple days. He couldn't even use Hedwig to write to Ron and Hermione, as owls were forbidden.

This made Harry stop and think. If owls were forbidden, how did the school owl get through? He supposed it made sense, since Dumbledore put the original charm on the house, so surely he could let his own owl in. But then, why couldn't he send owls? Hedwig had been staying with Hermione during the summer, since she would be of no use (and quite bored) with Harry, and Hermione didn't have an owl of her own. While Harry could understand the risk of receiving cursed letters, surely there was no risk if he sent an owl or two. It's not like he knew anything of importance that could be intercepted by Voldemort.

This last thought caused a re-emergence of all the anger and bitterness that Harry had forced down. The same anger that caused him to earn weeks of detention with Umbridge. The same anger that caused him to yell at his best friends last year, despite the fact that they were the only ones he could count on. He was still being treated like a child. Like a child! Shouldn't the fact that he saved the Philosopher's Stone at eleven, killed a Basilisk at twelve, drove off hordes of dementers at thirteen, dueled Voldemort at fourteen, and dueled various Death Eaters at fifteen count for something? Harry hadn't thought like a child since facing Quirrel in front of the mirror, yet still he was treated like one.

Harry crumpled his letter in anger and stood abruptly from the table, earning a small squeak from Dudley. Without a word, Harry stomped up the stairs towards his room. He fully accepted that he didn't know it all. But wasn't that part of the problem? He was reminded of that day at 12 Grimmauld Place after visiting Mr. Weasley in the hospital, when he was ready to run away when he thought he was being possessed. Phineaus Black told him to stay, and then lectured him, asking him if following Dumbledore's orders have ever led him into harm. True, nothing Dumbledore had every specifically said had caused him to get into trouble. And yet, trouble still seemed to be more than able to find Harry. And what about the things Dumbledore didn't tell Harry? After all, if Dumbledore had told Harry about the prophecy in the first place, if he had known that Voldemort needed him to acquire the prophecy, Harry would have been better able to practice resisting his dreams (he wouldn't have been so curious about the mysterious corridor and door, knowing what was inside), and he
Harry would have been able to better resist Voldemort’s plans, and thereby not get Sirius killed. But still, despite it all, Harry was confined to 4 Privet Drive, unable to contact the outside world except through Moody and Tonks, who’s news was undoubtedly censored, “for his own protection.” Harry stared outside his window. It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. Instead of enjoying the day, celebrating his OWLs with friends, he was trapped inside. Like Sirius was. By Dumbledore.

A spark of rebellion inside him soon grew into a raging fire; why shouldn’t he go outside? He already proved he could take care of himself. More than anything, Harry wanted celebrate by flying, just for a little bit. He never felt more free or alive then when he was on his Firebolt. The only problem was being seen, both by Muggles and the Order guard he was sure that was out there.

Harry reached into his trunk (he was allowed to have all his things this summer; Uncle Vernon was too scared to take them from him) and pulled out his broom to admire it. As he did so, he saw a shimmer at the bottom of his trunk. His father’s invisibility cloak! Surely if it could cover three people, it would be enough to cover Harry on his broom. At least, he hoped so. Grabbing the cloak, Harry mounted his broom and experimented with ways of covering both him and the broom. From the top or the side, the cloak was large enough to hide him, though he would have to be careful that the wind didn’t dislodge it. The problem was that he could be seen from below. He had to work a way around that. After trying various combinations for an hour, the best Harry could devise was to tie or tuck the ends of the cloak to his ankles; this would serve to keep the cloak in place despite the wind, and if he crossed his feet, the cloak would hide everything except for his feet. In the end, Harry decided to wear dark shoes and clothes and wait until night. That way, if people did look up and see his shoes, they might not recognize them for what they were. After all, how many people would trust their eyes if they saw a pair of shoes flying around?

As night fell, Harry was ready. He opened the window, made one last check that his cloak was secure, and then flew out the window. It was a wonderful feeling, especially after being locked inside the house for the whole summer. He was free, and he was able to go where he wanted. Harry was careful to keep his speed under control (no need to risk the cloak being blown away), and flew a few times around Surrey. He watched as the last of the children playing outside were called to dinner. After a few hours of freedom, Harry reluctantly turned his broom homeward and returned to his gloomy pris.

The weeks after went by much more quickly. The lessons continued as normal, with Harry confined and given only scraps of information. But almost every night, when the weather was nice, Harry flew. Sometimes only for an hour, once for four hours, but the feeling of being on his broom almost made up for the first part of the summer.

Much of that good feeling came crashing down about his ears when he returned from flying one night, to find visitors in his room. After flying back into his bedroom, Harry removed the invisibility cloak and closed the window. Harry then had an odd feeling; the hairs rise on the back of his neck, his awareness and reactions having improved greatly after his work with Moody. Whipping out his wand, Harry spun around and ducked, falling slightly to the side as he prepared to curse the two people who were behind him.

“Mr. Potter! Put away that wand before you hurt yourself!” Professor McGonnagal yelled, “and explain just what you think you were doing!”

Harry sheepishly tucked his wand away as he realized whom his visitors were: Professors McGonnagal and Dumbledore. Groaning inwardly, Harry frantically thought of an answer that would appease them both.

“Um, er, well…”

Professor McGonnagal fixed Harry with a very stern look. “Don’t even think about trying to cover up. You’ve been flying! You might have been seen, by Muggles or Death Eaters! Mrs. Figg nearly had a heart attack when her cats couldn’t locate you anywhere! What were you thinking?”

Dumbledore saved Harry from the trouble of formulating a reply. “Mr. Potter, surely you realize the need to ensure your own safety. The restrictions we placed on you are for your own safety. The world needs you alive, Mr. Potter. It was rather foolish and childish for you to rebel by flying around at night. However,” he said, looking at Professor McGonnagal,
“as school is starting in three weeks, we will consider this matter closed, and we will may have to confiscate your broom until the term begins.”

Harry only nodded dumbly with a contrite look plastered on his face as he handed over his beloved Firebolt. But inside, his anger returned. The world needs you alive Dumbledore had said. That was it, wasn’t it? At that moment, Harry realized that the world needed Harry Potter alive, for his sole purpose was to kill Lord Voldemort, but the world didn’t care if Harry Potter was happy. The world didn’t care about Harry Potter at all except for the bloody prophecy. Voldemort may have been looking for a weapon last year, but the Order had already found theirs: Harry Potter. He was nothing but a tool to use again Voldemort. If anyone had cared about Harry Potter’s happiness, they wouldn’t have let the Dursley’s lock him up in a cupboard for 10 years, to be treated like less than a servant. Was there no other option? If Hogwart’s is so safe, couldn’t he have lived there? Or if he had to live at the Dursley’s, couldn’t someone have talked to them, or otherwise ensure that Harry was treated humanely? It only took a few moments with Moody for the Dursley’s to treat him better; couldn’t someone do that 15 years ago? But no, no one cared about Harry beyond ensuring that he was still breathing.

Harry continued to make the right noises (“I’m sorry,” “never happen again”) until McGonnagal and Dumbledore left. Angry and depressed about the loss of his broom, Harry let himself drift away to a sleep.
3. King's Cross Station and Hogwarts

The final three weeks of the summer passed agonizingly slowly as his lessons with Tonks, Moody, and Snape were wrapped up and Harry packed to return to Hogwarts. His books and supplies had been purchased for him, as he was not allowed to visit Diagon Alley. Again.

“Oy Harry, are you about ready to go,” Harry heard someone call from downstairs, as he finished packing his trunk. Grabbing Hedwig’s empty cage, Harry went downstairs to find his guard detail: Remus Lupin, Tonks, Moody, and Kingsley Shacklebolt. Greetings were exchanged as Remus helped Harry with his trunk while Tonks grabbed Hedwig’s cage.

“Smaller guard detail this year,” Harry observed. “How are we getting to the station?”

“After what happened last year at the Ministry, they’ve agreed to provide some cars to keep you safe,” Kingsly replied. “Since the ministry’s cars are one of the safest modes of transportation, we won’t need as many people.” Harry nodded in understanding.

The trip to King’s Cross Station was uneventful. The cars provided by the Ministry seemed to travel on the same principle as the Knight Bus, just much more smoothly as it jumped from place to place. After waving goodbye to the others, Harry found himself on Platform 9¾ with plenty of time to spare.

Harry wasn’t sure what to do. Should he wait and look for Ron and Hermione, or should he find a spot on the train? He wasn’t sure if his two best friends had already arrived and were on the train, or if they were running late as usual. Harry decided that he would wait; after all, he expected they’d do the same for him.

Harry stood off to the side for a while, exchanging waves and greetings with the students he knew and trying his best to ignore the usual looks and whispers he received being the Boy-Who-Lived. Eventually the station started emptying as students boarded the train. Glancing at his watch and taking one last look around the station for red or bushy brown hair, Harry shrugged and boarded the train. He stood in the doorway with his trunk, still hoping to spot his friends, but soon the train started moving, and Harry knew he had to find a spot.

Dragging his trunk down the corridor, he looked for a compartment that had room for one more. Harry passed full compartments, waving at people he knew, but he still couldn’t find Ron or Hermione anywhere. They were probably upfront in the Prefect compartments, attending a meeting. If so, there’s no way for him to tell where they had stowed their things, so he found a seat in a compartment with Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan, and Neville Longbottom, catching up on a summer’s worth of Quidditch news.

As the train sped along, Harry was surprised to find himself at peace for once. Although Neville knew of the events at the end of last year, and Seamus and Dean read about it, none of them knew the full story, his relationship to Sirius, or anything about the Order. Harry was able to participate in a normal conversation, free of Dark Lords and death threats.

“Harry!” Hermione squealed as she opened the door to the compartment. She and Ron entered the compartment, their prefect badges shiny on their chests. Hermione approached Harry with arms raised in a welcome hug, but stopped awkwardly when Harry didn’t stand.

“Hi Hermione, Ron,” he said coolly, still sitting in his seat. “Was afraid you two missed the train, I didn’t see you out there and I waited for 10 minutes,” Harry said, the rebuke evident in his voice.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a worried look. Hermione visibly chose her words carefully, hoping to avoid an outburst like the one that greeted them at 12 Grimmauld Place.
“Um, Ron and I got to the station 15 minutes early. Er, we waited for you, but when we didn’t see you we boarded the train to attend the prefect meeting.”

Harry nodded. Although her answer didn’t satisfy him at all, he didn’t want to draw more attention to himself by giving in to his emotions. “Ok then. Well, I guess I’ll see you guys when we get to Hogwarts,” he said, turning his attention back to Neville’s description of his latest plant. Ron and Hermione stood uncertainly, then realizing Harry wasn’t going to say more, said their goodbyes and left.

The three roommates exchanged glances, noticing the odd behavior of Harry towards his two best friends. But they silently agreed to ignore it, and they returned to their talk about Quidditch, girls, and guessing about the newest Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

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Finally they arrived at Hogsmeade station. Harry was especially pleased, for somehow he managed to avoid an encounter with Draco Malfoy. Harry followed the others as they disembarked the train and was disappointed when he saw Professor Grubbly-Planks herding the first years together, rather than Hagrid. Harry exchanged greetings with his fellow Gryffindors (including a few awkward hugs with Lavender, Pavarti, and Ginny), and then followed his roommates to a carriage, first giving the thestral pulling it a friendly pat on the head. As Harry watched Hogwarts appear in the distance, he realized he didn’t have the same sense of anticipation and happiness he usually felt when returning to school. In fact, a sense of foreboding to come over him, as he thought about what happened in the past and what he could expect this year. Surely Voldemort will launch another scheme to kill him, and he wondered who would join Cedric and Sirius in dying simply because they knew Harry. He pushed his thoughts aside and tried to concentrate on the conversation in the carriage.

The Great Hall looked as spectacular as ever as Harry and the other filed in. Harry spotted Ron and Hermione already in their usual seats, with a spot saved for Harry. As he made their way to the Gryffindor table, Ron and Hermione waved him over, and Harry took his normal spot.

“Listen Harry,” Hermione began, “we want to apologize for not waiting for you at the station.”

After a second of silence, she gave a pointed look at Ron, who appeared startled then cleared his throat. “Er, yeah. That’s right Harry. We weren’t even sure if you were going to take the train. The Order never said,” he whispered. “When you didn’t show up we thought you took a different way and boarded the train. We’re really really sorry.”

Harry looked at the two of them. It was clear to him they had worked out what they were going to say in advance, and seeing the contrite looks on their faces, Harry resolved to not take out his anger on them as he did last year. He gave them a small smile.

“It’s ok. I had a nice chat with Dean, Seamus, and Neville,” he said to a very relieved looking Ron and Hermione. Then he lowered his voice. “How was your summer? Did you guys spend it at, er, you-know-where?”

Hermione nodded. “It was much like last year over again, cleaning up and trying to listen in on the meetings. Oh Harry, we’re so sorry we couldn’t tell you anything. The only way we could send you letters is through Tonks or Moody, and we were sure that they read them to make sure we didn’t say anything they didn’t want you to know.”

Harry’s face drew into a scowl, and Ron and Hermione braced themselves for an outburst. But Harry wasn’t angry with them. His anger was directed at the Order for keeping him in the dark. Taking a deep breath, he reassured them there were no hard feelings, then turned his attention to the head table.

“Do you guys know anything about Hagrid? About why he’s not here?” Harry asked.

Hermione scanned the head table then shook her head. “We haven’t heard anything. He’s probably taking his brother,”
she added with a shudder, obviously remembering their last encounter with “small” giant.

Harry nodded, then tried to pay attention as Dumbledore gave his usual opening speech and watched the first years as they were sorted.
4. Awards, Jealousy, and Hermione’s Secret

The first week of school went by as normal: Snape was his usual horrid self, the first and second year students whispered and pointed Harry with awe, the fifth and seventh year students were struggling with the extra workload caused by the upcoming OWLs and NEWTs, and the new DADA professor appeared to be neither evil nor especially good, at least not yet. And after five years of being the center of attention, for both good and ill, Harry was becoming accustomed to the stares and whispers. Harry’s relationship with Ron and Hermione was also back to normal, though Hermione seemed to be spending more time alone in the library, and all three hoped for a normal year.

All of this changed in the second week of school. The Ministry of Magic, which had finally acknowledged the rise of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, had been hard-pressed to find some good news to share with the wizarding world. Rumors and the fears of Voldemort and Death Eaters shook the support that Minister Fudge previously enjoyed, and he was desperate to find something to give the people hope, and at the same lessen the pressure he was feeling. He found that thing in the person of Harry Potter.

Previously ridiculed and slandered, Fudge decided to switch gears and make Harry Potter the beacon of hope. Rather than portray him as an attention-seeking celebrity, Fudge, through the Daily Prophet, turned Harry into a real-live hero for defying the Dark Lord since birth and foiling his plans before becoming of age. After all, if a 14 year child could defy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, surely the rest of the wizarding world could. To that end, Fudge decided to award Harry with the Order of Merlin (3rd Class) in a ceremony to take place at Hogwarts. Harry was informed of this the same time a few days before a general announcement was made. Suffice to say, Harry was displeased. The Order of Merlin (3rd Class)? Forgetting the fact that it was the same award Lockheart had received (and thus proving it meant nothing), Harry realized that what it did mean is more attention. He pleaded with Dumbledore to somehow prevent the award, or at the very least a public ceremony, but Dumbledore said his hands were tied. Two days before the ceremony was to take place, Dumbledore made his announcement.

“Attention students,” Dumbledore said, interrupting breakfast. “Today I’d like to announce the long-due recognition of one of our own. In two days, right here in the Great Hall, to honor of his struggle against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Harry Potter will receive the Order of Merlin (3rd Class). Let us all give him a round of applause!”

A shocked silence filled the air, then was quickly replaced by a thunderous applause. Harry looked pleadingly at his two friends, hoping to convey to them that he didn’t want the award or recognition. Hermione returned his look with one of sympathy, but Ron looked at him in an odd way. Harry tried to smile and acknowledge the congratulations he was receiving as Ron stared at him unhappily.

Although Malfoy and other Slytherins tried to use the occasion as a chance to mock Harry (“another attention-grabbing scheme by Potty”), the rest of school seemed to be more than impressed with him. More people then usual came up to him, some even asking for autographs. Harry tried his best to endure through it all, hoping the attention would die down, but knowing it wouldn’t, at least not for awhile.

The day of the ceremony soon approached, and the Great Hall was packed with students and visiting dignitaries. The Great Hall was decked in Gryffindor colors, and the four house tables had been replaced with seats and bleachers along the side. Classes were cancelled for the day, and almost the entire student body attended to honor Harry Potter. It was without a grand experience, and Harry hated every minute of it.

With the ceremony taking place during the second week of school, Quidditch tryouts were pushed back to the following week. With the graduation of many of the long-time Gryffindor Quidditch team members, including the reigning captain, Harry was unanimously chosen as new Quidditch captain (the lifetime ban being lifted and his broom returned), despite the fact he tried to refuse the position. Harry wasn’t keen on being captain, hoping to avoid anything that would create more
attention. However, being the most experienced Quidditch player Gryffyndor had to offer, having played every year, he was the obvious choice.

Unfortunately for Harry, the two events together festered feelings of jealousy in Ron that far surpassed those he had in fourth year, when Harry was named to the Tri-Wizard Tournament. While Ron’s attitude towards Harry was cold since the Order of Merlin (3rd Class), he now refused to speak to Harry after he become Quidditch captain. Harry, who could anticipate this part of Ron’s behavior, would normally have given Ron his space and been content to spend his time with Hermione. But this year something was different. Hermione’s frequent absences, which were less noticeable when all three of them were together, became painfully clear after Harry and Ron stopped speaking. In fact, outside of class, meals, and a few brief conversations in the Common Room, Harry found himself without his two best friends. Sure, he had his roommates and other Gryffindors (as well as his ever-growing fan club), but it wasn’t the same. Harry used his new found free-time to concentrate his Metamorphagus, Dueling, and Occlumency training, which each occurred once per week.

Soon enough, the reason for Hermione’s absences became clear. Two weeks after receiving the Order of Merlin (3rd Class), Harry was returning late one night to Griffyndor tower after a particularly physical lesson with Moody in the Room of Requirements. Immediately upon entering the Room, Harry had found himself flung sidewise across the room, painfully slamming into a wall. After picking himself off the ground, he was subjected to even worse: a lecture. “Constant vigilance!” was Moody’s mantra, and Moody felt that Harry showed a significant lack of it. The rest of the lesson was an “endurance” lesson, which essentially meant that Harry was to toughen himself up in taking punishment. Only allowed to cast shielding spells, Moody sent curse after hex at the teenager to test the strength of his shields and to toughen his resistance to curses. Suffice to say, it was not a fun session at all; Harry knew he would be feeling the bruises and aches for days to come.

Returning to Gryffindor tower after the lesson, Harry strode through the empty corridors. It felt strange to walk, as opposed to skulk and hide, through the castle after hours, but he had a permission slip signed by Dumbledore in the pocket of his cloak. To be honest, Harry was secretly hoping to run into Malfoy (or any Slytherin prefect would do in a pinch) and deflate the glee at finding Harry Potter out after hours.

As Harry approached the corridor that leads to Gryffindor tower, he heard a feminine giggle and the unmistakable sounds of snogging. Slowing his pace, Harry was unsure what to do. Public displays of affection always made him feel uncomfortable, after living without any form of affection for eleven years. Even the hugs he shared since arriving at Hogwarts made him slightly uncomfortable, since he was so unaccustomed to them before. He also didn’t wish to intrude on what was clearly a private moment. Knowing that there was no other way to Gryffindor tower, Harry waited five long minutes in uncomfortable silence, hoping the two lovebirds would move on. Unfortunately it was late, and soon Harry’s aching body screamed out for a soft bed. Wishing he had his invisibility cloak, Harry hoped that by walking along the shadows of the far wall he would be able to escape the notice of the couple. As Harry stole along the wall, he chanced a look at the two lovers (he was not above curiosity) and emitted a gasp of surprise.

“Hermione!”

Hermione and an older-looking boy, Ravenclaw by his robes, broke apart suddenly.

“Harry!” Hermione said, a deep red blush forming on her cheeks. “What are you doing here?”

“I might ask the same of you, if it weren’t so obvious,” Harry replied, looking at the other boy. Getting a better look, Harry was able to make out a Head Boy badge adorning his robes. Eddie Carmichael.

Eddie cleared his throat, clearly embarrassed at being caught. “Er, um…well, what are you doing out after hours?” he asked sternly, trying to maintain some semblance of dignity.

“I’ve got permission,” Harry said angrily, fishing his note out his pocket and handing it over. He looked at Hermione as Eddie took the note. Hermione seemed to have trouble meeting his eyes.

“Very well then Potter, you may go,” he said dismissively. Harry nodded, and with one final glance at Hermione, headed
back to Gryffindor tower. Climbing into bed, Harry was thankful he was so exhausted after his session with Moody; that way he was able to fall to sleep quickly, rather then stay up all night wondering why he was so angry.
Chapter: 5

5. Quidditch and Dreams

The next month was a study in contrasts for Harry Potter. Never before had Harry ever been more popular. To be sure, from the day he first stepped foot on the Hogwarts Express, he was a famous. Everyone wanted to see and talk to the Boy-Who-Lived, the youngest seeker in a century. Over the next five years, Harry remained famous, or infamous, but rarely popular. In fact, there were plenty of times when Harry was downright scorned and hated – there was the time in first year when he was caught after hours and cost Gryffindor 50 points; in second year he was thought to be the Heir of Slytherin; in fourth year he was despaired of by most of the school for his “attention-grabbing” from Cedric; and in fifth year he was either thought to be the saviour of the wizarding world or a raving lunatic. In fact, third year was probably his best; he only had dementors and an escaped prisoner (though wrongly convicted) after him.

But now, with the truth of Voldemort revealed, an Order of Merlin (3rd Class) to his credit, and captaincy of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Harry became popular; friends, acquaintances, and even strangers constantly surrounded him. He hardly had a quiet moment to himself except for rare moments in the library. And yet, despite it all, Harry never felt more alone in his life. In fact, he often felt that he would prefer to be hated by everyone else if it meant he could be with his two best friends again.

Ron was still as jealous as ever; the fact that Harry seemed to embrace his fans, rather then push them away, only deepened his bitterness. And after the incident in the hallway, Harry and Hermione felt very awkward around each other. It turned out that Hermione and Eddie have been seeing each other since the term started, having met at a Prefect meeting. After being caught, Hermione and Eddie decided there was no further point in concealing their relationship (Hermione had wanted to keep it a secret so she could tell Ron and Harry first). Now, they were openly dating, and she made no more excuses about where she spent her time. For the first time at Hogwarts, Harry had no one to talk to about his troubles; for even Hagrid had not returned from whatever secret mission he was on.

However, everything was not all gloom and doom for Harry. He was certain that Ron would come around someday, as he had in the past. He was also equally sure that that Hermione and Eddie were in that “new relationship” stage, and their need to always be together would lessen over time. In the meantime, Harry was able to spend more time with his fellow sixth-year Gryffindors, getting to know them better. He felt like he spent more time with Dean, Seamus, Neville, Lavender, and Pavarti in the past month then he had in the past five years. The other sixth years, in turn, were pleasantly surprised to get to know Harry better, and while they noticed the obvious break in his friendships with Ron and Hermione, they avoided the subject altogether. So, while Harry missed Ron and Hermione terribly, he was confident that things would turn out fine in the end.

As September turned into November, the first Quidditch match of the season was fast approaching. The first match pitted Gryffindor against Hufflepuff, as determined by last year’s standings. Harry was looking forward to the match as Quidditch provided him with one of his few joys. As captain, Harry increased the number of practice sessions to daily, but kept them relatively light as Hufflepuff did not present a great challenge: the majority of their team was below 5th year, and they had a new 4th year seeker. Harry felt the Gryffindor team was progressing well and had high hopes for the future. The loss of Fred and George Weasley at beater had hurt the team, but Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper were coming along nicely, somehow having practiced over the summer. Ron seemed to retain his confidence from the final game of last year, and Ginny was proving to be an excellent chaser, having switched positions after Harry’s lifetime ban was lifted.

Harry knew that, as captain, he would be looked upon to set the strategies for the team; unfortunately for Harry, he had never paid a great deal of attention to the plays of Oliver Wood or Angelina Johnson, since as seeker he was responsible only for the snitch. So, Harry spent many long hours in the library and talking with Seamus and other Quidditch-crazy Gryffindors, researching various Quidditch plays for chasers and beaters. He knew they were simplistic, but Harry was confidant of his team’s chances. He also knew that the quality of his plays and strategies would have to improve against Ravenclaw and Slytherin.
The day of the match finally arrived, and Harry led his team onto the Quidditch pitch. Clothed in their scarlet and gold robes, they gathered in the entrance tunnel, waiting to be announced. The stands were filled with cheering students, but not nearly to capacity, for the match was acknowledged by all as an easy win for Gryffindor; it would be a gigantic upset if Hufflepuff were to pull off a victory. Those with only a passing interest in Quidditch did not feel the need to attend, choosing instead to catch up on their studies.

As Harry stood before his team, he felt a strange sense of unease. He tried to find the source of his discomfort. It wasn’t about the outcome of the match – Harry was confident in his own skills and that of his team. But still, as the team flew onto the field to the cheers of the crowd, Harry couldn’t shake that feeling that something was wrong. As he searched the stands for some sign of danger, he realized he was flying with less abandon, a little slower and more carefully than he normally would. He shook his head and tried to clear his mind as Madam Hootch released the snitch and the bludgers before tossing the Quaffle, signifying the start of the match.

Harry circled the stadium cautiously, keeping one eye out for the snitch, the other on the game below him. He quickly realized that the Hufflepuff seeker was shadowing him throughout; it seemed the plan for their seeker was to shadow Harry and hope for luck in grabbing the snitch first. As Harry flew, he couldn’t shake his feeling of unease, which fairly distracted him from the game. Ron’s play as keeper was phenomenal (although the Hufflepuff Chasers didn’t provide the best competition), and he allowed only a few goals. Since the game wouldn’t end until the snitch was caught, and since Harry was too distracted to find the snitch, and since the Hufflepuff seeker was only watching Harry, the score continued to climb as the match went on, and the students watching began to lose interest. By the time Harry spotted the snitch near the Hufflepuff goal, the score read Gryffindor 180 – Hufflepuff 40. Harry dove for the snitch, though with less speed than was his usual. The Hufflepuff took off immediately in pursuit, but even though Harry was flying below top speed, his superior broom and flying skills easily propelled him to the snitch before his opponent. Harry grabbed the snitch and raised his hand in victory, as the crowd cheered.

The victory party in the Gryffindor common room was more reserved than for a victory over Slytherin, but a win was a win and any excuse for a party was a good one. Harry was the center of attention, being congratulated on his fine catch of the snitch as being gently mocked for letting the game go on for so long before catching it. Finally, Harry found himself on the couch, butterbeer in hand, with a few moments to himself. Looking around the common room, he spotted most of his fellow Gryffindors: Ron, still in his Quidditch robes, chatting away with Natalie McDonald and Jack Sloper; Dean and Seamus laughing with Lavender and Pavarti; and Ginny smiling warmly at Neville as he animatedly told a story. He noticed with disappointment that Hermione was not in the common room. He figured that she was probably studying or with Eddie.

All of sudden, Harry realized what was behind his feeling of unease. Hermione! Hermione wasn’t at the Quidditch match, the first time she had missed one of his games. Then Harry grew confused. Why should that make him feel uneasy? He was disappointed of course, but he knew that Quidditch wasn’t her favorite pastime, and now that she was dating Eddie, she naturally would want to spend time with him. He thought back over the years and gradually realized that to Harry, Hermione wasn’t just another cheering fan. She was like his guardian angel out on the field. Whenever something bad happened to Harry on the Quidditch field, Hermione was there. Through countless incidents, Hermione was always by his side, offering her help and support, and her presence provided a sense of safety that allowed Harry to fly with reckless abandon. Harry frowned. Somehow, he would have to get her to attend the remaining matches; he didn’t think he could play well enough to win without her.

Two days before the last Hogsmeade weekend before winter break, Harry had a dream. Harry was in a forest clearing. It was night, and he couldn’t make out anything past the trees around the clearing. Death Eaters surrounded Harry in a circle around him, their heads bowed in subservience. But the thing that caught his attention was the large shape of a man lying in front of him, bound and gagged.
“Ah, the time has come, my faithful Death Eaters,” Harry said, in a voice not his own. “Turn the half-breed over so that I may look upon him.”

Several hooded Death Eaters approached the bound man, and heaving with effort, they turned him over to face Harry. Harry wanted to scream, but he couldn’t; for there in front of him, bloodied but alive, lay Hagrid, looking at Harry with eyes filled with fear.

“I know you are there, Harry Potter; I know you see what I see” Harry said himself. “Come to the Forbidden Forest tomorrow night at midnight if wish to avoid another death on your conscience. Come alone, for we will be watching, and do not think you can hide under your invisibility cloak. If you do not come alone, we will kill the half-blood immediately.” With that, Harry pointed his wand towards Hagrid. “Crucio!”

Harry awoke with a start, Hagrid’s screams of pain still ringing in his ears. His bedsheets were damp from his sweat. Taking several deep breaths, Harry tried to calm himself as he looked around. None of his roommates were had awoken. Harry lay back down thinking. Was it another trick by Voldemort, as his visions of Sirius had been? Harry thought that to be unlikely; he was progressing quite nicely in occlumency and believed he could tell truth from fiction. Plus, this time Voldemort spoke directly to him, contacting him through their shared connection. But regardless of whether it was a trick or not, Harry knew he couldn’t simply ignore what he had seen.
A/N: Wow, thanks for the reviews! My first ever! I was afraid of the reactions I might get, but now I’m so encouraged. I know Ron’s jealousy might be a bit overboard, but don’t worry, he’ll get over it soon.

And to the one reviewer who said it needs more dialogue: you’re right! My problem is that I just want to get to the good stuff and skip all the build up. I have two scenes in mind that I’m dying to write, but they don’t happen until near the end of 7th year, and it’s only 6th year! Ah well. I do promise there’s more dialogue coming up in two or three chapters.

6. Reactions

Tossing and turning all night, Harry was exhausted when he went to the Great Hall for breakfast. The Hall was practically empty, as it was still very early in the morning. Harry ate in silence until he saw Dumbledore appear at the head table, and Harry immediately rose and approached him.

“Excuse me, Professor Dumbledore. Has there been any word on when Hagrid might be returning?” he asked.

Dumbledore looked at Harry a moment. “No, Mr. Potter, but I’m sure he’ll be returning shortly.”

“Have you spoken to him recently?” Harry asked.

“I’m afraid not Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore replied. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

Harry struggled with himself. He didn’t want to tell Dumbledore about the dream; after all the secrets that have been (and still probably are) kept from him, the petulant side of Harry wanted to keep his dream a secret. But Harry knew that Hagrid’s life was at stake, and now was not the time to be childish.

“I’ve had another dream,” Harry began, in a whisper. “I saw Hagrid, tied up. Voldemort was using the Crucius curse on him.

Dumbledore raised his hand, cutting Harry off mid-sentence. He shook his had slightly and fixed Harry with a look of disappointment. “Mr. Potter,” he said wearily. “I had hoped you would have taken your occlumency lessons more seriously, especially after you were manipulated by Voldemort last year.”

Harry shook his head angrily. “I have been.” Harry said indignantly. “Just ask Professor Snape! I know a false vision from a real one.”

“Even if what you saw is true,” Dumbledore said, with a look that clearly indicated he believed otherwise, “we cannot simply act based on a dream.”

Harry opened his mouth to interrupt, but Dumbledore quickly spoke again. “Hagrid is an adult. He is fully aware of the risks and would not want you to go running off again on another ill-advised rescue mission. In fact, whether or not Voldemort does have him, and he is clearly allowing you to see his thoughts and planning a trap. We cannot allow you to make yourself an easier target.”

“But what about Hagrid?”

“Hagrid can take care of himself. I’ve known Hagrid longer than you have, Harry,” Dumbledore said gently. “He would gladly give his life to keep you safe.”

Looking around, Dumbledore saw the Great Hall begin to fill with students. “Now, Mr. Potter, please return to you table and enjoy your breakfast. We can continue this conversation in private at another time.” Harry nodded and made his
way back to the Gryffindor table. Picking up his books, Harry made his way to his first class, even though it wouldn’t start for another half hour. He needed time to think.

Harry turned Dumbledore’s words over in his mind. He was fully aware that it was a trap to lure him from the protections of the castle. He was sure Dumbledore would do something, anything, rather then leave Hagrid to suffer. In fact, Harry wouldn’t put it past Dumbledore already be planning something, but keeping Harry in the dark about it. But Harry couldn’t take that risk; he couldn’t live if Hagrid were to die because of him, joining his parents, Cedric, and Sirius on that list. Harry considered telling Ron, but quickly discarded the idea; Ron would probably see his dream as another attempt to get more attention. He finally decided to tell Hermione. Even though she was preoccupied with Eddie, she could help him decide on a plan to keep Hagrid and himself alive. Yes, Hermione would know what to do.

Harry found his chance to talk to Hermione after dinner. He followed her as she walked to the library, and then pulled her aside into an empty classroom.

“Harry!” she exclaimed. “You almost gave me a heart attack, sneaking up on me like that.”

“I’m sorry Hermione,” Harry said contritely, “but I needed to talk to you in private.”

Hermione looked at him anxiously, almost visibly deciding on whether or not to leave. “Will it be quick?” she asked, “I don’t want to be late for an appointment.”

“It’ll be quick,” Harry said, fairly certain who her appointment was with. Hermione nodded, then sat in at an empty desk.

Harry began pacing. “I’ve had another dream,” he began. “It’s Hagrid. He’s in trouble. Voldemort’s got him and…”

“No!” Hermione hissed, bolting out of her chair. “No Harry, no! Haven’t you learned anything? Didn’t you learn from last year? It’s a trick; Voldemort’s knows how to bait you, like he did with Sirius.”

“It’s not a trick Hermione,” Harry said calmly, knowing that getting angry wouldn’t help his cause. “I’ve been practicing occlumency, and I know a real vision from a fake one.”

But Hermione wasn’t listening. She was pacing back and forth. “It’s always like this with you, isn’t it Harry? Always one thing after another,” she said. “Why can’t you just leave it alone?”

“You think I want this?” Harry said angrily. “I never asked for any of this. I don’t want any of this. But Voldemort’s got Hagrid, and can’t just sit here! I need to do something!”

“Fine!” Hermione practically yelled, tears forming in her eyes. “If want to go off on another of your rescue missions, you can leave me out of it! You almost got me killed the last time,” she added in a low voice.

Harry stared at her in shock. He couldn’t believe it. Hermione was refusing to help him? He expected her to be reluctant, but not to refuse him. She never refused him…

“You…you won’t help me?” he asked weakly.

“I’m tired of this Harry,” she said, her tears continuing to fall. “I’m tired of always worrying about you, of wondering if this is the time that Voldemort will kill you. I’m tired of worrying about Voldemort coming after me, or after my parents, just because I know you. I just want a normal life, where all I have to worry about is school, and homework, and winning the House Cup. I want a normal life with normal friends, not with people who wage war against the most evil wizard alive and may die at any time.”

Hermione wiped her eyes and walked to the classroom door, opening it. Before stepping out, she turned to Harry. “Eddie
gives me that normal life," she said before walking out.

Harry stood still for what several moments, before collapsing into a chair. Ever saving her from a troll their first year, Hermione has always been his foundation. Sure, Ron was important, but Ron, for reasons not his own fault, wasn’t always there with him, and times like now, Ron was actively against him. But Hermione. Hermione was always there. He could always count on her, to remind him to do his homework, to study for tests, to figure out mysteries and to stand by him as he faced scorn, ridicule, and even death. They saved Sirius together and faced Death Eaters together. Harry wouldn’t be who he was today, and probably wouldn’t be alive, without Hermione by his side. And now, she was gone, as everyone who seemed to love or care for him eventually left him as well.

An hour later Harry emerged from the classroom, his eyes long dry. He could still do this alone. After all, he was alone when he killed the Basilisk, and no one was with him when he dueled Voldemort in the graveyard. He could do this alone. Harry began running through the corridors to his room to prepare.

Slam!

Harry found himself painfully thrown to the ground. “Sorry Harry, I didn’t look where I was going,” Colin Creevy apologized frantically.

Rubbing his side, Harry said, “No, it’s my fault Colin. I shouldn’t have been running in the hall.” But Colin looked aghast at running into and knocking down his hero. Scrambling to his feet, Colin helped Harry up, handing him his books and his wand, which had been scattered about the corridor.

“It’s ok, Colin, really!” Harry said soothingly, as Colin fussed over him. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure Harry? I didn’t hurt you? I’m really really really sorry!” Colin looked on the verge of tears.

“It’s ok Colin,” Harry assured him. “Don’t worry about it.” He gave Colin a smile and headed towards Gryffindor tower, wondering if he would ever see Colin again, and trying to decide if that would be a good or bad thing.
Chapter: 7

7. Alone in the Forbidden Forest

Harry lay in bed, listening to the sounds of his sleeping roommates. Looking at the clock, he knew it was time to go. Despite trying to come up with a plan, Harry had nothing; he only knew his invisibility cloak would be useless. Harry was somewhat comforted by the fact that he had never had a plan in the past when going into danger. Hopefully he could improvise his way out of danger yet again. Pulling out the Maurader’s Map, he recited the incantation and saw his way to the front doors was clear. He also noticed the dots representing Hermione and Eddie were awfully close together in another hallway. Securing his wand in his holster, Harry reread his letter one last time. Harry knew that if he failed in his attempt and didn’t return the next day, people would wonder what happened. He spent his time waiting for midnight by writing the letter.

To whom it may concern,

Voldemort contacted me through my scar. He let me know that he has Hagrid captured, and would kill him unless I met him tonight alone in the Forbidden Forest. I am going to do so. If you are reading this, then I have most likely failed in my attempt to rescue Hagrid and am probably dead.

You may wonder why I’m doing this alone. I refuse to let another person I love die because for me. I’m not sure if you’ll understand how it feels to be the cause of your own parents’ death or the death of your own godfather. I look back on the life I’ve led, the choices I’ve made, and there are more times than I can count where I’ve made the wrong choice and gotten someone killed. And, in the end, every person that Voldemort kills is partially my fault, since Voldemort has returned because of me, because of my blood, because of my choice that ultimately freed Wormtail.

I know I cannot count on my professors for assistance; they are all too willing to sacrifice Hagrid die. And if they had any plans to do anything, they have, as always, kept it from me. I also leave my friends out of this, as they should have the opportunity to live a normal life and have their greatest worry be tests, not facing death. I now take control of my own life; after all, it is mine to do as I please. If I do die, then at least I will die doing what I feel is right, not what other people think is “best” for me.

- Harry

Harry sealed the parchment with an enchanted wax seal (it could not be removed nor repaired once broken) and addressed it to Professors Dumbledore and McGonnagal. He placed the letter on his bed, and then charmed the curtains to remain closed until at least morning. Stealing one last glance at his map, Harry muttered the phrase to return the map to appear as a blank scrap of parchment and crept down the stairs and out the common room.

Harry managed to make his way outside of the castle without incident. As Harry crossed the school grounds and approached the Forbidden Forest, he pulled his wand and held it tightly. Only then did he notice something wrong. The usual indentations where he normally gripped his wand were different. He stopped and examined it closely. It was the same wood and the same length; it looked the same but felt different. Then it hit him. Colin! This is Colin’s wand. When they ran into each other, their wands must have been switched. Harry cursed himself, berating himself for not checking earlier. He knew he would need his own wand if he were to battle Death Eaters, but at the same time he knew he didn’t have the time to sneak back into the castle and retrieve his wand. Steeling his resolve and squaring shoulders, Harry resumed his trek towards the Forbidden Forest, praying that the wand in his hand wouldn’t fail him.

As Harry approached the edge of the forest, he felt every sense come alive; his brain seemed to record and catalog every sight and sound, automatically categorizing them either as either suspicious or normal. He thanked Moody for the hours and hours of training, as he felt a sense of calm overtake him as his mind and body switched to danger mode. Looking around, Harry sensed, rather than consciously observed, something amiss near Hagrid’s hut. As Harry got closer, he
noticed something reflecting moonlight on the ground, approximately twenty meters from the Forbidden Forest. Approaching the hut carefully, his wand poised to strike, he identified the object as an arrow, pointing deeper into the forest. Peering in the direction the arrow indicated, he saw another shiny object, this time attached to a tree. Harry paused to think. He knew it was a trap, that the arrows would be pointing deeper and deeper into the Forbidden Forest. Harry knew that with each step into the Forest, he was taking one step away from the protections of Hogwarts. And yet, Harry could think of no other option. With one last look around at the grounds and a last look at the castle (hoping he would live to see it again), he entered the forest and followed the trail left for him.

Harry followed the arrows for several minutes until he arrived at a clearing, deep within the forest. He immediately spotted Hagrid’s enormous form lying on the ground, and rushed into the clearing towards him.

“Expelliarmus!” he heard someone cry out, just as he reached Hagrid. But Harry was ready for it, reacting on instinct only.

“Protego!” he cried, deflecting the spell away. Facing the source of the spell, Harry immediately fired back (“Stupify!”) into the dark forest. After a moment, his ears buzzing, Harry saw six hooded figures emerge slowly from the forest, forming a semi-circle around him and Hagrid. Harry quickly glanced behind him and saw no one behind him.

“Ruuuu Haeee” Hagrid cried, his voice obscured by a gag.

“Impressive Mr. Potter, but I’m afraid not nearly good enough,” called a cold voice. Harry looked at the Death Eater in fury and hatred; it was Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry looked around at the Death Eaters. “Looks like you’ve got the reserves and alternates out, eh Lestrange?” Harry said, with a confidence he did not feel. “After all, what with Lucius and the others in Azkaban, I’m guessing all the second-string Death Eaters got a chance to play.”

Harry heard murmurs from the Death Eaters; apparently they did not appreciate being called second-best. Bellatrix’s face contorted with anger. “Get him!” she cried.

Harry immediately ducked behind Hagrid’s massive form. He had remembered how the half-giant was able to shrug off stunners from Ministry officials last year during his astronomy OWLs. He hoped that Hagrid would be able to hold up, given his weakened condition. Harry saw movement out the corner of his eye as the Death Eaters were attempting to surround him.

“Stupify!” Harry cried, hitting one Death Eater squarely in the chest. He ducked a curse and returned fire, striking another Death Eater with a full body bind curse. Harry was still vastly outnumbered, but he hoped his luck would hold out. All of a sudden, Harry felt another Death Eater approaching, and he huddled as close as he could to Hagrid’s prone form as another Death Eater leapt over the half-giant, hoping to take Harry by surprise.

“Stupify!” the Death Eater shouted.

“Protego!” Harry cried, reflecting the stunning spell back at this attacker. The Death Eater was unprepared for the block, expecting Harry to be caught unaware. Rather than feel triumphant over being the one to incapacitate Harry, the Death Eater only felt shock before being thrown backwards by the force of his own spell.

Unfortunately, as Harry took out another Death Eater who was trying to maneuver around Hagrid’s massive form, he failed to notice a large, heavy branch being levitated above him. Bellatrix released her spell, allowing the branch to strike Harry on the head. Harry collapsed to all fours, dazed, and dropped his wand. The remaining Death Eaters swarmed around him and grabbed his arms, immobilizing him.

“Stand him up!” Bellatrix ordered. Harry looked at her, blood slowly dripping into his face from the cut on his head. Bellatrix looked at him with a glint in her eyes.

“Now you shall know what happens to those who oppose the Dark Lord,” she triumphantly. Pointing her wand at Hagrid, she cried, “Avada Kedavra!”
“Nooooo!” Harry screamed. He struggled against his captors, but was helpless to prevent Hagrid from dying. Harry watched as Hagrid’s eyes widened in fear when Bellatrix point her wand and him, then watched as the life left them when the stream of green light hit him. Harry sobbed uncontrollably, as he watched yet another person die because of him, this time the gentle half-giant who rescued him from the Dursleys, who gave him his first birthday cake, who gave him his prized photo album, and who he loved as a part of his dwindling family.

Bellatrix only laughed at his misery, and then pointed her wand at Harry. Harry heard her say “Stupify!” and his world lapsed into darkness.
Chapter: 8

For Hermione Granger, breakfast was her time of peace before another hectic day began at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Hermione was an early-riser by nature. She was usually one of the first students at breakfast, where she was able to finish a few lines of homework, read a good book, or simply enjoy the peace of the day.

On this morning, a Hogsmeade day, Hermione was immersed in a new book (“Arithmancy and it’s Uses for Practical Living”) when she felt a soft kiss on the top of her head. Looking up, she smiled.

“Eddie! I didn’t see you come in,” she said warmly.

“Don’t I know it. Always with your nose in a book,” he teased gently. “Meet you in the hall after breakfast?” he asked.

Hermione nodded. “Looking forward to it.”

Eddie grinned and gave her a quick kiss before retreating to the Ravenclaw table. Hermione watched him for a few moments before letting out a great sigh.

Hermione wasn’t sure how she felt about Eddie Carmichael. Sure, he was smart (he was Head Boy for a reason) and popular, and quite good-looking. But she didn’t feel that…that thing you’re supposed to feel when you’re in love. She’d heard being in love is like being pregnant: either you are or you aren’t, and you’ll know when you are. But Hermione didn’t know if she was in love with Eddie. Weren’t there supposed to be fireworks, a spark, or something whenever she looked at him? Sure, she definitely felt something whenever they kissed, but was that love, or just lust? Hermione blushed a little at that last thought. She’d been so flattered when he first started paying attention to her on the train going to Hogwarts. Eddie started following her around, flirting madly with her during and after the prefect meetings. Hermione had never been popular with the boys; too brainy, too bushy-haired, too bossy, and not pretty enough. She was surprised by the attentions Victor Krum paid her in her fourth year, and she pleased by the attentions of Eddie Carmichael. He made her feel attractive, something she never felt before (though she almost felt that way at the Yule Ball with Victor, but her fight with Ron diminished those feelings).

Hermione was worried about how a relationship with Eddie would affect her friendship with Ron and Harry. She was less worried with Harry, but she knew Ron probably had a little crush on her. But Eddie’s ceaseless courting overcame her reservations, and they had begun dating. Hermione chose to keep it a secret, trying to find the perfect time to tell Harry and Ron. But if she could have chosen a way to tell them, being caught in a dark hallway snogging with Eddie would definitely not have been it. But caught she was (and by Harry no less!), and her secret was revealed. As expected, Ron was hurt and angry, but there was nothing she could do about that. Ron avoided Hermione afterwards, and she missed him, but she knew he would need time to heal. She was sure he would talk to her again, if nothing else but for
help on some homework assignment.

But strangely, Harry also seemed hurt; Hermione figured he didn’t like being kept in the dark about her relationship with Eddie. And then there was their fight last night. Hermione groaned inwardly, deeply ashamed of the words she uttered in the empty classroom. She wasn’t sure what caused it all; sure she was worried about Harry and wasn’t pleased that trouble seemed to find him again. In fact, she had been downright angry that he was even thinking about running off to face trouble. But it really wasn’t his fault that Voldemort seems to have a vendetta against him, was it? It’s not like he wanted to face death annually or to be the Boy-Who-Lived. Maybe it was because she was late for a meeting with Eddie; maybe it was because she had believed that Harry’s dreams would stop if he just studied occlumency hard enough; maybe it was just the thought of Harry running off again, trying to save the world, and placing himself in mortal peril; or maybe it was all of it that caused her to yell at him and say those awful things.

And was any of it true? Hermione pondered that question. Sure, she fervently wished for a normal life for herself, but more so for Harry, so that part was true. But she also knew that she would always stand by Harry no matter what, as she had done so in the past. Hermione sighed again, then looked around the Great Hall as students started to file in. She hoped to spot Harry to apologize and to let him know she didn’t mean any of the things she said, but he never showed up for breakfast. Hermione shrugged sadly, then left to meet Eddie to go on their date to Hogsmeade. Perhaps being alone with him would inspire her to feel whatever she was supposed to feel when she was supposed to be in love.

Hermione came down to dinner that night with a lot on her mind. Her day with Eddie in Hogsmeade had been great fun. They visited all the usual spots, shared a butterbeer and an ice cream sundae, and even browsed the shelves at Flourish & Blott’s. But she still didn’t feel like she was in love. Maybe everything she had heard about love was wrong, or perhaps you were just supposed to grow into it. Or maybe she was just over-analyzing it, like she did everything else. She did know that she always had a fun time with Eddie, but she wasn’t yet comfortable enough with him to the point where she could just tell him anything, like she could with Harry (sure, she could also talk to Ron, but not as openly as he tended to ridicule her about certain things, like S.P.E.W.). After all, Harry was still her best friend, even though they haven’t talked much since school started, as Hermione spent most of her free time with Eddie.

Hermione laughed at herself. She pictured what her ten-year old self would say if she knew she would someday ignore the Harry Potter for some guy named Eddie Carmichael. She remembered with fondness (and with a little embarrassment) on that innocent, little ten-year old girl who opened her first letter from Hogwarts and found out she was a witch. Growing up wasn’t easy for Hermione. Her younger self was very much like her current self: bushy-haired, bookish, bossy, and not afraid to show she was smart. The only difference was that at ten, she still had her large front teeth. At school, she was considered nerdy, her nose in a book and her hand in the air, begging to answer teacher’s questions. Her looks, the large front teeth and the bushy hair, did nothing to enhance her image. She tried to fit in, honestly, she tried her best, but she couldn’t help who she was. At first, she would spend nights crying about the latest jokes or pranks the other children would play on her. Eventually, she learned to ignore it (for really, she had no choice), and found her solace in books, particularly in fairy tales. Growing up, Hermione found comfort in the stories of faraway places with beautiful princesses and their dashing princes who always saved the day. She would imagine herself as the fair maiden, held captive by one evil madman or another, until her handsome hero would rescue her. She dreamed of living in a world of magic and wonderment.

The day her letter arrived from Hogwarts, Hermione was thrilled beyond belief. Not only was magic real, but Hermione was a witch! She was special (as her parents would often remind her), and soon she would go to a school with people just like her, with other students who could understand her. Her parents were initially reluctant to send Hermione to a school for witches, but they knew how unhappy she was at her non-magic school and how excited she was about the magic one. Hermione was never happier to go back to school, for not only would she not have to attend her old school where she was made fun of, but also she would be entering her fairy tale world.

Of course, being Hermione, she couldn’t simply wait for school to begin to learn about her new world. Instead, she used her time wisely, convincing her parents to buy her several books about the wizarding world. Through those books, she learned many facts about her new world and her new school, and of arguably the most important event to occur in the
last 20 years: the defeat of Lord Voldemort. She read all about the actions of Voldemort in one night (thankfully her parents hadn’t read through her books; they would never have let her read such frightful things), and she suffered horrible nightmares for the next week. Voldemort was scarier then any fictional monster she had ever read or heard about because he was real, and if other wizards, older and wiser the she, were afraid to say his name, Hermione wouldn’t dare say it herself.

While You-Know-Who represented everything to fear about her new world, Harry Potter represented everything she always dreamed about. It was like a fairy tale come true: Harry Potter, just a baby, defeating the most evil wizard alive, then wisked away out of public sight. It was also a sad story, what with his parents being killed by You-Know-Who. Hermione figured out that Harry Potter would be about her age, just a few months older, and when she realized that he might be at Hogwarts next year too, she fell into a state of glee for three full days! Harry Potter certainly fit the role of the dashed hero, and maybe, just maybe, Hermione Granger could be his fair maiden. In the days before heading to Platform 9¾, all Hermione could talk and think about was meeting Harry Potter. She feared he would be arrogant and rude, and would look down his nose at her, like all the boys at school did. But she still hoped.

When she first entered that fateful compartment on the Hogwarts Express, looking for a toad, she would never have imagined that she would be meeting Harry Potter. The other boy, the redhead, reminded her too painfully of all the boys that had been mean to her at her old school. The other boy, the one with the glasses and messy hair, seemed shy. When she found out that he was, in fact, Harry Potter, she became nervous and flustered, and Hermione did what she does when she gets flustered: she talks. And talks. She could tell he was uncomfortable when she told him she knew everything about him, like she was obsessed with him or something, but she just couldn’t stop. As soon as she could, she managed to excuse herself from the compartment and immediately berated herself for being such a blabbermouth. But she was happy that Harry Potter didn’t seem arrogant, nice in fact, and she still had her hope; they had the whole year ahead of them.

Of course, Hermione had read about the four Houses before stepping foot on the train. She knew that she would probably be sorted into Ravenclaw, and she wasn’t fond of that idea one bit. She knew that Harry Potter’s parents had been in Gryffindor, and even if they weren’t, what house better fit the Boy-Who-Lived than Gryffindor, the house of bravery? So when she sat on the stool and felt the Sorting Hat placed on her head, she begged and pleaded to be placed in Gryffindor. The Hat seemed to think she belonged in Ravenclaw, but what did a hat know about fate and love, anyways? Somehow she managed to convince the Hat (perhaps by threatening to cry if placed in Ravenclaw), and her wish come true. She was in the same house as Harry Potter.

Unfortunately, that was the only bright spot for Hermione in her first two months of school. She had hoped to find that her fellow students were just like her, bookish and smart. But in fact, it was just like her old school all over again, except with magic. Her roommates were such pretty girls, and all they seemed to talk about was hair, make-up, and boys. And to Hermione’s great dismay, Harry Potter became best friends with that redhead boy from the train, Ron Weasley. Ron was everything Hermione was not: outgoing, not studious, and popular, and he made friends with everyone he met (except for that mean Slytherin boy). Hermione tried her best to become friends with Harry Potter, even following him (and that Ron Weasley) around school and getting caught up in their troubles with Fluffy. Although Ron Weasley openly didn’t like her, Harry Potter was less vocal, and still Hermione had her hopes alive. But all her hopes were smashed that day when she overheard them talking after Charms. Although it was Ron who was making fun of her, saying such horrid things like she had no friends, she saw Harry chuckle and nod. Her dreams became a nightmare – she would never become friends with Harry Potter, she would never be his fair maiden, and she was still bookish and nerdy Hermione (just with magic). She burst into tears and hid herself in the girls’ lavatory.

Strange enough, though such a childish thing to do, hiding in the bathroom, it turned out to be the best decision of her life. She was terrified when the troll lumbered into the bathroom, swinging his massive club at her. But all of sudden, it was like her fairy tale come true, for there was Harry Potter to the rescue, leaping onto the troll to save her life. His friend, Ron Weasley, cast a spell or something, but her eyes were focused only on Harry. And when the professors arrived, she knew she couldn’t let them take the blame, so she covered for them. And that turned out to be the second best decision of her life; for, ever since, the three of them were the best of friends. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley became the first real friends she’d ever had. Over time, her silly little crush on Harry Potter had faded, to be replaced by a more mature friendship that she treasured.
Unlike Ron, Hermione much preferred being known as “Harry Potter’s friend.” She could understand how Ron felt though; he was already overshadowed by the accomplishments of his many brothers, and now Harry overshadowed him. But for Hermione, being Harry Potter’s friend gave her acceptance by the rest of the school. To be sure, she was still bookish and bossy, but now instead of first being identified as “that know-it-all,” she was first known as Harry’s friend. Although it annoyed her to no end that people were always trying to talk to her about Harry, at least they weren’t making fun of her. People seemed to give her the benefit of the doubt when first meeting her since Harry had obviously approved of her, and she was able to make friends with her classmates and her roommates (although they were mystified by her lack of interest in hair, make-up, and boys).

Being Harry’s friend was not without it troubles. They lost all those points in first year, and she had plenty of adventures throughout her years at Hogwarts because of him. Outwardly, she disapproved of all the trouble her two friends got into and did her best to steer them away from it. But inwardly, she had to be honest with herself – she loved every minute of every adventure. Even riding that hippogriff in third year had given her a thrill, once she got over her initial fear, that is. Perhaps that’s why the Hat placed her in Gryffindor after all; she was braver then she would ever have thought.

But at the end of fourth year, her adventures took a darker tone. Sure, they had all faced death in some shape for form, but all of sudden it became real. You-Know-Who was back, and he was after Harry. Before, the worst Hermione would worry about are the detentions and expulsion that the three of them might receive if caught, but now she feared for Harry’s very life. And somehow, despite everyone trying to keep him out of trouble, he still managed to find it, or vice versa. And with their sixth year barely started, it seemed trouble wanted Harry Potter again. And Hermione was worried for Harry, because he was her best friend. And only her best friend, right?

Hermione shook her head, trying to prevent those thoughts from entering her mind. She had thought her little schoolgirl crush on Harry Potter had disappeared when she was eleven. She had long ago convinced herself that it was only friendship she felt for Harry, that it was out of concern for his safety that she could be so enthralled by watching him play a sport that would normally bore her to tears. Hermione even tried her best to help Harry form a relationship with Cho Chang last year; that truly was proof that she had no other feelings for him, right?

Then why, she had to ask herself, was she so irritated when Harry and Cho had kissed? Why had she all of a sudden started paying closer attention whenever they were together? And why, when Hagrid’s “little” brother was taking swipes at her, did she feel a strange happiness when Harry protected her with his body, holding her, a feeling that was completely inappropriate considering the circumstances? And in the Department of Mysteries, why had she felt oddly pleased that Harry grabbed her cloak, not Ginny’s, not Ron’s, nor anyone else’s, but her cloak and pulled her along to safety? In both cases she was facing death, and she was scared, terrified even, but at the same time, she felt it would be ok as long as Harry was with her. Did she really enjoy the adventure, or did she just like having experiences where it was only she and Harry together?

Hermione shook her head again, trying to focus at the immediate issue. No one had seen Harry all day; Hermione had even resorted to asking some of his “fan club” if they had seen him. She desperately wanted to apologize to him, but couldn’t if he was nowhere to be found. As dinner progressed, Hermione nodded absenty and joined in a few conversations with Ginny and some other girls, but all the while she was growing more and more uneasy, afraid that Harry had done something, well, Harry-like. Where could he be?

When Harry failed to make an appearance that night in the common room, Hermione asked around. It turned out that no one had seen him since last night, when he had a fierce collision with Colin Creevy (“If you see Harry, tell him I’m really sorry! Oh, and tell him we accidentally switched wands,” Colin had said, holding up Harry’s wand with reverence). As Hermione sat by the fireplace pondering her next action, she spotted Ron walk by.

“Hey Ron!” she called out, without thinking. “Have you seen Harry around?”

Ron paused a moment, then turned to face Hermione with a look of annoyance on his face. “Can’t a guy go fifteen minutes without hearing about the great Harry Potter? Does everything in this school have to revolve around the deeds and whereabouts of Harry Potter?” Ron said, throwing his hands up in frustration.
“Ron,” Hermione said with exaggerated calmness, “not everything revolves around Harry. I’m just worried about him. He came to me last night about a dream he had…”

“Another dream?!” Ron interrupted with frustration. “What, he still hasn’t learned his lesson? Trying to get another one of us killed like he did Siri— ”

SMACK!

Ron, his hand on his cheek, staggered backwards, not so much from the force of the blow but rather from the shock of being slapped by Hermione. All conversation in the common room ceased, as Ron and Hermione became the center of attention, but neither Ron nor Hermione noticed nor cared.

“Now you listen to me, Ronald Weasley!” Hermione said angrily, her hands on her hips in a pose of righteous fury. “You have been the biggest prat ever since the second week of school, and I’m sick of it! Just name one time when he ever wanted any of this, when Harry ever used his name or his money to do anything for himself! You know Harry better than anyone else; you know the other side of his fame, the things he’s had to go through.”

Ron looked taken aback, but did not back down. “But everything good always happens to Harry; he’s rich, he’s famous, he’s the bloody youngest seeker in a century and Quidditch captain, he has the Order of Merlin, he …”

“…has no family,” Hermione interrupted. “He was locked in a cupboard for eleven years. He has the most evil wizard alive trying to kill him, and he’s just lost his godfather. Not everything’s about you Ron!”

Ron stared at her, his mouth working but no sounds coming out. “But…” he started.

“But nothing!” Hermione shouted. “You’re so focused on yourself that you’ve forgotten about Harry. Do you think he wanted any of the attention? Did you know he tried to turn down both the Order of Merlin and Quidditch captain? Have you already forgotten what happened two years ago, when you were being a bloody idiot just like now?”

That stopped Ron in his tracks. He looked at her a moment, then slowly sat on the couch beside her as her words started to penetrate his anger. “Oh bloody hell,” he muttered after a moment, his head in his hands. “I have been a jealous twit, haven’t I?” he asked with remorse.

Hermione placed a comforting arm around his shoulders. “Yes, you have,” she agreed. The other Gryffindors, realizing the loud part of their argument was over, returned to their previous activities. Hermione hesitated to say what was on her mind, not wishing to hurt Ron, but she decided it needed to be said. “Ron, listen.” She began. “I’m not sure the best way to say this, but you really have to get over your own insecurities about your family.”

Ron turned to look at her, and Hermione feared another angry outburst. Instead, he just sighed heavily. “You’re right Hermione. But it’s just so hard. All my brothers are known for something, for being unique and great. I’m always being compared to them, how Bill was head boy, Charlie was a great Quidditch player, Fred and George were so funny (Percy can go sod off!). I’m not known for anything, just being Harry Potter’s best friend,” he said miserably.

“But don’t you see Ron?” Hermione asked. “That’s what makes you different. How many of your brothers faced a three-headed dog, or went into the Chamber of Secrets, or confronted Wormtail, or dueled with Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries? Yes, Ronald Weasley, you are not Harry Potter. But Harry couldn’t have done anything without you.” Hermione said. Ron looked a little cheered by her words. “Just think,” she continued. “Twenty years from now, when some second year comes across a Hogwarts yearbook, do you think they’ll recognize names like Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan, or Neville Longbottom? Of course not! But they’ll recognize your name. They’ll say, ‘oh, I know that Ron Weasley. He helped Harry Potter through all those adventures and even got that Special Award for saving the school!’ Ron, you’ve seen and done more in the past five years than your brothers have done put together!”

“I suppose,” Ron said reluctantly.
“Besides,” Hermione said. “Who won the Quidditch cup last year when Harry Potter was banned? Who made keeper based on his own talents, not by being Harry Potter’s best friend?”

“Yeah, yeah, ok Hermione, I get the point,” Ron said, blushing slightly. “But it does get frustrating sometimes, especially when Harry has all those girls following him around,” he said bitterly.

“Oh Ron,” Hermione replied. “There are plenty of great things about Ron Weasley. You’re funny, outgoing, brave, and a loyal friend, when you remember, that is,” she said with a playful punch on his shoulder. “Any girl would be lucky to have you Ron gave her a funny look. He took a deep breath. “And what about you, Hermione. Would you feel lucky to have me?”

Hermione groaned inwardly; she knew that they had to have the talk, but she had hoped her relationship with Eddie would help her avoid it. Ah well. “Listen Ron,” she said in her most sympathetic voice, “you don’t love me. You only think you do.”

“What do you mean, I don’t love you?” he asked, the initial surprise at her words overcoming any hurt he was feeling.

“I mean just that Ron.” Hermione said. “We’ve been such good friends for so long, it’s only natural you see us together because you see me as someone safe.”

“Safe?” Ron repeated. “Safe has nothing to do with it. I’ve liked you since fourth year; my eyes were opened when you went to the Yule Ball with Krum,” he said earnestly.

Hermione just shook her head. “But don’t you see Ron? That’s just another example of your jealousy. You didn’t like me, you were just jealous of Victor, afraid he was taking something away from you, that I would like him more than I like you,” she said. When Ron didn’t reply, she continued, “We’re just too different Ron, we would never work out.”

“But…but opposites attract,” he said, lamely.

Hermione chuckled. “Seriously Ron, can you really see us together? We have such different interests. I love reading and learning and schoolwork; you hate those things. You love Quidditch, and I can’t understand why.”

“But we’re like that now, and we’re still best friends,” Ron protested.

“Friends who fight a lot,” Hermione replied off-handedly. “Besides, it would be different if we were dating,” she said seriously. “Could you really be happy if I were to spend so much time doing homework rather than be with you? Can you accept it if I were to prefer to be in the library or work on S.P.E.W. than out with you in Hogsmeade? Or that fact that I will never like Quidditch the way you do? Wouldn’t you rather be with someone who shared your enthusiasm for Quidditch and who wasn’t concerned with house elf equality?” she said with a smile.

Ron sat quietly, letting her words sink in. After a long moment, as Hermione began to fear she hadn’t gotten through, Ron finally nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “I guess arguing about homework or Quidditch twenty-four hours of the day wouldn’t be the most fun thing to do,” he said with a half-smile. Hermione was heartened; she knew it would take time, but she could tell that Ron was finally beginning to see things for the way they were. Now, once they found Harry, things could go back to the way they were between the three of them, before hormones got involved.

“So anyways,” Ron said, changing the subject. “You mentioned Harry had another dream?”

Hermione nodded, and proceeded to tell Ron about her argument with Harry. She confessed that she didn’t know the details of the dream, for she had cut him off before he could tell her. She expressed her worry for Harry, since she hasn’t seen him since last night and was afraid he might do something rash.

I'll check our room to see if he's left any clues."

When Ron returned from checking their dorm room, he reported that the curtains to Harry’s bed were charmed shut. Hermione started to panic. Harry wouldn’t just disappear for a whole day, and she feared what state he might be in behind his bed curtains. Hermione and Ron left through the portrait hole and split up to look for Professors McGonnagal or Dumbledore, figuring with two people looking they would have a better chance.

It was Hermione who found someone first. “Professor McGonnagal,” she called, out of breath from rushing about the halls.

“Ms. Granger,” McGonnagal replied in surprise, “please calm down. Take a deep breath.”

“It’s Harry,” Hermione cried, “I think something happened!”

McGonnagal quickly grew concerned. “Harry? What’s happened?”

“I’m not sure,” Hermione said. “No one’s seen him since last night, and Ron said his bed curtains were sealed shut with mag

McGonnagal didn’t waste anytime. “Let’s go” she said, and immediately headed towards Gryffindor tower, Hermione following closely behind.

McGonnagal knocked quickly then entered the sixth-year boys dormitory, startling Seamus and Neville. McGonnagal nodded curtly to them, then approached Harry’s bed, Hermione by her side. McGonnagal tried, and failed, to draw the curtai

“Hmmm,” she muttered. “Finite Incantatum!” she cried, pointing her wand at the bed curtains. She swiftly grabbed ahold of the curtains and swept them aside, revealing a bed holding only Harry’s letter. Hermione reached over and picked up the letter. Noticing the addressee, she handed it to Professor McGonnagal with a curious look.

McGonnagal took the letter, apprehension written all over her normally strict face. She looked at it a moment, then quickly broke the seal and read it. Hermione watched as her face went from anxious to near panic as she finished the letter. McGonnagal looked at Hermione.

“Oh dear,” she muttered, and then left the boys' room with a sense of urgency. Hermione exchanged confused looks with Neville and Seamus before following after her professor.

“Professor McGonnagal! Professor McGonnagal!” Hermione cried, running to catch up with her teacher. “What does the letter say?” she asked frantically. Professor McGonnagal didn’t slow her pace as she walked, apparently headed towards Dumbledore’s office. But she wordlessly handed Harry’s letter to Hermione. Hermione, still half-running to keep up with the taller woman, opened the parchment and began to read. As she read, her heart grew heavy, and despair seemed to fill her. She felt sick to her stomach, and would have collapsed if she hadn’t been so intent on keeping up with Professor McGonnagal. When they reached the stone gargoyle guarding Dumbledore’s office, McGonnagal snatched the letter from Hermione.

“I'm sorry Ms. Granger, but Professor Dumbledore and I need to speak in private. Please keep what you’ve read to yourself for the time being,” McGonnagal said, then gave the password and disappeared up the revolving staircase.

Hermione could only stare, and finally her legs could no longer support her. She thought of Harry last night, about what he said he had dreamed. If only she had listened, or done a better job of convincing him to stay! Hermione sat next to the stone gargoyle and cried. A few minutes later, the stone gargoyle began moving again. Hermione scrambled to her feet and wiped her eyes. Soon, Dumbledore and McGonnagal came down, looking extremely worried. Dumbledore fixed Hermione with a look.

“Ms. Granger, please return to your common room. We will let you know as soon as we find anything,” Dumbledore said, before walking off with McGonnagal. Hermione suppressed the urge to run after them, and walked slowly back towards Gryffindor tower. She found Ron waiting for her, having heard that McGonnagal was in their room. With eyes wet from
tears, Hermione sat on the couch next to him and relayed the contents of Harry’s letter.

Harry awoke with a start. He wasn’t sure where he was, but wherever it was, it didn’t look good. He noticed that he still wore his glasses; whoever had captured him was kind enough to place them on his face. He saw that he was in a small room that reminded him of the dungeons at Hogwarts. There was one door, and except for him, the room was completely empty. He also realized he was chained into a standing (or slouching) position. He tested the strength of the chains, knowing it would be pointless. Sure enough, they held fast. After a few minutes getting his bearings, the door opened, and Voldemort himself entered, followed by two robed Death Eaters.

“Ah! It seems Mr. Potter is finally awake!” Voldemort said, looking at Harry. “I’m sure you’re curious as to why you’re still alive, no?” he asked.

Harry looked at Voldemort defiantly, but said nothing.

Voldemort grinned. “Still the fighting type, eh Potter? Perhaps hoping that old fool Dumbledore will save the day?” he asked. Voldemort shook his head and drew a wand from his pocket. “Recognize this?” he asked, waving the wand in front of Harry. “It’s your wand Potter, the brother to mine own. I cannot let that stand. Nothing about Lord Voldemort has any equal,” Voldemort said, snapping the wand in half and dropping the pieces to the floor.

Harry looked with dismay at the pieces of the wand, knowing Colin would kill him for that, which he knew was a strange thing to think when face-to-face with Voldemort and your own death.

“And now Potter, as to why you’re still alive,” Voldemort said, breaking into Harry’s thoughts. “In a couple days, we will attack Hogwarts castle. I have found a magical item that will allow me to bypass the wards protecting the castle; my Death Eaters will swarm Hogwarts. We shall capture the students and force the teachers to surrender! Then, Hogwarts will become the center of my empire and the symbol of the futility of resistance!” Voldemort cackled.

“And you, dear Mr. Potter, will be the symbol of their defeat. I shall place your dead body, impaled on a stake, in front of the castle. Then the world will know that no simple child could ever defeat Lord Voldemort!”

Harry stared at the Dark Lord in fear and began struggling against his bonds. Attack Hogwarts? He had to do something!

Voldemort only laughed as Harry struggled. “Since we wouldn’t want you to be bored, I’ll let my Death Eaters keep you company,” Voldemort said, indicating the two men behind him. They had a cart between them, carrying various vicious looking implements. Voldemort grinned maliciously. “No simple Cruciatus for you, Mr. Potter. Oh no, we want to leave marks, something to strike fear into all who see you.” Then he tapped Harry’s glasses. “And we want to you see and anticipate everything being done.”

With that said, Voldemort nodded to his Death Eaters, then left the room. Harry watched him go, and then turned his attention to the two men in front of him. One brandished a sinister looking knife, the other picked up what looked like a whip from the cart. Harry gulped and closed his eyes, bracing for what would come.
Chapter: 9

9. The First Battle of Hogwarts

Hermione Granger sat at the Gryffindor breakfast table, utterly exhausted. Neither Dumbledore nor McGonnagal had been by to see her or Ron last night. She had not been able to sleep at all, and her fear for Harry’s safety blocking out all other thoughts, except for her guilty ones. What if she had been there for Harry instead of yelling at him? Now he was who knows where, probably dead, and Hermione was sitting helplessly in the Great Hall hoping Dumbledore would share some news about Harry’s disappearance with the school. Even though Hermione had kept her word and did not reveal the contents of Harry’s letter, Seamus and Neville had spread the story of how McGonnagal had practically run out of their room, clutching a letter that was on Harry’s bed. The rumors abounded, theories of how Harry was kidnapped or ran away from school being shared among and between houses. Everyone noticed Hermione and Ron’s odd behavior, but no one could get them to speak, not even Eddie. Now, they kept throwing worried glances at her and Ron as they sat at the breakfast table. Finally, near the end of breakfast, Dumbledore cleared his throat and stood. The Great Hall immediately quieted down.

“As many of you may have heard, Mr. Potter has not been seen on Hogwarts grounds since late Friday night,” Dumbledore began. “We have reason to believe he was lured out of the caste and kidnapped by Lord Voldemort.” Various shrieks were emitted around the Great Hall at the mention of Voldemort.

“Additionally, I have the misfortune to announce that our own Professor Hagrid was found in the Forbidden Forest, murdered,” Dumbledore said. Hermione was shocked. Hagrid? Dead? She and Ron shared a pained look. Several students burst into tears at the news.

“We ask that if anyone has any information about the whereabouts of Harry Potter,” Dumbledore continued, seemingly looking directly at the Slytherin table, “that he or she report it immediately to a teacher. That is all.”

Dumbledore sat as the students began to talk again. Hermione looked around and spotted Ginny, who was openly crying at learning of Hagrid’s death. Hermione walked over to where Ginny was sitting, and they found as much comfort as they could from each other’s embrace.

Harry felt himself being dragged along the ground. Sensations of the world around him eventually managed to pierce the pain-filled fog that enveloped his brain. He first noticed that he was no longer in that blasted room that they had kept him in; in fact, he knew that he was outside, and that it was dark. As his body was scraped over rocks and fallen tree limbs, he realized his battered body was being pulled through a forest, his hands and feet bound together with ropes, his robes in tatters.

Memories of the past few days started to fill his mind, memories he would much rather have avoided. The past two days had been a cycle of pain, passing out, and awakening for another round of pain. The pain wasn’t quite as bad as being hit with the Cruciatus curse, or even the agony he felt from time-to-time from his scar. But pain was still pain, and this particular pain was inflicted on him hours at a time. Harry had long ago given up trying not to cry out. He was sure his body was marked in horrible ways, scars from blade and whip, cursed so that no magic could ever remove them. The only bright spot of the ordeal, if you could even call it that, was that Harry had not been able to think about Hagrid. But now, once he had figured out what was happening to him, Harry had nothing but time to think about Hagrid. Time passed quietly, his captors silent, and eventually whoever was lugging Harry through the forest stopped and propped him up against a small boulder. Harry looked up at the two emotionless men who have been his torturers the past two days. Soon after, Voldemort appeared through the underbrush.

“And now we begin the last phase, Mr. Potter. I’m glad you’ll be awake to witness it,” Voldemort said with a sinister smile.
on his face. “You may recognize this place, the Forbidden Forest. For months now, I have been infiltrating my Death Eaters to this place, preparing for the attack.” Voldemort looked up, searching the night sky. He seemed to revel in the moment, the moment before his triumphant return to Hogwarts. “In a few minutes, the stars will be in perfect alignment, and I shall perform the ancient ceremony that will allow us to breech the wards that protect the castle. Then, Mr. Potter, you shall have a front row seat to the attack,” Voldemort said. “Unfortunately for you,” he added, almost as an afterthought, “you’ll be dead. But I will try and keep you alive long enough to see your fellow students slaughtered.” Voldemort nodded to his Death Eaters and walked away, presumably to prepare for the ceremony he mentioned. The Death Eaters sprang to action, conjuring a large cross, constructed out of logs. They began tying Harry to it, and he realized they were preparing to crucify him.

Harry’s mind began to swim. Hogwarts! So close! If only there was some way to warn them! His mind flooded with images of what would happen. Voldemort and his Death Eaters would emerge from the Forbidden Forest and cross the school grounds unopposed, without any warning. No one would be there to stop them, no one to oppose the Death Eaters as they entered the defenseless castle. The Death Eaters would be able to simply walk through the front doors freely and enter the House dormitories. Images flashed through Harry’s mind as he watched Death Eaters rouse the students out of their beds, taking them hostage; he was sure some of the older students would fight back, only to be killed. Professor Dumbledore and the other teachers would be forced to surrender, since they would never risk the lives of their students. On their way through the castle, the Death Eaters would undoubtedly encounter prefects patrolling the halls, especially those alerted to the sound caused by countless Death Eaters in the main entrance. Hermione would probably be there…

Hermione! His mind screamed. They would surely kill her like they did to Hagrid, or torture her like they did to him. His mind pictured Hermione being tortured, treated as he was just a few hours ago. He couldn’t allow that, he had to protect her, he had to stop it somehow! As Harry’s mind flooded with thoughts of what might happen to Hermione, he felt his anger explode. All his frustration and bitterness, all the feeling he had bottled up and previously were directed towards Dumbledore, his teachers, and his friends, now broke free and focused solely on Voldemort. Harry felt something snap deep within him, as if a very old wall inside his body had been shattered. Harry stared at one of the Death Eaters in front of him, eyeing his wand. If only he could get his hands on it somehow.

All of a sudden, the wand flew from the Death Eater’s holster into Harry’s outstretched fingers. Without pausing to wonder what happened, Harry immediately reacted. Aiming awkwardly at the Death Eater closest to him (his hands being tied to the cross), Harry muttered a stunning spell, hoping it would be strong enough to incapacitate the Death Eater. With barely enough time to react to his wand flying out of his holster, the Death Eater crumpled to the ground after being struck by Harry’s spell. The second Death Eater turned when he heard his partner hit the dirt. The Death Eater was surprised into inactivity for only a few precious moments before reaching for his wand. Fortunately for Harry, those few moments were all he needed; the second Death Eater quickly joined his mate, unconscious on the ground. Harry then pointed the wand the ropes binding him and freed himself. Feeling a strange newfound strength flow through his body, Harry quickly approached the stunned Death Eaters, claiming the other wand. He quickly removed the robes from one of the Death Eaters and replaced his own tattered robes with it, drawing the hood up. After conjuring ropes to bind the two Death Eaters, Harry levitated the bodies (“Mobilicorpus!”) and directed them deeper into the forest, hiding them in the bushes and fallen branches. Harry knew he was running out of time and he only two goals in mind: prevent Voldemort’s ceremony from completing and somehow warn the school.

Harry debated quickly between trying to slink through the trees or simply walking through them. He knew that with the Death Eater robes on, hood up, no one could positively identify him from afar. But if he were spotted sneaking around from tree to tree, he would look suspicious. Harry decided to walk purposefully, as if he knew exactly where he was going and what he was doing. Doing his best to ignore the aches and pains in his legs, Harry did his best imitation of a Death Eater as he walked through the forest in the direction Voldemort had taken. Following the sounds of voices, Harry soon found the site of the ceremony. Harry stifled a gasp at what he saw.

Voldemort was in the center of a large clearing, standing in front of a raging bonfire. In both hands, Voldemort held a shimmering orb high above his head. Forty or so Death Eaters surrounded him, prone on the ground and chanting words Harry didn’t recognize. He knew the ceremony was still ongoing, but he wasn’t sure how much time was left before it ended. Peering through the trees, Harry could make out Hogwarts castle. Harry inched towards Hogwarts, getting as
far away from the ceremony as he could while still keeping Voldemort in sight. Then, taking careful aim, Harry pointed his wand at the orb in Voldemort’s hands, and cried out the Reductor curse.

The spell erupted from the tip of his wand and headed straight for the orb, smashing it into pieces. Not waiting to see Voldemort’s reaction, Harry immediately turned and ran towards the castle, hoping to gain precious ground in the confusion. Unfortunately, Voldemort tracked the path of the spell back towards Harry’s departing form and screamed out at his followers, pointing in the direction of the castle.

The branches and bushes seemed to grab at Harry as he ran, stumbling through the forest. All pain was forgotten as adrenaline flooded his body. “Relashio!” he cried repeatedly, sending fiery sparks from his wand in all directions that ignited the trees, bushes, and grass around him. Harry hoped to set up a wall of flame that would hinder the pursuit of Death Eaters. He wasn’t sure if by interrupting the wards protecting Hogwarts were intact, or whether some wards have been broken while others remained; he only knew he had to get to the castle, and quickly. A jet of light passed on his left, missing him by a couple of feet. Harry spared a quick glance behind him; although he could see no Death Eaters emerging from the quickly building flames, they were still firing curses at random, relying on luck to strike Harry down. Harry ran as fast as he could, tripping once, before finally emerging from the Forest. He knew he was particularly vulnerable now, as it was open terrain from the Forest to Hogwarts, no trees to obscure him or block any curses. As he ran towards the castle, Harry pointed his wand at his throat and placed a Sonorus charm on his voice.

“Professor Dumbledore! Professor McGonnagal!” he cried, his magically amplified voice carrying to the castle. “Death Eaters in the Forbidden Forest!”

Harry repeated his cries over and over again, hoping to alert the castle. Just as Harry was a few meters from the castle, when he started to believe he would make it safely, when a jet of light struck his leg and he went down, tumbling to a stop. He lay there for a moment, breathless. Harry got up, but his leg wouldn’t support his weight when he tried to run. Realizing he had no chance of reaching the castle by hopping on one leg, Harry firmly grasped his wand and turned to face the approaching horde Death Eaters. To his surprise and relief, only a dozen or so Death Eaters were running towards him, not the forty he saw at the ceremony. Harry took aim and starting firing stunners and other curses as the Death Eaters quickly approached. He couldn’t dodge the spells, as his leg refused to obey his mental commands, and he relied on the shielding charm to protect him. Several well-placed curses hit his shield hard, rocking Harry back onto his knees. As the remaining Death Eaters got closer, their spells grew more accurate and more frequent. Still on his knees, Harry had to focus all his concentration on maintaining the shielding spell, as the Death Eaters were firing curses practically non-stop. Harry watched as the Death Eaters slowed to a walk and formed a semi-circle around him, firing curses from all directions. Harry felt despair overtaking him; he couldn’t do anything, he couldn’t move or fight back; he was a sitting duck, and it was only a matter of time before they were able to penetrate his protection. Finally, a curse broke through Harry’s shield, striking him in the chest and launching him backwards ten meters. Harry landed painfully, his wand falling from his hand somewhere along the way. Harry knew it was over - he was wandless and could barely move, the pain beginning to cloud his vision. He could only pray that he had alerted the castle in time, and the last image in his mind before the world faded to black was of Hermione’s face.
Chapter: 10

A/N: Thanks to all my reviewers, especially to ears91 and onkel! I have about a bunch of chapters already but was planning on waiting to post them every other day or so. But I hate to keep you two waiting, so here's the next chapter. It's another long one, and it sets up the whole New Identity thing.

Enjoy!

10. Aftermath

Ron and Hermione were summoned to Dumbledore’s office the next morning where he explained what he knew of Harry’s condition. He assured them that Harry would recover fully, at least physically. With a great weariness in his eyes, Dumbledore carefully and gently described the marks left by his torturers. Dumbledore knew that Harry would most likely want to keep what happened a secret, but he also knew that it was in Harry’s best interest if he talked about it.

Hermione and Ron walked away from that meeting with Dumbledore angry and horrified at what Harry had to endure. Ron, in his typical style, had been furious with himself for his jealousy. It was so easy for him to focus on the good things in Harry’s life, the fame and the fortune. But, unlike the rest of the wizarding world at large, Ron knew the other side to being Harry Potter, and it was a side he often forgot. As they walked towards Gryffindor tower, Ron kept saying how he would make it up to Harry.

Hermione’s heart had broke when Dumbledore told them about the things Harry suffered through. She let her tears fall without trying to stem them, for she knew she had to cry. But she wouldn’t cry later; she knew she had to be strong for Harry. She wasn’t there for him before, but she would be there for him now, whether he wanted her or not. Hermione was also furious with the school and with her professors. How could Dumbledore let this happen? Hadn’t Harry gone through enough already? And damn the students here. They didn’t know Harry. Rooming with Lavender and Pavarti did have some benefits; through them, she always knew what the rest of the school was thinking. And she knew that the school only saw Harry as a protector, a hero as she once did when she was ten. But Harry wasn’t the stoic hero everyone thought he was. He was a real person, facing horrible things every day of his life. Everyone expected Harry to be there to save the day, even the teachers, and they sat back and let Harry endure it all. And, worst of all, Harry did save the day; he always was the hero. Even ignoring some of their more mysterious adventures (such as the Sorcerer’s stone and saving Sirius), everyone knew Harry still saved the school by killing the basilisk; they knew he was the school’s Tri-Wizard champion; and they knew he was there when Voldemort’s existence was exposed at the Ministry last year. And she knew that everyone knew what he did last night, if they hadn’t seen it first hand.

Hermione had been tossing and turning from worry that night. All of a sudden a voice echoed through the castle.

“Professor Dumbledore! Professor McGonnagal! Death Eaters in the Forbidden Forest!”

There was no mistaking that voice, for Hermione knew it like she knew her own. Harry! Harry was alive! She immediately ran from her room, grabbing her robe as she went. She ran to the common room, unsure where to go, of where she could best help her friend. Soon the common room filled as more students arrived, awoken by Harry’s cries. Hermione needed to figure out where Harry was, so she ran from through the portrait hole towards the corridor that faced outside, where she would be able to look through the windows. Students began to follow her instinctively, assuming that as a prefect and Harry’s friend, she would know where to go.

When she arrived at the windows facing outside, she gasped in shock. She saw someone running towards the castle; she knew it had to be Harry. Someone next to her screamed and pointed. Hermione looked and saw what looked like dozens of forms emerge from the Forbidden Forest. Death Eaters! She silently sent up a prayer of thanks that she had remembered to bring her wand with her when she left her dorm room. She pulled it from her robe and pointed it at the charging Death Eaters.
“Stupefy!” she cried out, and then watched in horror as her spell seemed to be absorbed by a barrier five meters from
the window. She looked around and saw that other students who had the forethought to bring their wands also met with
similar results. She cursed the wards that protected Hogwarts, for they also kept her from helping Harry. She watched as
Harry ran, and cried out when he tumbled to the ground after a curse struck him. She panicked, unable to leave her
place at the window and pleading for Harry to get up. To her immense relief, Harry struggled to his feet, but her relief
was short-lived when she realized he couldn’t run anymore, his leg injured by the curse. She watched as Harry turned to
face the coming Death Eaters, firing spell after spell at them until he was surrounded. She watched as the Death Eaters
fired curse after curse at Harry, who could only cast a shield spell for defense, unable to spare a second to fire back, and
unable to run. She cried out again when a spell broke through his shield and Harry was sent flying across the school
grounds. She helplessly wondered where the professors were, why Dumbledore hadn’t appeared to save Harry. She
closed her eyes; she couldn’t bear to watch as the Death Eaters approached Harry’s unmoving body. She snapped her
eyes open when a cheer erupted from the students around her. She looked back at Harry, and saw that the professors
had finally arrived, Dumbledore and the forefront firing spells at the retreating Death Eaters. And she watched as a
stretcher was conjured to bring Harry into the castle.

Immediately, Hermione rushed to the hospital ward, knowing that Harry would be brought there. She was refused
entrance, as she expected, but she waited. She waited outside the infirmary with Ron all night until summoned to
Dumbledore’s office.

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Harry Potter opened his eyes, seeing only a blurry white. He groaned inwardly; even without his glasses, Harry knew
exactly where he was. Most students have a particular spot in the Great Hall where they take their meals, or a certain
seat in class where they always sit. Harry Potter had his own bed in Hogwarts’ infirmary, which he often visited
throughout the year. Everything was familiar, too familiar. The sterile smell of the infirmary and the feel of the mattress
he lay upon, including that lump in the mattress right below his left knee. Harry hated this place.

Accustomed to waking up in the infirmary, Harry went over his usual post-awakening ritual. He tested each body part for
pain, one after the other. The circuit completed, he felt aches almost everywhere and a bit of stiffness in his right leg,
where he remembered that a curse had hit him. His chest also ached, presumable from the other curse. Harry reached
over to the bedside table, retrieved his glasses, and looked around. What Harry feared did not come to pass - the
infirmary was empty except for him. Harry had envisioned beds full of hurt staff and students. He had already figured
out that the attack had been repelled; otherwise he wouldn’t be waking up at all. He was thankful that there were no
other apparent injuries. Looking out the window, Harry guessed it was mid-morning, with classes underway.

Looking over at the end of the table, Harry was heartened to see a massive amount of flowers, candy, and get-well
cards, easily surpassing the collection he received at the end of his first year after saving the Sorcerer’s Stone. Harry
felt a great sense of relief at the sight of his trusty wand, which was lying on his bedside table, next to where his glasses
had been. Harry knew he owed Colin a new wand. He gave a small smile as he reached for a Chocolate Frog. As he
was unwrapping the chocolate, Madam Pomfrey entered.

“Oh good, your awake!” she cried. Harry was expecting to see her typical look of disapproval on her face, and he was
surprised to see a look of happiness and admiration on her face. “We were so worried about you. I’ll alert the
headmaster immediately,” she said, bustling out of the room.

Harry took the time to look himself over. Looking down at his chest, he cringed at the marks that were there; scars and
reminders of the torture he endured. Harry examined his arms and legs and winced at the sight; he was afraid to see
what his back looked like. While Harry was examining himself, poking at the scars that lined his ribs, Professor
Dumbledore walked into the room.

As soon as Harry saw Dumbledore, it all came back. From the time he awoke to just before Dumbledore walked in the
room, the past two days seemed like a bad dream he had just awoken from. Even the scars he viewed in a clinical
fashion, determining how they were caused and whether they could be covered. It was almost like everything happened
to someone else, but seeing Dumbledore made it all real. Everything; the fight outside the school, the orb he smashed, the torture, and worst of all, the murder of Hagrid. Harry felt a strong hitch in his chest when he thought of Hagrid, but he fought it down. He refused to show any weakness in front of Dumbledore.

"Ah, Mr. Potter! I’m so glad you’re awake," Dumbledore greeted him. "It seems you’re a bit ahead of schedule to be visiting the hospital ward," he joked.

Harry sat impassively. "I assume the Death Eater attack was repelled?"

Dumbledore nodded, unfazed by Harry’s lack of reaction to his joke. "Indeed. After your rather persistent wake-up call, I gathered the teachers and headed outside. The Death Eaters retreated when we exited the castle; we were able to capture four of them, not including the ones you had already stunned."

Harry only nodded.

"And now, I’m afraid, I must hear the whole story. Do you feel up to telling me what happened?" Dumbledore asked gently.

Harry nodded again. He told Dumbledore almost everything, from the time he had his first dream of the forest clearing, but neglecting to mention his fight with Hermione. Although Harry glossed over his torture, he was certain Dumbledore was aware of the extent of what was done to him, for surely he has seen the marks that remained. Harry described the night in the Forbidden Forest, how he escaped from the Death Eaters and interrupted the ceremony by destroying the orb, and how he fled to the castle. Dumbledore nodded often and asked for clarification a few times during Harry’s recital. At end, Dumbledore looked every year of his advanced age.

"I will admit, Mr. Potter, that much of what you have told me fills me with alarm. The orb you described sounds very much like the Orb of Tomduval, and I wonder by what means Voldemort has acquired it," Dumbledore said. "It is a very powerful device, who’s main attribute is to magnify the power of the bearer, allowing him to cast complex incantations. It does not, however, usually act like a wand would; Voldemort cannot use it to cast a more powerful Cruciatus curse, but it does give him the power to cast other spells like the one you interrupted, the one to breech Hogwarts’ protective wards."

Harry paled. "But, but it’s destroyed now, right? Voldemort can’t use it anymore?"

"Perhaps, perhaps," Dumbledore said. "It does sound like you were able to destroy the orb, but ancient artifacts such as the Orb of Tomduval are very sturdy. It may be possible that Voldemort can re-assemble the orb if he finds the pieces, and if he has enough time. I shall ask the Order to investigate the properties of the Orb and conduct another search of the Forbidden Forest for any pieces of the Orb."

Dumbledore looked uncomfortable for a moment. "Harry, I am sorry for everything you’ve been through, not only for the past few days but over your lifetime as well," he said sadly. "And I would very much like to ask about this," he said, holding up Harry’s letter, "but that can wait for another day. I only wish you had told us of your plans; after you came to me with your dream, the Order began investigating, and we were formulating a plan of action—"

"If only I had told you!?” Harry exploded. “If only I had told you!? Why didn’t you tell me?"

"Easy Mr. Potter," Dumbledore began, “take a deep breath and relax."

But Harry ignored him. "How could I tell you, when you didn’t even let me finish explaining my dream and just dismissed me, saying I’ve failed in occlumency? If you had only told me that you were going to do something about it, I could’ve helped! Instead, you made it perfectly clear that you were willing to sacrifice Hagrid for me."

"Mr. Potter, I chose not to tell you for your own protection. I didn’t want you placed in harm’s way—" Dumbledore began. "My own protection!?” Harry yelled. He lifted his shirt and pointed to his scars. “Here, look at this! This is the result of your protection!”
For once, Dumbledore was at a loss for words. He could only look at Harry’s wounds. After a moment, Harry spoke. “I'm getting tired Professor. Would you mind leaving so I can get my rest?” Harry asked evenly.

Dumbledore quickly recovered. “Of course Harry. We can continue our conversation at a later point. Rest well.”

Harry watched as Dumbledore left, then motioned over Madam Pomfrey.

“Madam Pomfrey,” Harry asked, in his weakest voice. “I’m still feeling rather weak. I don’t think I’m up to any visitors after what happened…” Harry paused, a painful look crossing his face.

Madam Pomfrey nodded. “I understand Mr. Potter. I shall make certain you have your privacy. If you need someone to talk to about your, er, ordeal, I can have someone brought by.”

Harry nodded his thanks then turned over, settling into bed. For a while, Harry’s thoughts were in turmoil. But they eventually settled onto one thing; Hagrid. Hagrid was dead because of him. Another life wasted because of that bloody prophecy. It was only a few months ago that Sirius died, and now Hagrid was gone. Harry knew he could go insane with guilt if he kept think about it. He made a promise to himself that he would fulfill that prophecy, that not another life would be lost because of Harry Potter. He felt that his emotional ties to Sirius, Hagrid, and his parents were a weakness that Voldemort could exploit, so Harry spent his time in the hospital wing building a wall around his heart to block out his feelings, and to plan his future.

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When Harry made his triumphant return to the Great Hall at breakfast two days later, everyone was aware of what he had done the night of the attack. In fact, Ravenclaw’s common room faced the front of the castle, and the entire house was able to watch, as the Gryffindor’s who followed Hermione had watched from the balcony. Several Hufflepuffs and Slytherins also witnessed what happened. The stories grew with each telling, Hermione having heard one Hufflepuff tell another that Harry had single-handedly defeated fifty Death Eaters. Hermione was initially overjoyed to see Harry, until she saw his eyes. To everyone else, Harry seemed to be in good spirits, accepting accolades with grace and participating in friendly conversations. But there were probably only two people who knew Harry well enough to see through the mask he often wears. And since Ron, who wasn’t known for his sensitivity, wouldn’t notice unless it was pointed out, only Hermione was there to see it. And she saw it in his eyes - nothing. The smile on his face did not reach his eyes. There was no emotion there, not the expected embarrassment or irritation at all the attention, no joy at being alive. There was no life in his eyes, and this scared Hermione as much as anything else had.

Over the next days, Ron and Hermione tried to find a moment alone with Harry, following him around. Her behavior annoyed Eddie greatly, but she was past caring. They had to talk to Harry, to make up for what she had said and for Ron’s behavior. But they quickly realized that finding a moment alone with him to impossible. People were always around Harry, trying to get a piece of their hero, their friend. Hermione would even risk a loss of Gryffindor points if she could speak to him in class, but he never showed up.

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Harry knew that Dumbledore had expected him to return to classes and catch up with his homework, but Harry would have none of that. In fact, the time when everyone else was in class was the only time during the day Harry had to himself. Rather than go to class, Harry would spend his time in the library researching facts about the wizarding world, and he would send and receive countless letters. Harry was amazed at the things that could be accomplished via owl post and was pleased that everything would work out as he hoped. Meanwhile at night, under the cover of his invisibility cloak, Harry ventured into the restricted section of the library to continue his research.

His absences in his classes did not go unnoticed. In fact, it all came to a head one night in the library. Harry was sitting at his now familiar table, books piled around him. His admirers were scattered throughout, stealing glances at him as he worked. Professor Snape strode into the room, paused, and then made his way towards Harry when he spotted him.
“Mr. Potter,” Snape said with his usual look of contempt. “I see fame has gone to your head again; you seem to think yourself above taking classes and have missed yet another one without excuse. That will be one week of detention and thirty points from Gryffindor.”

Harry continued writing for a moment, clearly irritating Snape, before setting his quill down and meeting his eyes. “No,” Harry said.

“No?” Snape repeated incredulously. Then he said, sneering, “Mr. Potter, if you continue to fail to show up for any of my classes or do not take detention as ordered, I will be forced to do everything in my power to get you expelled!”

Harry chuckled, then laughed. “Expel me? Expel Harry Potter? Ha!” he cried, rising to his feet to face Snape. “Dumbledore would never expel his secret weapon, his only hope against Voldemort!” Students in the library, all of who could not help but to watch the spectacle unfold, emitted gasps and shrieks at the sound of Voldemort’s name.

“Mr. Potter, your level arrogance sometimes surprises even me. You think because you benefited from incredible luck that you are above the rules? You’re just like you father,” Snape spat, “always thinking you’re better than the rest of us!”

Harry slammed his fist on the table. “That’s it! I’m sick and tired of you blaming and hating me for being the son of James Potter. You are nothing but a pathetic, little man who cannot get over a twenty-year old grudge with a dead man! You obviously don’t know anything about me or the life I’ve led, so I suggest you bugger off and stick to teaching Potions…Snivel

Snape’s face turned white with anger. Never before had a student addressed him like that, and he would certainly not allow it now, least of all from James Potter’s spawn! Without thinking, simply reacting to his hate and feelings of humiliation, Snape reached into his robe and drew his wand. But Harry was faster, his training showing through once again.

“Expelliarmus!” he cried, he force of his spell sending Snape flying across the room before landing in a heap by the doorway, unconscious. The library erupted into chaos, as students stood and scrambled around, unsure what to do. Madam Pince, who had been watching the exchange, rushed to Snape’s side to make sure he was not seriously hurt.

Harry simply sat down and resumed his research, a very satisfied grin on his face.

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After the incident with Snape, Harry knew his time was limited. While he thoroughly enjoyed knocking Snape out, he knew it would only cause trouble. Minutes after the incident occurred, Professor Dumbledore appeared and pulled Harry aside. Based on witnesses, he quickly decided that it was a regrettable act, made in self-defense. Professor Snape would face sanctions, and Harry had to endure another lecture about self-control and responsibility. He absences from his classes were not mentioned, but Harry had a feeling it would only be a matter of time before that lecture came up, and he knew there would be consequences if he failed to attend classes after winter break.

Two days later, Harry finally felt everything was ready. Waiting until everyone had gone to sleep, he cast a silencing charm on his things as he packed them away, and then cast a shrinking spell on his trunk to reduce it to the size of a Quaffle. Tying the trunk to his Firebolt, Harry dressed in his warmest cloak and grabbed his gloves and scarf. Leaving another letter on his bed, Harry descended the stairs to the common room and out the portrait hole, under the cover of his invisibility cloak

Harry walked along the empty corridors, heading towards the Astronomy tower. As he started to climb the stairs of the tower, he heard someone approach. Standing perfectly still, he waited.

“Harry? Are you here?” Harry recognized Hermione’s voice calling out. “Listen Harry, I know you’re here somewhere, hiding under your invisibility cloak. I have the Marauder’s Map,” she said, as she came into view at the bottom the stairs.

Harry cursed. The map! He had assumed it was at the bottom of his trunk. Harry reluctantly removed his cloak, eliciting a small gasp of surprise from Hermione. “Hermione,” Harry said while folding the invisibility cloak and placing inside his
robes. “What are you doing here?” he asked coldly.

Hermione looked as if she wanted to embrace him in a hug, but stopped herself upon hearing Harry’s cold voice. “Harry,” she said uncertainly. “I, er. I just wanted to make sure you’re OK.”

For a second, Harry paused in his resolve. He remembered how Hermione had always been there. He thought of how nice it would be to have her by his side again, to have everything return as they were before. But then he remembered what happened in the Department of Mysteries, how Hermione almost died because of him. He couldn’t put her through that again; she deserved better than a life being friends with Harry Potter, her life always in danger. Harry forced a laugh. “Yeah, I’m OK Hermione. Thanks for your concern,” he said as he turned and continued up the stairs.

Hermione followed him. “Listen Harry, I want to say I’m sor…” she cut herself off when she noticed that Harry was carrying his broom. With a small trunk tied to it. Wearing his winter cloak and carrying his gloves and scarf. In no time, Hermione was able to figure out what Harry was doing.

“You’re….you’re leaving Hogwarts, aren’t you Harry?” she asked hesitantly, afraid of the answer but knowing full well what it would be.

Harry gave her a small smirk. “You’re not the cleverest witch at Hogwarts for nothing,” he said. “Yes, I’m leaving Hogwarts.”

Hermione stared at him for a moment. Then she grew angry. “What are you thinking?! You can’t leave Hogwarts!”

“And why not?”

At this, Hermione’s analytical brain shot into gear. Surely there were plenty of reasons to stay, and all she had to do was convince him of every one. “You have to stay Harry,” she said, ticking off the reasons on her fingers. “For one, Hogwarts is the only other place besides the Dursley’s where you’ll be safe. For another, you have to learn how to be a fully trained wizard to defeat V-Voldemort, and you can only do that here. Another reason is that Professor Dumbledore is here and …”

Harry’s bark of laughter cut her off. Then he grew serious. “Safe?” he asked, in a low voice. “You call this safe?” he asked, as he opened his robe and exposed his stomach to Hermione, pointing at the torture scars. Hermione gave a gasp of horror, as she felt tears beginning to form in her eyes. Hearing about his scars was one thing; seeing them was another. She wiped her eyes away. She had to be strong. Harry just looked at her. “You think this is bad, you should look at the rest of me. This is just a taste of what they did to me. You honestly think I’m safe here?” Harry continued. “You know better then that Hermione. Name one year when someone or something wasn’t trying to kill me. I’ve faced Voldemort four times, five if you count his diary, all while under the safety of Hogwarts.”

“And a fully trained wizard?” Harry rambled on. “Do you honestly think Herbology is going to help me defeat Voldemort? Or that my knowledge of magical creatures will impress Voldemort into submission? Or perhaps if I recite enough of what I learned in History of Magic, Voldemort will become so bored he’ll fall asleep, and I can subdue him? No, what I need to learn won’t be taught at Hogwarts.”

Hermione grabbed the side of her head in frustration. Things were not going like they should. She had to stop him from leaving! “But Professor Dumbledore-,” she began.

“Dumbledore?!” Harry exploded. “You expect Dumbledore to help me? After he’s kept so much from me, kept the truth, what I have the right to know, hidden from me? After he treats me like a child yet expects me to save the world? How he sent me to live with the Dursley’s for ten years, and how he sends me to go back there every summer?” Harry practically shouted. “No Hermione,” Harry said a low voice. “I owe absolutely nothing to Dumbledore. To Dumbledore, I’m nothing but a tool to use against Voldemort.”

Hermione stood shell-shocked. She frantically searched her mind for the words to make him stay, but nothing came. Harry only looked at her for a moment, daring her to speak. Then he turned to mount his broom.
That propelled her to act. “You’re not leaving!” she screamed hysterically. Panicking, Hermione drew her wand and did the only thing that came to her; it was an old spell that served her well in the past. “Petrificus Totalus!”

Harry’s arms and legs immediately shot together as his body became as rigid as a board. But before he could fall to the ground, he began twitching. As Hermione watched, Harry slowly began to free himself of the curse, eventually regaining full use of his body. He turned to Hermione. “For being such a clever witch, that was a stupid thing to do,” he said menacingly. Harry pointed his wand at her, as Hermione took a fearful step backwards.

“Accio!” Harry muttered under his breath, as Hermione’s wand shot out of her grasp and into Harry’s open hand. Tossing Hermione’s wand aside, Harry once again turned and mounted his broom.

“Harry, don’t leave me! We need you! I need you!” Hermione cried out desperately, running to him and clutching his arm as tears ran freely down her face. “Please don’t leave me!” she said, sobbing uncontrollably.

Harry turned to look at her. He hated to see her cry, and felt the wall he so diligently built around his emotions begin to crumble. But he had to go through with his plans, for her sake. “You don’t need me Hermione,” he said gently, as he released her grip on his arm. “Knowing me will only get you killed. You’re a great witch Hermione, you have a wonderful future ahead of you. Me? I probably won’t last another two years. You need normalcy, as you said so.” he said, then mounted his broom. He hovered above the tower for a moment, and for second full of hope, Hermione thought he had changed his mind.

“Take care of your self, Hermione,” she heard through her sniffles, and then watched as Harry took off into the night and over the Forbidden Forest. As soon as he was out of sight, she sank to the ground and cried.
Chapter: 11

A/N: Here’s a regular sized chapter, but not a lot of action, just a lot of talk. It probably wasn’t too smart of Harry to leave, but he’s feeling that combination of betrayal and anger (at Dumbledore), abandonment (by his friends), and of course, Harry’s innate sense of self-sacrifice: remember, he was going to run away before when he thought he was possessed, and now Hermione reminded him that she almost died in the Ministry battle.

Just to warn you, I’m going to focus on Hermione for a while; I’ll leave you in suspense about Harry for a bit.

Thanks for the reviews, and enjoy!

11. Repercussions

Hermione sat huddled on the balcony of the astronomy tower. Her mind could only focus on three thoughts: Harry was gone; Harry had left her; She couldn’t stop him. Harry was gone; Harry had left her; She couldn’t stop him. Hermione felt helpless, like her world had just crumbled; her best friend was gone, and it was her fault. If only she hadn’t turned him away or knew what to say to keep him from leaving. Eventually, Hermione wiped her eyes and stood up, her mind finally coming to terms with what had happened. Hermione was not the type to sit around and feel sorry for herself. She focused on what to do now. She had to tell Dumbledore, he would know. Retrieving her wand from where Harry had tossed it aside, she ran from the astronomy tower to the stone gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore’s office.

"Professor Dumbledore! Professor Dumbledore!" she cried, not caring who heard her. She banged her fists against the gargoyle as she tried to get Dumbledore’s attention. Finally, her fists sore from striking stone, the gargoyle began to move. Hermione sprinted up the stairs and threw open the door to Dumbledore’s office.

"Ms. Granger," Dumbledore asked with a concerned look on his face, "what wrong?"

"It’s Harry, sir. He’s left, he’s gone!" she cried, and then collapsed into a chair as her tears began anew. "I tried to stop him, but I couldn’t. He wouldn’t listen to me. He just left me!" she wailed.

Dumbledore grew alarmed. He knelt next to the weeping girl and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Where did Mr. Potter go?

"I don’t know," she replied between sobs. "He had his broomstick and his trunk and he just flew away, over the Forbidden Forest."

Dumbledore nodded. "Please stay here Ms. Granger. I must alert the Order and find Mr. Potter." Hermione nodded as Dumbledore left his office; she didn’t have the strength left to do anything, anyways.

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About twenty minutes later, Dumbledore returned with Professors McGonnagal and Snape in tow, looking rather concerned. “Ms. Granger,” he started. “Unfortunately we have been unable to locate Mr. Potter. The only evidence we have is this letter we found in Mr. Potter’s own handwriting,” Dumbledore said, handing a piece of parchment to Hermione. She read it:

I’m leaving. Hogwarts provides neither the protection nor the training I require. Do not look for me.

- Harry

“As you can see, the letter does not provide any details,” Dumbledore said. “In the hopes that we might find some clue, would you tell us everything that happened?”
Hermione nodded. She took a deep breath, and proceeded to explain the events of the night, leaving no detail out. Her voice caught several times, and twice she needed to pause to collect herself, but her story was told. Professor Snape looked incensed.

“That proves it! Mr. Potter is nothing but a self-centered little brat, concerned with only his own needs! I knew we should never have placed our hopes on him; he was bound to fail us,” Snape said, practically spitting out the words. Before Hermione could react, Dumbledore spoke.

“No Severus,” he said in a low tone. “It is not Harry who failed us. Rather, we have failed Harry; to be more specific, I have failed Harry. I have not endeared myself to the boy, he had no reason to trust me after last year,” he said sadly. “We will continue to look for him though; we must bring him home safely.”

Professors McGonnagal and Snape nodded (though Snape looked less than convinced), then left. Dumbledore turned his attention back to Hermione. “Unfortunately, finding Mr. Potter is one thing, convincing him to return is another. Can I count on you and Mr. Weasley to help us to convince him to come back?”

Hermione nodded. “Of course Professor!”

Dumbledore smiled, his first smile since Hermione first walked into his office that night. “Very good. Now, I suggest you get some sleep. With luck, we may need your assistance tomorrow.”

Hermione gave a faint smile. “I hope so Professor. Good night,” she said, then left Dumbledore’s office. She made her way back to Gryffindor tower. No one was awake. She was too emotionally drained to relive her experience with Ron, so Hermione went to her dorm room and went to sleep.

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Hermione awoke the next morning with a splitting headache. At first, as she lay in bed feeling sorry for herself, she had half-managed to convince herself that it was all just a horrible nightmare. When she noticed she still wore the clothes she wore last night, not her normal dressing gown, she knew it was real. She remembered Lavender trying to wake her up for breakfast, but she begged off, citing her headache. For the next thirty minutes Hermione simply lay in bed, not wishing to get up and face reality. But her grumbling stomach, so used to food by now, reminded her that she couldn’t stay in bed all day. Reluctantly, Hermione changed her clothes and left for the Great Hall, her roommates and other Gryffindors already at breakfast. When Hermione entered the Great Hall, she noticed the festive mood that permeated the room. Then she remembered that yesterday was the last day of Fall Term, and today the Hogwarts Express would be taking everyone home for winter break. And unlike years past, Harry wouldn’t be staying at Hogwarts. As she made her way towards the Gryffindor table, Eddie intercepted her.

“Hermione, you look…well, you look horrible. What’s wrong?” he said, concerned.

Hermione gave him a weak laugh. “Gee thanks Eddie, you don’t look so good yourself,” she joked feebly.

“I’m serious Hermione, what’s the matter?” he persisted. However, Hermione brushed him off.

“It’s nothing Eddie. I’ll talk to you later, Ok?” she said. Without waiting for a reply, Hermione left Eddie standing with a look of hurt and confusion on his face as she sat next to Ron at the Gryffindor table.

“Are you OK, Hermione?” Ron asked, just as concerned as Eddie was.

“Ron,” she said, looking very distraught. All of a sudden, she burst into tears and hugged Ron. “He’s gone, Ron! We’ve failed him, and Harry’s left Hogwarts!”

Ron was speechless. “Gone?” he said.
Hermione nodded, then broke the embrace. She quietly told Ron about the events of last night, skimming over only the parts that were too difficult to mention. Ron looked distraught after she finished.

“Don’t worry Hermione,” he said reassuringly. “I’m sure Dumbledore will find Harry soon, and he’ll be back just in time for Winter Term to start.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Ron nodded, but Hermione could see the doubt in his eyes.

“You have to eat something Hermione. The train leaves right after breakfast so you won’t be able to eat again until you get home.”

Hermione sighed, and then grabbed a piece of toast and a goblet of pumpkin juice.

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Winter break crawled along for Hermione; it was shaping up to be the longest three weeks of her life. Each day she waited hopefully for an owl from Dumbledore saying they had found Harry, but that owl never came. Eddie had written to her a few times, but her responses were short and vague; he stopped writing. Two days after Christmas, as Hermione was sitting in her room, staring at the open book before her, her mother knocked gently and entered her room.

“Hermione, honey?” Dr. Granger asked. Hermione looked up, startled out of her reverie. “Are you ok, sweetie?”

Hermione made a noncommittal noise, “I’m fine mum.”

Dr. Granger walked into Hermione’s room and sat quietly on the bed, looking at her daughter. After a moment, she spoke. “You’re father and I know something’s bothering you, honey. Do you remember our conversation after you came home last summer,” she asked.

“I remember.”

“Your father and I were so worried when you came home injured. We always knew there was some part of your life that you were keeping from us, but we never imagined that your life was in danger. Remember the deal we made, Honey? We wouldn’t try to take you out of Hogwarts as long as you promised to talk to us. Please talk to us,” Dr. Granger pleaded to her only child.

Hermione sat still for a moment. Then she turned to face her mother, her eyes wet from tears. She flung herself into her mother’s arms and started weeping. Dr. Granger closed her eyes and embraced her daughter, content with holding her for now. After a while, Hermione pulled away and sat next to her mother on her bed, wiping her tears on her sleeve. She gave a small laugh.

“Sorry, Mum. I got your shirt all wet,” she said sniffling, pointing to her mother’s shoulder where her tears fell.

Dr. Granger chuckled. “It’s ok Honey. Do you want to talk about it? Did that Voldemort do something again?”

“It’s worse than that,” Hermione said. “So much worse.” She told her mother everything that happened at the end of last year. How mean she had been to Harry. How he had been kidnapped (but left out the torture), and then somehow escaped and saved the school again. And how he left. Through it all, Dr. Granger listened with compassion, and at the end they shared another tight embrace.

“I’m sure Harry will be alright Honey. From what you’ve told me about him, he’s very resourceful.”
“I know Mum,” Hermione said. “But it’s not just that. Don’t you see? I’ve failed him! He’s out there thinking that I don’t care about him anymore!” she wailed, causing a fresh round of tears and another hug from her mother.

“Shhh, shhh. It’ll be OK. You said yourself Dumbledore is the greatest wizard alive. He’ll find Harry, and then you can sit his stubborn behind down and explain everything. It’ll be OK.”

Hermione nodded through her tears. She pulled away and looked at her mother. “Thanks for listening Mum. I feel a little better now,” she said, a half-smile on her lips.

“You’re welcome Honey; you’re father and I will always be here for you. You just wait; Harry will probably be at school when you arrive looking embarrassed at his behavior.” After Hermione nodded, Dr. Granger continued. “Now come on down for dinner. We still have leftovers from Christmas dinner to finish,” she said with a smile.

“Ok. Give me a minute to freshen up.” Dr. Granger nodded, then left. Hermione gave one last glance out her window, looking for the tell tale signs of an owl. Finding none, she sighed and wiped her eyes, then went downstairs to join her paren
Chapter: 12

A/N: Thanks for the reviews, please keep them coming, it really helps my creative juices. I’ve probably added about three chapters worth of material based on them. Even the little things count. For example, onkel, leothelion3, and ksmcan brought up Hermione in their reviews, it got me thinking. I wanted to portray her feelings about Harry, but then I became worried that I might make her seem too dependent on him and not strong and confident enough. So, I basically added all of Chapter 13 and 14 because of that. That’s two chapters based on a few comments on Hermione. Also, a bunch of people (Romm, Ash, and Belle) questioned Harry’s decision to leave and wondered how he would train himself. I reread the chapters I wrote about Harry’s adventures by himself and realized I could add a lot more about exactly those two things, so I threw in a paragraph here and a paragraph there.

Anyways, here’s the latest. I hope you enjoy!

12. Life Continues

Hermione experienced a whirlwind of conflicting emotions as the Hogwarts Express approached Hogsmeade station. Fear battled with hope, while anticipation wrestled with dread. She desperately wanted to believe her mother’s words: that Harry would be waiting for her in the common room, a sheepish look on his face as he apologized for running off. But another part of her feared he wouldn’t be back; that he was still out there, thinking that she had abandoned him.

Ron and Ginny, who had been told of Harry’s departure, sat across from Hermione, each lost in their own thoughts. Hermione knew that Ron felt just as guilty as she, and Ginny was probably feeling upset that she hadn’t noticed any clues or had the opportunity to talk to Harry. As the Express entered Hogsmeade station and the students departed, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny silently made their way to the carriages. Once they reached Hogwarts, Eddie tried to catch Hermione’s attention, but all she could manage was a small smile and weak embrace. They exchanged pleasantries and small talk before Hermione excused herself and ran to the common room, hoping to find Harry there. He wasn’t.

At the Welcome Back Feast, Hermione was expecting another announcement about Harry by Dumbledore, but not came. With a heavy heart, Hermione returned to the common room for McGonnagal’s start-of-term speech. Hermione found a seat next to Ron and Ginny as Professor McGonnagal gave out reminders and notices about Winter Term. By the time McGonnagal was winding down, the Gryffindors were restless.

“I have one final announcement to make,” McGonnagal said. Her voice was tense and sad, and was such a change from her normal strict and businesslike tone that all the students immediately quieted down and sat up straighter. “It is with extreme regret that I have to announce that Harry Potter has withdrawn from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. No one on Hogwarts staff, myself included, knows how to contact him, so please do not ask us to pass along messages. We also don’t know where he went or what he is doing. That is all.” With a final look at her Gryffindors, McGonnagal exited the portrait hole. As soon as she left, the common room exploded with questions, all directed towards Ron and Hermione.

“Harry’s gone?”

“Where did he go?”

“Why did he leave?”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“Do you know if he’ll be back?”

“What are we going to do about a seeker?”
Ron and Hermione begged off, saying time and time again that they knew nothing, which was the truth. Their answers were met with a few skeptical looks, but after awhile it became clear that the two friends were just as upset as the rest of Gryffindor House. Eventually they were left to themselves, as the House tried to come to acceptance with the surprising news. Ron and Hermione sat by the fire in silence until it was time for bed.

By breakfast of the next day, the news had spread around Hogwarts. Everyone knew Harry Potter had left. Typically, the Slytherin’s attempted to make Harry’s disappearance as a result of cowardice, but their comments were met with a cold response by the rest of the school. A general feeling of confusion and curiosity filled the air, but underneath it all, Hermione also sensed a bit of fear. No one said anything specific, but she heard it nonetheless.

“What are we going to do now that Harry Potter’s gone?”

“Don’t worry, Dumbledore’s still here. Voldemort won’t try anything with Dumbledore in charge.”

Hermione sleep-walked through her morning classes, her mind elsewhere; it was fortunate that she had already read her materials through Spring Term. During her final class of the day, she and Ron received a note from a nervous first year, asking them to report to Dumbledore’s office after dinner. As requested, they climbed the stone steps to Dumbledore’s office in the hopes of hearing some news about their missing best friend.

“Oh, Ms. Granger, Mr. Weasley. Please sit down,” Dumbledore greeted them. Ron and Hermione sat and looked at Dumbledore expectantly. “Unfortunately,” Dumbledore said with a grave face, “we have found no information about Harry’s whereabouts over winter break. However, we have all our Order members trying to find some news about him. It may be that, sometime soon, we may hear a lead or rumor about Harry’s location. We could use your assistance should that time come. Would you be willing to drop everything, classes, homework,” he said, looking at Hermione, “and even Quidditch practice,” he said, looking at Ron, “and leave Hogwarts at a moment’s notice to search for Harry?”

Ron and Hermione agreed without hesitation. Dumbledore looked pleased, and then dismissed the two students. When they reached Gryffindor tower, the two best friends tried to return to normalcy: Hermione pulled out her homework while Ron struck up a Quidditch-conversation with Dean. But neither could get the welfare of their missing friend completely out of the minds.

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The next day, the Daily Prophet carried the headlines: HARRY POTTER MISSING! Almost half of the edition was focused on Harry Potter and his disappearance, impressive considering his disappearance was revealed only yesterday. There were stories about his defeat and subsequent battles with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and a reprint of the article on his award of the Order of Merlin (3rd Class). His exploits at Hogwarts were covered, including Harry being the “youngest seeker in a century.” There were quotes by “close, personal friends” who never talked to him before, as well as comments concerned Ministry officials who only last year called him delusional. One full page was dedicated to trying to figure out why Harry left Hogwarts (ranging from secret training to unrequited love), and another two pages on what Harry might be doing and might be right now. Somewhat surprising, given the Daily Prophets record on covering Harry Potter, there were no theories that Harry Potter turned to darkness (however, considering the political capital Cornelius Fudge invested in Harry, Hermione figured the Minster of Magic would have a say in Harry’s coverage by the media).

Two weeks later, the general hustle and bustle at Hogwarts had returned. Ron, not without feeling a little guilty, succeeded Harry as Quidditch captain. Ron was the logical choice, being the oldest player, arguably the most Quidditch-crazy, and a prefect to boot. Much to her dismay, Ginny returned to the seeker position, and try-outs for another chaser were held. Ron quickly dove into his position as Captain with enthusiasm, dedicating the season to Harry and studying training methods and strategies with relish. Hermione even helped Ron “study” Quidditch and develop plays, feeling that it would be important to Harry that the team did well despite his absence.

Ron and Hermione’s first chance to join a search for Harry arrived while both were in Care of Magical Creatures. A frantic looking second year ran up to Professor Grubbly-Planks (while still maintaining a safe distance from the fearsome-looking
creature tethered behind her) and handed her a note. “Granger and Weasley,” she called out, after reading the note. “Report to the headmaster’s office immediately.” Without a word, Ron and Hermione gathered their things and sprinted towards the castle. They found Professors Dumbledore and McGonnagal waiting. Without preamble, Dumbledore spoke, “an Order member believes he spotted Mr. Potter in Diagon Alley. I’ve connected my fireplace to the floo network, and we will floo over to the Leaky Cauldron immediately.” Ron and Hermione nodded, and then grabbed some floo powder from the bag in McGonnagal’s outstretched hand. After a spin through the floo network, the four travelers arrived in the Leaky Cauldron. “Time is of the essence,” Dumbledore said. “We’ll split up and meet back here in two hours.” McGonnagal, Ron, and Hermione nodded, then the four left to look for Harry. Dumbledore headed towards Knockturn Alley, just in case Harry might have some use for the stores there. McGonnagal went to Gringott’s, hoping to discover if Harry had accessed his vault; it was felt that the goblins, famous for the confidentiality and discretion, had the least chance of intimidating McGonnagal. Ron and Hermione split up, with Hermione covering Madam Malkin’s to Quality Quidditch Supplies, and Ron searching from Ollivander’s to Magical Menagerie.

Initially, Hermione had been excited and hopeful, half-expecting to find that trademark messy hair and piercing green eyes at every turn. Now, as she finished peeking through the window at Eeylops Owl Emporium, she felt despondent. It was getting late, and after one hour and forty-five minutes she had covered her area of Diagon Alley twice with no sign of Harry. Hermione approached Madam Malkin’s to finish her circuit, when she noticed a man with dark, messy walking out of Flourish & Blotts. Excited, Hermione ran after the man; catching up to him, she grabbed him by the arm and spun him around, causing him to drop his shopping bag of books.

“Harry!” she exclaimed happily, only to have her hopes quickly dashed. The man was not Harry. Although he was of the same height and build, the man she had so hoped was Harry had blue eyes, wire-rim glasses, and dirty blond hair, which she had thought was black in the increasing shadows of Diagon Alley. And no scar. Embarrassed, Hermione muttered an apology and ran off, the stranger giving her an odd look as she departed.

Returning to the Leaky Cauldron she was not surprised to find that the others had found nothing as well. They agreed to eat dinner at the Leaky Cauldron, since dinner at Hogwarts had passed. Over a decidedly depressing atmosphere, the four discussed the latest, though scant, news about Harry, and the possible things he might have gotten himself into. After a quick floo, Ron and Hermione made their way to the common room, where they caught up on their missed classes.

Hermione sat in the library, trying to focus on the text in front of her. Her mind, unfortunately, refused to cooperate as she thought about Harry, thinking on whether they had just missed him in Diagon Alley, wondering how close they had been to finding him. She spotted Eddie Carmichael enter the library and make his way towards her table. She felt slightly guilty; she hadn’t talked much to him since winter break ended. In fact, she had practically ignored him, only exchanging pleasantries but avoiding his attempts to talk to her. And he did try his best to be there for Hermione, he was a good man who deserved better than a girlfriend who wasn’t really there. She appreciated his efforts, but there so many things that she couldn’t put into words, so many things she felt he just wouldn’t understand.

“Hi Hermione,” Eddie said, looking nervous. “Can we talk?” he asked, indicated that he wanted to talk outside the library.

“Sure,” she said, getting up and following him. To her great dismay, he was heading towards the same classroom where she and Harry had had their argument. She paused momentarily before following him in. “Eddie-,” she began.

“No, please, let me start,” Eddie said. He took a moment to compose himself, then started. “We’ve been together for a while now, and it’s been great, at least for me. I think we could become something special, Hermione,” Eddie said, taking her hands in his own. “I know you’re going through a very rough time right now, and I want you to know I’m here for you if you want to talk about it.”

Hermione looked up at Eddie. “I know Eddie, you’ve been wonderful to me, and so patient. But,” she said, faltering slightly. “but, it just won’t work out, between you and me. You deserve better than me.”

Eddie looked at her, the hurt on his face evident. “What do you mean, Hermione? Why won’t it work?”
“You’re a wonderful man, Eddie. You’re smart, kind, and attractive, and you deserve a girlfriend who puts you first, who loves you with all of her heart. I just can’t give that to you right now. I can’t be the kind of girl that you deserve,” Hermione said, tears forming in her eyes.

Eddie gently brushed her tears away, then nodded. “I still think we’d have been great together,” he said, and then pulled her into a hug. They broke apart, and Eddie gave her a small smile before walking out of the classroom. Hermione leaned against the wall and sank to the ground. She didn’t regret what she’d done, but it didn’t make her feel any better. That’s two hearts she’d broken in a matter of months, Ron’s and Eddie’s. And if you include Harry, that’s three. Hermione cried a bit, before drying her eyes on her sleeve and returning to the library.
Chapter: 13

A/N:

I've taken artistic license here and decided to make apparition hard and uncommon. I never liked how everyone could just pop in and out so easily; think of all the things you could do if you could teleport yourself wherever you wanted! Plus, the bad guys would almost always get away! Anyways, I figure about 10% of the population can apparate, and only 3% can apparate long distances (i.e., over a mile, er, I mean 1.61 kilometers). I'm also throwing in that most, if not all, magical communities have a portkey station where witches and wizards can pay money to transport to other stations; less messy then the floo network. I'm sure it's not original.

Anyways, here's the next installment. It's got a bit of talking and a bit of action, a nice combo if I do say so myself. I hope you enjoy!

13. Sixth Year Adventures

Later that month, on a day of unseasonable warmth, Hermione and Ron took a walk by the lake and settled in their usual spot. It was the spot where Harry, Ron, and Hermione would gather when they had some secret to share, some news or plan that they could discuss without prying ears around, or when they just wanted to get away for a moment. It was more private than their spot in the corner of the courtyard, for they could be as loud as they wanted out here. They would usually meet there during mealtimes, and they took turns bringing food happily provided by Dobby. It often became a picnic of sorts, and despite the often grave situations they discussed, it was a place of fond memories.

Hermione sat and stretched out her legs as Ron settled beside her, his back leaning against a tree. They sat quietly for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts, reminiscing the past. Hermione reached into her bag and pulled out the latest edition of the Daily Prophet, the reason why they had retreated to their spot. She unfolded the newspaper and spread it on the ground.

“Voldemort strikes again; death eater attacks confirmed in France and the United States!” the headline screamed.

“Looks like Voldemort's back in action,” Ron commented glumly.

“Yeah,” Hermione agreed. “I overheard Dumbledore talking to Remus. They were talking about how Voldemort's actions this time are very different from his first reign of terror.”

“How so?”

“Instead of just gathering power, as if he were trying to take over the wizarding world, Voldemort seems to be acting more like a terrorist than a conqueror,” Hermione explained.

“Terrorist?” Ron asked, confused. It was apparently not a term often used in the wizarding world.

Hermione sighed. “Basically, Voldemort is using quick, violent strikes with maximum impact to scare everyone. Usually terrorists have a cause they support, but Voldemort seems to be attacking people just for the sake of attacking people,” she said glumly.

“So…,” Ron asked, “Voldemort’s not trying to take over the world anymore?”

“That’s the thing that Dumbledore’s worried about. He’s thinking that Voldemort’s just doing this in the meantime while he prepares for something much bigger. It’s hard to anticipate and stop his hit-and-run tactics, and with all the fear and
confusion he’s causing, whatever he’s planning will be that much more effective.”

Ron nodded, taking it all in. Then, trying to change the subject to a happier one, he remarked, “looks like the weather’s starting to warm up. Time to start scheduling Quidditch practice.”

“That should be nice,” Hermione said absently while she looked through the paper.

“Uh huh. We’ll have to practice extra hard if we want to keep the Quidditch Cup without Harry. We’ll probably have to practice everyday!” Ron said, with a glint in his eyes.

“Honestly Ron! There are more important things that Quidditch! Considering the time we’re going to spend looking for Harry, it wouldn’t hurt if you started thinking about studying for exams, and we have NEWTs next year,” Hermione said.

“Are you mental?” Ron cried. “NEWTs aren’t for another year and a half!”

“Well, they’re more important than some game!”

“Game?! Quidditch is not a game! It’s…it’s…life!”

“Ha!” Hermione roared, crossing her arms in front of her. They sat there a moment, staring eye-to-eye for several moments. Finally, Hermione relaxed her arms and looked away, sighing. “You realize we’ve been fighting and not talking to each a lot recently, when we’ve not been looking for Harry, that is,” she said.

Ron leaned back and slumped his shoulders. “Yeah, I know.”

“You know why, don’t you?”

Ron nodded. “Harry,” he said simply.

It was only something Hermione had begun to fully appreciate recently. While Ron and Hermione were the best of friends, they still argued. A lot. Harry had always there in the past to play mediator or go-between, but now, without him around, there was nothing to stop their small arguments from turning into full-blown fights that often resulted in them not speaking to each other. “We need to do something about it,” Hermione said. She waited for Ron to nod, and then turned to face Ron. “I propose we enact a rule.”

Ron eyed her curiously. “What rule?”

“We can call it the Potter Rule. Whenever one of our fights start to get out of hand, all one of us has to say is ‘Potter,’ and we stop fighting right away and try to calm down.”

Ron looked thoughtful. “Do you think it’ll work?”

“I don’t know, but we need to do something.”

“I agree. OK, so from now on the Potter Rule is in effect,” Ron said, grinning. “Deal?” he said, extending his hand.

“Deal!” Hermione said, shaking his hand. She looked at him a moment. “How did you ever think we could ever date the way we fight?” she teased gently.

Ron chuckled, blushing slightly. “Ah well. I figured you’d eventually realize I’m always right.”

“Ha!” Hermione roared, but punched him playfully in the arm. And with the Potter Rule enacted, the two friends made their way back to the castle for dinner.
Life for Ron and Hermione fell into a routine as winter term progressed. They would go to classes and do their homework, and about once a week they would be called for a fruitless search for Harry. The worst times for Hermione were when someone thought they had spotted Harry’s corpse. It was never Harry, but that didn’t stop her from feeling a cold dread every time they responded.

Near the end of winter term, Hermione and Ron were in Potions when they were summoned to Dumbledore’s office. Hermione and Ron traded looks before gathering their books. The search missions were beginning to take their toll on the two best friends, the emotional roller coaster of doubt and hope and despair beginning to wear the two Gryffindors down. Their spirits rose when they saw the familiar twinkle back in their headmaster’s eyes as he greeted them in his office; that twinkle had been rare since Harry’s disappearance.

“We have just received word of a very credible Harry sighting,” Dumbledore said without preamble. “Lupin, Tonks, Moody, and Arthur and Bill Weasley have gone ahead. We,” he said, indicated himself, Professor McGonagall, and the two students, “will meet up with them using this portkey.” Dumbledore held up large serving spoon. Professor McGonagall reached out and placed a finger on the spoon, and Ron and Hermione followed suite. After the familiar tug-at-the-naval sensation, they found themselves at the outskirts of a little hamlet. There they were met immediately by Lup

“Hello Professors Dumbledore, McGonnagal,” he said, nodding at each in turn. “Ron, Hermione, it’s good to see you again,” Lupin said, smiling warmly.

“What’s the situation?” Dumbledore asked.

“Harry’s been spotted in one of the restaurants near the center of town, right here,” Lupin said, unfolding a map of the town and pointing where Harry was spotted. The four newcomers pored over the map as Lupin continued. “Moody and Bill Weasley are scouting the area. Arthur is waiting for us a couple blocks from the restaurant. The idea is that Arthur, Ron, Hermione, and I will enter the restaurant so as to not scare Harry off. The rest will take positions around the town.”

“Very good,” said Dumbledore, and without further conversations they set off to meet Arthur. Hermione was incredibly nervous; the butterflies in her stomach felt more like a swarm of finches, flying about. She glanced at Ron, whose anxiety was etched across his face. Even though she had given a great deal of thought on the matter personally, and talked over various ideas with Ron, Hermione still had no idea what she would say to Harry beyond apologizing profusely. They greeted Arthur, and then the four of them approached the restaurant.

When they entered the building, Hermione saw that calling it a restaurant had been very generous. It was reminiscent of The Hog’s Head tavern in Hogsmeade – dirty, dingy, and disreputable. She noticed with distaste the condition of the furniture and walls, and quickly saw that the place was completely empty with the exception of a single figure, seated at a table with his back to them, his messy black hair plainly visible. It was she could do to hold herself back from running over grabbing him in a fierce hug.

However, just as they were about to take a step towards Harry, Moody rushed in through the door. “EVERYONE OUT!” he screamed, grabbing Ron and Hermione in each hand and tired to drag them out. Arthur and Remus looked at him in confusion, and Hermione started struggling against his grasp. “IT’S A TRAP”, Moody cried, and bodily picked up Ron and Hermione and carried them out, a bewildered Arthur and Remus following close behind. Just as they were ten meters from the building, it disintegrated in a great explosion, the force throwing them to the ground. Hermione screamed, then looked at the burning building with wide eyes. She scrambled to her feet and tried to run back to the building, but Moody caught her arm.

“Harry! Harry!” she cried through her tears, trying to free herself from Moody’s grip.

“It was a trap,” he said gruffly. “It wasn’t even Harry.”

Once Arthur made sure his son wasn’t hurt, he faced Moody. “How did you know?”
Moody pointed at his magical eye, which was spinning in his head. “I saw through the walls. I’m not sure who it was, but I
could tell it wasn’t Harry, wasn’t even a person. Whoever did this, they did a good job in making it look like Harry.”

By then, Dumbledore and the others arrived, running from their various positions. “Look!” cried Bill, pointing down the
street. They all turned to look and saw several robed figures disappearing around the corner.

“Death Eaters,” Moody said in a low tone. He turned to the others. “OK, here’s the plan: Remus and Tonks with me,
we’ll pursue them. Bill, Minerva, and Albus cut around and try to get ahead of them. We’ll run them right into you and
have them surrounded!”

“What about us?” cried Ron and Hermione simultaneously.

Moody ignored them and turned to Arthur. “Arthur, your job is to keep these kids safe.” Arthur nodded while Ron and
Hermione protested loudly, to no avail. Moody and his team ran off in the direction the Death Eaters had gone, while
Dumbledore, McGonnagal and Bill Weasley ran off to a side street, hoping to intercept the Death Eaters.

“But Dad!” Ron cried out, “We just can’t sit here! We have to do something!”

“Let the others handle it son. We should go now and find someplace safe to wait,” Arthur said, shepherding the two
students in the opposite direction that the Death Eaters took.

Hermione allowed herself to be led away, but took frequent looks behind her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw
movement. Stopping, she watched as five hooded figures emerged from behind a collection of bins and ran up the street,
safely away from Moody and the others. Death Eaters! Without thinking, Hermione sprinted off in pursuit, leaving
Arthur and Ron behind her. As she followed, Hermione could tell she wouldn’t be able to overcome their head start. She
figured that the Death Eaters would try to make their way to the portkey station. Picturing the map of the town that
Lupin showed them, Hermione orientated herself and took off down a side street, having deduced the quickest route to the
portkey station in her head (there’s a reason why she’s the smartest witch at Hogwarts, after all). She reached the
station quickly, and Hermione paused to catch her breath as she looked around. No Death Eaters in sight – she had
gotten there in time. After Hermione regained her breath, she stood in front of the entranceway to the portkey station.
Minutes passed, and the five Death Eaters came running down the street. They paused momentarily when they saw her
blocking their escape, but seemed to regain their confidence when they saw she was alone. The Death Eater in front, the
leader by the looks of things, practically swaggered up to her. All of a sudden, Hermione felt a surge of panic overwhelm
her; she’d never before faced danger without Harry, what was she thinking coming here alone? Hermione looked around
frantically, desperately searching for an escape, when the Death Eater called out.

“Awww, if it isn’t ickle Harry Potter’s ickle little girlfriend,” the Death Eater said mockingly. Hermione remembered that
voice, and that horrid face, from the Department of Mysteries - Bellatrix Lestrange. “Get out of the way, child, before
you get hurt!” she warned, as the four other Death Eaters took positions around her.

Suddenly, all Hermione’s emotions and fears crystallized on a single thought: in front of her stood the woman who
caused Harry so much pain. She straightened and stood firm, determination replacing her fear, and she raised her wand
as she faced the five Death Eaters. “Never!” she cried. “You shall not pass!”

Lestrange looked at her in amusement. “I shall enjoy seeing you treated as Potter was. Did you know he tried not to
scream? He really did, but after ten minutes of slicing and dicing, he cried like a little baby. Sometimes, when I close my
eyes, I can hear the screams and begging in my head. It’s truly a beautiful sound.”

Rage and fury flowed through Hermione. She cried out, “Stupefy!” A jet of red light leapt from her wand and struck
Lestrange in the chest, blowing her backwards on the street. The four Death Eaters immediately scattered, firing curses
back at Hermione. “Protego!” she cried, reflecting a curse back at its originator, then dived to the ground as two hexes
collided above her. She rolled, then aimed her wand at the Death Eater closest to her, firing a stunning spell. Just as the
spell left her wand, a purple fire hit her in the side, causing her to fall to her knees, the pain clouding her sense. The two
remaining Death Eaters took careful aim as Hermione clutched at her side.

“Stupify!” cried a voice, as one of the Death Eaters was struck by a red light. The final Death Eater swiftly turned and retaliated. He apparently missed whoever had come to Hermione’s aid, for another blast of light sent the last Death Eater to the ground. Hermione, the pain growing as the adrenaline began to leave her system, felt a pair of hands on her shoulders. “Hermione! Are you alright?” she heard, and then looked up into the concerned eyes of Ron. She nodded, before passing out.

Hermione awoke minutes later to find Tonks tending to her wounds. She saw the five Death Eaters, including Lestrange, bound and unconscious, and surrounded by various witches and wizards. “Aurors,” Tonks said, seeing where Hermione was looking. “We summoned them as soon as we saw what happened. What you did was very brave Hermione,” Tonks said, a look of admiration on her face.

Hermione tried to get up, but winced at the pain. “Brave and stupid, you mean,” she said as she gripped her side. “Am I going to be alright?”

“You’ll be fine. A brief stay in the hospital wing under Madam Pomfrey’s care and you’ll be up and about in a day.”

Hermione nodded gratefully. “What about Ron?”

“He’s fine too. Although, I dare say he’s a little miffed that you ran off without him,” she said with a teasing smile.

Hermione chuckled, then sat up slowly. She watched the Aurors haul away Lestrange’s limp body. “This one’s for you, Harry Potter,” Hermione said softly with a smile.

As Hermione made her way to her feet, a short wizard ran up to her. “Ms. Granger! Ms. Granger!” he cried. “Mike Perry of the Daily Prophet. I’d like to ask you a few questions…”

“My little homage to one of the greatest scenes and speeches ever written! I’m a sucker for gallant last stands, especially when they turn out to be not-so-last stands.

More notes:

To smegul: sorry my notes weren’t clear. I actually have a bunch of chapters already written after this one. Based on some reviews and flashes of creativity before bedtime, I’ve augmented them

To Wind Whisperer and liseli vanida-kateb: I’m a little worried that two POVs can be confusing, especially later on; but I’ll think about it…
A/N: Here’s the next edition. To smegul and everyone else wondering about poor Harry: patience, my good people :) I’m not good enough of a write to intertwine their tales; I’d confuse myself much too easily. But for you, I’ve put the next two up in a row, which closes out the Hermione-only portion of our tale. After this, we’ll get about five fun-filled chapter of the wacky adventures of Harry, before everyone meets up again (sorta) for the next death-defying school year.

Sorry TimGold, Harry and Hermione won’t be together until the end; just a lot of unadulterated friendship until then, but I’m trying to add a fluffy chapter before that to quench your thirst; unfortunately it’s not for another 14 chapters though…

Ack! Am I drawing this out too long? Too much nothingness? Well, it’s already written, so I’m gonna post them once I edit ‘em. Tell ya what though, skip until I get to Chapter 21, when everyone’s back at Hogwarts (sorta), and I’ll give you a summary in the A/N about what happened over the summer.

Otherwise, enjoy!

14. Girls’ Night Out

Two weeks after Spring break, Hermione found herself eating alone during lunch, finishing a few inches of parchment for her Arithmancy course. Ron and Ginny were at the Quidditch pitch, choosing to spend the lunch break practicing for their upcoming match with Slytherin. As Hermione finished up, she looked up in mild surprise as Lavender and Pavarti approached her and asked to sit down.

Hermione smiled at her two roommates and nodded. Although she was friendly with the two girls, Hermione had never been especially close with them. Part of it was because she had always spent her time with Harry and Ron. But a bigger reason is that she just never felt at ease around them. It was silly, she knew; she wasn’t a nine-year old child anymore. She was sixteen and had done so much and seen so much in her short life. Yet, something about being around her pretty roommates just put her on guard. They were nice to her, for sure, but deep down she expected at any moment to be on the receiving end of a snide comment about her hair or her looks or her bookishness. Although those kinds of comments had stopped early on in her first year (well, except from the Slytherins, and the one time in fourth year when everyone was jealous of her because of Victor), Hermione was always aware of the possibility that all she had to do was say the wrong thing, and she would be that little girl again, taunted by her schoolmates.

Hermione put those thoughts aside. “Hi,” she said.

“Hi Hermione,” Lavender said, looking slightly uncomfortable. “We were wondering if you could help us with that Potions assignment Snape just gave us?”

Pavarti nodded. “We were so incensed by what Snape said about Neville, and all those points he took, that we weren’t paying attention,” she said, somewhat sheepishly.

Hermione smiled. “Sure, I’d love too. Snape was definitely ghastly, wasn’t he?” she said.

“Most definitely!” Lavender agreed. “Why, I haven’t seen him be so mean to anyone since Harry left – ouch!” Lavender glared at Pavarti, reaching down to rub the shin that was just kicked.

Hermione looked uncomfortable. “It’s ok. You can talk about Harry around me,” she said, trying to reassure them. But the damage was done. They quickly arranged a time to meet (“Tonight in the library after dinner”) and made their awkward goodbyes. Hermione sighed, and then finished up her parchment.

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Hermione found Lavender and Pavarti already waiting at a table for her, one of the tables tucked away to the side. She smiled at them and then cast a proximity-based silencing charm, so they speak without incurring the wrath of Madam Pince. They got to work immediately. For Hermione, it was a little strange to be working on homework in a group that didn’t include Harry or Ron. It wasn’t that she didn’t help anyone else; it was just that Harry or Ron, or the both of them, somehow managed to be part of the group. But Ron was off focused on Quidditch, trying out the latest plays that Hermione helped him draw up. The three worked quickly, only speaking about Potions and the dire consequences of not using the right ingredients at the right time. After an hour Lavender stretched, and then flipped her textbook to find the ingredients for the next potion.

“Yuck!” Lavender said. “These kappas are disgusting-looking. I hope we don’t have to take their scales off ourselves.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Pavarti replied, looking closely at the drawing of a kappa in their Potions textbook. “Reminds me of Goyle with his bristly hair,” she said giggling.

Hermione laughed. “Oh, I don’t know Pavarti. I think the kappa is much cuter. At least it has better skin.” Lavender and Pavarti looked at Hermione for a moment before laughing. After that, the ice had been broken. The three girls continued to work on their potions, but rather then finish the assignment in a total of two hours (as Hermione had estimated in her head), it took them nearly three and half, as they took frequent breaks to talk, gossip, laugh, and giggle. Lavender and Pavarti were positively shocked at Hermione’s lack of knowledge on the latest events in Hogwarts social scene (“For such a smart witch, there’s a lot you don’t know,” Lavender teased gently). For Hermione, it was a strange feeling, laughing and joking with two girls, rather then two boys. She found it refreshing, since Quidditch talk barely made an appearance, and only then to discuss the physical attributes of the male players and the benefits provided by a Quidditch uniform. Finally, as they were gathering their books to return to the common room, Lavender turned to Hermione.

“Hey Hermione. Pavarti and I were thinking of organizing a sixth-year girls’ only trip to Hogsmeade in two weeks. Would you like to come?” she asked. “Please?”

Hermione initially looked at her with a slight feeling of suspicion. Her nine-year old self told her it was just a trick; they would get her to go, then all make fun of her. But one look into the earnest and sincere faces of Lavender and Pavarti convinced her otherwise. “Sure,” she said brightly. “I’d love to.”


The day of the Hogsmeade trip, the “girls’ night out” had arrived quickly. Ron has naturally assumed they would go down together, and then split up as he went in search of all things Quidditch, and she went in search of all things bookish. Instead, Hermione told Ron of her plans to spend time with the girls.

“I never thought I’d see the day!” he said melodramatically. “Hermione, gossiping and talking about hair, make-up, and clothes! What is the world coming to?”

Hermione punched him gently in the arm. “Shut it!” she said, but with a warm smile. “I’ll meet you later after dinner.”

“You better. And you better tell me everything anyone said about me, or else,” he warned.

“Or else what?” Hermione said with amusement.

“Or else I won’t help you with your homework anymore!” Ron cried and then ran off, avoiding another punch to the arm.

Hermione smiled as she watched him scamper away, and then left the common room to meet up with her roommates. All the other sixth-year girls were there except for Slytherin girls, who all “had better things to do.” Hermione couldn’t shake her nerves as the girls shopped en masse at Gladrags Wizardwear. It was different then the library, where once they
started joking, Hermione felt at ease with her roommates: after all, they've shared the same room for six years. But now she was with her roommates plus six other girls, and Hermione felt uncomfortable. Finally after an exhausting shopping session (where she allowed herself to be talked into buying a new robe, one that “accentuated her cheekbones,” according to Mandy Brocklehurst), the girls headed towards Madam Puddifoot's for some tea (and also a fine opportunity, according to Lavender, to catch up on who’s snogging who).

They quickly bustled into the small teashop and claimed three round tables, pushing them together. They immediately started several different conversations, usually centering on the clothes they just bought, the couples in the teashop, and the latest happenings at school. Hermione participated sparingly in the conversations, not feeling able to simply relax, but no one seemed to mind or notice. Eventually, another round of tea and biscuits were called for, and Hermione volunteered to get them. Lavender joined her as Hermione placed their order with Madam Puddifoot.

She looked at Hermione. “I’m so sorry about the behavior of the other girls, Hermione,” she said with apologetic eyes.

Hermione grew worried, “wha-what do you mean?”

Now, Lavender looked downright grumpy. “Oh, you’re nice to pretend not to notice, but some of the girls just can’t get over being near you. They just need to relax!”

Now, Hermione was confused. “Lavender, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Lavender looked closely at Hermione, trying to decide if Hermione was being honest. “You don’t, do you?” she asked slowly. Hermione shook her head, and then Lavender grabbed her hand and dragged her to the counter, where they found seats.

“Wow, Hermione! I mean wow! I can’t believe you never noticed!” she began. “Haven’t you always wondered why so many of the girls at Hogwarts seem nervous of you?”

Hermione did indeed notice, but had attributed their actions to disdain, not nervousness. But to Lavender, she said, “maybe just a little.”

“And you never wondered why?”

“Not really. But I do now. Why?”

“Oh Hermione. I’ll say it again. For such a smart witch, there’s a lot you don’t know,” she said with a smile. “Most those girls,” she pointed towards their table, “are so in awe of you that they don’t know how to be themselves when you’re near.”

Hermione was shocked. Was this some kind of joke? “What are you talking about Lavender?”

“You really don’t see it, do you?” Lavender asked, surprised. “You’re like their…role model. You’re the witch that every girl wants to be!”

Hermione stared at her dumbfounded for a moment, then let out a short bark of laughter. “Wants to be like me? Are you sure you have the right girl? I mean look at me! I’m not nearly as pretty as you or Pavarti” she exclaimed, grabbing at her unkempt hair and the decidedly non-trendy clothes she wore underneath her robes.

Lavender shook her head. “It’s got nothing to do with your hair or your clothes or how you look, Hermione. You’re so smart, everything comes so easily to you, and you’re so confident, like nothing ever fazes you. You’re so brave and smart, Hermione!”

“Well…well, you’re brave too, Lavender. Remember when Hagrid’s blast-ended skrewts got loose? You stayed and helped while all those Slytherins ran.”
“Ha!” Lavender laughed out loud. “I would never have been able face of those Death Eaters or that Lestrange lady, and that’s not even counting the adventures you’ve gone on with Harry! Everyone just looks up to you, especially the younger girls.” Lavender leaned in, and whispered, “Everyone was sorta worried when Harry left, because he always protected us and all. But people feel better knowing that you and Ron are still here. Besides,” she said in a normal voice, “everyone just knows you’re going to be Head Girl next year.”

Hermione blushed and then said, “well, no one knows for sure.”

But Lavender dismissed her comment with a wave of her hand. “Anyways, I hoped that some of the girls here would be more comfortable with you, but they can’t seem to relax.”

At that moment, Madam Puddifoot motioned them over with their completed order. Hermione and Lavender took their refreshments to the table. For a while, Hermione just sat there, trying to process everything she just heard. “The witch that every girl wants to be,” is what Lavender called her. It was a strange; she was used to being the odd girl out, the girl people looked down their noses at. There were times when Hermione asked herself if she made the right choice, coming to Hogwarts. While she loved her experience at Hogwarts, it would have been a lot safer if she stayed at her Muggle school, and she’d still be the same bookish girl that she was at Hogwarts. But never in her wildest dreams did she imagine she would ever be really liked outside of Harry and Ron. And now, thanks to her “adventures with Harry,” Hermione was actually respected, a role model even. All of a sudden, Hermione felt happier than she ever had since Harry left, and she turned her attention back to the conversations in front of her and felt, for the first time, at ease.
Chapter: 15

A/N: This is a short one; I was getting bored myself ;)

15. The End of Sixth Year and the Start of Seventh

Hermione sat in her compartment on the Hogwarts Express as it sped along towards King’s Cross Station. She stared out the window at the passing countryside, as Ron and Neville played a game of Exploding Snap! across from her. The rest of spring term had passed rather uneventfully. There were no threats against Hogwarts by Voldemort, and exams passed as normal, with no OWLs or NEWTs to worry about this year. Quidditch games were won and lost, and the number of searches that she and Ron participated in had decreased since the failed trap. In fact, the number of Harry sightings had decreased substantially, as the wizarding world seemed to be in a state of denial on that particular subject. Harry’s disappearance became something you didn’t mention, for many reasons. Harry was the embodiment of hope against Voldemort, and people didn’t want to think about something untoward happening to Harry. Further, there was the underlying sense of abandonment, that Harry had left the wizarding world when it needed him the most, that people didn’t want to address.

Feelings of abandonment were something Hermione often struggled with. Although she had improved greatly (there were times when she could go two whole hours without thinking about Harry), she still had her moments of private introspection, when a whirlwind of emotions swirled in her mind. Her thoughts usually started with worry about Harry’s safety and well-being. From there, her feelings would often switch to anger, anger at Harry for leaving her behind while he went off to save the world. Who did he think he was, anyways? Harry couldn’t do anything without her; if not for Hermione pushing him to study, Harry would probably still be in third year! And who was there to get Harry through Snape’s final test before the Sorcerer’s Stone? Who figured out it was a basilisk, or had the time-turner, or who patiently taught him the Summoning Charm? Did he really think he succeed in doing whatever he was doing without her?

After venting, Hermione often fell into a depression. Did Harry even need her anymore? After all, he didn’t need her when dueling Voldemort in the graveyard. Maybe he outgrew his need for her? Maybe she was useless to him, and that’s why he left her? It was a scary thought, because Hermione definitely needed Harry to take care of her, and she always felt that Harry needed her to take care of him, to make sure he took care of himself. But now, he was somewhere doing something, and he didn’t need her. These thoughts often left her sniffling.

Righteous indignation often followed (“well, who needs him anyways! I’m doing fine by myself!”). After that came doubt (“But Harry’s never been by himself for so long! He just doesn’t realize he needs me!”), and finally back to worry. It was a vicious little emotional cycle. But through it all, no credible leads had been uncovered about Harry. Hermione believed he was just being very clever about hiding. After all, if Voldemort had gotten to Harry, surely he would have proclaimed it to the world. That gave Hermione hope, the hope that she would see her best friend again someday.

Hermione snapped out of her reverie when Lavender and Pavarti entered the compartment, dropping by to say hi. They exchanged greetings, and then Ron flashed the two girls his puppy dog eyes. Immediately, Lavender and Pavarti sat on either side of Ron, doing their best to console Ron over the Quidditch loss – Gryffindor had lost the Quidditch Cup to Ravenclaw that year, in a truly nail-biting final game; it was only by the smallest margin that Cho managed to beat Ginny to the snitch. Hermione rolled her eyes with Neville and had to smirk as she watched Ron. Ever since she had disillusioned Ron of his feelings for her, Ron had shown a newfound confidence around girls. Perhaps it was being keeper and Captain and that Quidditch outfit; Hermione always thought Oliver Wood looked dashing in his uniform. But really, Hermione felt it was the combination that he stopped pining for her, along with the fact that their frequent fights early on forced him to spend time with other people, with no Hermione or Harry to hide behind. Those two things enabled Ron to become more comfortable with other girls. She was genuinely happy for him. As for her own love life, or lack thereof, she was ambivalent. She was still holding out for that perfect love, somewhere out there. Besides, she didn’t have that shabby of a dating record: Victor Krum, world-famous Quidditch player and Eddie Carmichael, Head Boy of Hogwarts. She was still young, after all.
Finally, the train arrived in London, and Hermione made her way to the Muggle side of King’s Cross Station. She, Ron, and Ginny promised to write. Hermione exchanged hugs with Ron and Ginny and her newest friends, her fellow sixth-year girls, and then made her way to her parents who waited nearby.

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Two events occurred Hermione’s summer were bright spots in an otherwise bleak summer. The first event was that Hermione finally learned to apparate. She was incredibly pleased with herself, for apparition was a difficult ability to learn; she had read that only 8% of the wizarding population ever managed to earn their apparition license. Hermione spent one full week at the Burrow so she could practice apparating without alerting any Muggles. Ron, unfortunately, wasn’t able to pick it up as quickly, but they both hoped he would learn how to apparate next year. Mr. Weasley himself took Hermione to the testing center, and there was a great feast laid down by Mrs. Weasley when Hermione returned, license in hand. It was truly a happy day for Hermione, only slightly dampened because Harry wasn’t there to celebrate with her.

The second event occurred over the breakfast table at Hermione’s home. As the Grangers were sitting down to a plateful of ham and eggs, a Hogwarts owl flew through the open window. Hermione freed the owl of its letter, than squealed in delight. Hermione had been named Head Girl! Of course, part of her always expected it, but one never knew for sure. Hermione jumped up and down in glee, sharing hugs with her extremely proud parents. She then dashed off to write letters (her acceptance of the position went to Hogwarts, her happy news went off to the Weasleys, Lavender, and Pavarti). She spent the rest of the day admiring her Head Girl badge as she experimented with different ways of wearin

Finally, summer came to a quiet close with absolutely no word about Harry. Someone had reported to the Order that Harry had been spotted near Chicago in the United States, but no trace of him had been found. Voldemort continued his terrorist strikes, attacking various places around the world roughly once a month. With all this in mind, Hermione approached platform 9¾ with a rising hope. Despite her efforts to talk herself out of it, Hermione hoped that Harry would be at Platform 9¾, like always, ready for their final year of school. She imagined that she would be rather upset at him for leaving, but they would apologize and everything would be OK. In her mind, she saw herself tutoring Harry endlessly on all subjects they had learned while he had been away. But all of her hopes were for nothing as she boarded the train and Harry was nowhere to be found.

Hermione had read her list of duties and responsibilities that came with her letter, and after the prefects’ meeting, she alternated her time between the Head Girl’s cabin, Ron’s compartment, visiting with her fellow seventh year girls, and patrolling the corridors. All the while, she tried to suppress the hope that Harry would be at Hogwarts, waiting for her.

The Great Hall was as beautiful as ever as Hermione walked towards the Gryffindor table. She remembered with fondness the first time she walked into the Great Hall, exactly seven years ago. The sight of the enchanted ceiling, on a beautiful night, still took her breath away. If only Harry were there….

Hermione exchanged hugs and greetings with her fellow students, and sat at her regular seat by Ron. Harry’s seat was empty; no one had sat in it since his disappearance. She listened through Dumbeldore’s opening remarks, and stood when announced as Head Girl, graciously accepting the applause that she shared with the Head Boy, Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff. A stray thought entered Hermione’s mind, the thought that Harry should’ve been Head Boy. Settling herself, Hermione took her seat and turned her attention to the front of the Great Hall as the sorting ceremony began.
A/N: Alrighty, back by popular demand, heeeere’s Harry! Sorry, there’s not a lot of dialogue, since he’s pretty much a loner right now.

What’s he been up to all this time?

16. A Plan Set in Motion

Harry Potter woke up to the sun shining brightly in his face through the window. For several moments, he had no idea where he was. Slowly, the events of last night returned to his sleep-addled mind: the argument with Hermione, the incredibly long broom ride, freezing despite his cold weather gear, and the long port over to his current location. He hoped it was all a bad dream, that he would wake up and it would be the first week of class again. But one look around him told him there would be no class for him today.

Harry raised himself to a sitting position on the bed, his head in his hands. For a moment, he just sat there, allowing his body to adjust to full wakefulness. Rubbing his eyes, he reached for his glasses and walked to the bathroom. After answering his biological need, Harry washed his face and stared at his reflection in the mirror. That would definitely have to change. Over the past several months, since his Metamorphagus training sessions began over the summer, Harry had the ultimate goal of hiding his famous scar. Recently, he’d been able to soften it somewhat, but never completely hide it, and that feat required great amounts of concentration that left him feeling drained. Now, facing the mirror and focusing his magic inward, Harry willed his scar to vanish, and it did!

Harry was only slightly surprised, but greatly pleased. Stepping out of the bathroom, he took two steps to the kitchenette in the tiny, one-room flat he had rented. Harry had found the place through an ad in the Daily Prophet and arranged to rent it sight-unseen through owl post and by transferring the first month’s rent from his new Gringott’s vault to the owner’s. Harry prepared a breakfast of cereal and cold milk for himself. He sat on the couch and ate off of the cocktail table, the only pieces of furniture, along with his bed, that he owned. As Harry ate, he remembered the night in the Forbidden Forest, when he performed his near-miraculous feat of wandless magic. He’d had plenty of time to mull that particular incident over.

Through his research in Hogwarts enormous library, he had read about the effects that a traumatic experience could have on magic power, both for good and ill. He felt that both applied to him now. In particular, he read of several cases where incidents of child abuse and caused a dampening of the child’s magic, even so far as obscuring it behind layers and layers of emotional abuse. Harry grimaced; another thing he could thank the Dursley’s for. In a way it made sense, for it explained his proficiencies with certain spells (like his Patronus) and his prior incidents of wandless magic, as well as his utter…Neville-ness with simpler spells, like Transfiguration in general. But traumatic experiences seemed to follow Harry around like moths to a flame. He surmised that his emotional reaction to the idea that Hogwarts would be overcome somehow let his magic potential breakthrough the emotional scars left by the Dursley’s. He did feel more powerful, and his ability to hide his scar seemed to confirm his thoughts.

A loud knocking on his door broke Harry from his thoughts. Checking first to make sure his scar was hidden, Harry straightened. He looked through the peephole before opening the door.

“Hello Mr. Leonard,” Harry said politely to his new landlord.

“Ah, I thought I heard you moving about, Mr. Harrington,” Mr. Leonard replied with a smile, and then he paused. “I, er, I hope you don’t mind saying, but you look awfully familiar to me. Have we met before?”

“Oh, no Mr. Leonard,” Mr. “Harrington” replied. Harry quickly brushed his hand against his forehead, relieved that his scar was still concealed.
“Oh, alrighty then. I just wanted to introduce myself and welcome you to the neighborhood,” he said with a warm smile.

“Thank you very much. I’m sure I’ll like it here,” Harry said with a smile of his own.

Harry closed the door behind his elderly landlord, slightly frustrated. Even without his scar, Harry was still somewhat recognizable. He went to the bathroom and stared at his reflection again. Fortunately it wasn’t an enchanted mirror, so he didn’t have to endure any of the usual commentary about his appearance. Harry stared at his face and realized that his scar wasn’t the only distinguishing mark about Harry Potter, though it was the most important. There were also his glasses, those black, round-framed glasses that he always wore in photographs. They had to go. His eyes were a problem also - too green. Harry concentrated, and as he watched, his eyes shifted in color to a nice cool blue. There, that would do. He gave his reflection a smile and started to walk out the bathroom, when he paused suddenly and did a double-take. His eyes were green again! Confused, Harry concentrated on changing his eye color. They returned to blue, but his hair became black. Frustrated, Harry focused on both his eyes and his hair. They appeared as he wished, but his scar returned. Harry groaned. That would definitely not do; he apparently didn’t have enough power or control to do everything he wanted. After giving it a great deal of thought, Harry decided to rely on Muggle technology, hair dye, to change his hair color. Returning his eyes to blue and his forehead to smooth, Harry returned to his couch and finished breakfast. Harry looked at his watch; it was late morning, and he decided to explore the small town he would now call home. He had no pressing engagements scheduled, and his new job didn’t start until the next day. Harry tossed aside his Hogwarts uniform and put on Dudley’s old clothes that fit the best. He locked his door and walked out of the building.

Boroughbridge was a small English town situated in northern England, about fourteen and a half kilometers from Harrogate, far from Hogwarts. Harrogate had a sizable magical community, hidden amongst the genteel Muggle population. Boroughbridge had reasonable prices for flats, and it was within easy distance to Harrogate but far from the hustle and bustle of the bigger city. Harry was pleased; after being the center of attention for the past six years, Harry felt he could easily fade into the background at Boroughbridge. Harry toured his new home. He found a convenience store that sold hair dye, and then took lunch at a quaint little establishment. After lunch, Harry returned to his room and, carefully following instructions, dyed his hair a dirty blond color. Satisfied, Harry found his landlord and got directions to the nearest portkey station for travel to and from Harrogate.

Harry walked to the station just in time for the next transport. Paying the small fee, Harry placed his finger on the portkey and waited for the tug at his navel. A mere twenty seconds later, Harry found himself in the wizarding section of Harrogate. It was a smaller version the main building in Diagon Alley, though less ostentatious. Harry was surprised to find the branch manned not by the goblins he was accustomed to, but by regular wizards and witches. Harry waited his turn, and then approached the next available window. The young witch at the counter flashed him a customary smile and took his key and information down, her eyes widening slightly at the amount Harry wished to withdraw. “If you’ll just wait a moment,” she said, then left, leaving Harry standing at the window. Harry was slightly surprised, then realized that his vault was still physically in Diagon Alley and no roller-coater ride would be needed. Harry knew that his Gringott’s vault would be an easy way to track him down, or at least to keep tabs on his activities. Via owl post, Harry transferred the contents of his vault to a new one, under the name of Sean Harrington. After a lengthy verification process that exhausted poor Hedwig, Harry received his new key.

Harry also found that Gringott’s would act as a mail post of sorts, and he had purchased an item via owl post that he had delivered to the Harrogate branch. The witch returned shortly, and Harry, after exchanging some wizarding money for Muggle money, placed his galleons in his moneybag, pounds in a Muggle wallet, and shouldered his package. Harry left Gringott’s and wandered around a bit, before finding an unoccupied bench overlooking a small park. Harry opened his package and pulled out the robe inside.
This particular robe was very special, and very expensive; in fact, they were only slightly less expensive than the Firebolt Sirius bought him. Harry had read about them a few years ago in a Daily Prophet article. The story focused on the new advances and discoveries in spell crafting that went behind into the robe and stuck in his mind, though he would never have thought he would be spending so much money on a single item. The robes were developed for Aurors to use in extremely high-risk situations, but because of the high cost, they were not standard issue gear. They had several features that Harry thought invaluable. One was that they could change their color, and texture to a slight degree, to match an existing robe; this allowed the Aurors to wear the robe while undercover. They also had a special hidden pocket that only the wearer could access; it was a place for a second wand, protected within the robes, in case the Auror was disarmed. But the most expensive feature was the most important one: the robes absorbed and dispersed harmful magical energy becoming, in effect, a wizard’s bulletproof vest. Curses and hexes directed against it would be absorbed and then released in the form of heat. The transformation occurred so swiftly that the heat was barely noticeable, but a large influx of magic could cause the robes to climb in temperature; fortunately, the wearer was protected, but anyone near him would be affected.

Harry smiled broadly as he put the robe on over his regular clothes. Following the directions, he changed its appearance from its original majestic blue into a shabby and worn-looking black. Pleased with the results, Harry continued his tour the magical Harrogate. He passed by a wand shop and went in. It was smaller than Ollivander’s, but much neater and less dusty. He put his own wand in the secret pocket of his robe and looked around. Finally with the help of the clerk, Harry purchased a new wand. It wouldn't be as good as his original wand, but it would make do. Harry left the shop pleased, and toured Harrogate until he found a store that surprised him - an eye doctor. Harry didn’t even know wizards had eye doctors, or even if that’s what they were called. Harry entered and browsed the selection of frames that filled the walls. Finally, he went up to the witch at the desk and asked if he could make an appointment, accustomed to Muggle doctors who needed reservations weeks in advance. To his surprise, the doctor was available, and Harry was led to his office. It soon became clear why no appointment was necessary; the entire visit, from examination to picking out new frames, took a mere fifteen minutes - magic truly made things easier. The doctor had placed an enchanted mirror in front of Harry after he removed his glasses. Covering one eye, the mirror automatically adjusted until he could see clearly without any prompting. The process was repeated for the other eye, and that was all there was to it. Harry selected a pair of wire-frame, oval glasses (a drastic switch from the plastic, round frames he currently sported), and the lenses were crafted in minutes. He inquired about fixing his eyesight completely. After all, he reasoned, couldn’t magic be used to fix his eyesight? He had heard something about a similar procedure in the Muggle world.

“I'm I can’t help you there, Mr. Harrington,” the doctor said apologetically. “Transfiguring the miniscule nerves of the eye is too exacting for almost all wizards. There are a few who can, but there services are extremely expensive, and appointments are incredibly difficult to acquire; they’re usually reserved for the rich and the famous.” Harry nodded, then paid for his new glasses and left. He returned to the portkey station where he paid the fee for the transport. Instead of returning to Boroughbridge, though, Harry paid for a pass to Diagon Alley; he still had a few things left to purchase that wasn’t to be found in Harrogate. Harry then sat quietly while he waited, trying to appear as innocuous as possible, before joining two other wizards on a trip to London.

To Harry, Diagon Alley was practically deserted. Although still quite lively with wizards and witches doing their last minute shopping, Harry was used to a Diagon Alley filled with students and their families buying supplies for school. Harry followed a path he once took by accident, and he turned down towards Knockturn Alley.
Chapter: 17

A/N: Thanks to everyone for reviewing! This chapter brings us to about the halfway point of the tale, at least in terms of word count. Here’s the next installment in the Harry adventures; responses to reviewers at the end. Enjoy!

17. Knockturn Alley and the Daily Routine

Knockturn Alley was just as dark and foreboding as he remembered. This time, though, Harry was able to skulk around unnoticed in his drab robes; his Hogwarts robes had all too conspicuous the first time around. Harry found the shop he had accidentally flooed into before his second year and entered.

Whenever there are people willing to pay to satisfy a need, there will be people willing to provide that need at a cost, even if that need is illegal. During his nightly research at Hogwarts, Harry had found a rather interesting book in the restricted section that contained a description of several “Dark” objects and artifacts. Though many of the items described could be considered dark, most of them were simply objects that let their owners skirt several bothersome laws. One law in particular that Harry found bothersome was the Restriction on Underage Magic. Remembering the owner’s willingness to take on Lucius Malfoy’s illegal items, Harry hoped that he would find what he needed at the store. As Harry perused the contents of the shop, the storekeeper seemed to slither up to him. “May I help you, young master,” he asked in an oily tone.

“Yes,” Harry replied, remembering his planned speech. He knew he couldn’t just come out and ask if they had the item in stock. “Perhaps you can help me. I am still a year away from seventeen and being of age, yet I desperately wish to learn how to apperate and cast certain spells.”

“Ah, I see the problem you face,” the shopkeeper said, with a knowing look on his face.

“Indeed. I don’t suppose you carry anything that could help me…shall we say, avoid the interest of certain parties?” Harry asked, pulling out his moneybag and casually hefting its weight from hand to hand.

The shopkeeper’s eyes watched the movement of his moneybag, clearly trying to discern the amount held within. He looked at Harry for a moment and then motioned towards the back of the store. “Please, follow me. I may be able to help you.”

Harry followed the man to the back, where the shopkeeper murmured a spell under his breath and a small counter appeared. He went behind the counter, reached down, and returned with what looked like a simple ring.

“This object, I have heard some say, should help you solve your problem, my young master,” he said, eyeing Harry carefully.

Harry picked up the ring and examined it critically. Remembering the telltale signs he read about, Harry confirmed that what he was holding was genuine. “Very impressive,” he said honestly. The shopkeeper smiled. “Oh, I just remembered,” Harry said. “I’m also having a problem with a rather pesky ghost. He took residence in the attic of our summer home, and he’s resisted all our efforts to evict him.”

“Hmm…an interesting problem, indeed.”

“Yes,” Harry said, nodding. “Would you happen to have a soul gem for sale?”

The shopkeeper disappeared behind his counter a moment, before rising and placing a finger-sized crystal on the countertop. Although not illegal like the ring, the use of a soul gem was frowned upon. Harry put the ring down next to it and then picked up the crystal, holding it to the light. “Do you have anything stronger?” he asked after a moment.

The shopkeeper reached down and placed a palm-sized crystal on the counter. “This is the strongest they make, but the most expensive as well.”
Harry put down the smaller crystal in favor for the larger one. He hefted it in his hand, feeling the weight, and then examined it closely for cracks or imperfections. Noticing his customers demand for high quality, the shopkeeper placed a selection of four other palm-sized crystals on the countertop along with a loupe. Harry took the loupe gratefully then spent ten full minutes examining each of the five crystals in minute detail; it had to be absolutely perfect. Finally satisfied, Harry chose one of the crystals. “How much for the gem and the ring?” Harry asked.

“For objects of such obvious craftsmanship? Three hundred and fifty galleons,” the shopkeeper replied.

“Three hundred and fifty galleons?” Harry repeated, ready to play the game both participants knew had just started. “That’s quite a bit more than expected. Perhaps you would be willing to part with it for two hundred galleons?”

“Two hundred galleons is insult to me and the hardworking spell crafters who created such magnificent pieces of enchantment,” the shopkeeper said indignantly. “But I shall forgive you, because you are so young. For you, I shall lower the price to three hundred and twenty-five galleons, but don’t spread it around,” the shopkeeper said with a conspiratorial wink.

Harry appeared to consider the offer seriously. Then he shrugged and looked at his watch. “A bit more than I had expected to pay, and still so early in the day. Perhaps if I were to search the other shops I could find similar objects, though of clearly lower quality.”

The shopkeeper’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Two hundred and eighty galleons,” he said simply.

“Two hundred and fifty”

“Two hundred and seventy-five, and not a knut less.”

Harry paused a moment, then agreed. The sale finalized, Harry pocketed his items and left the store. He returned to the cheeriness of Diagon Alley and took the long journey home, via Harrogate.

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Safe in his studio flat, Harry examined the ring he had purchased. After a moment, Harry dug out the newer wand and threaded it through the ring. Once the ring rested against the grip, it magically altered its size to fit securely around Harry’s wand and changed color to blend in with the wood. Harry looked at his wand with trepidation; he knew that the ring was supposed to mask the fact that he was underage, but he wasn’t sure if it would work. He knew if it didn’t work, he could expect an owl, followed most likely by Ministry officials. Pointing his wand at a small rock, he muttered “Wingardium Leviosa” and watched as the rock levitated. Releasing his spell, Harry sat and waited, invisibility cloak in hand in case he had any unwelcome visitors. When an hour passed with no owls, Harry knew it worked. Pleased, he removed his new robes and walked outside, looking for a place where he could have a nice dinner.

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Harry awoke early the next morning, quickly getting dressed and ready for work. Although Harry was wealthy thanks to his inheritance, he felt bad about spending his parents’ money. He wanted a job so that he could at least defray some of the cost, and in addition a job would make sure he wouldn’t drive himself insane training and studying all day. He placed his original wand in the secret pockets of his robe and holstered his new wand, the one with the ring. He folded his robe until it was the size of his wallet (yet another nice feature, designed for easy concealment around Muggles) before leaving his flat. Harry took a portkey to Harrogate, where he followed the directions he had written down to his new place of employment.

Weir’s Weird and Fantastic Items was located in a large building. The storefront windows boasted a dazzling array of objects not usually found at the standard wizarding shops. Harry had found an ad for a stock boy, and he had responded immediately and sent his wizard resume via owl, one of over a dozen jobs he applied for. It was the only one
he had actually been offered, and Harry gratefully accepted. He entered the shop and waited at the counter as a large witch who wore her gray hair in a tight bun finished with her purchase. When it was his turn, he smiled at the wizard behind the counter.

“Hello. My name is Sean Harrington. I applied for a job as stock boy, and this is my first day.”

“Ah, of course. Hullo there, my name is David Love, but you can call me Dave,” the man said, shaking hands with Harry. “Mr. Weir isn’t here right now, but he left instructions that I was to show you around and get you started. Follow me,” he said with a smile. Harry followed him as they went about the store, Dave explaining things as they walked. Harry found his job to be rather simple, stocking shelves, helping with deliveries, and generally keeping the place tidy. Mr. Weir was a pleasant fellow, and his first day went by quickly.

Before porting to Boroughbridge, Harry stopped by Gringott’s to pick up another, much heavier package—the books he had ordered. Once outside and safely hidden from prying eyes, Harry cast a lightning spell on his package. He walked to the portkey station and made his way home.

Harry’s days soon fell into a comfortable routine. Harry would awaken early in the morning and eat breakfast reading the Daily Prophet. Three days a week, Harry went to Weir’s Weird and Fantastic Items, where he worked all day and took lunch and dinner in Harrogate. He quickly made friends with Dave and a few customers, but he honestly enjoyed the anonymity of being Sean Harrington and the solitude that came with it. True, there were times when Harry felt the sting of loneliness, as he thought often of Ron and Hermione; he sometimes would spend hours looking at his photo albums of family and friends. But for the most part, Harry was very comfortable being alone. Growing up in a cupboard with the Dursleys had quickly taught Harry independence. Evading and enduring Dudley’s gang of friends taught Harry to depend only on himself. Being ostracized by his schoolmates and the neighborhood kids (who were all afraid of Dudley) taught Harry to live without friends. And no matter what, five years of friendship with Ron and Hermione couldn’t erase ten years of abuse and neglect. If anything the years of Hogwarts only intensified his need for some alone time. It would be an understatement to say Harry was shocked to go from being ignored and despised in the Muggle world to being famous and sought after in the wizarding world.

The nights and other days of the week were spent on training and studying. Harry knew he would have to expand his knowledge and control of magic if he wished to defeat Voldemort. He purchased a number of books before leaving Hogwarts on defensive and offensive spells, dueling, maximizing magical power, and apparition. At times, Harry would retreat to a secluded area outside of Boroughbridge, where he could practice his spells freely. Harry practiced his apparition daily and was pleased at his early successes. In fact, Harry was so engrossed by his activities that he failed to notice Christmas approach. Mr. Weir closed his store on Christmas Day, giving Harry a free day. But Harry wasn’t in the mood to study or to practice, so instead he wandered both the magical and Muggle side of Harrogate, beautifully decorated for the Holidays. He watched a free performance in the park, then found a bench and sat contentedly as he watch ice skaters glide effortlessly around the rink. Harry allowed himself to feel melancholy as he watched; he was slightly depressed to be alone on Christmas, even though his second through tenth Christmaseses were never happy affairs.

Regardless, Harry felt an overwhelming sense of peace, and he was happy that no visible threat or danger seemed to be awaiting him or his loved ones. Harry was more than willing to feel alone if meant the safety for the people he cared about the most. Harry got up when the ice rink closed down for the night, and made his way back to the portkey station and home. Crawling into bed, Harry wished Ron and Hermione a Happy Christmas, and then settled into sleep.

A/N:

· ears91 and onkel: you two rock!

· Dean The Lean Mean Killing Machine – good question. The answer? Probably too much of a hassle to find a doctor and too many questions about a sixteen year-old kid without any parents or guardians paying in cash for a multi-thousand dollar procedure.
Duke-of-Argyle – Hermione, at least in my story, would have dropped out if given the chance, but Harry didn’t ask and she was too emotionally distraught to offer, which Harry would have declined anyways. Instead, he’ll be going back to school in a few chapters.

MaidenMasherV – hehe I agree. Coplio’s suggestions were very enthusiastic!

COPLIO – good suggestions, hehe, but this is more of a canon-based story. I was reading a good one like you imagine; it involved Harry becoming super-powerful and, for some reason, shrinking in height along the way. I can’t find it now though
Chapter: 18

18. Close Calls and A Bad-But-Not-So-Bad-Considering Day

Harry looked at The Aurors Handbook, Volume 3: Dueling and Combat in frustration. Harry was mystified that he ever thought that he could learn it all from books – he was no Hermione, after all. He never imagined how difficult it would be to train himself. Sure, he accepted that it would go much faster and he’d probably learn more from an experienced wizard, like Moody, but Harry thought that with the books he purchased and all the time he had, he could make do. He was wrong. There’s no substitute, he found, for hands on experience. He could practice and master all the spells in the book, but he couldn’t recreate the sensations of a duel: the danger, the cunning of an opponent, and yes, even the thrill of the battle. Part of Harry had believed that he would be able to find a self-defense teacher, much like there were many self-defense places in the Muggle world. Apparently, the wizarding world didn’t approve of teaching dueling to the general population, and not for the first time, Harry regretted his decision to leave Hogwarts. He wasted as much time rereading his texts to understand a concept that a teacher could have taught him in minutes as he did wasting his time in Herbology or History of Magic. But he knew that he really had no choice but to leave.

Although his anger towards Dumbledore had faded somewhat, he still didn’t trust the old headmaster. Too often, Harry felt like a pawn in Dumbledore’s grand chess game against Voldemort; nothing but another piece on the chessboard. Harry didn’t feel comfortable entrusting his life in Dumbledore’s hands when he honestly didn’t know Dumbledore’s intentions or motives.

He had forgiven his friends long ago; in fact, he had never really been angry with them in the first place. He knew Ron could be a jealous git sometimes, but he always stood by Harry in the end. And he could hardly be angry with Hermione for wanted the very thing that Harry desired – a normal life. If anything, Harry felt that he was the bad friend to her. Harry couldn’t even begin to count the number of times Hermione clutched his arm in fear because of something Harry got the two of them into. Based on their last meeting in the astronomy tower, Harry felt certain that if he sent Hermione an owl today, she would rush over and help him (he wasn’t sure if Ron was over the jealousy yet). But that would mean putting her in danger, and Harry would never, ever, forget the panic and guilt he felt when she was struck down in the Department of Mysteries. If anything ever happened to Hermione, to either of them, because of Harry…

So, as always, Harry reassured himself that he made the right decision despite his difficulties. Harry was able to do one thing himself: develop his new-found magical potential. Once safely back at Hogwarts after being kidnapped, Harry had been curious about his ability to summon the Death Eaters wand without one of his own. His curiosity led him to the library, and after poring through many books, Harry believed he found the answer in Psychology and Magic. The book explained that a traumatic event often has a serious impact on a wizard’s magic. Additionally, there were reported cases of child abuse that left a young wizard or witch without access to their powers. This explained a lot. Although there was never any physical abuse, Harry could certainly see how his time at the Dursley’s could be considered as emotionally abusing. And that could explain why Harry could master certain advanced spells (like the Patronus) while at the same time be utterly Neville-like when it came to simple transfigurations. Harry also believed that the emotions he felt while tied up in the Forbidden Forest broke through the emotional scars that the Dursley’s inflicted, giving Harry access to his true potential. Much like that story about the mother who lifted a car when her child was trapped underneath, Harry believed his emotions allowed him to tap into that potential and, in a moment of emotional stress, perform wandless magic. So, in addition to practicing spells, Harry spent hours each day focusing on his magic and tapping into the previously unused portion of his power. He found an immediate improvement in Transfigurations and Charms, but he was not quite up to Hermione’s level. Yet.

Harry looked at the book, his eyes blurring as he read the same lines over and over again. Studying was never a favorite pastime of his, and without any teachers or tests looming over his head, he had little motivation to stick with it. He wished, not for the first time, that Hermione were with him, to explain whatever nonsense he was trying to understand. He sighed. Harry struggled through the book and felt triumphant as he turned the last page, signifying another book finished. He read to the end of the page and groaned loudly. Part one of two?!? “AARGH!” Harry cried out. Shouldn’t
it have been called The Aurors Handbook, Volume 3a or something so Harry would’ve known to look for the second part? Harry procrastinated for a bit in self-pity before getting dressed and heading for Harrogate to complete the set.

Harry browsed through the shelves of Harrogate’s largest bookstore. Apparently, it wasn’t large enough, as part two of that most boring of books was nowhere to be found. Harry considered his options. He could owl for the book, as he had for what turned out to be only part one. But there would be a wait, up to a month. Or, he could go to Flourish and Blot’s and see if they carried a copy there. Harry looked at his watch; it was a little past lunchtime, and he really didn’t have anything to do today. He decided to grab a bite in Harrogate and then port over to Diagon Alley; a side-trip to Fortescue’s or Quality Quidditch Supplies might be fun. It was the third week of January, and Harry figured Diagon Alley wouldn’t be too crowded.

Harry took the portkey to Diagon Alley and stopped off at Quality Quidditch Supplies first. He spent a good hour in there, marveling at the latest in brooms and the newest Quidditch gear. He purchased two Quidditch books for light reading, and then headed off towards Flourish & Blot’s. It was a veritable mess in there. Harry was used to finding chaos in F&B, caused by countless students purchasing their books at the same time. He’d expected that in the downtime, F&B would be neat and tidy, much like the bookstore in Harrogate. He was sorely disappointed. Despite help from the staff (a very polite young witch), it took Harry another hour of his time to find volume two. He was pleased though; he’d rather spend an hour searching then waiting a month for an owl delivery. As Harry headed towards the check-out counter, his eye was caught by a book lying on a shelf. He paused, and then looked at the book, fingering its spine. Hogwarts: A History. He smiled, indulging in a few moments of happy memories. Shaking his head, Harry turned, and then stopped. Giving in to his impulse, Harry plucked the book from the shelf and walked to the front of the store. After purchasing the two books, adding them to the bag containing his Quidditch books, Harry walked outside and decided to stop at Fortescue’s before the long port home. All of sudden, he felt his arm being grabbed, and he was spun around with surprising force.

“Harry!”

Harry could not believe it. Hermione! How did she find him? How did she recognize him? Was his scar showing through? Once his initial shock wore off, Harry had an almost overwhelming urge to gather Hermione in a hug. He hadn’t seen her or Ron in such a long time, and seeing her right in front of him, he realized how much he missed her. Before he could act or say anything, Hermione muttered an apology and ran off. Harry fought the urge to call out to her, calling out for her to come back. Instead, he watched as she disappeared into the crowd. Somewhat shaken by the experience, Harry decided to forego his trip to Fortescue’s and port home.

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Harry stumbled into his flat, grumbling angrily under his breath. He had had a very, very bad day. In fact, he would consider it the worst day of his life where no one died, was injured, was tortured, was attacked, was locked in a cupboard without dinner, was accused of being a lunatic or a Dark Wizard, etc. Indeed, if one doesn’t count those kinds of days, then yes, this was definitely one of the worst days of Harry’s life.

It began, as most bad days do, with Harry oversleeping. His enchanted little alarm clock decided that Harry could use an extra hour of sleep since he stayed up late the previous night reading. When Harry hit the snooze on his alarm clock, he closed his eyes and settled deeper in his bed to enjoy his small reprieve from awakening. Then realization hit him, and his eyes popped open, looking at the clock in disbelief. Harry set an all time record for getting ready, thankful for once that he didn’t need to spend any time on his hair. Predictably, it was a dreary day outside, rain pouring down. Splashing his way to the portkey station, getting his socks wet in the process, Harry had just missed the morning rush. That meant the portkey activated once every hour, and not every fifteen minutes as during the morning and evening rush. So, despite his efforts to ready himself quickly, Harry ended up having to wait forty-five minutes to port over to Harrogate.

Once he finally got to work, Harry received a quick lecture from Dave for being late, but overall Harry was grateful he didn’t suffer anything greater. Dave was rather sympathetic, and Harry’s past performance had been excellent thus far. Harry had hoped for a quiet day at work, but as soon as he knocked into the display in the front of the store, he knew it was not to be. Unfortunately, the display was rather complex; no simple Reparo would bring the display back to life.
Instead, it was a painstaking process, each individual part of the display needed to be reassembled by hand then restored with his wand; it caused him to stay an extra hour after work to finish the job. Then, of course, he had to deal with his least favorite customers. Mr. and Mrs. Baker were just so…Malfoy-ish. They were rich, powerful, and pureblood, as they loved to remind Harry and Dave (and everyone else, for that matter) quite often. Harry, a polite smile plastered on his face, succeeded in maintaining his composure, but it was a mighty struggle. Finally, Harry was finished, and he ran back to the portkey station hoping to make the evening rush. Predictably, Harry missed the last port since he had to stay that extra hour, and he spent the time waiting for the next port to Boroughbridge feeling rather sorry for himself.

Things at home didn’t go much better. It was still raining, so Harry couldn’t take a fly on his Firebolt, his usual remedy when he was feeling depressed. Harry also painfully struck his shin against the cocktail table, as he rushed to prevent his dinner from burning. Not only did his dinner burn anyways, but he had a nice bruise on his shin. Today was definitely a bad day.

Harry sat on his couch, the remains of his burned dinner on the cocktail table in front of him. He rubbed his shin and winced. Harry was feeling especially depressed today, and he knew why. It wasn’t just the waking up late and missing the ports. While at work, two older witches walked into the store, followed by three children, two boys and a girl, around the age of nine or ten. The children, clearly good friends, reminded Harry painfully of his first year at Hogwarts. Just a few months being away from the best friends he had ever known was beginning to take a toll on Harry. He found himself progressing less and less in his training and finding little motivation to do more.

It was still early, around 9pm, but Harry was reluctant to move and incur some other disaster. Looking at the ever-growing stacks of books piled around him, Harry considered reading a Quidditch book, but decided it would only depress him as he couldn’t play Quidditch or even fly right now. Instead, Harry chose to read up on some useful potions before going to bed. At the worst, it would help him fall asleep. Harry reached over and gently tugged at the book he wanted, careful because it was in the middle of a large stack. He should have known better, considering his day; after a few tugs, the entire stack toppled over, created a mini-domino effect of falling books. Harry threw his hands up in resignation; he knew he should have just gone to bed and let the day end. Sighing heavily, Harry knelt down and started to tidy up the books. Reaching down to grab another book, Harry paused when he read the title.

Hogwarts, A History - the book he bought in Diagon Alley months ago. His encounter with Hermione had shaken him up, and when he got home that day, he tossed that particular book into the pile and promptly forgot about it. Now, Harry just sat still for a moment, Hogwarts, A History in his hands. He stood slowly and moved over to the couch, the mess of books forgotten. As he sat, he could hear Hermione’s voice in his head explaining for the first time about the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall, or the umpteenth time that she told him that no one apparate or disapparate onto school grounds. Harry closed his eyes and could actually see Hermione’s face, glowing as she quoted one fact or another from the book. Harry smiled, a feeling of warmth spreading through his body. It was the best he’s felt since Christmas. Harry opened the book to the first chapter. “Well,” he said to no one in particular, “Hermione always said I should read this.” Harry looked at his window, watching the rain stream down the glass. “This one’s for you, Hermione Granger,” he whispered, and feeling strangely contented, he settled down to read Chapter One of Hogwarts, A History.
Chapter: 19

A/N: Thanks to all my wonderful reviewers! You’re the best!

Here’s some good news/bad news: Bad news is that I’m taking off on Wednesday for my sister’s wedding in D.C., so no updates while I’m gone. The good news is that I’ll do a mass update of multiple chapters tomorrow to make up for it. Be warned though I probably won’t be able to go over them as I do with the other chapters, so there might be more grammar mistakes.

To Romm: most of the books Harry’s bought were just normal books, not Dark Magic. There are no restrictions on them. Any “questionable” books that Harry has, well, let’s just assume he bought them at Knockturn Alley.

19. Killing Curses and Visions

“Avada Kedavra!” Harry said and watched as his prey fell to his killing curse and was carried off. Another victim came his way, and Harry carefully aimed his wand. “Avada Kedavra!” he said in a quieter voice, testing to see how low his voice could get before the curse failed to work. To his satisfaction, the green light struck his target, and the life left his victim. Looking around to make sure no one was watching Harry lifted a corner of the invisibility cloak he wore to wipe the sweat off his face. He gagged slightly at the smell that greeted him.

The slaughterhouse Harry had found smelled of livestock, manure, and blood. It was a fair distance from the nearest magical community, but Harry had been able to practice his apparition to get there. For the past two weeks, Harry had come to the slaughterhouse, positioning himself at the assembly line directly before the point where the cattle were killed. Harry knew he could not simply read about the killing curse; he had to perform it. The ring on his wand, purchased from Knockturn Alley, kept his activities hidden, and day after day Harry, hidden underneath his invisibility cloak, killed cows as they passed before him. It was rather depressing, but at least the cows felt no pain, and they were going to be killed, anyways. For the next hour Harry continued to kill cattle before calling it a day. He crept out of the processing plant and apparated back to the nearest portkey station.

Harry ported to Boroughbridge in a decidedly miserable state. Even though he was only killing cattle that were seconds away from death, it still depressed Harry to kill anything. As soon as Harry got to his flat, he shed his clothes and replaced them with a comfy pair of pajamas. He prepared a warm, soothing bowl of soup and curled up on the couch and opened to where he left off in Hogwarts, A History. For some reason, reading Hogwarts, A History always seemed to lift his spirits. It was a little confusing as to why it cheered him, since the subject matter didn’t compare to any of a number of Quidditch books he owned. But Harry figured the book reminded him of simpler times, times with his friends and at the first real home he’s known. It became a ritual for Harry that whenever he was feeling depressed, a bowl of soup and a few hours with Hogwarts, A History always seemed to cheer him up.

Killing curses and apparition were not the only things Harry studied. He had continued his practice of occlumency, but now he added legilimency to his list of growing skills. He was confident that he could avoid Voldemort’s prying eyes, and now it was time for a little payback. In past years, Harry had seen many things from Voldemort’s point of view. Harry hoped this meant that Voldemort wasn’t as accomplished in occlumency as he was in legilimency, and perhaps Harry might be able to see into Voldemort’s mind on command. At every opportunity he had in Harrogate, Harry practiced his legilimency on passersby and the customers of Weir’s Weird and Fantastic Items. As the months passed, Harry was gaining increasing success; in fact, it had the side benefit of being able to pluck out exactly what the customers needed or his bosses wanted, thus making his job easier. Harry also practiced memory charms, but he was very hesitant to practice them on anyone, remembering the effect of a spell gone wrong on Professor Lockheart.

Near the end of May, Harry sat on his couch in front of his breakfast. Taking a bite, he almost spit it out after unfolding

BELLATRIX LESTRANGE CAPTURED! HOGWARTS STUDENTS FOIL DEATH EATER ATTACK

By Michael Perry, Staff Reporter

Yesterday afternoon, Ministry Aurors in the town of Huntworth apprehended Bellatrix Lestrange and four other Death Eaters, approximately 42 kilometers from Cardiff. For Lestrange, her capture ends almost a year of freedom after her daring escape from Azkaban prison. What was most impressive about the arrest was that it would never have happened without the assistance of two students from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Nymphodora Tonks, one of the first Aurors at the scene, described how Lestrange and the other Death Eaters were only meters from escaping before they ran into the two students.

“It was amazing,” she said. “The rest of us had been fooled by the Death Eaters into pursuing in the wrong direction; they had paid several youths from the town to run around in dark robes. Lestrange and the others would have escaped if not for Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley.”

Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley, both sixth-year prefects in Gryffindor House, prevented the Death Eaters from reaching Huntworth’s portkey station. Eyewitnesses report that Miss Granger stood alone and confronted the five Death Eaters. After a frantic fight that left three Death Eaters disabled (including Lestrange herself) and Miss Granger wounded. Mr. Weasley arrived and finished off the two remaining Death Eaters. When asked why she would risk her life, Miss Granger responded, “I wasn’t really thinking; I just knew I couldn’t let her escape after what she had done to Harry.”

The Harry she refers to is none other than Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived and recipient of the Order of Merlin (3rd class). Sources close to the situation say that Lestrange had murdered Sirius Black in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries last year, where Voldemort’s return had finally been revealed. Although Black is an escaped convicted criminal himself, recent events have placed his guilt in doubt (please turn to page 4 for further details on the life and conviction of Sirius Black). It is believed that Black was Harry’s godfather, which sheds some light on Miss Granger’s comments.

Mr. Weasley was asked how two underage students could defeat five murderous Death Eaters. “We owe it all to Harry [Potter]. Last year,” he went on to explain, “We had a horrible Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. [Former Professor Delores] Umbridge refused to teach us to use any spells, so Harry formed his own club of students and taught us how to defend ourselves. If not for Harry, the Death Eaters would have escaped and probably killed Hermione and me.”

The other four Death Eaters were identified as…

Harry was astonished. Ron and Hermione had caught Bellatrix Lestrange! He was filled with happiness that Lestrange had been captured; pride that his friends were the ones to stop her; and a bit of guilt and horror that his friends placed themselves in danger. Harry read the story twice and stopped when he reread Ron’s quote, “We owe it all to Harry.”

This sounded very different than the Ron he had left behind. He would have thought that Ron would reveal in the attention and would be angry if Harry’s name found its way into the paper. He never would have imagined that Ron would actually give him any credit, in effect sharing the spotlight with him. Harry grinned, then realized with a start he was going to be late for work. Harry folded the paper and stuck it in his back pocket, intended to read the rest of the paper and the story about Sirius on his lunch break.

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On a warm day near the end of June, Harry sat quietly in a forest clearing, focusing on his magical power. He didn’t have a wand in his hand, or an incantation on his lips. Instead, Harry simply felt his magical potential and focused on it, allowing his mind to become in-tune with the magic. He had just finished an exhausting series of charms and transfiguration (not his best area) and was recovering.
Harry had three objectives when he left the astronomy tower almost seven months ago. The first was to leave Hogwarts; he felt like a sitting duck there, as the last three years proved. He also wanted to protect his friends. The second objective was to learn and train. After six months of training, Harry felt good about his progress. Instead of trying to learn as many spells as he could, Harry chose to master a handful of useful spells, practicing them until they were as powerful as he could cast them. These spells included the stunning spell, apparition, the killing curse, the disarming curse, and the shielding spell, among others. Harry felt his skills in many areas improve, but his Herbology and Potions skills definitely deteriorated, to say nothing of his History of Magic knowledge and Divination ability.

Harry’s last objective was the hardest one. Find, defeat, and survive against Voldemort. Harry knew that a mere six months wouldn’t compare in the slightest with Voldemort’s years of experience, knowledge, and practice in the Dark Arts. But he had a trick up his sleeve that would hopefully even the playing field. He wasn’t sure whether it would work, but there wasn’t much he could do about that. The hardest part was finding Voldemort and a way to confront him alone; Harry didn’t fancy his chances against Voldemort and a crowd of his Death Eaters. But he did have a plan for finding Voldemort, even if it wasn’t working so well.

Harry felt a strange prickling in his scar. Ever since he had begun to master occlumency, his scar had stopped hurting except when something very significant was happening with Voldemort. Harry looked at his watch and decided it wasn’t too soon to try and prepared himself to enter the mind of Voldemort. Harry knew that he should not have been able to master legilimency so quickly; it took years to become a fully capable legilimens. But Harry also knew Voldemort was an accomplished legilimens, and he attributed his innate ability to Voldemort, in the same manner that they were both Parselmouths. Harry began focusing on his scar, on his connection to Voldemort. For the past month, Harry had been using his legilimency skills to “eavesdrop” on Voldemort. He would only peek for a few minutes at a time, at different times each day, to avoid detection. So far, his efforts have not produced anything useful, though seeing the daily activities of Voldemort was slightly disconcerting. Today, however, Harry Potter was to be rewarded.

As Harry found himself becoming Voldemort, he immediately sensed that Voldemort was happy. Harry had experienced a variety of Voldemort’s emotions, mostly anger and hatred. But today, Voldemort was happy, a rare occurrence. Harry noticed someone was talking to him.

“...pieces have been found, my Lord,” said a figure, prostrate before him.

“How soon before it is ready?” Voldemort asked. He sensed the fear in the man before he responded, and Harry felt Voldemort’s anger build as the man took the time to choose his words.

“It will take time my Lord. There are many pieces, the restoration must be complete, and the magic is ancient. We will need to test it at every step to make sure we are restoring it correctly, and-”

“How soon?” Voldemort repeated, the menace and danger clear in his voice.

“I do not know,” the man squeaked, cowering in fear. “Perhaps a-a year.”

“A YEAR!” Voldemort exploded.

“Six months! Six months!” the figure cried out.

Voldemort sat back down, thinking. “Very well. Six months then. In six months time, I shall make my long-awaited return to Hogwarts.” Voldemort smiled, and laughed in glee.
Chapter: 20

A/N: Ok, here's the mass update. Six chapters for your reading pleasure, that's over 13,000 words!

Thanks for the reviews. It's because of your reviews that I'm uploading so many instead just one, so give yourself a big pat on the back :)

Enjoy!

20. A Meeting and a Change in Plans

Harry broke out of his trance, sweating. Despite the brief trip into Voldemort's head, Harry had a pretty good idea about what was being planned. The “pieces” that the man reported as found must be the pieces of the Orb of Tomsduval, the object that will take time to restore. Voldemort was planning another attack on Hogwarts, and for a second Harry panicked before he remembered that the man said it would take sometime between six months to a year for the Orb to be restored. Harry privately thought it would probably be closer to a year, but he thought Voldemort looming over you can work wonders. Harry knew he had to warn Hogwarts, to warn Dumbledore. But not wanting to do anything rash, and with the benefit of time on his side, Harry returned to his flat and spent the rest of the day in deep thought.

Two days later, Harry set out first thing in the morning and took the long port route to the city of Bristol. At the owl post there, he spoke to the manager and was swiftly reunited with his beloved Hedwig. Knowing that people would be looking for Harry, he could not risk using Hedwig to send and receive mail; she was too recognizable, and it wouldn’t take a wizard of Dumbledore’s ability long to track her back to Harry. So, he had “rented” Hedwig to the owl post in Bristol. Hedwig was overjoyed to see Harry, and she fluttered around excitedly before settling on his arm.

“Hello there girl,” Harry said affectionately. He offered her an owl treat, and then took her outside. They played for an hour before Harry called her down. “I need you to deliver this letter to Dumbledore,” he said, tying a letter to Hedwig’s leg. “No reply needed.” Hedwig seemed to nod, before giving Harry one last nip on the ear and flying off. Harry smiled as he watched Hedwig fly away, and then headed back to the portkey station. It was a long way home.

One week after sending Hedwig off, Harry ported to the magical district of Coventry. It was small, consisting of only the station, a Gringott’s branch (they were everywhere), three shops, and a tavern. Harry entered the tavern and found a seat facing the entrance. He ordered a butterbeer and waited. Fifteen minutes later, an aged man with a long, white beard entered the tavern and sat at a table, also facing the entrance. He was immediately recognizable, and several of the patrons greeted him. He ordered pumpkin juice from the waitress, than sat quietly, occasionally looking up as people entered the door. Harry waiting five minutes, watching for anything out of the ordinary. Finally, butterbeer in hand, he approached the table. “Professor Dumbledore,” Harry said.

Dumbledore looked at Harry with a smile, but without recognition in his eyes. “Hello,” he said with a friendly smile.

“May I sit down?”

“Ah, perhaps later. I’m sorry, but I’m currently waiting on someone,” Dumbledore said apologetically.

“He’s just arrived,” Harry said with a grin, and then sat down. Dumbledore regarded him with confusion, then a smile slowly made its way to his lips.

“Harry?” he whispered. Harry nodded, then pointed to his forehead. For a split second, his scar appeared. Dumbledore looked pleased. “I see you’ve improved your Metamorphagus skills significantly. It’s good to see you, Mr.—”

“Harrington. Sean Harrington”, Harry finished, also pleased, for two reasons. It wasn’t often that his old headmaster
was fooled, and more importantly, Harry found that simply changing his most recognizable features (the hair, glasses, eye color, and scar) was sufficient to hide his identity. Harry was happy he wouldn’t have to do other changes to his face, like to his nose or cheekbones, since he wasn’t sure he could maintain all the changes to his face at once. Harry got right to the point. “I asked you to meet me here to warn you. For awhile now, I’ve been peeking into Voldemort’s activities, and I’ve found something worrisome,” Harry said.

“How do you know that your visions are authentic?”

“You were right when you said Voldemort transferred some of his powers. In addition to Parseltongue, Voldemort gave me his legilimency and occlumency abilities.” Dumbledore nodded in acceptance. Harry continued, “Voldemort has found all the pieces to the Orb of Tomsduval. He intends to restore it, and then use it to attack Hogwarts again. He was told that the restoration would take six to twelve months time.”

Dumbledore looked grave at Harry’s news. “That is very worrisome news indeed. Thank you, Mr. Harrington. I will set up some additional wards and ask for Ministry assistance in protecting Hogwarts.”

“There’s more. I,” Harry said, pausing. “I want to come back to Hogwarts.” Noticing Dumbledore’s look of surprise, Harry continued quickly. “For two reasons. One: I want to be there to help protect Hogwarts. Two: if he does attack, this will be my best chance to confront him. These past months he’s rarely left his lair, and I’ve never been able to find out where he’s going until it’s too late,” Harry said bitterly.

Dumbledore looked at him with his customary twinkle. “Mr. Harrington, nothing would make me happier then for your return to Hogwarts. I know the students would love to have you back.”

But Harry shook his head. “Harry Potter won’t be going to Hogwarts; Sean Harrington will. If Voldemort knows Harry Potter has returned, he might try something.”

Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. “The trick will be coming up with a convincing cover story…” he mused.

“I have a few ideas about that,” Harry said, interrupting. “Perhaps I could be hired as the gameskeeper’s assistant? Or someone to help Filch, as unpleasant as that would be. I’ve never seen any people in the kitchens, just House Elves, but maybe I could work in the background somewhere.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Harry, I know I’ve failed you in so many ways. I mean to make it up to you as best as I can. One thing I can do, as Headmaster of Hogwarts, is to make sure you get a full education. You will return as a student.”

Harry’s surprise showed on his face. “But how? I don’t want to take anyone’s place...”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Harrington. You won’t. You will be Hogwarts’ latest transfer student.”

“Transfer student? Hogwarts has transfer students?”

Dumbledore nodded. “As you know, the name of a child who is to be accepted to Hogwarts is written in a magical book when they are born. However, not all the selected children attend Hogwarts. Some cannot afford the high price of a Hogwarts education, and we only have so many scholarships to offer. And sometimes the child’s family moves, and the new location is not agreeable.”

“Scholarships?” Harry said, surprised again. “Hogwarts has scholarships?”

“Of course, Mr. Potter. You yourself are a recipient of a scholarship, as was Tom Riddle. There are other programs as well. For example, the Weasley’s benefit from a subsidy for the children of Ministry employees.”

Harry nodded. “If not all the children attend Hogwarts, then where do they go?”
“There are three comprehensive schools in Europe. Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. There are two more in America, and two in Asia. These seven schools are called comprehensive because they comprise first through seventh year students, and cover all aspects of a magical education.” Dumbledore explained. “However, not all magical children go to comprehensive schools; you’ll notice there are only about three hundred students at Hogwarts. There are innumerable smaller, ‘trade’ schools. These schools cover only specific parts of magic, such as potions, charms, etc.”

Harry nodded, very interested in this aspect of the wizarding world that he never knew about.

“We shall say you are an orphan, accepted to Hogwarts but unable to afford it. You have been going to various trade schools, where your exceptional abilities and intelligence earned you ten OWLs. Your achievement was brought to my attention over the summer by one of your headmasters, and I offered you a scholarship, which you accepted. You shall be the first transfer student at Hogwarts in twelve years.”

Harry smiled broadly; he would much rather be a transfer student than carry Filch’s mops around for a whole year. “I love the idea.”

“It won’t be easy, Mr. Harrington,” Dumbledore warned. “You have missed six months of your sixth year; you will be behind your old classmates, and you will have to work very hard to catch up, especially with NEWTs in your seventh year.” Dumbledore paused. “I have many things to prepare, and you have many decisions to make. Let us agree to meet again in two weeks time. In the meantime, you need to decide which year you want to enter: sixth year where you’ll be ahead, or seventh year where you’ll be behind. Consider which House you would like to be in, as I can charm the Hat to do as you wish, and which classes you want to take.”

Harry nodded. “I will contact you with a meeting place and time.” Harry stood. “Thank you, Professor Dumbledore,” he said, before exiting the tavern.

“No, thank you, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore whispered.

Two weeks later, it was all decided. Harry would enter Hogwarts as a seventh year. He was confident that his training would help him in the practical aspects, such as Charms, Transfiguration, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. He was worried about some of the more knowledge-based subjects, but he would work hard over the remaining months before term started. Dumbledore brought him a listing of the subjects covered in the last six months of sixth year, as well as homework assignments and tests (with answers) to help him prepared for seventh year. They agreed that Harry would be in Gryffindor again; he was a Gryffindor at heart, and it feel too odd to be wearing another House’s colors. They chose his classes for next year, and time permitting, Harry would work ahead as much as he could during the remaining summer months. Finally, together they finalized his cover story as an orphan who attended several trade schools before his scholarship. There was one final issue that Dumbledore wanted to address. “What about your friends? Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley?”

“What about them?”

“Will you tell them who you really are?”

“No.”

“You won’t reconsider? Their friendship and support will be invaluable,” Dumbledore said gently.

“No. I do not want to involve them in this,” Harry said firmly.

Dumbledore sighed, as if expecting Harry’s answer. “Very well then, but I have prepared something just in case you change your mind, or accidentally reveal your identity,” he said, passing a parchment over to Harry. “Since our last
meeting. I have been working on this spell, which will be tied to your scars appearance. When cast on a person, he or she will be unable to say ‘Harry’ in reference to you as long as your scar is hidden. No matter what they think or mean to say, the word ‘Harry’ will not escape their lips.” Dumbledore looked very pleased with himself. “I would suggest trying it now, on me, but as you are underage…”

Harry grinned. “Not a problem,” he said. Drawing his wand, Harry read the spell aloud and cast it on Dumbledore.

A look of surprise flickered across Dumbledore’s face until he saw the ring that was camouflaged on Harry’s wand. Dumbledore looked at Harry and smiled. “That is a very complex spell. I would not have expected you to be able to cast it successfully on your first try, even had you stayed at Hogwarts. I see you’ve put your time to good use.” Harry nodded. “Is there something else?” Dumbledore asked when he noticed Harry’s uncertain look.

“Well, there is one thing that I haven’t been able to practice effectively,” Harry said.

“Whatever it is, I shall do everything in my power to help you.”

“I need some practical experience dueling. It’s hard to get the feel of dueling when your targets don’t fire back.”

Dumbledore chuckled and then thought a moment. “It would be suspicious if I were to ask an Order member or a teacher to give you special dueling lessons.” Harry looked disappointed. “However,” Dumbledore continued, “there is nothing that prevents me from giving you lessons. Once you return to Hogwarts, we shall arrange weekly lessons together. How does that sound?”

Harry smiled broadly. “That sounds perfect!” he said.

“You are indeed a resourceful young man, Mr. Harrington,” Dumbledore said in admiration. “Ah good, I tried to say Mr. Harrington, but only Mr. Harrington came out.” Dumbledore chuckled when he heard his own words. “Good!” he repeated. “Then I shall see you at the Sorting Ceremony, Mr. Harrington.” Harry nodded, and they went their separate ways.

The remainder of the summer was spent reviewing the materials he had missed over sixth year. It was, of course, impossible to cover six months of classes in two months. Harry started by reviewing the final exams for each of his subjects, then researching through his books to find the answers. He skimmed critical topics, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to understand them all, and accepted that he would be behind. Harry was pleased that his birthday finally arrived; although he received no presents, Harry was finally seventeen; the restriction on underage magic no longer applied. Harry removed the ring from his second wand and put it in a safe place (who knows if he might have use for it later), and he was able to practice with both of his wands without fear of a Ministry owl flying through the window.

The decisions that Dumbledore asked of Harry were difficult. Harry considered returning as a sixth year; it would be much easier academically. But Harry knew he would feel uncomfortable with all his old friends in seventh year. His decision whether or not to stay in Gryffindor was also difficult. He knew it would be harder to maintain his “Sean” image in Gryffindor; he could imagine how easy it would be to lapse into being Harry Potter and bring up events that Sean would have no knowledge about. But in the end, Harry knew he had to believe that he would survive, that he would defeat Voldemort. And if that came to pass, Harry wanted to graduate with his old friends in his old house, not as a sixth-year Hufflepuff.

As September 1st arrived, Harry began to put closure to his life in Boroughbridge. He gave his notice to Mr. Weir, and told Mr. Leonard that he would be leaving. Mr. Weir and Dave took him to a nice lunch on his last day of work. Harry packed up his little flat and took one last walk around Boroughbridge and Harrogate, his home for the last nine months. Harry was sad to be leaving, and extremely anxious about returning to Hogwarts. Finally, the morning of September 1st, Harry said his farewell to Mr. Leonard and, all his things packed neatly in his magically-lightened trunk, ported over to Hogsmeade. Harry considered taking the Hogwarts Express, but in the end, Harry thought he would feel more comfortable being introduced at Hogwarts’ Sorting Ceremony. Harry took the walk to the school slowly, savoring every
moment, remembering every detail. The students had already arrived by the time Harry ported over, so he had the walk to himself. Arriving at the familiar doors, Harry entered the castle and was met by Dumbledore himself. They exchanged greetings, and then a couple of House Elves took his trunk.

"Welcome back, Mr. Harrington," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Harry said.

"The Sorting Ceremony is about to begin. You are to wait in the back of the Hall. Once the first years have been sorted, I will announce Hogwarts' first transfer student in twelve years, and then sort you."

Harry nodded, then walked into the Great Hall and took his spot against the wall. Harry was filled with a great warmth; he felt like he was home. The first years, huddled in the center of the Great Hall, looked so tiny and scared; he remembered his first Sorting Ceremony fondly. Harry scanned the Gryffindor table, seeing his old friends. His heart leapt at the sight of Ron and Hermione, and he was delighted when he spotted Hermione's Head Girl badge. He longed to run over to them and congratulate her and take his normal seat, which he noticed was empty. But he held back, he wasn't Harry Potter anymore. Instead, Sean Harrington leaned against the wall and watched as the Sorting Ceremony began.

*as part of the spell, harry specifies which name he wants to be referred by, so Harry is replaced by Sean and Potter by Harrington.*
Chapter: 21

A/N: Ok, here’s a summary of what’s been happening so far:

Harry feels abandoned by his friends and betrayed by Dumbledore. He gets kidnapped while trying to rescue Hagrid, but manages to escape and defeat a plot to take Hogwarts using an ancient magical artifact, the Orb of Tomdsuval. Harry realizes Hogwarts isn’t safe from him and takes off, leaving a heartbroken Hermione behind. During the summer away, while Harry trains, he peeks into Voldemort’s head and sees that he’s reconstructing the Orb (which Harry busted) and planning another attack. He goes to Dumbledore and they concoct a plan for Harry to return to Hogwarts as a transfer student. Harry arrives at the school in the guise of Sean Harrington and awaits his sorting.

21. The Return and Sorting

Harry leaned against the wall as the Sorting Ceremony continued. As Harry watched, he couldn’t help but feel a little jealous of the ten and eleven-year old children. Unlike Harry, they probably wouldn’t have to go through their Hogwarts years with a madman after them; have to face death and Dementers; be accused of various evil things one day then hero-worshipped the next. Instead, these kids were going to have a nice, normal life, one that Harry Potter would never have. Harry shook his head, chastising himself for feeling so sorry for himself lately. The first years were sorted, and Dumbledore stood.

“Welcome and congratulations to our newest students. But the Sorting is not over yet,” he said, causing curious whispers from around the Great Hall. “For the first time in over a decade, we will have a transfer student at Hogwarts.” Murmurs and quiet conversation broke out, and Dumbledore motioned at Harry. Reluctantly, he stepped forward and walked the length of the Great Hall by himself as the entire school looked on. “He will be a seventh year student, and he will be sorted. I know you will all accept him with open arms,” Dumbledore said with a warm smile, and then sat down.

When Harry was before the stool, Professor McGonnagal gave him an appraising look before reading from her scroll, the same scroll that listed all the first years’ names. “Sean Harrington!” she called out.

Harry approached the stool and sat, remembering the nervousness and fear the first time he did this. Although the fear was gone (for he knew he wasn’t going to be sent home), the nervousness remained. What if the Hat could broadcast it to everyone in the Great Hall? Harry fidgeted as the Sorting Hat was placed on his head; to his surprise, instead of the expected voice, he heard nothing. In fact, he endured roughly ten seconds of silence before he heard the Hat cry out, “GRYFFINDOR!” The Gryffindor table burst into applause, and Harry, very relieved, glanced at Dumbledore, who slyly winked at him. Harry escaped from under the hat and headed for the Gryffindor table. A spot was made for him among the seventh years, and he noticed with relief that the seat was between Neville and Dean. He didn’t think he could handle sitting in his old spot near Ron and Hermione on his first day back. He smiled and shook hands with many Gryffindors as he made his way to his seat. Once he had sat down, Dumbledore made his final remarks, and with a clap of his hands, the feast began.

“So Sean,” Dean said while reaching for a plate of mashed potatoes, “where ya from?” Although various conversations were going on at the same time, everyone near Harry had one ear on what he was saying, very interested in their new seventh-year classmate.

“My last home was in Boroughbridge, up near Harrogate,” Harry said, deciding to stick to the truth as much as possible; it was easier to remember that way. “My parents died when I was young, and a Mr. Leonard and his wife, a nice wizarding couple, took me in.”

“How’d you get to be a transfer student?” Neville asked.

“I got my Hogwarts letter when I was eleven, but the Leonards couldn’t afford it,” Harry said.
“Aye, tough break there, mate,” Ron said sympathetically. Harry nodded at him, but didn’t make eye contact.

“So instead, I went to a lot of the smaller schools out there, like Torrey, Riviera, Doral, Quail Hollow, and Avenel.”

Hermione joined in. “I’ve read about those schools. Very specialized magic schools that focus on one or two subjects, like Transfiguration or Charms,” she said for the benefit of the many students who looked confused at the strange names. “But I’ve never heard of someone going to so many. Did you go to them one at a time or all at once?” she asked.

“Mostly at the same time,” Harry said, not looking at Hermione.

“Very impressive,” she said, as the others nodded in agreement.

“Did you have to take your OWLs then?” Lavender asked.

“Yeah, going to all those schools helped me to prepare, and Dumbledore gave me a scholarship because of my OWLs. But none of the other schools had any of the advanced level courses,” Harry said, “So I’m probably very behind the rest of you,” he said with a gloomy look.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Dean said, putting an arm around his shoulder. “We’ll help you through it, right guys?” Everyone nodded in agreement.

Harry smiled gratefully at his fellow Gryffindors. “Thanks everyone.”

“Now then,” said Ron. “It’s time you learned the best thing about Hogwarts,” Ron paused dramatically, “the food!” Everyone moaned good-naturedly, and Harry reached for a plate, smiling.

After the feast, Harry attached himself to Neville, Dean, and Seamus as they walked to the common room. On the way, they described the various intricacies of the castle, like the fake step and the moving staircases.

“And this,” Seamus was saying, “is the door to the common room. It’s actually a portrait, and you have to give her the password, which changes every now and then.” The portrait of the Fat Lady smiled benignly on them.

“But don’t worry if you forget,” said Ron, “Neville forgets all the time, and he always manages to find a way in,” he teased. Neville blushed, but didn’t object.

“Caput Draconis,” Hermione said, and they all walked through the portrait hole. Once inside, they all looked at Harry expectantly. Harry was confused for a moment, before realizing what they wanted.

“Wow! This place is amazing,” Harry said, forcing a look of surprise and wonderment on his face. This pleased his fellow classmates, and they went about describing the common room and the dormitories, things that Harry already knew about. Harry joined Dean, Neville, and Seamus in a couple of games of Exploding Snap! before bedtime while Ron, Hermione, and Ginny left the common room to perform their prefect/Head Girl duties. Finally, it grew late and Ron and Hermione returned. The boys retreated to their dorm room, showing Harry the way. Harry entered his old room and, without thinking, he headed to his old bed. He was pleased to find his trunk at the foot of the bed, and he reached down to open his trunk and retrieve his pajamas. Straightening up, he suddenly noticed a heavy silence. Turning, he saw the other boys looking at him uncomfortably.

“What?” he asked, confused.

Dean, Seamus, and Neville looked at Ron. Ron cleared his throat, “It’s, um, nothing Sean,” he said, looking at the others meaningfully. “A former classmate of ours used to have that bed, but he’s been gone for a year now. There’s no reason
for you not to have it.” That broke the tension, and the boys returned to their activities. When Harry couldn’t help but remark on Ron’s latest Chudley Cannons poster, he revealed that he was a Quidditch fan, to the delight of the others.

“Do you play any, Sean?” Ron asked with interest.

“A little at my old school,” Harry said warily.

“Oh? What position?”

“Er, um, seeker.” Harry had given a great deal of thought to whether or not he wanted to play Quidditch. Actually, it wasn’t whether he wanted to. Of course he wanted to. But rather, was it smart to bring attention to himself, especially if he played his old position? Harry had mostly decided to skip the Quidditch season.

“Seeker? That’s great!” Ron exclaimed. “Any good?”

Harry nodded modestly. “Pretty good, I was always on the school team,” he couldn’t help himself from saying.

By this point, the others had gathered around. “That is good news,” said Dean. “We could really use a good seeker, ever since, er, um, last year. Not that Ginny’s not good,” Dean said quickly, looking at Ron.

“Yeah, Ginny’s our seeker now,” Seamus said. “She’s that pretty little red-headed prefect, and Ron’s little sister,” he said, laughing at the glare that Ron shot at him. Harry couldn’t help but laugh at Ron’s expression.

“Ginny’s not good?” he asked. Harry knew in fact that she was good, but he couldn’t let them know that he knew.

“Oh, she’s good, don’t get me wrong,” said Ron. “But she’s a much better Chaser, and she prefers to be one anyways. She’s only Seeker because there’s no one else.” Ron grew thoughtful. “Listen Sean, why don’t you go to try-outs this weekend? If you’re as good as Ginny, or even just a little worse, you can be on the team, and Ginny can replace Anna Soren; Anna’s not a bad Chaser, but she needs another year before she could be really good.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Harry began. “I figure I’ll need all my spare time to catch up on homework.”

“Please Sean,” Ron pleaded, “I’ll get Hermione to tutor you. Hermione’s the smartest witch in school, and she’ll do anything for Quidditch,” Ron said, ignoring the snickers from the other boys.

Harry looked at Ron’s face. It was hard to refuse him, especially since Harry wanted to play so badly. “Alright Ron, I’ll try-out, but I can’t guarantee that I’ll be good enough.”

“That’s great Sean,” Ron said happily. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. I was beginning to get worried about the team; I want to make sure we win my last year! We’ll practice every other day, and I’ll make sure we have the best strategies and plays!” he said determinedly.

Seamus shook his head. “Uh-oh, now you’ve gone and done it. Captain Ron is at it again!”

Harry was taken aback. “Ron is the Quidditch Captain?” he asked, surprised.

Dean answered, for Ron had already returned to his trunk to pull out his Quidditch playbooks. “Yup, he was Captain last year after, er, the old Captain resigned.”

“Wicked!” Harry said. He was truly pleased that Ron was captain; Ron was born for the position, for he had an endless supply of energy when it came to Quidditch. But Harry learned one other thing: he would have to get someone to talk to him about himself; it would be a long year if everyone suddenly become awkward whenever the subject of Harry Potter came up. Exhausted after the full day, Harry changed into his pajamas, climbed into bed, and fell asleep instantly.
22. Classes and Quidditch

Harry awoke early the next morning, accustomed to waking early to work or train. He showered and dressed, first changing his Auror robes to match his new Gryffindor ones. He walked to the Great Hall by himself as the others were still sleeping. The Great Hall was empty this early in the morning, and since it was only the first day of classes, no students were frantically working on a homework assignment due in first period. Automatically, Harry walked to his spot at the Gryffindor table and helped himself to eggs and sausages. Harry had forgotten how good the food at Hogwarts was, and he failed to notice the odd looks he was getting as people filed into the Great Hall. Finally, Harry looked up when he felt Hermione standing beside him with surprise and, he thought, anger in her eyes. All of a sudden, Harry realized where he was sitting.

“Erm, hello. Hermione, right?” he asked, trying to be as nonchalant as possible when trying to pretend that you don’t know your best friend.

“Yes, that’s right,” she said coldly. “I’m sorry, but that spot is reserved.”

Harry felt his cheeks redden. He fumbled an excuse, then gathered his things and sought refuge by Neville. Hermione gave one last look at him before sitting down and turning her attention to breakfast.

“Sorry about that Sean,” Neville said. “Hermione’s a bit sensitive about that seat. We shoulda warned you last night.”

Sean looked at Neville, Dean, and Seamus, who sat across from him. He saw this as opportunity to get Harry Potter out of the way. “Alright guys,” he said, trying to look indignant. “Last night you guys got uncomfortable whenever that ‘old classmate’ was mentioned, and now this. What’s going on?”

Dean looked at Neville. “You tell him; you knew him better.”

“I did not! You guys always talked about Quidditch together!”

“Yeah, but you were with him in the Department of Mysteries!”

“Alright, enough!” Harry cried out. “Will someone, anyone, tell me what’s going on?”

Lavender and Pavarti approached, drawn by the yelling. “What’s all the fuss about?” they asked.

“Sean wants to know about, er, our former classmate,” Dean said.

“You guys didn’t tell him about Harry yet?” Pavarti asked, a slight rebuke in her voice.

Seamus shook his head. “We were, um, deciding who would tell him.”

“Ugh! Boys!” Lavender said. “I’ll tell him.” The boys shifted sideways and made room for Lavender and Pavarti. “Ok, do you know who Harry Potter is?” she asked Harry.

“Yes. He beat Vol-You-Know-Who when he was a baby, and he got that award last year.”

“So, no one’s heard from him since?”

“En yeah, I remember reading about how he disappeared.” Harry felt a bit odd talking about himself like this.
Lavender nodded, “that’s right. It was pretty sudden, and he didn’t even say goodbye. Ron and Hermione were his best friends.” Dean then told Lavender and Pavarti how Hermione kicked Harry out of his seat. Lavender nodded. “I think they’re still taking it a bit hard, Hermione more than Ron. But then again, Ron was never the most sensitive of guys,” she said with a shake of her head.

“I am sooo super-sensitive!” Ron said, as he walked up to them and sat next to Lavender. “My ears are burning. Are you all talking about me? All good, I hope” he asked with a grin.

“We were telling Sean about Harry. He accidentally sat in Harry’s old seat and Hermione bit off his head.”

“Ah ok. Well, no worries, you didn’t know, mate. I’ll talk to Hermione and straighten it all out. She’s alright underneath that tough exterior,” he said with a wink before leaving and sitting across from Hermione.

“Alright, I get it,” Sean said. “Don’t sit in Harry’s spot. Anything else?”

“No, that’s about it,” Pavarti said. “So,” she said, changing the subject, “I hear Harrogate has some kind of museum that’s also a spa?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, the Royal Pump Room,” he said, and the conversation turned away from the topic of Harry Potter. Schedules were handed out, and Harry was told about school life at Hogwarts, like which Professors were strict (“McGonnagal definitely, but she’s fair”) and which classes were the worst (“Snape is awful! He hates Gryffindors, and we always share Potions with the Slytherins”). Harry acted interested in everything they told him, but he couldn’t help a twinge of guilt as he remembered Hermione’s face when she saw him sitting in his old place.

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Harry looked at his schedule as he followed the rest of the seventh year Gryffindors. This year would be tough, even if he weren’t so far behind. Fortunately, the morning went quickly. The first class was Charms with Ravenclaw. The class started with a quick review of what was covered last year, and although many of the spells were unfamiliar, Harry was able to perform them all. He was pleased with his practical application and hoped the theory part would come as easily. After lunch, Harry walked over to Greenhouse #3, where he listened intently to the review session. It went by too quickly for Harry’s tastes, and he scribbled the names of various plants furiously on his parchment, planning to look them up later in the library. After lunch, Harry followed his fellow Gryffindors to the dungeons for the class he was looking forward to the least: Potions.

Harry found a seat near the back by himself. He was new, and he didn’t know who to pair up with. To his surprise, he saw that Hermione wasn’t sitting with Ron; instead, she was with Lavender and Pavarti, which left Neville and Ron together and Dean and Seamus. When Dean saw Harry by himself, he motioned him over, and Harry sat alongside them. As Harry waited for class to begin, he felt something out-of-place. He soon realized what was missing: Malfoy wasn’t taunting him. Harry looked at the Slytherin side of the classroom and noted with happiness that none of them were giving him a second look. Seconds later, Snape made his customary entrance into the dungeon, barging through the door. He looked around, catching each and every student in his gaze. Harry cleared his mind and strengthened his mental shields, for after his occlumency lessons, he knew Snape was trying to get a general read on his students.

“Well,” he said. “Looks like the beginning of our last year together. For some,” he said, looking at Neville and Hermione in turn, “I shall be glad to be rid of. Others,” he said, looking at Malfoy in particular and the Slytherins in general, “I will miss. Let’s get started and see how much knowledge you’ve managed to lose over the summer.”

Like the other teachers, Snape briefly reviewed the materials from last year, but in typical Snape-fashion: with scathing remarks and tension-filled moments. He went around the room throwing out questions, leaving the hardest and most obscure for the Gryffindors (except for Hermione, who he had by now given up on trying to find a question she couldn’t answer). Harry wasn’t sure how he felt about Snape. For sure, the deep loathing was still there, but it had dissipated somewhat as Snape hadn’t insulted him as usual. Plus, whenever Harry felt his anger build, he could remember the sight
of Snape’s body flying across the library, for that always brought a smile to his lips. To Harry’s dismay, though, and despite all the studying over the summer, he couldn’t answer a single of Snape’s questions correctly. After his third failed attempt, Snape looked at him in disdain.

“Mr. Harrington, wipe that smile off your face. I understand that you’re previous education came from trade schools,” Snape said, practically spitting out the word trade, “but your lack of knowledge, even for a Gryffindor, astounds me! Tell me, what is the last potion that you studied?”

Harry thought hard, trying to remember the last potion he read about and truly understood. “Um…the Strengthening Draught, sir.”

Snape scoffed. “The Strengthening Draught? We covered that in winter term last year.” Snape shook his head in derision. “I sincerely hope your potion-brewing skills far exceeds your potions knowledge, or else I will have another Neville Longbottom on my hands.” Harry looked at Neville, who turned a bright pink. “Well, due to your obvious deficiencies, I’m going to have to re-arrange the class slightly. Mr. Harrington, you will be paired with Miss Granger. Hopefully some of her know-it-all-ness will rub off on you and kill two birds with one stone.”

Harry remembered why he hated Snape so much as he packed his bag and took the empty bench that Snape indicated. In his mind, Snape had just landed in a heap by the library entrance. Seconds later, Hermione sat next to him, and Harry could almost feel the icy chill radiating from her body. He turned and smiled at her, but was ignored completely. Harry sighed heavily, thinking of the mounds of homework that awaited him. Harry was used to spending many long hours in the library that first week, as all the professors piled on the homework so that the students “could be prepared for NEWTs.” It was like fifth year over again, except Harry didn’t have to waste time in detention with Umbridge. Instead, he had to spend extra hours in the library trying to catch up on his Potions and History classes. Dean, Neville, and Lavender provided a great deal of help, but Harry still spent long hours studying alone.

“Tough week, eh?”

Harry looked up at the smiling face of Ron. He couldn’t help but smile back at his old best friend. “Yeah, these classes are running me wild. Are we going to have this much homework the whole year?”

Overall, the first week of classes went by smoothly for Harry. It was a wonderful feeling being absolutely unremarkable. Harry was used to the attention he got whenever he walked the halls, and it was initially unnerving for Harry to walk around without anyone paying him any heed. He soon got used to it, and he reveled in it. Harry quickly found that he was behind in many classes, but fine in others. He was dreadfully behind in classes like History of Magic and Potions. But in other classes, Harry found his studying over the summer and his increased magical potential made-up for the missing months. In Transfigurations, he was able to perform the spells that Professor McGonnagal assigned the class, and he was actually bored in Defense Against the Dark Arts. The Professor, Justin Clarke, was the same professor as last year; he was the first Defense Against the Dark Arts professor to last more than a year during Harry’s stay at Hogwarts. Clarke covered many curses and counter-curses that Harry had already studied.
“Pretty much,” Ron replied, taking the chair next to him. Neville ambled by on his way up to their room, and Harry noticed Ron shoot a look in his direction.

“hey, what’s that all about? Neville’s a good guy, isn’t he?” Harry asked.

Ron followed Neville progress up the stairs before turning back to Harry. He sighed. “Yeah, I suppose he is. But he’s got this…this…thing for my sister!”

Harry grinned and placed a sympathetic hand on Ron’s arm. “Tough being a big brother, huh?”

Ron nodded, then grew excited. “Hey, so what are you doing tonight? Want to take a fly around the Quidditch pitch so I can see how good you are?”

Harry shook his head. “I’d love to, but I gotta look up a lot of those ingredients that Snape used in class. I haven’t heard of most of them,” he said dejectedly.

“Well in that case, how about one game of wizard’s chess before you start studying?”

“Sure,” Harry said, and then they set up a board. As they played, the Dean and Seamus joined them, mostly interfering with their game with conversation, but Harry didn’t mind; he didn’t expect to beat Ron anyways. Eventually, Lavender and Pavarti joined them as they shared stories; Harry telling modified (and sometimes completely made-up) stories about his old school, and listening to his own adventures from his Housemates, though it was interesting to hear them from another point of view. Harry was quite impressed with himself, even if he knew that there was a lot of exaggeration taking place. Hermione entered the common room from a meeting Head Boy/Girl meeting with the staff, and shot Ron a dirty look when she saw him playing chess with Harry. Ron rolled his eyes before getting up to talk to her, which gave Harry a chance to excuse himself and trudge to the library.

Finally, Saturday arrived, and with it, Quidditch try-outs. When Harry agreed to try-out for the House team, he knew immediately that he couldn’t use his old Firebolt. It would be too much of a coincidence, plus it was be hard to explain how the Leonard’s could afford a Firebolt when they couldn’t afford Hogwarts. So, Thursday night when everyone knew he would be in the library, Harry took out his invisibility cloak and the Marauder’s Map and took the familiar tunnel to Hogsmeade. There, after transforming his cloak to a nondescript black, Harry purchased a Comet 260, which was modestly priced. Harry returned to Hogwarts and put his new broomstick away before returning to the hours of studying abhe

It was a cool autumn day for the Quidditch try-outs, a slight breeze in the air. Harry arrived at the Quidditch pitch with his Comet over his shoulder. He stood in the back, a little uneasy among all the potential candidates who didn’t know him, even if he knew them. After standing about nervously for a moment, the current team arrived. Ron led the way with, to Harry’s great surprise, Hermione by his side, chatting away. Once they arrived, Hermione quickly called them to attention and explained the try-out procedure. Harry inched his way until he was next to Ron, who was talking to Ginny. He waited until they were finished, then he nudged Ron and asked quietly, “Is Hermione on the team?”

Ron looked confused, and then thought he understood. “Oh, that’s right, you weren’t here last year. When I was became captain, there wasn’t a lot of time left to prepare for the next match. Hermione helped me out a great deal to organize things and draw-up plays, and I practically begged her to help out this year too. But don’t worry, I won’t let her dislike of you keep you off the team,” he said reassuringly.

“But, but I thought she didn’t like Quidditch.”

“How did you know that?”

Harry flustered a moment, “oh, er, well, Lavender or Pavarti told me, I don’t remember.”

Ron nodded in acceptance, and then leaned his head in closer. “To tell you the truth, she doesn’t like it all,” he whispered, “but she’s really doing it for Harry. Harry Potter, I mean. It was his favorite sport.” Ron looked up. “Try-outs are about
to begin. Ready?” he asked with a grin.

Harry nodded and walked to where the other candidates were standing, but his mind was stuck on what Ron had said. Hermione was doing it for him. The thought made him happy, but at the same time he began to wonder what impact his leaving had on her. The Hermione who spoke to him coldly the first morning and ignored him ever since, who helps out with Quidditch is not the one he remembered. Then he heard his name called, and Harry put those thoughts aside and turned his attention on the Snitch. Harry mounted his broom and took to the skies. He instantly noticed the difference between the Comet 260 and his Firebolt: the Comet was less responsive, slower, and a little less of a smooth ride. It was still a good broom, and with Harry’s natural flying skills, it would perform admirably. The first few minutes in the air were slightly awkward for Harry. He hadn’t played a game of Quidditch in almost a year, and it took him a few moments to remember how to be a Seeker. But it came back quickly, and soon enough Harry went zooming after the Snitch, beating his competition to it every single time. It soon became apparent to all that Harry was a very good, perhaps great even, Seeker, better than Ginny (who was more than happy to be replaced and go back to being a Chaser), but he was, of course, not as good as the legendary Harry Potter.

“That was brilliant Sean!” Ron exclaimed, looking gleeful. The other team members congratulated Harry on being the newest Seeker, and even Hermione complimented him, although her smile didn’t reach her eyes. But overall, Harry was pleased and looking forward to the Quidditch season.
23. Training and the Daily Routine

The first week completed, Harry had something else to look forward during his second week: his first training session with Dumbledore. They had agreed to meet every Wednesday night. Although it was another thing in addition to Quidditch that took time away from studying, Harry knew that the training would be invaluable. After dinner on Wednesday, Harry went to the Room of Requirements. He found the door already visible, so he pulled on the handle and walked inside. Harry was pleased to see the room looking very much like it had during Harry’s DA meetings. Dumbledore was already there, waiting in the center of the room.

“Ah, hello there Mr. Harrington,” Dumbledore said. “How has your first week been?”

“Er, Ok, I guess. It’s a little harder than I thought being someone else. A couple times I mentioned things that happened last year or the year before that I shouldn’t know about,” Harry said. “I was able to make an excuse, but I know I’ll mess up sooner or later.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I imagine it will be difficult for you. I know you believe in what you’re doing, but please consider telling a few of your closest friends. The spell I gave you over the summer would come in handy.”

“I’ll think about it, Professor Dumbledore.”

“That is all I can ask,” Dumbledore said. “Now, shall we begin? First, let’s find out how much you’ve progressed.”

Without warning, Dumbledore sent a Tickling Charm at Harry. Harry reacted immediately, ducking to the side and drawing his wand in one swift motion. Pointing it at Dumbledore, he sent back a stunning spell. Dumbledore deflected it easily with a shielding charm, and then fired back a brilliant blue light. Harry quickly conjured a small bronze shield, but the shield shattered when Dumbledore’s spell made contact, forcing Harry to twist around to avoid the pieces.

“Very good, Mr. Harrington! Very good indeed!” Dumbledore cried happily. “Your reactions are still excellent, and I was most impressed by the shield you conjured.”

Harry felt his body relaxing as he realized that the impromptu duel was over. “It wasn’t that impressive. The shield broke right away.”

“True, but I didn’t expect you to be able to conjure anything yet.”

Harry gave Dumbledore a thin smile. “I spent months working on it. After I saw Voldemort use it, I thought it would come in handy.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Then we shall work to increase the toughness of your shields. Let’s begin.”

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Soon, October rolled its way around, and Harry’s days were filled with classes, homework, training with Dumbledore, and Quidditch practice. In fact, it was very much like years past (except for the sessions with Dumbledore), but Harry didn’t have his two best friends to really talk with. Although he spent a lot of his time in the library, Harry had been able to bond quite well with his fellow Gryffindors. Harry knew it was because of their shared past; even though they didn’t know it was Harry, he knew them and felt comfortable, and he was able to blend right in. Also, his position as Seeker on the House team gave him a sort of popularity, and he was able to stay friendly with Ron through their Quidditch practices. Harry noticed a subtle difference in Ron. Harry observed Ron as he talked to girls, formerly a harrowing prospect for the
red head. But now, Ron’s confidence on the Quidditch pitch seemed to carryover to his regular routine, and he was his usual self, whether it was with Dean and Seamus or Lavender and Pavarti. Although Harry was very happy for Ron, he felt a little discouraged by it: he attributed Ron’s positive change to the fact that he was no longer under Harry’s shadow, and Harry felt a little guilty for holding him back for so long.

Like Ron, Hermione had seemingly changed considerably as well, even ignoring her uncharacteristic dislike of him. Of course, she was Head Girl, but that was to be expected. What Harry did not expect was the easy way she interacted with other girls; she seemed much closer to Lavender and Pavarti then before, as well as the other girls of different Houses. The Hermione he remembered was always a little uncomfortable around the other girls in the school, and she preferred to spend her time with himself or Ron. But now, she seemed to split her free time equally (what there was of it, between studying for NEWTs and Head Girl duties) between Ron and the other girls. And like Ron, she seemed to exude a new confidence. Once again, Harry felt a little guilty, wondering why his best friends had changed for the better without him, suspecting that his absence had a positive affect on them both.

Hermione still wouldn’t talk or make eye contact with Harry. At first, it didn’t bother him. He didn’t feel ready to act like he didn’t know every little thing about her, pretend that they hadn’t gone through so much together. But as her icy treatment continued, Harry felt a little lost. He longed to talk to his other best friend again, but she continually ignored him, apparently not forgiving him for his mistake at the breakfast table the first day of classes. Harry also privately thought Hermione was mad at him for being the new Seeker, taking his own place from himself. He missed Hermione.

All these thoughts were in Harry’s head as he watched Hermione talk animatedly to Lavender and Pavarti before their Defense Against the Dark Arts class. It was Halloween, and most of the class looked forward to the Halloween feast. Ron, whose two favorite subjects were food and Quidditch, filled Harry’s mind full of images of the Halloween feast. They chatted awhile until Professor Clarke entered the room to begin class. Harry eased out his Potions textbook and hid it in his Defense textbook. Defense Against the Dark Arts had always been his best class, and with his training over the summer, it was even easier. Harry chose to spend his time on Potions, with one ear listening in case his name was called. As Harry began looking through the index for kappas scales, he heard Professor Clarke mention the Patronus charm. He looked up quickly.

“…Patronus Charm will be on your NEWTs. You should have no problems in producing the charm under controlled circumstances, as the NEWTs will be. However, keep in mind that most adult wizards cannot produce a Patronus when facing live Dementers, so I wouldn’t go off and try and find a Dementer just yet,” he said with a wink. “Now, let’s go around and practice. The incantation is Expecto Patronum, and you must think of your happiest memories as you say it. Miss Granger, would you like to start?”

Hermione nodded eagerly, then stood. “Expecto Patronum!” she cried, and a silver mist emitted from her wand, coalescing into the shape of an otter that padded around her. Hermione smiled warmly at it.

“Excellent!” cried Clarke. “Next,” he said, pointing to the next student in line.

Harry felt a moment of panic. He couldn’t produce his Patronus, or more accurately, he shouldn’t; Ron, Hermione, and the other former DA members would recognize his stag. Harry didn’t know if each Patronus was unique or if was possible for two people to have the same Patronus, but he didn’t want to risk it. He knew what he had to do: he had to fail. Harry waited his turn, noting with satisfaction that every former DA member could produce a Patronus; Clarke was practically jumping up and down in happiness at the skill of his class. When his turn came, Harry stood and thought of living at the Dursley’s; of his parents being murdered; and of Cedric, Sirius, and Hagrid dying before his eyes.

“Expecto Patronum!” Harry cried, and a silver mist briefly escaped his wand tip before disappearing.

Clarke looked surprised. “Again Mr. Harrington. And remember, happy thoughts.”

Harry pictured Hagrid’s bound form before him, being hit by Lestrange’s killing curse. He remembered his own torture, something he hadn’t thought about since he left the hospital ward last year. “Expecto Patronum!” he said, in a slightly shaky voice, and again, only a wisp of silver came from his wand. Twice more he tried, Professor Clarke clearly at a loss.
as to why his best student couldn’t cast the spell. Finally, Clarke moved on to the next student as Harry took his seat. Harry was especially depressed after reliving those horrible moments; he spent the rest of the class sullenly staring out of the window, ignoring the looks of the other students.

Once the bell rang signifying the end of class, Ron gave Harry a grin. “Cheer up, Harrington, you’ll master it in no time,” he said, thinking Harry’s gloominess was caused by his inability to cast the spell. “C’mon, let’s get to the Great Hall before all the good food is taken.” Harry smiled and didn’t see the point in mentioning that the House Elves always made sure they never ran out of food during a Feast.

Harry sat near Ron while they waited for the Feast to begin, discussing Quidditch. Hermione took her usual seat, giving Harry an icy stare.

“Hi Hermione,” he said.

“Sean.”

“Erm, that was a nice Patronus you made in class.”

“Hmm.”

Harry looked at Ron, who only shrugged in response. Harry was grateful for the start of the feast as the food magically appeared on the serving plates. As always, it was excellent, and Harry especially missed the wide variety of desserts that he couldn’t find in Boroughbridge or Harrogate. Finally, dinner wore to a close, and Harry and Hermione simultaneously reached for the last slice of pumpkin pie.

“Er, you take it Hermione,” Harry said, graciously.

“No thanks,” she said.

“Please I insist,” Harry said, hoping to somehow get on her good side. Instead, he got an impatient look.

“Just take it Sean. Once you do, another pie will appear and then we’ll both have a slice,” she said, irritation clear in her voice.

Harry blushed slightly. It seemed like a lost cause - she would never speak to him again. Depressed more than when he was in Defense class, Harry took the slice and put it on his plate. To both of their surprises, another pie did not emerge on the serving plate. Ron looked on, fascinated. “Wow, I guess they really do run out of food. Thank goodness we got here early!”

Harry and Hermione looked at Ron, and then shared an eye-roll with each other. “Here, Hermione,” Harry said, cutting his slice in half and offering it to Hermione. “Let’s share. Please.”

Hermione looked at him, and after a long moment she gave him a smile. It was a small smile, but a smile nonetheless, the first since the term started. As they ate their slices of pumpkin pie together, Harry felt that maybe there was hope, after all.

November arrived and brought with it the first Quidditch match of the year. Because of Gryffindor’s second-place finish last year, Gryffindor would not be playing a match until the end of November. Instead, the first match of the year pitted Ravenclaw against Hufflepuff. Although most of the school attends the matches anyways, Ron required attendance of his team; he said it would give them a chance to scout their opponent.

As Harry walked with the rest of the school towards the stadium, he could hear snippets of Ron’s conversation to whoever would listen.
“...they lost several positions, and I saw Hufflepuff practice. They looked pretty good, and if they can keep the match close and then Slytherin’s team...”

Harry looked at Ginny as they walked, and they shared an eye-roll. “Is he always like this?” Harry asked, not remembering Ron being this enthusiastic before.

Ginny shook her head. “It’s gotten worse after he made Captain. I’m amazed he manages to fit anything other than Quidditch in his brain,” she said with a smile.

Harry chuckled, then felt someone bump into his shoulder as they walked by. Looking up, he recognized Hermione ahead of him. He expected to see her walk without acknowledging him, but to his surprise, Hermione turned her head slightly and mouthed “sorry,” as she ran to catch up to Ron. A grin lit up Harry’s face. Ginny noticed as well. “Looks like she’s starting to come around,” she said happily; Hermione’s dislike of Sean made for some uncomfortable moments during practice.

Harry nodded hopefully. “I sure hope so.”

They reached the stadium and Harry sat next to Ginny and Natalie MacDonald, and they talked Seeker things while they watched. Hermione was there as well, filling parchment after parchment with notes on the performance of each team. Ron mostly spent his time screaming; Harry couldn’t see how he was planning any strategies or scouting with all his jumping up and down. It was a close and exciting match: Hufflepuff was definitely improved this year, and Ravenclaw was hurting after the graduation of their Seeker (Cho Chang, Harry remembered idly) and two other positions. Finally, after two hours of nail-biting action, the match ended with Ravenclaw suffering an enormous upset, losing by ten points to Hufflepuff. Ron was as excited as Hufflepuff House because he felt that a Ravenclaw loss would only help Gryffindor’s chances of reclaiming the Quidditch Cup. After the match, Harry participated in the mini-celebration for a few minutes before retreating back to the library; he had two parchments of Potions to fill, and he had very little idea what he would write.
24. Tutoring and Quidditch

Hermione Granger entered the library and groaned inwardly. Sean was there again! She nodded stiffly at him and walked to her normal table, pulling out her books and parchment and quills, and arranging them to her specifications. Ron was overly pleased with the Ravenclaw defeat and couldn’t concentrate on her notes of the match. Fortunately, Gryffindor wouldn’t play either team until February, so there was no rush. Rather than join in the mini-celebration, Hermione headed to the library for some peace and quiet, intending to review some of her notes for NEWTs and Defense Against the Dark Art.

The past two months were hard for Hermione. Dumbledore had called her and Ron to his office soon after the term began and told them that he suspended all searches for Harry, saying “he will come back when he is ready.” Well, to quote Hagrid, Codswallop! Someone needs to find Harry and knock some sense to him. Does the old man seriously believe Harry can train himself to face Voldemort? Hermione suspected there was more she was not being told, but there was little she could do about that. Additionally, Dumbledore told her and Ron the disturbing news that somehow, Bellatrix Lestrange escaped Azkaban again. Dumbledore knew Voldemort was involved, but wasn’t sure how he managed it; he assured them that the Order and the Ministry have made finding Lestrange a top priority. Hermione’s saving grace was NEWTs. It was strange, as most of her fellow seventh years would say that NEWTs are driving them crazy, but for Hermione, studying for NEWTs kept her sane, as she didn’t have to think about Harry or Lestrange. So, the library became her sanctuary from the rest of the world, as it had been for the previous six years.

But now, like in fourth year when Victor followed her around, her haven was tainted. She shouldn’t have been surprised to find that transfer student there as well; he seemed to spend more time in the library then Hermione did! Simply put, there was something about the new transfer student that bothered Hermione. It started when he wouldn’t even acknowledge her at the Welcome Feast. Then, the next day he actually sat in Harry’s seat! Ron explained that he didn’t know, but it still bothered her. Then, he became Seeker. For some reason, she was OK with Ginny being seeker, but the idea that Sean was Seeker upset her more than it should have. It’s not that he was unpleasant or mean; in fact, he became friends with the other Gryffindors surprisingly quickly, and many of the other girls seemed interested in him (though Hermione suspected that was because he was new and unknown). He tried so hard to be friendly with her, but there was just something about him that she couldn’t put her finger on.

Hermione turned her attention to her Defense homework. It was one of those rare times when she was having trouble in class. Sure, she was still getting high marks (she would be at the top of the class if not for that bloody Sean Harrington!), but it was difficult for her to perform the spells, and she had to put an inordinate number of hours studying for Defense compared to her other classes. She wondered if her problems were because the spells they were covering required more innate ability then theoretical knowledge, or whether every time she was in Defense she thought of Harry and those DA meetings.

After an hour, Hermione was ready to give up. The spells in question wouldn’t be covered for another two weeks, anyways. She packed up her books and spotted Sean as he scribbled away. A wave of pity washed over her as she watched him. Hermione knew he had performed well on his OWLs (he wouldn’t say how well, but well enough to get into Hogwarts), but she heard that his old schools didn’t prepare him as well for NEWTs. He was woefully behind in many of his classes, and he only excelled in Defense. Well, except for the Patronus charm. She was initially surprised that he couldn’t cast it properly, but then she remembered that he didn’t have the benefit of Harry’s tutoring like the others did. Regardless, Sean spent every night in the library, even on days when he had Quidditch practice, and he was almost always there before Hermione got to the library, and almost always stayed after she left. Hermione sighed; even though she disliked him, she knew as Head Girl she should try to help him. Besides, she knew there was no good reason why she disliked him so, and maybe helping him could let her overcome it. Hermione swung her bag over her shoulder and walked to Sean’s table.

“Hi there,” she said.
Sean looked up, surprised. “er, Hi Hermione. How are you?”

“Good,” she said. “Mind if I sit for a moment?” Sean nodded dumbly, then waved at a chair across from him. Hermione put her bag down on the table and did her best to smile at him. “Listen, I know you’re having problems with some of your subjects,” she said kindly. “Would you like some help?”

Sean stared at her a moment before recovering. “I, er, well,” he stammered. He paused a moment, as if choosing his words carefully. “I thought you hated me.”

Hermione blinked. Boy, this guy was blunt. “I don’t hate you. I was just…upset that first morning. But that was a long time ago,” she said, trying to look sincere.

Sean looked at her doubtfully. “I’m sorry for that. I didn’t know that was Harry’s old seat-”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hermione said quickly. “Ron explained. So, what do you say?”

“Well, I’d love to have the help, but I’d feel bad. I’m really behind in a lot of these classes, and I’m sure you have other things to do, especially since you’re Head Girl.”

Hermione thought a moment. “How about we make a deal? I’ll help you with your subjects, and you help me with Defense?”

Sean laughed. “Defense? Hermione, you get top marks in that class. You don’t need any help, especially from someone who can’t produce a Patronus.”

Hermione couldn’t help but smile at his self-deprecating humor. “True, but I spend an awful lot of time studying to get those marks. If you can help me with Defense and save me some time, I can spend that time with you, and we’ll be even.”

Sean visibly considered her offer. Then he smiled at her, “it’s a deal.”

“Great!” she said, then looked thoughtful. All of sudden, something about Sean seemed very familiar, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She voiced the question in her mind. “I know this may sound strange, but have we met before? You seem awfully familiar.”

Sean looked very uncomfortable, and he seemed lost in thought for a moment. Then his face brightened. “Yeah, I think so. I was in Diagon Alley one day last winter, and I think I ran into you outside of Flourish & Blott’s.”

Hermione thought hard, then remembered. He was the one that she thought was Harry. She blushed in embarrassment at the memory. “Oh, right. Sure, I remember now,” she said quickly. “Anyways, what are you working?” she asked, indicating the pile of books in front of him.

“Potions,” he said, and then moved his Potions textbook closer so Hermione could read it. “It’s this chapter. I just can’t get how burning the scales causes the potion to change to a yellow color,” he said in obvious frustration.

Hermione looked at the text. “Oh, it doesn’t explain it well here, that’s why. We covered that last year, and I guess the book expects you to know it already.”

Sean groaned. “No wonder I can’t understand half the things Snape says!”

Hermione placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry Sean, we’ll work it out together,” she said with a genuine smile. Sean smiled back, and together they began tackling Potions.

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Two weeks later, Hermione met Sean in an unused classroom to study for Defense Against the Dark Arts. They had been meeting twice a week - once for Hermione to help Sean, and the other time for Sean to help Hermione. Today, they were working on a new spell taught in Defense class. They quickly set the room up, conjuring tarps to protect the furniture from the spell they were working on.

Sean smiled at Hermione. “Ok, we’re doing the freezing spell. Watch me,” he said. Then, pointing his wand at the far end of the classroom, he cried, “Glaciacio!” A stream of white shot out of his wand and covered the wall in ice. He looked at Hermione with a smile. “Now you.”

Hermione was nervous. For some reason, she just couldn’t master this spell. She raised her wand at the wall and said “Glaciacio!” But instead of a stream of ice, Hermione produced a shower of snowflakes that gently arced high into the air before falling gently to the floor. She felt her cheeks blush.

Sean looked at the miniature snowfall and chuckled. “Hermione, Christmas isn’t for another month,” he teased gently.

Hermione giggled, then turned on him in mock anger. “Oh Yeah, Mr. Smarty-Pants?” she said, brandishing her wand at him.

Sean looked at her in alarm. “Whoa, easy there, Head Girl. No one has to get hurt. Just put the wand down, slowly,” he said with mock seriousness, a smile dancing in his eyes.

“Take that!” Hermione yelled. “Glaciacio!”

Sean ran from her, but in the closed classroom, all he could do is run around her. Hermione directed a spray of snow in his direction as ran, and soon a circle of snow appeared around her. Hermione finally stopped, collapsing in a fit of giggles. She looked up at Sean, who was covered in a thick layer of flakes, preparing to apologize, when all of a sudden a handful of snow was thrust down her back. She shrieked and jumped up, shaking her robes a vain effort to get the snow out of her back while Sean sat at a desk and laughed. After jumping around for a minute, Hermione settled down and fixed Sean with an eye. He cringed under her glare, until she broke out laughing and he happily joined in.

As Hermione sat on the floor laughing, surrounded by snow, her back cold and wet, she realized this was her first real laugh in a long time; it felt good to laugh. She looked at Sean fondly. Over the past two weeks, they have grown much closer. In addition to one-on-one tutoring sessions twice a week, they spent time together almost every day at Ron’s daily Quidditch practices. Although Hermione spent a lot of time research and developing plays with Ron, her role during the practices was limited to note taking, analysis, and post-practice critique. That didn’t keep her very busy during practices. Likewise, as a Seeker, Sean didn’t have to pay attention as much as the other members. While the Chasers and Beaters practices the intricate plays that Ron and Hermione developed, all Sean had to do was find the Snitch and generally keep out of the way. He had a few plays designed for him, distraction plays mostly, but otherwise he had some free time as the Ron would run the Chasers and Beaters through their paces. During those free times, Sean often kept Hermione company, and their friendship grew.

Sean had quickly grown on her. It was that same feeling that she had when they first talked in the library – he just seemed so familiar, so easy to talk too. Although she and Ron were still best friends, it wasn’t the same as when Harry was with them. They both had their other friends and interests (Ron had his Quidditch, Hermione had her friends that she made late last year), and they simply didn’t spend as much time together. But Sean was a bridge between them; he was on the Quidditch team, and he was becoming closer to Hermione. The two of them started spending more time with Sean and each other. They weren’t as close as they were with Harry though; Sean spent too much time in the library catching up. But she often wondered how it would be if he didn’t have to be in the library all the time.

Hermione felt all kinds of guilt about Sean, and she knew deep inside why: he reminded her of Harry. She felt like she was betraying him. What if Harry walked in the door right now? Would he feel like they replaced him with Sean, not only on the Quidditch pitch but also as part of their friendship? Would he be angry? Would he resent them and hate Sean? But she also felt bad for Sean. Although, they’ve gotten to know each other better over the weeks, Hermione knew that if Harry appeared tomorrow and demanded that she completely ignore Sean, she would do so without a second thought. And that made her a bad friend to Sean. She shook her head of those thoughts as Sean walked to her and helped her to
her feet. They continued their lesson until Hermione was able to produce a steady stream of ice from her wand.

Sean’s first Quidditch match arrived at the end of November. They were playing Slytherin, and the stands were packed as usual for the heated rivalry. Hermione was worried for Sean; she would have preferred that his first match be in a less hostile environment, where he could ease into the Hogwarts Quidditch season. Instead, he was thrown into the crucible of a Gryffindor-Slytherin match. Surprisingly, he seemed quite calm and was even able to eat breakfast the day of the match, something not even Ron could always accomplish.

“Oy! Sean, Hermione, let’s go,” Ron called out. The rest of the team was arrayed behind him. Hermione nodded and collected her notes and playbook while Sean shoveled down last-minute bacon. They followed Ron out to the Quidditch pitch and into the team locker room. As the team sat, Hermione went over her scouting report (limited as Slytherin hasn’t played yet, but still useful based on last year’s performance), and then Ron went over the plays. He gave a final, rousing pep talk, and the team was ready to go. Hermione thought that Sean looked incredibly focused and very excited. He had that same look in his eye that she’d seen countless times in Harry.

Hermione retreated to the stands as the teams were introduced, flying about the stadium. She was close enough that she could see Sean’s face, and it seemed to glow from pure exhilaration. As they faced off with the Slytherin team, she was surprised to see a look of intense disgust as he faced opposite of the Slytherin Seeker, Draco Malfoy. While Draco often inspired looks of disgust, Hermione didn’t expect to see such loathing in Sean’s face; she wouldn’t have thought he had enough time to hate the Slytherin yet. But one shouldn’t underestimate Malfoy’s ability to inspire hatred and disgust.

With a blow of a whistle, the Quaffle was released and play began in earnest.

[A/N: blah blah, Quidditch stuff happens here]

All of a sudden, Hermione let out a loud gasp and clasped her hand over her mouth. From high above the stadium, Sean suddenly fell into a steep, almost vertical dive, heading directly for the ground. Malfoy was nearby, and immediately followed him, his superior broom covering the ground quickly. But Sean somehow managed to squeeze every 28.3 grams (A/N: an ounce to us Americans) of speed from his broom and maintained a small lead. Too quickly, they were approaching the ground at breathtaking speed. Seconds later, Malfoy pulled up and hovered, waiting to see which direction the Snitch would take. Sean, however, continued his dive, picking up more speed if possible. Hermione silently pleaded for him to pull up, but he didn’t. Every eye in the stadium turned to watch in that split second, as Sean tried to pull up before slamming into the ground. He partially succeeded, but the tail of his broom hit the ground, and he went flying in one direction while his broom flipped end-over-end in another. Sean hit the ground hard and rolled, until his limp body finally skidded to a stop, unmoving. However, the game played on while Madams Pomfrey and Hooch rushed in his direction. Before they reached him though, Sean raised his right arm slowly, the Snitch firmly clasped in his hand. The stands erupted in a thunderous cheer, and Madam Hooch blew the whistle, ending the game with a Gryffindor victory. Hermione let out a deep breath that she didn’t even remember holding, and then rushed to the pitch to make sure Sean was OK. As she ran, she suddenly felt like she’d done this before.
Chapter: 25

A/N: Finally! Here’s one of the chapters that I envisioned when I first thought of this story. Basically, everything that happened to this point I wrote simply to get to this very chapter (well, the part in Hogsmeade, at least). I hope you enjoy!

25. Attack on Hogsmeade

Harry lay on the ground, the roar of the crowd washing over him. He felt like one great bruise, and his vast experience of falling off brooms told him that he had broken at least one rib, but that was the extent of any major injuries. The dive had been thrilling, but he had misjudged his broom. He had only remembered at the last second, the Snitch in hand, that he wasn’t on his old Firebolt. He reacted instinctively, pulling up hard, harder than he would have on his old broom. But he underestimated the Comet 260, and it responded too well; instead of leveling out, he pointed it upward, and the tail scraped the ground, flinging him from the broom. It was a painful landing, but he’s had worse, and the important thing was that the Snitch was caught and the Slytherins had lost again. Madam Pomfrey’s face appeared in his field of vision. She heard him tut over him and murmur something that sounded like, “just like Harry Potter.” He felt a warm blast of air hit his face, and he was sure that Madam Pomfrey cast a spell. Harry began to feel sleepy and his vision started to fade. The last thing he saw was Hermione’s worried face above his own.

Harry sat in the hospital wing, surrounded by his Quidditch teammates, eating Chocolate Frogs. It was just like old times, and Harry was pleased. Hermione even gave him her standard speech (“that was foolish! You could have been killed!”), and he smiled warmly at her…no victory would be complete without it. Finally, Madam Pomfrey shooed everyone out so Harry could rest.

“Hurry up and get better soon!” Ginny said with a smile.

“Yeah, we’ll save you some butterbeers at the party later,” said Jack Sloper.

Harry waved as the team left, and he reflected on the past three months. To be honest, they were probably the best three months he’d ever had at Hogwarts. True, there were some bad things. He had more homework then ever, trying to catch up in Potions as well as studying for NEWTs. It was also tough at first with Hermione ignoring him. But all the bad points were more than made up for by the fact that he wasn’t being stared at, whispered about, or noticed in any way; he was able to walk the halls in peace. And best of all, he had his best friends back now, even if he couldn’t truly be himself with them. He knew some of anonymity would disappear after the Quidditch victory, and he’d probably have Malfoy harassing him again, but it was worth it to play again. Harry turned over to get some rest and allow his ribs to heal. As he fell asleep, he noticed with a smile that he wasn’t in his usual bed; this bed was much nicer.

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Winter break came and went without any drama. Harry was supremely worried that Voldemort had restored the Orb of Tomsduval and would attack at any moment, but Dumbledore received intelligence that the wizard in charge of the restoration was killed, indicating that a severe setback had occurred. Dumbledore figured that they had at least another six months before Voldemort could attempt another attack, and in the meantime the Order focused on slowing down his terror attacks.

Harry submitted his name to Professor McGonnagal to stay, as he had done every year before. He was the only seventh-year student to stay, as the rest had gone home to spend their last Winter break with their families. He got a lot of sympathetic looks from his friends, but Harry was more than happy to stay. He briefly considered taking a trip to Harrogate, but it seemed too much trouble to sneak out of the castle. His holiday break was spent studying in the library and daily lessons with Dumbledore. His progress in dueling was remarkable – it truly proved that you couldn’t master dueling from a book. Harry was able to conjure a very nice shield that could withstand several of all but the most powerful spells Dumbledore could produce. Harry even mastered the Serpensortia spell; he felt a little uneasy about it, since it
seemed clearly a sinister spell. But he figured that if Voldemort gave him the power to speak to snakes, he might as well take advantage of it.

One thing that he could no longer do, however, was peek into Voldemort’s mind. After the events of his sixth year, Dumbledore cast several protective wards that prevented mind contact at Hogwarts. Although that meant that Harry was protected, it also meant he couldn’t reach out to Voldemort. Harry did not like losing this bit of intelligence, but he was forced to be satisfied by Order reports.

Christmas morning arrived, and Harry was surprised to find a number of presents waiting at the foot of his bed. Being the new kid, Harry wasn’t expecting anything, and he was thrilled. He opened his gifts from Ron (a Quidditch book on Seekers, one Ron had already given him, Harry thought with a smile) and Hermione (a homework planner like the one he go in fifth year, though Harry knew he had more use for it this year) with glee. After opening his gifts, Harry reached into his trunk and retrieved the parchment on which Dumbledore’s spell was written. Not for the first time, he stared at it; each day it seemed to be harder and harder to maintain his façade; each day he wanted to tell Ron and Hermione his true identity. But Harry knew that the longer he kept his secret from them, the harder it would be to tell them, feeling that they would be hurt that he kept his secret for so long. Finally he put the parchment away, the words long since memorized, and he went downstairs for Christmas breakfast.

January arrived with the Ravenclaw-Slytherin match, which Slytherin won handily. Ravenclaw was 0-2 and their chances of repeating as champion were slim indeed. Ron was ecstatic, and was preparing almost maniacally for their match with Hufflepuff in February. In late January, the event Harry was looking forward to arrived, his “first” Hogsmeade weekend. There had been one before, during the Fall term, but Harry was too inundated with Potions at the time to be able to go. It had been over a year and half since he had last visited Hogsmeade, remembering with a heavy feeling in his stomach the reason why he missed last year’s trip.

Harry had another reason to be pleased: he was going with Ron and Hermione, just like old times. Hermione originally wasn’t going to go, citing homework and NEWTs. But when she realized that Harry, as Sean, had never been to Hogsmeade before, she took it upon herself to show him around. She easily enlisted the aid of Ron, and it was quickly decided the three of them would spend the day together. They left Hogwarts together, Hermione in the middle linking arms with the two boys, and Harry didn’t think he could ever be happier.

The Hogsmeade visit started out as all the others had; stops at the bookstore, Zonko’s, the Quidditch store, and Honeydukes. They ran into their fellow students several times, but overall, the three of them kept to themselves. Finally, with bags laden down with sweets and other packages, they entered the Three Broomsticks for butterbeer. They found a table with Dean, Seamus, and Lavender.

“So Sean,” Lavender said with a smile, “how are you enjoying Hogsmeade so far?”

“Oh, it wonderful! I didn’t even know there were all wizarding towns like this!” Sean gushed. He privately felt that he was becoming quite skilled as an actor.

“Yeah, he was blown away by all the sweets at Honeydukes,” Ron chimed in.

“Although he and Ron spent way to much time at the Quidditch shop,” Hermione pouted. Lavender gave her a sympathetic look while the boys laughed. All of a sudden, a piercing scream was heard outside. The Gryffindors looked at each other a moment before rushing outside. What they saw filled them with dread.

It was as if a blanket of darkness had covered the town. Harry felt a cold numbness, and he felt despair fill him. He immediately recognized what was happening, as it seemed to happen to Harry all too often. He looked around wildly for the source, as Lavender started to shake uncontrollably. He finally spotted them coming down the main road; eight Dementers glided towards them, a hooded figure walking ahead of them.
Suddenly, the figure spotted them, and pointed at Harry. “There they are,” the figure screamed. “Get them!” The voice only added to Harry’s feeling of misery. He would know that voice anywhere, the voice of Bellatrix Lestrange. That woman had more lives then a cat! Harry knew that she couldn’t have recognized him, and he looked behind him to see whom she was pointing at. Behind him stood only Ron and Hermione, and he remembered the Daily Prophet article; Lestrange was seeking revenge on his two best friends. He saw that the effects of the Dementers paralyzed them, and he grabbed each of their hands and pulled them away from the oncoming Dementers. Harry led them away from the populated area of Hogsmeade, hoping to spare innocents from the Dementers.

They ran and ran, hoping to escape their pursuers. Harry led them down street after street, but it had been too long since Harry had last been to Hogsmeade, and Ron and Hermione were in no condition to direct him. Harry turned a corner, only to find that he had led the three of them into a dead end. Crying out in frustration, Harry quickly turned them around and headed back to the main street, only to find all eight Dementers slowly turning into the alley. Harry turned back and propelled his friends further down the alley, searching desperately for a door or ladder or anything to escape.

Their backs to the wall, Harry turned to his friends. Ron had a glazed look in his eyes, and Hermione was in tears. He shook them each hard by the shoulders, “Ron! Hermione!” he screamed in their faces. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the Dementers making their slow approach. “Snap out of it! You need to cast a Patronus!” But neither would respond. Ron would only stand there, mumbling something about flying brains under his breath. Hermione sank to her knees, tears spilling out of her eyes. Harry could hear her moaning, “don’t leave me! Please don’t leave me!”

Harry knew he had no choice. He didn’t want to, but the Dementers were almost upon them, and his friends were incapacitated. He turned and drew his wand. “Expecto Patronum!” he cried, but was shocked to see only a small wisp of silver escape his wand. He suddenly felt the despair crash down around him. Images of the last moments of Sirius and Hagrid flashed through his brain. He shook his head; if he didn’t do anything, Ron and Hermione were going to die. They were counting on him. He focused on the past three months, remembering the happy feelings, playing Quidditch, the snow fight in the classroom. He raised his wand again.

“Expecto Patronum!” he yelled, and this time a cloud of silver sprang from his wand, quickly taking the shape of a stag. The Dementers paused a moment, and Harry screamed at his Patronus, “Over there! Get them!” The stag obeyed, and it sprang forward, dashing at the Dementers and crashing them aside like bowling pins. It turned and began impaling Dementers on its horns, sending them retreating into the darkness they created. Harry pointed and shouted at his stag, directing him after each and every Dementer. Finally, the three friends were alone, and Harry walked up to his Patronus. He rubbed its head gently, and the stag seemed to nuzzle his hand. “It’s good to see you again, Prongs. I missed you,” Harry said with a wistful smile, and then the stag disappeared. Sighing in relief, Harry turned around to check on his friends. He saw that Ron had passed out, but Hermione looked back at him with wide-eyes, her eyes sparkling from tears. “Harry?” she asked in a quiet voice, before falling unconscious.
Chapter: 26

Hermione awoke slowly, not sure if she had just had a good dream or a horrible nightmare. She opened her eyes and saw she was in the hospital wing. She groaned as her head ached, which caught the attention of Madam Pomfrey.

"Miss Granger, rest easy. Here, take this," she said, handing Hermione a slap of chocolate. Hermione accepted the chocolate, broke of a piece, and placed it in her mouth.

"What happened?" she asked after swallowing. It made her feel better, so she ate another piece.

"You're suffering the effects of being so close to Dementers," Madam Pomfrey. She shivered. "I don't know how those things got into Hogsmeade, but a number of students were affected. Fortunately, there are no permanent injuries."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully, nibbling on the second piece of chocolate. "How did I get here?"

"Once we heard that the students were in danger, the professors and I rushed to Hogsmeade. We were stationed in the town center, taking care of the wounded, when Mr. Harrington appeared and brought you and Mr. Weasley to us. You were both unconscious, and we took you here."

Hermione nodded, then remembered. Harry! She had seen Harry! But was it just an effect of the Dementers, part of her memories of Harry leaving her last year, or was it really him? She didn't know what to think. Madam Pomfrey left to tend to the other students once she was assured Hermione was fine. Hermione sat up in bed, finishing her chocolate, and thought of everything she knew about Sean Harrington. Was Sean Harry? The idea seemed preposterous! Surely she would know Harry, no matter what he looked like, right? But she could have sworn she saw his stag Patronus driving off the Dementers. But she was so weak from the Dementers that maybe it was in her imagination, or maybe it was just a reflection of her deepest hopes. But it would explain a lot; it would explain how familiar he seemed; how he seemed to know things he shouldn't; how quickly and easily he got along with the other Gryffindors; how he was so good a Seeker; and why he couldn't, or wouldn't, perform the Patronus charm in class. A moan from the bed to her right caught her attention, and she happily saw that Ron was waking up. Maybe he had seen the same thing she did.

"Ron! Ron! Wake up!" Hermione urged. Ron made an unintelligible noise and looked around groggily. "Wake up Ron!" Hermione said impatiently. "Here, eat some chocolate." Ron slowly reached for the chocolate by his bed and took a large bite. Hermione waited until he seemed fully awakened.

"What happened?" he asked.

Hermione sighed, then said quickly, "The Dementers attacked us, remember? They drove us into a dead end, and Sean saved us somehow. They brought us here and we're safe now."

Ron looked at her with slightly glazed eyes, slowly remembering what happened. "Ah, OK."

"But Ron," Hermione said, "Do you remember what Sean did? Do you remember his Patronus?"

Ron shook his head. "Sean made a Patronus? I thought he couldn't."
Hermione nodded. “He can, and guess what?” she asked. Without waiting for an answer, she said, “it’s a stag Patronus.”

“Huh? A stag? You mean like Harry’s?”

“Exactly like Harry’s!” Hermione said excitedly.

“Waitaminute. What are you saying?”

“Think about it Ron. He just appears this year out of nowhere at the same time that Dumbledore stops looking for Harry. He seems so familiar, and he knows things about us that I certainly don’t remember telling him. He’s a natural seeker, even on that old broom of his; he flies exactly like Harry!”

Ron looked thoughtful for a moment. “But the scar…”

“Ok, I don’t know how he did that, but change his eyes to green, and his hair to black. Switch his glasses with Harry’s old glasses, and doesn’t he look just like him?”

“So what you’re saying is that-”

“Yes!” she said breathlessly. “Sean is Sean!”

Ron looked confused. “Huh?”

Hermione realized what she said. “I mean, Sean is Sean. Wait, that’s not what I meant to say. I mean, Sean Harrington is Sean Harrington. Argh!”

Ron laughed at her look of frustration. “Easy there, Hermione. I think you mean that Sean is actually Sean. Whoa!”

They looked at each other, confused. Hermione could say the words in her mind, but it wouldn’t come out of her mouth. “Sean is Sean,” she whispered, confused. At that moment, the door to the infirmary opened and the person in question entered.

Sean walked until he was in-between their beds, looking at his shoes. He looked extremely anxious. “Are you two ok?” he asked.

Hermione ignored the question. “Sean?” she asked, and then growled in frustration. Sean gave her a pained look. Then he lowered his voice.

“I talked to Madam Pomfrey; you two should be out of here in an hour or so. Meet me at the usual spot by the lake during dinner. I’ll bring the food,” he whispered, then walked out of the room without giving them a chance to respond.

Hermione and Ron stared at him as he left, then looked at each other. Things were strange indeed.

Once they were released from the hospital wing, Ron and Hermione went looking for Sean, but they couldn’t find him. They discussed what happened in detail; they figured out something was preventing them from linking the words Sean and Harry together, and they were certain that Sean was Harry in disguise (or at least Hermione was certain), supported by the fact that he asked to meet them in the usual spot by the lake. Ron brought up that Sean might just know Harry very well, but Hermione still believed it was Harry who saved them in Hogsmeade.

Dinnertime arrived, the main topic of conversation being the Dementer attack. Although no one knew how the Dementers were repelled, they knew Lestrange had escaped again. A few students, mostly younger ones, were still recovering in the hospital ward. Ron and Hermione by-passed the Great Hall and left the Entrance Hall together. It was a brisk winter
day, but calm, and a layer of snow covered the ground. The two students wore their thickest cloaks, scarves, and
gloves, and Hermione conjured three bluebell flames (each in its own jar) that kept them warm. They walked slowly to the
lake, each lost in their own thoughts. Hermione’s were a jumble; she was incredibly nervous. What if it really was
Harry? What would she say? Was he still mad at them? Was she mad at him? She honestly had no idea how she would
react when and if she saw Harry. As they got nearer to their favorite spot, they saw a lone figure, facing towards the
lake, away from them. When they got to within a few meters of him, he turned around slowly.

“er, Hi,” Sean said awkwardly. Hermione and Ron just looked at him. “Well,” he continued, “I guess the best way is to
just show you.” Sean scrunched up his face and seemed to concentrate. In seconds, his blond hair became raven-black,
and his blue eyes became emerald green. His previously smooth forehead changed, and a lightning bolt-shaped scar
appeared. Sean Harrington is Harry Potter. He looked at them expectantly, almost fearfully.

Once she was sure that he was Harry, Hermione gave in to her emotions. She flung herself at Harry in a tight hug,
holding on to him with everything she had. Harry staggered backwards a bit, surprised for a moment, before putting his
arms around her. Tears began to fall from Hermione’s eyes, but they were tears of happiness, not sadness. After a long
while, when there was no sign of Hermione letting go anytime soon, Ron gently untangled the two. Then, he did
something that surprised both Harry and Hermione: he grabbed Harry in a huge bear hug, lifting him off his feet and
spinning him around. After Ron released him, Harry motioned for them to sit, gesturing at the food and the blanket he
had prepared. No one had spoken yet, each of the three friends too choked up to talk. They sat down and for a moment
just looked at each other. Finally, Harry broke the silence.

“um, well, I guess I have a lot of explaining to do,” he said hesitantly. “But first, I want to say how sorry I am for
everything. For getting you two in this mess with Voldemort in the first place; for keeping you guys in my shadow while I
was here, and for leaving you guys and making you worry about me. I know you probably won’t forgive me—”

“Harry Potter! What are you talking about?” Hermione interrupted. “It’s all our fault. We should have been there for you
before,” she said tearfully. “It’s you who has to forgive us, not the other way around.”

“She’s right, mate,” Ron said. “I was absolutely dreadful to you last year. I know I have a problem, but I think I’ve
worked through it, with Hermione’s help. We’ll always stand by you, no matter what.”

Harry looked stunned. He looked at Hermione, who nodded. Harry got teary for a moment, before being enveloped into
by his two friends in a group hug. No words were needed, for the moment.

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“So, I talked to Dumbledore, and he helped plan this whole transfer student idea. He’s been giving me private lessons
once a week too,” Harry said as he polished off a chicken wing. He had spent almost an hour telling Ron and Hermione
about the events of the summer as they ate the food Dobby provided. Hermione was amazed at the things he did on his
own, impressed by his independence and how hard he worked. She was also impressed that he actually read Hogwarts, A
History, although Ron seemed dismayed (“Oy, now I’ll have to listen to the both of you telling me to read it”). She was
very relieved as well, for she had feared that Harry was off searching for Voldemort, encountering danger and fighting for
his life every day. Ron was equally impressed; the idea that anyone could live on their own at their age was incredible.
They were both amazed by some of the spells he learned, and Harry’s robes fascinated Hermione. She threw question
after question about how it worked. Ron was more interested in the ring that allowed Harry to do underage magic,
saying how he wished he had one before he turned seventeen. Harry also explained why they couldn’t say his name.
While they were unconscious, Harry told them how he cast Dumbledore’s spell on them, figuring that Hermione might figure
out his secret. He apologized for casting a spell on them, but they dismissed it. Hermione was slightly miffed that he kept
his secret from them for so long, but her happiness at his return and relief that Sean was Harry overrode any hurt feelings.

Although he never said so, Hermione could hear the loneliness in his voice as he told his story. He never mentioned it
directly, but Hermione picked up on the cues when he told them about some of his days spent practicing. Hermione didn’t
wish to bring it up in front of Ron, but she wanted to somehow show Harry that they were they for him now, that he
wasn’t alone any longer. Throughout his story, she made it a point to give him encouraging smiles and comments,
touching him tenderly when she felt he needed it. She smiled modestly when Harry mentioned how many times he wished she were there to explain something; but inside she felt that she should have been there with him. She was happy to know that he still needed her, but she couldn’t help but feel she let him down by not being in Boroughbridge with him.

Suddenly, Hermione gasped. “Oh no!” she groaned. “I was so awful to you earlier this year Harry! Forgive me?”

Harry chuckled. “I’m just glad you changed your mind.”

“So,” Ron said. “What will you do now?”

“What will we do now, you mean,” Hermione corrected with a smile.

Harry chuckled. “I want to keep my disguise; I don’t want Voldemort to find out I’m back.” His friends nodded. “Otherwise, I don’t know. Just continue the way things are, I guess.” Then he smiled, that smile that Hermione had missed so much. “It’ll be much better though, now that you two know the truth,” he said earnestly. That prompted another round of hugs, even from Ron, before they packed up the remains of their picnic and returned to the castle.
Chapter: 27

A/N: Once again, thanks for the reviews! The first thing I do when I get to work is check to make sure I’m still doing an OK job with this story. There are about 5 chapters left after this one. I’m going to throw in a couple angsty and fluffy chapters before getting back to the action.

Oh, I’m a die-hard Chicago Cubs fan (American baseball); I’ve been so since I was ten (by some cruel twist of fate I just missed the 1984 season! Argh!), so I’m not some bandwagon jumper. Tonight is Game 1 of the NLCS, so go Cubbies! C’mon Sosa! Earn your money and drive in a run or two!!

Apologies to any Marlins fans who may be reading this, but you guys already got your rings anyways ;)

27. Breakfast News and the Prophecy Revealed

It was as if a huge weight had been lifted from Hermione’s shoulders. Everything felt infinitely better now that Harry was back. And not only was Harry back, but her internal conflict around Sean was proven unnecessary. She thought back over the past months at the clues and hints that Sean was Harry, and she berated herself for not putting two and two together. She also marveled at the spell Dumbledore created; it was truly a masterpiece, and very necessary: many times, she could tell Ron would have revealed the truth if not for the spell. The three of them spent most of their time together, just like old times, studying for the upcoming NEWTs. Harry seemed very grateful for the homework planner that she gave him, but she was a little embarrassed when she realized that she had given him the exact same present just two years ago.

A week after she found out the truth, the three were sitting to breakfast on a sunny Sunday morning. Her Sunday Daily arrived, and Hermione spread out the paper while Ron and Harry discussed Quidditch beside her. She gave a small gasp as she read the front page.

YOU-KNOW-WHO ATTACK CLAIMS THREE LIVES. MESSAGE FOUND FOR BOY-WHO-LIVED

By Michael Perry, Staff Reporter

Three people were killed in a late night Death Eater attack on the city of Bath. Although details are still sketchy, a source within the Auror division reports that anywhere from eight to twelve Death Eaters approached Bath from the north on broomsticks around one in the morning. They conducted several strafing runs, setting fires to many homes in the wizarding section of the city. Several homes were lost, and three wizards lost their lives fighting the blaze. Two Muggles were also killed in the attack. Eyewitness report that the Dark Mark could be seen for miles, and additional Ministry officials were brought in to Obliviate nearby Muggles.

The Daily Prophet has also learned that the word “Potter” was found inscribed below the Dark Mark. Insiders believe that You-Know-Who has grown frustrated with the disappearance of the Boy-Who-Lived and is resorting to attacks to draw him out into the open. The office of the Minister of Magic refused to comment on the latest…

Harry and Ron looked up when they heard her gasp. “What is it?” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” Ron said, “What has You-Know-Who done now?”

Hermione quickly folded the newspaper in half and stood, clearing her plate with a flick of her wand. “It’s nothing,” she said in a high-pitched voice.

“What do you mean nothing? Your face went as white as Nearly Headless Nick!” Ron said.
“It’s just another attack. In Bath, this time. Three wizards and two Muggles were killed.” Hermione said as she quickly gathered her things and started to walk away. Harry grabbed her wrist before she could get far.

“Hermione,” he said in a low voice. “What happened?”

“It’s nothing, really Sean. Please let me go, I-I have to go to the library,” Hermione pleaded.

“No. Let me see the paper.”

Hermione panicked. She couldn’t let Harry read the story; she knew he would feel guilty and might try to do something he’d regret later. “Please Sean, trust me. You don’t need to read it.”

“What happened that you don’t want me to know about?”

“It’s nothing, just another attack. Please let me go,” she begged, struggling to escape his grasp.

“Not until you give me the paper.”

“Please trust me Sean. It’s better this way; it’s for your own good.” But as soon as the words left her mouth, she knew it was the absolutely wrong thing to say. Harry’s eyes narrowed, and his previously impatient face turned into one of betrayal.

“Fine!” he spat, practically throwing her wrist aside, the disgust evident in his voice. “You’re the last person I expected to keep things from me, for my own good. Go! Go to the library! You think I can’t find a Sunday Daily myself?” Harry turned away from her and stabbed savagely at a sausage with his fork.

Hermione just stood there. She could have kicked herself for her words. Of all the things she knew about Harry, she knew he hated being kept in the dark. The look on his face reminded her too painfully of their conversation in the empty classroom last year. She couldn’t repeat that mistake. She sat down next to Harry and offered the paper to him. “I’m sorry,” she said in a quiet voice. “You’re right. Here.”

Harry didn’t lift his gaze from his plate, and he didn’t move for what felt like an eternity. Finally, he put down his fork and took the paper from her outstretched hand. He looked at her briefly, and then reached for a small plate of toast. “Here,” he said, meeting her eyes, “Eat. You didn’t finish your breakfast.” Hermione took a bite of the toast gratefully, accepting it for what it is – an offer of reconciliation. He met her eyes again, understanding passing between them, before Harry turned his attention to the story. Ron read over his shoulder while Hermione watching Harry’s face anxiously. She saw Harry’s face change from curiosity to shock to despair. She could practically feel the guilt and anger coming in waves off of his body. Without a word, Harry stood and walked out of the Great Hall. Hermione and Ron immediately got up and followed. They shadowed him at a discrete distance as Harry walked towards an empty classroom. Ron and Hermione followed him inside and shut the door behind them. Harry’s back was turned towards them, and it was silent for a full minute.

“Damn Voldemort!” Harry cried out in anger, his fists pounding on the teacher’s desk. Ron winced at hearing the name. Hermione was worried. She knew that Harry had an overdeveloped sense responsibility and gallantry, and that he could be very rash when reacting emotionally. She tried to calm him down. “Listen Sean, it’s not your fault. Voldemort’s been attacking cities all year long; he would have still attacked Bath whether you were in hiding or not,” she said in a soothing voice. Harry didn’t respond.

“Hermione’s right,” Ron said. “It’s not your fault. You-Know-Who just gets his kicks from tormenting you. He’s got an unhealthy obsession with killing you.” Hermione shot Ron a look; it was times like these that she wished he were a bit...discrete.

“Please Sean,” Hermione said apprehensively. “Don’t do anything rash.”

“Rash?” Harry said, rounding on them. “Like what, Hermione? Rash like heading down the trap door past Fluffy? Rash
like entering the Chamber of Secrets or entering the Whomping Willow? Rash like making us all go to the Department of Mysteries? Is that what you mean by rash, Hermione?” he yelled. “Or is there something else that you’re trying to say? Something about a hero complex?”

Hermione paled, but she didn’t back down. “That’s not what I meant at all Sean. I just want you to be safe,” she said, her concern clear in her eyes.

Harry looked at her angrily a moment. “Did you ever wonder why?” Harry asked suddenly.

Ron looked at Hermione in confusion. “Why what?”

Hermione looked up at them. “Why Voldemort’s been so obsessed with killing me?”

Hermione looked at Ron, equally confused. They both shook their heads.

“Do you remember the prophecy? The little glass ball Voldemort was after?”

Hermione nodded slowly, remembering. “Yeah, but we stopped him. The prophecy was destroyed. You and Neville both couldn’t hear it over the fighting,” she said.

Harry shook his head. “Neville and I couldn’t hear it, but Dumbledore heard it. He heard the original version, and he told me.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other in surprise; Harry never told them this before. “Wh-What did it say?” Ron asked timidly.

“It said that the one with the power to defeat Voldemort would be born when I was born, to parents that match my parents, and that Voldemort would mark him as his equal.” Pointing to his scar, Harry said, “Marked.” Then he turned around again and faced out a window. He took a deep breath, and his shoulders tensed. “It also said that we both couldn’t be alive at the same time, and that one of us would have to kill the other. That’s why he’s after me, and that’s why Dumbledore seems to care so much about me. They both know that I’m the only one who can defeat Voldemort. Or die trying.”

“Oh God…” Hermione whispered. She suddenly felt helpless, and she couldn’t think of any words that could possibly make him feel better. She looked at Ron and could tell he was at a loss as well. So, Hermione did the only thing she could think of, what she felt that she should have done in the astronomy tower last year. She went up to Harry and hugged him, her cheek resting against his back. She felt him stiffen at her touch, and wondered for millionth time what kind of life he must have led to make him so wary of physical contact, to always feel so uncomfortable when hugged. But Hermione didn’t let go; if anything, she held on tighter. For several minutes the two stood silently, unmoving. Gradually, Hermione felt his shoulders start to relax, the tension leaving his body. She felt him start to move, so she released him. He turned around, and this time, he hugged her, the first time she could ever remember him initiating a hug. They held each other for a moment, before Harry released her.

“Thanks,” he said quietly, looking at her in the eyes. Hermione shivered slightly, realizing suddenly that there’s been a lot of intense looks shared between them lately.

Ron came up to him, still at a loss for words. He put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Well, erm, you know you won’t have to do any of this alone, right? We’ll always stand by you, Sean.”

“Promise us, Sean. Promise us that you’ll let us help you, that you won’t go facing him alone,” Hermione pleaded.

Harry nodded and said, “I promise,” but Hermione saw it in his eyes – he had no intention of keeping that promise. But she stayed silent for now, content with the knowledge that they had lifted his burden, even if only a little bit.
Chapter: 28

A/N: A little bit of angst, since who doesn’t love angst? A bit long, and nothing really happens (except for the angsty bits). Just a warning, I switch POVs in the middle. It shouldn’t be confusing, but I decided to switch POVs rather than separate them into two short chapters. At the rate I’m posting, the last chapter should be posted by the middle of next week, so almost done.

Thanks for the wonderful reviews!

Anyone catch that game last night? Game one was a nail-biter (Argh! Stinkin’ Zambrano! Stinkin’ bullpen!), and Game 2 was pretty…relaxing :). The best news is that Sammy seems to be coming out of his slump.

Enjoy!

28. Memories and Friendship Strengthened

The instant Harry opened the door he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Something was wrong. No sooner did the thought cross his mind then a blast of light sped towards him. Instinctively, Harry dove out of the way and drew his wand, sending back a stunning spell. A shielding spell was cast, sending the red light back at Harry. Harry quickly conjured a golden shield that absorbed the spell. Winded slightly from the unexpected attack, Harry peered over the top of his shield at his attacker. “Bloody hell! You almost gave me a heart attack!” he cried.

Dumbledore only chuckled. “Just wanted to keep you on your toes, Mr. Harrington. Very well done. Did you know what I had planned? You seemed to evade my spell the second that it was cast,” he added somewhat suspiciously.

Harry shook his head and vanished the shield. “No, Sir. I just…sensed something was amiss.”

Dumbledore looked pleased. “Your reactions are improving. I daresay you would give even Moody a run for his money.” Harry smiled.

The two spent about twenty minutes covering endurance before Dumbledore brought their training to an early close. “I’m afraid I’ll have to cut this session short, Sean. I have an appointment with an Order member shortly. So that you may prepare yourself, I’ll let you know that it is someone that you once knew in your other form.”

Harry nodded and sheathed his wand. He had yet to see an Order member since his return, having gotten all of his information directly from Dumbledore. Harry missed many of the Order members: Remus, Tonks, the Weasleys, and even cantankerous old Moody. But he knew they would be suspicious of Sean Harrington, and he wasn’t ready to reveal himself to them. That did remind him of something though.

“Oh, Professor Dumbledore?” Harry asked. “I forgot to tell you. I told Ron and Hermione, er, rather they found out, who I really am.”

“Really?” Dumbledore said, the look of surprised happiness evident on his face. “That’s wonderful news Sean. I can’t begin to tell you how happy that makes me. You need your friends, Mr. Harrington.”

“I know, Professor. I really didn’t have a choice, though. They saw my Patronus during the Dementer attack on Hogsmeade, and it was only a matter of time before Hermione put two and two together.”

“Ah, I suspected it was you who drove off the Dementers after they were last seen chasing the three of you.”

Harry nodded, shivering slightly at the memory of eight Dementers chasing them. “Your spell worked wonders too.”
“I’m glad you had an opportunity to use it,” Dumbledore said sincerely. There was a knock at the door. “Ah, my appointment is here. One moment please.” As Dumbledore walked to the door to open it, Harry nodded and prepared himself to greet the Order member as if he didn’t know them. It was all for naught as the door opened and the Order member walked in.

“Mooney!” Harry cried happily when he saw Remus Lupin enter the door. For the most part, he looked the same as when Harry last saw him; a little white around the temples and dressed in shabby clothes. However, his face looked more haggard, and Harry immediately realized that if anyone felt Sirius’ loss as much as Harry did, it would be Lupin. Cursed from the bite of a werewolf, and with two of his best friends dead and the third a traitor, Remus did not have an easy life eith

Remus looked at Harry in confusion. “Hello,” he said uncertainly. “Have we met?”

Harry flustered, all of a sudden remembering who he was supposed to be. He stammered, trying desperately to think of an explanation as to why he would be privy to such personal information as Lupin’s nickname.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Mr. Harrington. As you have already, shall we say, opened the barn door, perhaps you would be willing to let one more horse out?” (A/N: an old saying about closing the barn door after the horses have already escaped. Apologies if it’s not a British saying as well, I couldn’t think of another way to say it.)

Harry thought as Remus looked at the both of them in confusion. He really wanted to tell Remus; not only would it probably lift Lupin’s spirits, but also Remus was the last real connection he had to his parents. Harry decided, knowing that he probably couldn’t think of a good excuse for his slip-up anyways. “Mooney,” he said. “I have something to show you.”

Harry scrunched up his face, and Harry Potter was revealed once again.

Lupin looked him in shock, unable to move or speak for a few seconds. Then he rushed over and gathered Harry in a great hug. “Harry!” he exclaimed. He released him, and Harry was surprised to see a tear on his former professor’s face. Lupin quickly brushed it away, years seeming to drop from his face along with the tear. “Sweet Merlin Harry! It’s so good to see you!” Harry couldn’t speak, choked up by the surprising surge of emotion he felt.

Once again, Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Ahem. Harry, Remus and have some business to attend to. Perhaps you can practice your accuracy? It shouldn’t take more then a few minutes, and then the two of you can catch-up. I can fill him in with the details of your past months if you wish.” Harry nodded gratefully.

“I’ll see you soon, Harry. Ok?” Lupin asked.

“I’ll be right here.”

Lupin nodded, and then he and Dumbledore left the Room of Requirements. Harry stood still for a moment, at a loss for what to do. Finally, Harry decided to take Dumbledore’s suggestion and practice while he waited. He had been shooting at moving targets for fifteen minutes before clapping interrupted his focus.

“Very impressive Harry!” Lupin said admiringly. Harry blushed slightly and walked over to him. Lupin looked undecided for a moment, and then said “What the hell,” and drew Harry into another embrace. After they parted, Lupin raised his wand conjured some comfortable armchairs, which they took. “You look good Harry. The months away have been good for you. I was so worried about you.”

Harry felt slightly ashamed at causing Lupin pain. “Listen Mooney, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. I-”

Lupin raised his hand to interrupt. “I understand completely, Harry. Dumbledore already explained. Plus, he cast a spell on me that would keep your identity a secret,” he said with a smile. “I know that James and Sirius would be proud of you, of what you’ve accomplished.”

Harry noticed that Lupin’s smile faltered slightly at the mention of the two former Maruaders. “Listen Mooney. I know
Sirius was your best friend, and—"

“and he was your Godfather,” Lupin interrupted again. “He was a good man, and we’ll both miss him very much.” Harry nodded, and they fell into a comfortable silence, each remembering Sirius Black in their own way. Suddenly, Lupin looked at Harry. “Oh Harry,” he said. “I just realized that you never knew Sirius at his best.”

Harry felt confused. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you only knew Sirius after he spent fourteen years in Azkaban and while on the run or cooped up at Grimmauld Place,” Lupin said. “Plus, the only thing you know of his school days is that he almost played a fatal joke on Snape and that memory you saw in Snape’s pensieve. You never knew Sirius when he was at his best. Would you like to hear about Sirius? How he and James eventually ‘reformed’ after the scene you saw?” Harry nodded eagerly, and he listened intently as Remus began to talk.

An hour later, a knock sounded at the door. Harry immediately changed his features just in time as the door opened.

“Hey Sean, we were wondering…Professor Lupin!” Ron said as peer around the door. Once he saw Lupin, Ron and Hermione quickly entered the room. Lupin stood and greeted the two with a handshake for Ron and a quick hug for Hermione.

“C’mon in you two, have a seat. We were just talking about old times,” Lupin said, conjuring two more armchairs.

“What kind of old times?” Hermione asked with a smile for her old Defense teacher.

Lupin chuckled. “I was just telling Sean here about the time Lilly publicly humiliated James. We were afraid he would be so angry, but it ended up turning him from the arrogant show-off that Harry saw from the scene in Snape’s pensieve to the James that we all knew and loved.”

Ron chuckled, then looked thoughtful. “erm, what scene in Snape’s pensieve?” he asked Harry.

“Er, it was nothing Ron.”

“Nothing?” Lupin said amused. “Well, it’s probably nothing now, but at the time, I could tell it bothered Harry a lot. After all, why else would he risk contacting us using Umbridge’s fire? I’ll tell you, it sure gave me a fright when I saw his head poking up through the fireplace.”

Harry grew uncomfortable. He had never told Ron or Hermione why he wanted to contact Sirius, only that he had to use Umbridge’s fireplace. He wasn’t sure why he didn’t, just that he felt Ron wouldn’t understand how it really made Harry feel (he probably cheer his father and Sirius on after learning what they did to Snape), and he couldn’t bear another lecture from Hermione. He saw now from the looks his two best friends were giving him that it was a mistake not to tell them. “Er, I think it’s getting late,” Harry said, desperate to get away from the piercing looks he was receiving. “Will you be coming back later, Mooney?”

Lupin looked at his watch as well and started at the time. “Goodness you’re right. You three should get to sleep! I’ll try and visit again next week and continue the story.”

Harry smiled gratefully at Remus, and the four of them left the Room of Requirements and accompanied Remus to the Entrance Hall. There, they exchanged hugs and Remus left the castle. After watching Remus depart, Harry practically sprinted back to Gryffindor tower, hoping to avoid conversation that night.

“Sean, wait up!” he heard Hermione call out. He had a lead on them, but they caught up at the portrait of the Fat Lady while Harry paused to remember the password.
Once inside the common room, Hermione rounded on Harry. “OK, Sean, what’s going on? What was the scene in Snape’s pensieve that you didn’t tell us about?”

As Harry looked at his two friends, he was sure the guilt was written on his face. He sighed, and then sat at the couch by the fire with Ron and Hermione taking seats across from him. The common room was empty except for the three of them. Harry was quiet for a moment, before taking a deep breath and telling them the story of OWLs during his father’s fifth year. It took about ten minutes to tell the tale, and Ron seemed amused by the entire story. Hermione’s face, however, betrayed no emotion.

“That was brilliant, Harry,” Ron said. “I wish I could have seen that! I would love to have seen Snape get what he deserves!”

Harry grinned at Ron, his reaction predictable. He looked at Hermione and braced himself.

“Harry, listen,” she began. “I know how seeing that must’ve made you feel, but sneaking into Umbridge’s office wasn’t the right thing to do. You could have been caught! If you had told us, then we could have found another way that didn’t involve you risking expulsion and—”

“And this is exactly why I didn’t tell you,” Harry said in an exasperated tone.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Hermione demanded.

“It means,” Harry said, his voice rising, “that I don’t need another lecture from you!”

“Lecture? I don’t lecture you!”

“That’s all you ever do. ‘Harry don’t do this, Harry, don’t do that’,” he said in a poor imitation of Hermione’s voice. “You’re as bad as Mrs. Weasley!”

Hermione looked shocked. And angry. “I am not like Mrs. Weasley at all!” she practically yelled. “Maybe if you had a mother you’d realize that…” Hermione clasped her hand over her mouth when she realized what she said, her eyes wide.

Harry looked like he had just been slapped. He glared at Hermione for a moment. “Good night,” he said curtly before heading up to his room.

“Harry, wait, I didn’t mean…” Hermione began, but Harry ignored her as he moved out of view.

Ron stood awkwardly. “Well, that didn’t go well,” he said. Hermione threw him a dirty look before disappearing into the girls’ dormitory.

Hermione felt despondent when she entered the Great Hall the next morning. She had only been able to sleep for a few, fitful hours, her mind spinning with what happened that night. Why did she keep saying the wrong thing? First last year, when Harry disappeared, and then at breakfast over the Sunday Daily. And now this! She knew that she was very upset after being compared to Mrs. Weasley and she simply said the first thing that popped into her head – that if Harry had a mother, he would know Hermione wasn’t acting like one. But Harry doesn’t have a mother, and she wished she could take those words back.

She hoped to be able to apologize to Harry over breakfast. He probably wouldn’t speak to her all day, but in time, he would forgive her once he realized she wasn’t intentionally trying to hurt him. To her dismay, Harry wasn’t at breakfast, and she felt a twinge of panic – not too long ago, she had gone looking for Harry at breakfast, and he wasn’t there then either. She found Ron at his usual spot, eating away.

“Morning Ron,” she said tiredly.
“Morning Hermione. You’re late,” he said between mouthfuls.

“I couldn’t sleep much. Have you seen Sean?” she asked, a sense of dread building inside her.

To her relief, Ron nodded. “Yeah, he, well…he said he didn’t feel like breakfast,” Ron said, concern on his face. “Listen Hermione, he’s pretty upset about what you said—”

“I know Ron,” Hermione said miserably. “I feel horrible about it. Do you know where he could be?”

“I know his first period is free, and he said he was going to go down by the lake for a bit.”

Hermione nodded and looked at the clock. She only had twenty minutes before her first class, and she knew that wouldn’t be enough time to find and talk to Harry. For a second she wavered between finding Harry or going to class, but it really wasn’t much of a contest. Hermione grabbed a plateful of toast and muffins and headed towards the lake. She saw Harry sitting against a tree in their usual spot. She hesitated, but then steeled her resolve and walked up to him. She stood quietly, not knowing if he knew she was there, thinking of what to say. Instead, it was Harry who spoke first.

“Shouldn’t you be in class?” he asked, bitterness clear in his voice.

“I…I wanted to talk to you. Please,” she said.

Harry turned and looked up at her, his face hard as stone. They locked eyes for a moment, Hermione refusing to look away. Finally, Harry’s face softened fractionally, and he gestured at the grass nearby. “Talk then.”

Hermione sat down beside him, unsure of where to begin. “Sean, I never meant to hurt you. It just slipped out,” she began. “I’m not trying to act like your mother; I just want you to be safe. I-I just worry so much about you, about what you have to go through. I wish I could take some of your burden away from you, and I want to help you so much. Sometimes it comes out as a lecture, and it might sound—”

“Stop,” Harry said. He was silent for a moment, and Hermione was afraid that things weren’t going well. “I know, Hermione,” he said finally, looking into her eyes. “I know. Sometimes, when I’m thinking of doing something stupid, I hear your voice in my head. It’s like you’re always watching out for me, like you’re my conscience, and a lot of times I don’t want a conscience, I want to do something stupid.” Harry then sat up and grasped both of Hermione’s hands in his own. “I need you Hermione, always will, and sometimes I forget that. If it weren’t for you, who knows where I’d be right now - probably dead. All I know is that I need you to be there for me, to keep me on the right track and to rein me in when I want to do something…rash.”

Hermione felt tears forming, but not from sadness. She hugged Harry tightly and whispered in his ear. “I’ll always be there for you, Sean Harrington.” She felt Harry nod in response. She released him and smiled. “Oh, I almost forgot,” she said suddenly. “You missed breakfast,” she said, offering her plate of toast and muffins to him.

Harry laughed, a sound Hermione missed. He smiled brightly. “Like I said, always looking out for me.”

To Devonny Rose: I love that Tim Wakefield…I liked him since he was with the Pirates when they were good. I figure if I ever have a son, I’ll teach him to throw a knuckleball and he’ll be good to go. A Cubs-Sox series would be great, since either way a “lovable loser” gets to be a winner (though of course it’s gonna be the Cubs)! Oh, and thanks for comments about Hermione. If I edit this story, I’ll have to make a few changes.

To willspirateprincess: No H/Hr yet, but next two chapters are light and fluffy.

To fopalup: I’m sorry, but I simply can’t write Malfoy. Every time I try, he just comes off sounding like the stereotypical annoying bad guy and not the devious evil feller he is; I can’t do him justice.
A/N: Here's my shot at a nice H/Hr fluffy scene. Nothing important happens, and there's no kissing or exclamations of love. But it's a nice switch from the previous chapters. Just the typical friendship-that-hides-a-deeper-love-underneath.

29. Spring Break

Spring break soon arrived, and the students were preparing to go home for the break. “C’mon Sean,” Ron persisted. “Come with home with me to the Burrows. Mum would love to see you.”

“I’d like to Ron, but it wouldn’t be smart. I can’t tell your family who I really am, and it’d be a little weird if you brought home a complete stranger for the week. They might suspect something.”

Ron looked disappointed, but he agreed nonetheless. Harry smiled at him, and then helped him finish packing. “What are you going to do, then?” Ron asked.

“I’ll be Ok. It’s not like Christmas; there are plenty of students staying to study for NEWTs. I won’t be lonely,” Harry said with a smile. Harry helped Ron carry his things to the carriages that would take the students to Hogsmeade station. There they met Hermione. “Where’s your stuff, Hermione? I thought you were going home too?”

“Oh no. I told my parents I had way too much to study for. They were happy enough that I went home for winter break,” she said, then added with a smile, “Besides, I can’t just leave you here alone by yourself.”

Harry smiled in response; he was grateful for the company and could definitely use her help to study. They watched as their classmates filled the train and waved goodbye. Then they walked side-by-side back to the castle.

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“C’mon Sean, I’m bored! Let’s do something!” Hermione cried, tugging at Harry’s sleeve.

Harry looked at her in shock. It was early morning on the fourth day of Spring break, and he was sitting in the library poring over his History of Magic textbook. “Who are you and what have you done with my Hermione?” he asked.

Hermione giggled. “All we’ve been doing is studying for the past three days!” she whined in a sad little voice. “It’s finally a nice day outside. Let’s go to Hogsmeade or something!”

Harry looked at the pile of books in front of him. He still had a lot he wanted to do today, but one look at her shining face erased all that. He found it nearly impossible to say no to her when she got so excited. Plus, how times did Hermione Granger want to do something other than study? He grinned. “Ok, Hermione, let’s go do something. Did you have anything in mind?”

“Well,” she said shyly. “I’ve been curious about Harrogate and Boroughbridge ever since you mentioned them. I’d like to visit the places where you lived last year,” she said, her eyes bright with anticipation.

Harry was surprised. “But, how are we going to get there? Are we allowed off Hogwarts grounds?”

“Oh Sean,” she said patiently. “We’re both of-age wizards now. We can go wherever we want now. We can take the floo from the Three Broomsticks over to Diagon Alley, then take a portkey to Harrogate,” she said smiling.

Harry laughed. “You’ve definitely thought this one out. Ok, let’s go.”
Hermione smiled. “I’ll meet you in the Entrance Hall in ten minutes,” she said on her way out of the library. Harry nodded, and then gathered his books together. He went up to his room, changed into jeans and a well-worn jumper (it being a little on the cool side), and grabbed his cloak. He met Hermione downstairs, who was similarly attired. Hermione gave him a dazzling smile as they headed towards Hogsmeade.

Harry and Hermione had to secure a special floo to Diagon Alley, since travel was strictly controlled to and from Hogsmeade. They received tokens that would allow them a single round-trip only and flooed to the Leaky Cauldron, brushing each other off when they arrived. Harry gave his token to Hermione for safekeeping, and then they entered Diagon Alley. They walked to the portkey station near Gringott’s and were dismayed to learn that the next port wasn’t due for another hour.

“Well, isn’t that predictable,” Hermione said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “The first time I want to go out instead of studying, and look what happens,” she said sulkily.

Harry grinned at her expression. “Don’t worry about it Hermione. It’s only an hour. I’m sure we can pass the time.” Hermione looked unconvinced. “C’mon Hermione, I bet I know what’d cheer you up.”

Hermione gave him a sidewise look. “What’s that?”

“Why, you’re favorite store, of course. I’m sure the latest, riveting edition of Arithmancy for Dummies is out by now!”

“Oh Sean,” Hermione said apologetically, as Harry was reading an account of his adventures at Hogwarts. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t realize I was taking so long.”

Harry smiled. “That’s ok Hermione. I was busy reading about myself,” Harry said, holding up his book.

Hermione laughed. “C’mon, let’s go. There’s nothing I want to buy and we have time for an ice cream before the port.” Harry nodded and followed her to Fortescue’s, where they shared an ice cream sundae and watched people pass by. Finally, they took the portkey to Harrogate.

“Oh wow!” Hermione exclaimed, her eyes dancing. “This is amazing! Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

Harry chuckled. “It’s not always like this Hermione. I’d forgotten; it’s the annual wizarding fair this week.” They had arrived at Harrogate and were greeting with a kaleidoscope of sights and sounds upon leaving the portkey station. The main street in magical Harrogate was filled with various tents and booths. People packed the streets, and the squeals and laughter of children filled the air. It was the week of the annual spring fair of Harrogate. As soon as Harry exiting the station, he remembered the fair from last year; he had been working that day, but he spent his lunch hour touring the fair with Dave, literally open-mouthed at the wizarding version of a fair. He was pleased that the fair was on; he knew Hermione would enjoy herself immensely.

Harry found that it was Hermione’s first time at a wizarding fair, though she had, of course, read about them. They walked together through the crowd, Hermione o’ing and ah’ing at the different exhibits and rides. She shook her head vigorously when Harry suggested taking a ride on the wizarding version of a Ferris Wheel, which was exactly the same as the Muggle version except there was no wheel – riders simply floated on couches high above the air, much too high for Hermione’s tastes.
“Oooh!” Hermione cooed. “This is so pretty!” she said. They were at one of the booths, and Hermione’s eye had been caught by some object for sale. Harry looked over and saw that Hermione inspecting a small wizarding bag. It was about 15 by 15 centimeters (A/N: 6 inches) and enchanted to be able to hold about ten times its normal capacity. It was tastefully decorated, with “Harrogate” elegantly stitched on the side, and she found one in Gryffindor colors of scarlet and gold. Hermione was absolutely taken with it and purchased it, explaining excitedly how she could fit all her quills, inkpots, and spare change in the little bag, leaving more room for books. Harry smiled warmly at her, noting how her face seemed to light up as she talked. Her first act was to put her money and the floo tokens in the bag before rolling it up and putting it in her pocket. As the two friends walked through the crowd, Hermione suddenly turned and grabbed Harry by the arm.

“Oh! I just remembered! You have to show me where you worked!”

Harry smiled at her. “Sure, it’s over this way,” and he steered them towards Weir’s Weird and Fantastic Items. The bell tinkled as they walked in, and Dave looked up at the sound.

“Sean, my boy!” he exclaimed, hurrying over and shaking Harry’s hand enthusiastically. Hermione smiled at Dave’s excitement.

“Hi Dave,” Harry said happily. “This is my friend, Hermione Granger. She’s Head Girl, y’know,” Harry said with a touch of pride in his voice.

“Good to meetcha Hermione,” Dave said, shaking her hand.

“Nice to meet you to. Sean’s told me all about this store. It sounds fascinating!”

Dave chuckled. “Well, that’s the name, after all. Please feel free to take a look around.” Hermione smiled and left to peruse the aisle. Dave watched until he was sure she had turned down an aisle, and then whistled at Harry, giving him a thumbs-up. “Not bad,” he said appreciatively as he raised an eyebrow. “Head Girl too.”

Harry flustered. “Nothing like that Dave,” he said. The two exchanged news for about five minutes until Hermione returned, a quill in hand. “Find something, Hermione?”

She nodded and displayed the quill excitedly. “It changes the ink so you can write in any color you want.”

Harry smiled and then handed it to Dave. “Just this, then,” he said.

Dave put up his hands, palms out. “On the house. Just be sure to visit again.” Harry and Hermione smiled, and exchanged farewells as they left the store. For lunch, the two sampled food from booths set up by several of Harrogate’s finest restaurants as they walked. All of sudden, Hermione felt someone bump forcefully into her as they ran by. She looked up.

“Sean!” she exclaimed in alarm. “That man just stole my bag!”

Harry looked at the figure as it ran through the crowd. Squinting, he could just make out a scarlet and gold bag clutched in his hand. He groaned. “Don’t worry, Hermione. We’ll get you another one.”

“No, you don’t understand!” she cried, almost desperately. “Our floo tokens were in there!”

Harry looked at her a moment, before grabbing her arm. “C’mon!” he yelled, and dragged her through the crowd after the man. Fortunately for them, the man had slowed to a walk, hoping to attract less attention. They managed to keep him in sight, until he turned and saw them heading towards him and took off at a sprint. “We can’t get to him through this crowd,” Harry said. “We have to apparate ahead of him.”

Hermione looked worried. “I-I don’t think I can. I haven’t practiced since school started.”

“Don’t worry, just hold my hand. We can do it together. Just concentrate on the intersection ahead, and we’ll go on the
count of three.” Hermione grabbed his hand and shut her eyes. Harry concentrated and counted, and together they disappeared with a pop.

They reappeared about ninety-one meters (A/N: 100 yards, an easy sand wedge away) further down the street. They turned, looking for the man who stole Hermione’s bag, and saw him running right towards them. The man saw them too, and he quickly turned down a side street. Harry and Hermione took off after him, and they spotted him running down an alleyway. They turned into the alley and stopped in surprise — it was a dead-end, but it was also empty. The man had disappeared! Harry and Hermione looked around wildly.

“Maybe he apparated,” Harry said, but Hermione shook her head.

“We would have heard something, and if he could, he probably would have a long time ago.” Harry nodded in agreement. “He must still be here then, just hiding using magic,” she finished.

“Ok then,” Harry said, pulling out his wand. “Let’s go looking then. Tickling charm?” he asked, giving Hermione a devilish smile. Hermione grinned wickedly and pulled out her own wand. Together, they began crying “Rictusempra!” and sending the charm in all directions, covering every inch of the alleyway. Finally, they were rewarded with the sound of uncontrollable laughter. “He must be using a disillusionment charm, incredibly handy for thieves,” Harry said dryly.

Hermione followed the sound of laughter and cast the counter-spell for the disillusionment charm. The figure of the man appeared clearly, rolling on the ground laughing. Hermione cast another counter-spell, and the man stopped laughing. He tried to grab his wand, but a quick disarming spell from Harry solved that problem. The two students pointed their wands at the man as he stood up, fear evident on his face.

“Please don’t hurt me!” he cried as he backed up against the wall.

Harry advanced on him menacingly. “Hurt you? Hurt you?” he said. “You stole from us!”

“I didn’t! I didn’t!”

“Liar!” said Hermione said accusingly. She cursed him with a full-body bind then rifled through his clothes until she found her bag. “Ah ha!” she cried triumphantly.

Harry released the man from the curse. “Don’t ever try that again!” he said, and then pointed down the alley. The man needed no further encouragement and sprinted away.

Hermione looked at Harry sternly. “Shouldn’t we have called the Enforcers (A/N: wizarding police, since I figure Aurors are for more evil things then pickpockets)?”

“ Probably,” Harry agreed. “But I’d rather spend the rest of the day with you then sitting in an Enforcers station filling out paperwork,” he said apologetically.

Hermione’s face softened. “Your probably right. C’mon, let’s go back to the fair,” she said brightly. As they retraced their steps, Hermione suddenly let out a large gasp.

“What is it Hermione?” Harry said alarmed as he drew his wand, searching for a threat. Hermione only looked at him. She still held her bag in her right hand, but slowly raised her left hand, holding an identical bag.

“Oh no!” she cried. “My bag is right here!”

Harry looked at her dumbfounded. Then he started to laugh. “You mean,” he said when he could draw breath, “that we mugged him?”

Hermione draw herself up, her hands on her hips. “That is not funny, Sean Harrington! We just stole from that poor
man!” Harry continued to laugh. “Why are you laughing?” she demanded. “We’ve got to find him and return it!”

Harry regained his composure and reached for the man’s bag. “Give it here. Maybe there’s some identification in it,” he said between his chuckles.

“Oh, this is sooo bad!” Hermione said as she handed it over, her face reflecting her panic. “We’re going to get in so much trouble! What if he tells an Enforcer? I can never show my face here again! What if they tell Hogwarts? What if Dumbledore or McGonnagal finds out?”

Harry listened to her ramblings with one ear while he searched through the enchanted bag. He finally found a wizards’ ID card. “er, Hermione,” he said.

“…they’ll take away my Head Girl’s badge…”

“Hermione.”

“…will they let us graduate? What if they expel us…”

“Hermione,” Harry said a little louder.

“…this’ll go on our permanent records! What if we can’t get good jobs now…”

“Hermione!” Harry yelled, finally getting her attention. She looked at him surprised. “It wasn’t his, look,” he said, handing over the ID. “He didn’t lie when he said that he didn’t steal from us; he stole from some little old witch instead.”

Hermione took the ID and stared at it. Her face grew indignant. “Of all the…how dare he steal from some nice old lady!”

Harry chuckled at sudden change in demeanor. “C’mon, let’s return it and get back to the fair.” He grabbed her arm before she could get started again. Holding hands, they apparated to the address on the ID and returned the bag to a nice young wizard, who assured them that he would return the bag to his grandmother.

“Well, that was nice,” Hermione said, as they apparated back to the fair. They spent the rest of the day at the fair, and somehow Harry managed to convince Hermione to ride the Ferris Wheel at the end of the day. She clutched at him in fright while they floated high above the ground, Hermione vowing never to let Harry talk her into anything dangerous like this again. He reminded her that riding a Ferris Wheel was a far cry from infiltrating the Department of Mysteries, but he got no response.

“Look Hermione,” he said, pointing to the sky. Hermione cracked open an eyelid, and gasped at the sight. It was sunset, and it was truly a beautiful sight from high in the air. Hermione sighed happily, forgetting for the moment the fact that she was floating one kilometer (A/N: 0.6 miles) in the air, with only thin air below the couch they sat on. She relaxed her death-grip on Harry’s arm, but didn’t let go.

“It’s so pretty,” she said quietly, as she leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder. After a while, she straightened and released his arm, meeting Harry’s eyes. “I…I miss the face of my best friend. Can you be the real you, just for a little bit?”

Harry looked at her and smiled. He scrunched his face, and his eyes took their green color, his hair turned black, and his scar returned. They were small changes, but put together they were significant. Hermione gazed at him a moment, as if memorizing every detail, before leaning back into him and looking at the sunset. Harry put an arm around her shoulders, and together they watched the sun dip below the horizon.
A/N: Oh dear! Have I been misspelling McGonagall wrong this whole time? Argh! Anyways, here’s the next chapter. Thanks to everyone for reviewing! The end is nearing. Another bit of fluff, but no kissing yet. Soon, I promise!

Go Cubs!

30. Dances and NEWTs

The beginning of May arrived, with NEWTs only a month away. Panic started to spread slowly among the students, and the last two Quidditch matches were sorely needed to break the tension. The first match, at the beginning of the month, found Hufflepuff beating Slytherin in a very close match. Hufflepuff House was ecstatic; they were in the running for the Quidditch cup for the first time in three years, and were guaranteed at least second place, the first time they had been anything but fourth place the last three years. The last match of the season would set Ravenclaw against Gryffindor. With three wins, Gryffindor was in the lead for the Quidditch Cup. Ravenclaw was currently 0-2, and Slytherin was 1-2, which left Hufflepuff as the only real threat to Gryffindor winning the cup. Hufflepuff had gone 2-1, but their single defeat was at the hands of Gryffindor, by a wide margin. Ravenclaw would not only have to beat Gryffindor for the Hufflepuffs to win the Cup, they would have to beat Gryffindor by a lot.

The weekend of the Quidditch match also marked another Hogwarts tradition that was previously unknown to Harry: the Graduation Ball. Unlike previous dances in the past, this was limited to only seventh year students and their dates. The Great Hall would be decorated beautifully, and a live band brought in. Harry felt a bit of panic when he found out, but quickly realized his panic was unnecessary – no one knew he was Harry Potter, so no one would care. Ron had asked little Natalie MacDonald to accompany him, and Harry found out they were going together just as he was on his way to the library.

“Hey Hermione,” he said, as he sat across from her. “Did you hear? Ron and Natalie are going to the Graduation Ball together.”

Hermione looked up from her book and smiled. “Good! I think those two would make a cute couple.”

“Who are you going with?” Harry asked.

“I’m not going.”

“What? You have to go!”

“Are you going?” she asked Harry.

“Well, er, no,” he said.

Hermione grinned. “Then why should I go when you don’t have to? Hmmm, Mr. Harrington?”

“Well, you’re Head Girl! And it’s your last year Hermione. You have to go!”

“It’s your last year too,” she pointed out.

“Well, sorta. But no one knows it’s me,” he said, a bit lamely.

“Well, be that as it may, there’s no one that I would want to spend hours fumbling about on the dance floor,” Hermione said, then turned back to her books.

Harry stared at her thoughtfully. Then he cleared his throat. “Um, Hermione. Would you like to go with me?” he asked.
tentatively.

She looked up, surprised. “With you?”

“Sure! We’ll have a great time, and as you said, it’s both of our last year here,” he said eagerly.

Hermione looked at him, and then got caught up in his enthusiasm. “Sure,” she said. “We’ll have a great time!”

Harry grinned happily, and together they returned to their studies, punctuated by discussions about the Ball.

Ron became an absolute animal the two weeks before the final Quidditch match. He scheduled practices daily, but fortunately Harry and Hermione were excused from part of each practice to study for NEWTs (despite their pleadings, Ron refused to leave any of his practices early). But the outcome was never in any real doubt. Ravenclaw was too weak of a team to seriously contend, and there was little chance that they could score enough points to swing the cup in Hufflepuff’s favor. Ron was insistent on a perfect season though, and his fervor ignited the Gryffindor team to a dominant victory. The Quidditch Cup found it’s way back into McGonagall’s office, and the victory party lasted all night long, a welcome break from the shadow of NEWTs. The Graduation Ball was the next night, and Harry was nervous.

He wasn’t sure what prompted him to ask Hermione. At first, he had felt a little sorry for her. It was her last year, after all, and she was Head Girl. Besides, Harry wasn’t a shy, bumbling fourteen year old anymore. He was seventeen, and there was nothing wrong with going to a dance with your best friend. But as soon as he asked her, he grew excited about the idea. It would be nice, he told himself, to go with Hermione. They could be themselves and not have to worry about any of the things people on a date have to worry about. The seventh years were allowed a special trip to Hogsmead one week before the dance, where they could purchase robes and other accessories. Harry looked around at the dress robes, trying to find a pattern he liked. He didn’t purchase one though, since his Auror robes could change to appear as dress robes. Ron purchased a new set, since his growth spurt made his old robes too short.

The night of the Ball, Harry was amused by the other boys’ antics. Ron was especially nervous about taking Natalie, which was a good thing for Neville. He was taking a Ginny, and a glaring older brother breathing down his shoulder wouldn’t be a good thing. Dean asked Padma, and Seamus was going with Pavarti, which seemed fitting. Harry wasn’t sure whom Lavender was going with, but he’d heard it was someone in Ravenclaw. Harry sat with the others in the Common Room waiting for their dates, though Dean had left to find his way to the Ravenclaw common room. Finally, the girls made their appearance; one-by-one they made their entrance. Harry chuckled at Ron’s reaction when he saw Natalie, and he smiled at Ginny as Neville went to meet her. But then his eyes drifted to Hermione, and all of a sudden Ron’s antics were forgotten.

She was wearing an elegant set of dress robes, her hair falling in curls around her face. His mind briefly remembered her appearance at the Yule Ball, three years ago. Harry’s stomach did a small back-flip, and he chastised himself. This was Hermione, after all. He smiled at her and offered his arm.

“You look beautiful, Hermione,” he said honestly.

Hermione blushed. “You don’t look so bad yourself,” she replied with a wink, and then she took his arm. They followed Ron and Natalie out the portrait hole, and Harry felt himself settle down. She was still his Hermione, despite her tamed hair, and a part of Harry actually missed her bushiness. Arm-in-arm, they walked to the Great Hall, chatting away as friends.

Harry was having a surprisingly good time. It was nothing like the Yule Ball; Harry was not the center of attention, and he was with someone he felt completely at ease with. Harry had to laugh as Hermione made a comment about a fifth year girl as she walked by.
“Did you look at the length of that hemline? And that slit on the side!” she said with disdain. Noticing the lack of reaction from Harry, she punched him in the arm. “I see you did notice, Mr. Harrington,” she said acidly.

Harry rubbed his shoulder. “Ow” he said in an exaggerated hurt voice. “Oh Hermione, she’s got nothing on you,” he said earnestly.

She glared at him a moment, then softened when she saw that he really meant it. “Anyways,” she continued, “that girl’s too young. She’s a fifth year, here with a seventh year!” she said scandalized. Harry laughed, and Hermione looked at him curiously. “What’s so funny?” she demanded.

Harry grinned. “How soon we forget, Miss Granger. Can we say, ‘Victor Krum?’ Wasn’t he a seventh year when you were a little fourth year?” Hermione blushed and flustered to find a response. Fortunately, she was saved when Ron and Natalie made their way back to the table.

Harry and Hermione had been highly entertained by Ron’s dancing. He may be agile on a broom, but on the ground, his dancing skills left much to be desired. However, what he lacked in rhythm, he more than made up for in enthusiasm.

Harry and Hermione gently teased him as he and Natalie sat, but not for long. A slow dance soon played, and Natalie pulled Ron to the dance floor. Harry looked at Hermione. “Would you like to dance?” he asked. Hermione looked dubious, but then agreed. They made their way to the dance floor where they danced, a good 0.3 meters between them (one foot for us Americans). As the song wore on, they closed the distance, and Hermione rested her head against Harry’s shoul

There were times when Harry dared think of a future beyond Voldemort. It wasn’t often, but sometimes he wondered what his life would be like if he survived a final confrontation with the Dark Lord. He dreamed of a family, a big family, something he never had and was supremely jealous of Ron over. But before he could start a family, he needed to find a wife. And there lay the problem. Harry Potter was famous already, and if he managed to defeat Voldemort, he would be even more famous. He knew it would be next to impossible to find a witch who loved him for being Harry, and not someone who was in love with his public image. Harry looked down at the witch in his arms, and he knew Hermione was probably the only witch that knew the real Harry, warts and all, and not the Boy-Who-Lived. But would that be taking the easy way out? Harry didn’t want a serious relationship with Hermione just because she was the only choice. It would be unfair to Harry and insulting to Hermione. Plus, he didn’t have many close friends in the world, and he didn’t want to risk losing her friendship. Harry sighed softly and figured that he would have to go to find a Muggle and gradually introduce her to the wizarding world.

The song ended and Harry and Hermione smiled at each other, before returning to their table. They laughed and talked the night away in easy familiarity.

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The week after the dance was filled with studying, studying, and more studying. The level of panic was even higher than in fifth years, as NEWTs determined careers, not just classes. All-night study sessions were common, and Professors handed out review sheets and practice tests. Harry was thankful that he had been studying since the first day of fall term; he was used to spending hours in the library. Hermione’s assistance was invaluable, as she developed study outlines for each of their subjects. Long hours were spent in the library for all seventh year students.

Although Harry studied as hard as he could, he wasn’t sure that it would matter. First, there was the question of him living long enough to for the results of the NEWTs to impact him. But second, Harry really didn’t know what he wanted to be. He had told McGonagall in his fifth year that he wanted to be an Auror. But was that still true? Harry was enjoying his seventh year as an anonymous student and used to not being in danger. As an Auror, he would be in danger often, and the thought didn’t appeal to him; Harry had enough brushes with death to last him a lifetime. Like OWLs, NEWTs were given over two weeks, and Harry finished his last test feeling that he had done reasonably well.

Responses to reviewers

Lord Nyax: Sorry, no Angry!Harry here. He had a few blow-ups, but he’s pretty content overall, considering all the things
he’s been through.

HermioneGreen: hehe. He’ll be fine; besides, who can resist Hermione when she’s being all cute like that?

Devonny Rose: Tough loss last night :( Now it’s a best-of-5 for both teams. But Pedro vs. Clemens sounds great, and of course Kerry Wood is gonna be dominant tonight. Hopefully the Cubs will wrap it up on Sunday and the Sox on Monday.
31. The Second Battle of Hogwarts

With NEWTs behind him, the only thing that remained was Graduation Week. The seventh years had the last week of term to themselves. Curfew was extended, and they were allowed to visit Hogsmeade whenever they wished. It was a time to decompress from the stress of NEWTs, and a time for friends to reminisce about the last seven years at Hogwarts. On Saturday, the first through sixth years took the Hogwarts Express to King's Cross Station, and the Express returned the following Saturday with the families of the seventh year students. That night would be a Graduation Feast in the Great Hall for the graduating class and their families, and on Sunday the graduation ceremony would take place before their final train ride.

Harry was reluctant to go to the Graduation Feast. He had no family, after all, but Hermione and Ron managed to convince him. Ron thought it would be good for Harry to see his parents and brothers again, even if it had to be for the "first" time. Hermione wanted Harry to meet her mother and father, since they had previously only met briefly at the station and in Diagon Alley. So, Harry changed his Auror robes to match Gryffindor ones, and he went to the Great Hall and found a spot at the Gryffindor table between Ron and Hermione. He suppressed the urge to call out to Mrs. Weasley, and made pleasant conversation with Drs. Granger.

An hour into the Feast, the doors to the Great Hall were suddenly blown open with a loud bang. Everyone looked up in surprise as hordes of black robed figures stormed the Hall, taking positions along the back wall. The teachers and other adults stood and swiftly drew their wands, ready to defend themselves, when a deathly silence filled the room. A tall figure slowly entered the room, his hands hidden within the folds of his robes. Harry knew who it was immediately – Voldemort. With the exception of Harry and Dumbledore, no one in the Great Hall had ever seen the revived Voldemort in person before this very moment. A near panic swept the Great Hall as students and parents screamed and backed away. Only the professors remained calm (though some had gone pale), Dumbledore fixing Voldemort with a steely look.

Voldemort raised his arms and held the clearly restored Orb of Tomsduval in front of him. He let go of the Orb, and it hovered in place. Voldemort pointed it at the Orb. A spell from his wand hit the orb, and instantly every wand in the Great Hall shot from hand and holster and stuck to the Orb, as a magnet draws paperclips. Every person was disarmed in an instant, from students to siblings to parents to teachers. Only the Death Eaters retained their wands. A hooded Death Eater went to Voldemort’s side, carrying a bag. He held it open underneath the Orb, and Voldemort released his spell as the wands fell into the bag. Voldemort then muttered another spell at the Orb, and ropes shot out the Orb in all directions, binding every person in the Great Hall.

Harry had little time to react to Voldemort’s entrance. Along with the others, Harry rose and drew his wand immediately when the Death Eaters entered, and he did not shy away when he recognized Voldemort. However, also like the others, his wand was pulled from his grasp by the power of the Orb, and thick ropes covered his body, immobilizing him. As Voldemort watched impassively, the Death Eaters then spread throughout the room, pushing and prodding the captives until they were lined up against the wall, some standing, many kneeling, sitting, or lying down. Students and parents alike cried in fear, as tables and benches were vanished away. Three Death Eaters conjured a large, raised circular platform in the center of the room, and Dumbledore was dragged onto the center of the platform. Voldemort casually walked to the middle of the platform where Dumbledore stood, his body bound by ropes.

"Finally, Hogwarts, the symbol of light, has been toppled!" Voldemort yelled in glee, the Death Eaters cheering mightily as the captives shrank back in fear. “Now, my faithful Death Eaters, spread though out the castle, pick up any stragglers, and prepare this place to be the center of my new world order!” The Death Eaters left the Great Hall, leaving two behind, who took positions around the Great Hall. Voldemort looked at Dumbledore, who stood in defiance.
“Kneel before your master!” cried one of the Death Eaters, hitting Dumbledore in the back of the leg. Dumbledore fell to the ground in pain, but he retained his defiant look.

Meanwhile, Harry stood against the wall, with Hermione and Ron sitting on either side. The raised platform was high enough so only Harry’s head was level with it. Harry struggled, but couldn’t free himself from the ropes. If only he had his wand! Harry only then remembered one of the features of the Auror robes: the hidden pocket located in the sleeve of his robe. Harry felt relief wash over him as he felt his wand, his original wand, still securely in his pocket.

He looked around, placing each of the two remaining Death Eater: one was on the platform with Voldemort, while the second walked slowly around the Great Hall. Both were watching Voldemort with rapt attention, as he mocked and insulted the old Headmaster. Harry eased the wand from the pocket, and quietly cast a proximity-based silencing charm around him; it would prevent any sound they made from reaching Voldemort’s ears, although Harry doubted it would be necessary as Voldemort was focused solely on Dumbledore. Harry waited until the Death Eater was close, then quickly flicked his wand and stunned the Death Eater, who collapsed into a heap, to the silenced gasps of those who witnessed.

He used his wand to free himself from the ropes and quickly tied up the stunned Death Eater. He looked around was relieved to find his actions go unnoticed by Voldemort, though he had quite an audience from the captives who could see him. Harry cast a powerful locking charm on the doors to the Great Hall to prevent any unwanted Death Eaters from entering.

“Sean!” he heard Hermione and Ron whispering at him. Harry took one look at Voldemort to make sure he was still occupied. He was, having brought Professors McGonagall and Flitwick to join Dumbledore on the platform. Harry turned to look at his friends.

“Sean, quick! Cut us free!” Ron said. Hermione looked at Sean expectantly. When Harry did nothing, realization slowly dawned in her eyes.

“Sean, don’t do this!” she begged. Ron only looked confused, wondering why his friend wasn’t releasing him. But Harry only looked at Hermione.

“It’s the only way, Hermione,” he said sadly.

“That’s not true! We can help, we can be there for you!” she cried, tears shimmering in her eyes.

“Not this time,” he said gently, wiping a tear away. “This is something that I was meant to do alone. Remember the Department of Mysteries, the prophecy I told you about? It all comes down to this moment. It ends here and now,” he said resolutely.

Hermione shook her head vigorously. “I don’t believe that!” she cried. “And you shouldn’t either. We can help! You promised!”

Harry just stood there and looked at her sadly. “You know I have to do this alone. If I fail, there’s still a chance you’ll live, and I can’t risk that,” he said, and then turned around to climb the platform. He took one last look back at Hermione and paused.

Harry knew he was most likely going to die. He knew despite all his preparations and training, that Voldemort was still the superior wizard. As Harry looked at Hermione, her teary eyes full of fear and anguish, he felt something. His stomach did no back flips, and there was no funny feeling in his chest. Instead, as Harry looked at the girl who’s always stood by his side, he suddenly understood. He understood why he always sought out Hermione’s advice and comfort. He understood why he instinctively protected her, and her alone, when confronted by danger. He understood why he could never be truly angry with her, even as she argued against him. He understood now why reading Hogwarts, A History comforted him even when he wasn’t interested in the material. He understood it all. Hermione was his anchor, his foundation, and has always been. He knew if that if he were to die now…

Harry pocketed his wand and stepped up to Hermione as she watched with eyes full of the hope that he would free her. He paused, and then turned to address her parents. “I’m sorry about this, Drs. Grangers. But I’m probably not going to survive the next five minutes, and I would never forgive myself if I didn’t do this,” he said, matter-of-factly.
Hermione looked at him in confusion. Harry lifted his hands and placed one on either side of her face. Cupping her face gently, Harry gave her a small smile, a reassuring smile. There were no butterflies, no nervousness; this was not Cho in front of him. Harry knew that this was meant to be, that all the experiences they shared together had built up to this one event, had occurred for this single purpose. He lightly pressed his lips against hers and closed his eyes, her tears warm and wet against his face. He felt her stiffen in surprise, but then, slowly, tentatively, her mouth softened and responded, her lips moving ever so slightly against his own. All of sudden, the calmness he felt earlier disappeared in a rush of indescribable emotions; excitement, longing, nervousness. But most of all, the feelings of completeness and love. Harry moved his hands, gently massaging the back of her head and tangling his fingers in her hair as they kissed. Their lips gently brushed against each other, before he pressed his lips more firmly against hers. Hermione began to kiss him back in earnest, almost desperately, as if afraid to stop and let Harry go to face Voldemort alone. He heard a soft moan escape her mouth as she parted her lips and allowed Harry in deeper. Their kiss took on a feeling of urgency, as they each tried to communicate their feelings through it. With great reluctance, primarily caused by a lack of oxygen, Harry broke the kiss and looked into her wide eyes. No words were exchanged, understanding passing silently between the two.

Harry released her head and stepped back. Resolutely, he turned and drew his wand, approaching the platform. Additional captives had been brought to the platform, parents who were Ministry officials or otherwise important. Harry pointed his wand at the last Death Eater and muttered a stunning spell, sending the Death Eater flying from the platform. Voldemort spun around as Harry climbed the platform. They faced each other, Harry's wand raised.

A/N: hehe...I'm so evil! Mwhahaha! My first real cliffhanger! Ok, maybe I had one before when Hermione had just realized who Sean is, but c'mon, I posted six chapters in a row before that, so it doesn't count.

That second-to-last paragraph, the kiss, was the hardest to write because it's been 12 years since my first kiss so it was hard to remember all the jumbles of feelings (don't tell my wife that though!)

Game 3 of the NLCS tonight. Woo!
A/N: Here’s the last chapter. All open items and responses to reviewers will be after the epilogue. Thanks for the reviews!

32. The Final Confrontation

Harry faced Voldemort, his wand raised. “What’s this?” Voldemort asked, amusement in his voice. “You wish to challenge the might of Lord Voldemort? I shall give you the honor of being the first to die!” Voldemort flicked his wand, and a green light sped its way towards Harry.

In one smooth motion, Harry muttered a stunning spell, aimed at Voldemort’s wand, and rolled aside. The killing curse and stunning spell seemed to collide, and in a flash of golden light, they disappeared. Harry immediately slashed in the air, sending a purple flame at Voldemort. Surprised by the flash of light and the disappearance of his own spell, Voldemort only had seconds to react to Harry’s attack. He quickly cast a shielding charm, but Harry’s spell was only partially deflected: the spell struck Voldemort in the shoulder and sent him to one knee. He roared in anger.

“You! How!?” he spluttered in shock and fury. “Who are you!” he yelled.

Harry stood and laughed, knowing it would infuriate Voldemort. “I see thirteen years living off vermin has dulled your mind. I’m disappointed that the great Tom Riddle can’t see through a simple metamorphagus disguise!” Harry taunted.

Voldemort looked at him closely, then said in a low voice, “Harry Potter.” A collective gasp arose from the captive students, teachers, and family. Harry only smiled grimly, then scrunched his face and returned his features to their original state. “It’s time, Riddle. Time to fulfill the prophecy,” he said, then raised his wand. Voldemort whipped his wand around him in response, sending all the captives flying from the platform to fall painfully to the stone ground below.

Voldemort leered at him. “Yes, let’s end this once and for all, Potter!” Voldemort sent another killing curse at Harry, but this time Harry didn’t bother to avoid it. Harry simply sent another stunning spell in the direction of Voldemort’s wand, knowing it would intercept and cancel out Voldemort’s curse. That was Harry’s secret - his hope of defeating Voldemort lay in their wands. Harry knew he couldn’t counter all of Voldemort’s spells, but he knew that the brother wands would. Harry silently thanked Colin Creevey for switching their wands; he relied on the fact that Voldemort thought Harry’s wand was broken, and that Voldemort would have no reservations about using his own wand. When the first killing curse was cancelled, Harry felt elation: he might survive this after all. Harry knew the only weakness of the killing curse was its slower speed; Harry could cast a stunning spell quickly, and he was confident he could counter every killing curse Voldemort sent at him.

Voldemort was slower to realize this, as he sent three more killing curses in succession. Each was cancelled. They eyed each other warily: the brother wands would hinder Harry’s attacks, as well. Harry sent a disarming spell at Voldemort, which was blocked with a shielding spell and rebounded back at him. Harry dove to the side and evaded his own spell, then flicked his wand as a bolt of electricity flew towards the Dark Lord. Voldemort countered with a stunning spell, clearly intending to cancel out Harry’s attack. To his surprise, the jet of red light simply passed through the bolt of electricity.

The bolt struck Voldemort in the chest, and he staggered backwards. Harry was taken by surprise too, expecting the same thing that Voldemort did. Thus, he was not prepared for the stunning spell, and the force of the blow sent him to the ground. To his surprise, Harry didn’t lose consciousness, though his chest ached. He silently thanked the inventors of the Auror robes, and stood. Seeing Voldemort still on his knees, Harry sent another disarming spell at his enemy.

But Voldemort looked up in time, and conjured a shield to protect him. Harry took the advantage and sent a freezing spell to the shield, covering it in ice, then followed with a stunning spell. The stunner shattered the frozen shield and struck Voldemort down. But he was not incapacitated. Voldemort struggled to his feet, fury evident on his face. He swished his wand, and a large snake flew from his wand to only feet away from Harry. But Harry was prepared, and sent his own snake to meet Voldemort’s, and the two serpents battled one another. But in the meantime, Voldemort had moved to the
side and sent a beam of light at Harry, who was focused on the snakes before him. Harry reacted and cast a shielding spell, but seconds too late, as Voldemort’s spell penetrated his shield and hit him in the shoulder, sending him to his knees. Harry looked up, ignoring the pain, to see the snakes writhing about about a meter from his face. Harry quickly cast a spell at the two snakes, sending them off in a flash of light. Voldemort stuck again while Harry was down, sending another spell that sent Harry sprawling.

Harry lay on his back, the breath knocked out of him. His side, chest, and shoulder were aching, but Harry was still alive. He saw burn marks in his robes, and realized that Voldemort’s spells were strong enough to penetrate the Auror robes’ defenses. As Voldemort’s laughter filled the air, Harry struggled to his feet. He squared his shoulders and faced his enemy.

“Still alive Potter? Still fighting, eh?” Voldemort said. “This has been great fun; I haven’t dueled like this in ages! But I’m afraid it’s time for playtime to end,” he said. Voldemort flicked his wand, and another spell shot at Harry. Harry dove to the side to avoid the spell, but his impact to the ground sent another jolt of pain through his body. Harry struggled to his feet, then his eyes widened when he saw a green light heading towards him. Reacting, Harry lifted his wand and sent a stunning spell, the flash of golden light only inches away from his wand temporarily blinding him.

Harry managed to clear his eyes as Voldemort laughed. Still kneeling, Harry slashed his wand and sent another stream of purple flame at Voldemort, who conjured another silver shield to block it. Harry immediately sent a series of stunners at Voldemort, who blocked them with his own spells. The flashes of golden light appeared, temporarily blinding Voldemort. Harry took advantage of Voldemort’s disorientation; he rushed to the side, and sent another stunner around Voldemort’s silver shield to strike him down. Voldemort went flying, landing painfully on the platform. Harry launched another attack, but had to duck as Voldemort redirected it back at him. Voldemort stood slowly, his face no longer carrying the smug look it had only seconds before. They circled each other slowly, and then Voldemort surprised Harry by dropping his arms to his side and bowing his head. Harry looked on in confusion.

Pain suddenly ripped through Harry’s head, and he felt like his scar had exploded. It was the same pain he felt at the Ministry, the pain that made him wish for death. Harry fell to his knees, dropping his wand and grasping his head in agony. But through the pain, Harry knew what he had to do; he had prepared himself to counter this attack. He thought of Sirius, of how much he meant to Harry. But the pain continued. Harry desperately thought of his parents, of seeing them in the Mirror of Erised, of being with his family again. But the pain remained, and Harry retched. He tried to think of Ron and Hermione, of happy times at the Burrow and the wonderful school year just completed. He thought of the Quidditch victories and spring break in Harrogate and the Graduation Ball. But still the pain continued, and Harry felt like he was going to pass out. Harry lay on the ground, his knees to his chest, crying out in agony. He knew he was going to die. He hoped he was going to die, and he began to welcome death. He knew he would soon be with his parents and with Sirius and Hagrid. He didn’t regret any of his actions in the slightest, and he was thankful that he kissed Hermione before he died.

Hermione. Thoughts of that kiss began to pierce the hazy cloud of pain. He remembered the softness of her lips, the feel of her face and hair under his hands. He remembered the way her lips tasted and moved as she kissed him back. He remembered the look in her eyes as they gazed at each other after the kiss. He had known immediately that she loved him, as he loved her. He thought it a pity that he should die just when he finally found true love.

As this last thought crossed his mind, Harry suddenly realized that the pain had fallen to a dull ache, and then disappeared altogether. Harry opened his eyes in surprise, only to be greeted with a greater surprise: Voldemort had fallen to the ground, in a position that mimicked his own, grabbing at his head in pain. Harry looked on in confusion and saw Voldemort slowly raise his head to look at Harry in bewilderment. Harry realized what happened, and he focused his thoughts back on Hermione. He remembered the times they spent together, the times they held each other for safety and protection. He remembered all their silent conversations, worlds of meaning conveyed through nods and looks. He imagined their future together, a cozy home somewhere with bushy, black-haired children with brown eyes running around. Harry stood and watched Voldemort writhe in pain, begging for release.

Harry picked up his wand. “Expelliarmus!” he cried, and Voldemort’s wand flew from his weak grasp into Harry’s hand. Harry staggered to Voldemort, his thoughts focused on the feeling of Hermione in his arms as they danced at the
Graduation Ball. Raising both hands, the brother wand tips touching and pointing at Voldemort, Harry cried out, “Avada Kedavra!” A single beam of green light emitted from the two wand tips, moving inexorably towards Voldemort. Voldemort raised his head in surprise, and his eyes registered with disbelief the spell as it approached. In his last moment, Voldemort fixed Harry with a look of pure loathing before the killing curse struck its mark. Harry watched as Voldemort’s and his lifeless body fell to the ground. Exhausted, Harry fell to his knees, his head bowed.

Harry looked up at the gasps of the captives, still bound around the platform. A dark cloud was seeping from Voldemort’s eyes and mouth, rising into the air – Voldemort’s body was defeated, but his spirit was not. Spurred into action, Harry reached into his robe and withdrew his other purchase from Knockturn Alley, the one he was never without. He tossed the soul gem into the ground and began the incantation. A strong wind seemed to materialize, originating from the soul gem itself. The black cloud that was Voldemort’s spirit began to fly away, but the heavy winds buffeted it. Harry repeated the incantation, focusing every fiber of his being on the soul gem. Slowly, the dark mass began to be drawn into the gem itself. Voldemort struggled mightily, but he was too weak after the battle. The whirlwind captured his dark spirit, and he was pulled into the soul gem. Finally, there was nothing left of Voldemort but a swirling mist in the depths of the soul gem.

Harry cast unbreakable charms on the gem, then summoned it to him. He looked at Voldemort’s trapped spirit, and smiled grimly as he pocketed the gem. He knew that without a host to live off of, Voldemort would eventually die. After a moment to regain his breath, Harry searched for and found Hermione’s face. They looked at each other for a long moment, the relief and happiness, and love, evident on their faces. Harry then rose to free Dumbledore and the rest of the captives.

A/N: Ok, I hope the final battle didn’t disappoint. A short epilogue to follow.

*Why didn’t the spells cancel you ask? Mainly because I made it up. I figure spells comprised of magical energy will cancel, like stunning spells and curses. But because Harry sent a bolt of lighting, it was electricity and doesn’t cancel. Similar if Harry sent a fire ball or a kitchen sink at Voldemort’s head, those wouldn’t cancel either.
Chapter: 33

33. Epilogue

The transition from slumber to wakefulness was slow for Harry Potter. It started with a feeling of contentment and the strong desire to return to the comfort of sleep. But Harry’s sense of responsibility, and curiosity, eventually prodded his mind to awaken. He next became aware of presence next to him, his arm curled around it. Something tickled his face, and Harry wrinkled his nose in irritation. Harry brushed aside whatever it was that was bothering him and then snuggled into the warm body that lay beside him. Warm body? Harry’s eyelids snapped open with the realization. He was greeted with the sight of a mass of brown, which didn’t reveal much. Harry carefully raised himself on one elbow, and almost cried out in happiness at the sight before him - curled up next to him lay Hermione. Harry stared at the sleeping face of the woman he loved for a minute, as men all throughout the world, Muggle and wizard alike, have done over the centuries. Satisfied that he was not dreaming, Harry lay back down and held her comfortably, allowing his mind to recollect the events of the prior night.

After the defeat of Voldemort, a weariness and exhaustion hit Harry with a force previously not felt. Drained and injured from the fight itself, Harry was suddenly faced with the understanding that it was over – seventeen years of being hunted and having his closest friends in danger was finally over. Harry limped his way towards where Dumbledore lay and cut away his bonds. Using Harry’s wand, Dumbledore summoned his own from the bag and proceeded to free the rest of the captives. Harry didn’t wait for his wand to be returned though; he had immediately made his way to where Hermione was, though in his injured state, she was freed before he reached her. She gathered him in a bone-crushing hug and happy kisses, though not without an admonishment or two (“I can't believe you did that to me! If you do something so stupid again I'll kill you myself!”)

After that moment, things became somewhat of a blur for Harry, due equally to his weakened state and the fact that his mind was focused only on Hermione. He did, however, remember Dumbledore sneaking off with Ron to retrieve the Marauders’ Map. He vaguely remembered them returning and forming groups of adults and seventh-year students to rid the castle of the Death Eaters. With the aid of the Marauders’ Map, it was quick work. Through it all, Harry lay in the comfort of Hermione’s arms, protected from the questions and awe-struck babbling of those who witnessed his triumph. Once the Aurors had arrived and the castle was clear, Hermione helped Harry to his bed in the dorm room, where he fell asleep instantly. He hadn’t remembered Hermione climbing into bed next to him, but he was happy that she had. Harry was broken out of his reverie by the soft movements of the body nuzzled against him. Harry watched as Hermione slowly opened her eyes and blinked a few times, before a sleepy grin formed on her face when she saw Harry.

“Morning, sleepy head” Harry said fondly, careful to keep his chin raised and thus spare Hermione from the curse of morning-breath.

“Mmmmm,” Hermione responded as she stretched, her arms raised and her back arched. That feat completed (to Harry’s very wide eyes), she turned and looked at him intently. “Are you feeling better?”

Harry nodded. “Much better,” he said, pulling her closer. She didn’t resist and nestled her head underneath his chin.

Harry sat in the fairly comfortable chair outside on the lawn of the castle, watching as various witches and wizards stood and crossed the stage that had been erected in front of the doors to the castle. The professors had truly made the grounds beautiful for the graduation ceremony, and Professor Sprout had truly outdone herself with the beautiful flowers placed around them. Predictably, the ceremony had been delayed a week. After Voldemort’s defeat, the ministry and media had quickly descended upon Hogwarts in droves. Aurors, ministry officials, and reporters had questioned each and every witness to the duel between Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort. Voldemort’s death had been confirmed, and the day had been proclaimed a wizarding holiday. Harry, once he had time to recover, had faced a barrage of people trying
to get a piece of his time. Although Dumbledore, Hermione, and the Weasleys tried to protect him as much as they could, Harry found himself firmly in the spotlight. Midweek, Harry received another Order of Merlin, though 1st class this time. Offers of employment (less actual work, more just being a name to be used) flooded in, even from professional Quidditch teams. Harry cared less for his skill and more for his ability to draw paying crowds. It was a veritable circus.

Although sad to be leaving the only real home he’d known, Harry was looking forward to the next phase of his life. Hermione had earned a prestigious internship at St. Mungo’s, while Ron had secured a job at the Ministry, as his OWLs and NEWTs weren’t high enough to earn him a spot in Auror training. After graduation, Harry would stay at the Burrow (there being no need to return to the Dursleys, ever) until he and Ron could find a nice three bedroom flat in London. Hermione would spend the summer with her mother and father, though she would apparate to London to give her final approval or disapproval on the flat they would share. The idea had been rather sudden.Originally, with the threat of Voldemort still strong, it was assumed Harry would return to the Dursley’s or Grimmauld Place to continue the war. Now, with Voldemort merely swirling about in the soul gem, the three friends had decided to live together after graduation in London; considering where both Hermione and Ron were to work, it was the obvious choice. Harry was initially reluctant about the idea, afraid of how the dynamics between the three friends would change now that two of them were involved intimately. He hadn’t had to worry though, as Ron had smoothly adjusted to the idea, even anticipating that his two friends would eventually fall in love. When he asked Hermione about Ron’s surprising attitude, she only smirked and said that they’d had a “discussion.”

Harry returned his attention to the ceremony as the Patil sisters received their diplomas. Although reporters crowded the stands, aiming to get a picture of the graduation of Harry Potter, Harry was mostly left in peace among his friends. Although plenty of students were in awe of him as well, most of the Gryffindors were by now used to his exploits and were slightly less awestruck. Ernie and Hermione, as Head Boy and Girl, had given nice speeches, and the diplomas signifying fully qualified witches and wizards were being handed out. Only in his deepest, most closely guarded hopes and dreams did Harry believe he would live to see his graduation. And, as he made eye contact and shared a smile with Hermione, he knew that his life truly lay open in front of him, free of dark wizards and prophecies.

Harry Potter sat on a bench, watching a pack of children playing in the snow. They alternated between building snow wizards, complete with pointy hats, and furious snowball fights, filled with squeals and laughter. Harry was filled with utter contentment as he watched the scene of innocence and joy. He was broken out of his reverie by the beeping of his watch. Looking at his wrist, Harry saw that it was time to go.

“Emma! Emma, time to go!” he called out. A small girl, her curly black hair hidden underneath a homemade woolen hat, broke away from the group of children and said her goodbyes to her playmates. Harry kneeled down and opened his arms wide, and the little girl ran into them. He lifted her up and carried her as the two left.

“Time to get Mummy?” the little girl asked animately.

“That’s right. We go get Mummy and then go skating.” The little girl seemed excited by this news, and she nestled comfortably against Harry’s neck. He walked for a few minutes until he spotted a brown-eyed witch.

“Mummy!” the little girl cried, sitting up and leaning over to her, arms outstretched. Hermione reached for her daughter. “How’s my little pumpkin?” she asked, smiling. Hermione listened as Emma recounted her snowy adventures.

“How was your day?” Harry asked his wife as they made their way to the skating rink. They found a bench and sat.

“Tiring,” Hermione said. “I keep bumping into things, including the patients!” she said amused. Harry patted her growing stomach. “Only a few more months,” he said smiling.
“Skate mummy! Skate!” Emma cried out.

Hermione looked at her. “Of course darling. Coming, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “Not just yet. I’d rather watch for now.” Hermione nodded and carried their daughter to the entrance of the rink as Harry settled into the bench. Hermione paid and mother and daughter held hands as they skated in lazy circles. Harry was suddenly reminded of another Christmas, in this exact place, years ago. He had felt content back then also, but he was alone at the time. Now, many years later, Harry was back with a family of his own. Harry smiled, ever thankful for his life.

The end!

*Thanks to Ankalagon for providing the perfect words so I didn’t have too :)

Author’s Notes:

I hope you enjoyed our little trip. It was great fun to write, and I’m absolutely flabbergasted by the reviews! I would write a sequel if I could think of a plot, so any ideas would be welcome. This was my story that tried to stay as true to canon as possible; now I’ll indulge in some AU stuff.

Just to let you know, my original epilogue was only the last scene at the skating rink. But after all the great feedback, I knew I should write more. It was a good thing FanFiction was down yesterday (at least for me) because that &$%^# game two nights destroyed any ability to write. Yesterday’s game was simply depressing (twenty years of life waiting for a World Series!) and not as blindly enraging, so I was able to cobble the rest of the epilogue together.

One thing that was a bit clumsy in the writing was the fact that Harry had such an audience in the last battle, all tied up around the platform. I could have easily had Harry and Voldemort have a more private fight, but I wanted Harry to have witnesses. In all his adventures so far, there really wasn’t anyone to see what he’d accomplished except for his friends. This way, everyone who’s anyone saw his defeat of Voldemort.

What would I do differently/change:

First, if I were to ever go back, I would bolster the front end of the story (before Harry runs off). I could probably add another 5k to 10k words by adding dialogue and a couple of scenes. At the time, I just wanted to get to the good part and hurried through it. Plus, this being my first piece of fiction ever, I’d like to think my writing got better as the story went along.

Second, I might try and interweave the Harry and Hermione stories rather than have them completely separate. But I think I’m too lazy to do that.

Thanks to my reviewers:

I hate to thank only certain reviewers, since it might make it sound like I didn’t appreciate everyone’s reviews. But some deserve special mention:

ears91 and onkel:you two are the best! Definitely my most prolific reviewers (twice as many reviews as the next) and reviewing since the very beginning, I know you two would have reviewed every chapter if I hadn’t updated so fast. In fact, near the end I delayed an update or two until you could get a review in. Thanks for always being there!

In alphabetical order, thanks to: babyjayy, Devonny Rose, Facade1, hermionegreen, keebler-elmo, Linda_Ishtar, Maxx77, Romm, and Squirrelface RAE: These guys/gals came on strong at the end. Multiple reviewers who, from whichever chapter you started, reviewed until the last chapter. Thanks!

Responses to my reviewers:
Devonny Rose: Well, at least the Sox still have a chance. Good luck tonight! I don’t think I’ll be able to watch any more baseball this year though…too painful.

SilverDagger: Thanks for the review. Don’t be surprised if I shoot you an email asking for advice about the confusing bits (can’t do it from work though). Eek! I do give my chapters a once-over before posting to avoid grammar errors, and while Word does spell-check for me, it won’t catch things like their vs. there. Ah well, that’s the problem when you edit your own work. I kept the metric units in the story since it’s supposed to be British. I threw in the English conversions for US readers.

Romm: Hehe I debated on keeping the whole apology-to-the-parents bit in, seemed a bit cheesy, but I figured Harry’s always been a polite guy. Besides, there’s no reason to completely piss off your future in-laws, even if you do save their live

NasserPotter: You’re correct about Voldemort being more powerful. While Harry was off by himself, he focused only mastering his “basic” spells, increasing the potency of them, and increasing his ability to withstand magical attacks. He knew he didn’t compare in magical knowledge, so trying to effectively learn every counter-curse to what Voldemort knows would be futile (also, I’m no good at making up spells). Voldemort would have wiped the floor with Harry if not for the brother wands, which in effect was a counter-curse to almost everything Voldemort used against him.

keebler-elmo: the whole too obvious of his disguise: Harry was worried about it too. It would have been smarter for Harry to be in a different House, but he really couldn’t see himself as anything other than Gryffindor. It would have been smarter for Harry to start 6th year over, since academically it would be easier, but he felt it would be too hard seeing his old friends in different classes. He really couldn’t help being a seeker, since playing Quidditch is one of his few joys, and he never told anyone the exact number of OWLs he got. Besides, I’m sure subconsciously he wanted to get caught ;)

Hermione and Ron had felt too much guilt to feel angry with Harry. They blamed themselves for his capture (since they weren’t there for him when he ran after Hagrid) and subsequent torture, and even for not stopping him when he fled. So, while they were sorta mad that he kept the secret, their overwhelming guilt and plain happiness at his return mitigated any anger. Harry was never really mad at either of his two friends: by now he’s accustomed to Ron’s temper, and Harry feels a lot of guilt himself for getting Hermione hurt in the Dept of Mysteries. He could never be truly angry with Hermione: she’s the only one who always stood by him (except in my story, of course), and he understands that everything she does is for him. Now, I did mess up in that Harry should be much more angry with Dumbledore, but I forgot all about that.

Ankalagon: neither telepathy or cliché…simply genius on our parts!

Romm: good idea! Sometimes when they dismantle an old stadium, they sell pieces of it, like the old Chicago Stadium and Boston Gardens. I can have Harry sell “bits o’ Voldemort” to collectors…he can sign and number them, and he would make a fortune!
The END