

## Potter's Revenge

**Authors Notes:** This story is the result of plot bunny that refused to go away despite our best efforts to kill it. Please do not ask for a sequel, there are no plans for one in this storyline.

**Disclaimer:** Do we really need to say we don't own Harry Potter? Must we torture characters to prove it? Must I poke my eyeball out with a sharpened pencil and crush a testicle in a vise just to show I don't own Harry Potter? Must I? Must I? MUST I?

You people are sick.

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### Potter's Revenge

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#### St. Mungos (August 5th)...

The healer scowled and pushed past the Order member guarding the door. She had managed to keep them out of the room itself with a little help from security, but it was becoming increasingly more difficult, especially with the Minister on the Order's side.

Harry Potter winced and sat up in bed, looking at Healer Watkins.

"Well, Emily? How am I today?" he asked with a wink.

Healer Watkins ran her wand over him a few times, muttering spells and checking the results.

"You're much improved, Harry," she replied, then her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "I'd release you, but you know what will happen when I do."

Harry nodded silently. He had made friends with the healer and she had been keeping him informed of what the Minister and the Order were doing. They were just waiting for him to be released from the hospital before taking him into protective custody.

"I feel pretty good. Am I well enough to be released?" he asked in a hushed tone.

Emily nodded.

"Can you get away from them?" she asked in reply. Half her family had been killed by Voldemort and she didn't like what people were doing to the man who had killed the monster. In the past few days she had come to know and like Harry Potter for who he was.

Harry nodded, grinning slyly.

"Very well. Let me get you some creams that I want you to apply daily to those burns, then you can go," Emily replied worriedly.

When she left the room, he slipped from the bed and waved a hand, transfiguring his hospital gown into jeans and a t-shirt. He gestured and his wand appeared in his hand, vanishing from wherever they had hidden it. He didn't need the wand anymore, but it had sentimental value to him.

His magic had started to radically change at the beginning of the summer, but something had happened during his battle with the Dark Lord that had accelerated the change. In fact, it was the only reason he had succeeded in killing Voldemort. No one except Emily knew about his wandless magic, and even she didn't know the extent of it. There had been a few rumors leaked, but no one believed that he was that powerful. It was a mistake they would come to regret.

Emily came back a moment later, carrying two large containers, which she gave him.

"How will you get out of here?" she asked, the concern in her eyes evident.

Harry smirked. "Watch, and don't worry. I promise it will wear off in twenty four hours."

"What will wear..."

There was a brief flash of light, and she blinked. Harry was gone! Outside the door came a shout and she rushed toward the sound. Opening the door, she skidded to a halt. Everywhere she looked she saw Harry Potter. He had changed everyone in the hospital to look like him.

She looked at her own hands and slid to the floor laughing while the aurors and Order members scrambled, trying to figure out who was the real Harry Potter. It was several hours before they realized the extent of the change.

## Scottish Highlands (August 6th)...

Harry rolled in his bed and sat up slowly, still aching from his wounds. He slid out of bed and shuffled over to the small kitchen, thankful that he had purchased the self-stocking model yesterday. After his escape from St. Mungo's, he went on a short shopping spree in Diagon Alley, charging things to his vault. With everyone in the Alley also looking like him, shopping was incredibly easy. No one believed he was the real Harry Potter.

His wizarding tent contained a small bedroom, suitable for two, a kitchen/dinette area and a small sitting room. It wasn't the best tent he could have bought, but he wasn't sure of his finances, so he bought an economy model. Besides, he didn't need much, just enough to be comfortable. The tent was under a masking charm, so no one would be able to track him.

That was another change. He knew there were masking charms, but he didn't know them. It was just another case of his magic complying with his wishes and setting up a spell that did what he wanted. He didn't want to be found by other wizards, magically or physically. His magic took care of it for him.

He sat at the table pushing some food around on his plate. He thought back to the final battle and what it's cost him. The Dursleys were no more. He had visited Privet Drive briefly yesterday and found Dudley in the process of moving out. He explained what had happened to his family and, while surprised, Harry thought it was poetic justice.

He thought about the battle and the tears fell from his eyes. He hadn't been able to mourn at all in St. Mungo's.

A flash of flame caught his attention and he looked up in shock and surprise. The small phoenix circled over his head, trilling with happiness. Thunderstruck, he held up his arm and the phoenix landed gently.

Compared to Fawkes, she was small, maybe half the size of the Headmaster's phoenix. And unlike Fawkes, who was red and gold, she was a pure, snow white with black tipped wings.

She looked at Harry, staring deeply into his eyes, connecting to his very soul and he shuddered as the bond was made. Once the connection was complete, she sent him a rush of images.

"Hedwig?" he whispered in disbelief, tears started spilling down his cheeks.

The phoenix bobbed its head and trilled at him. He gently pulled his friend into a light embrace, talking to her and weeping for joy.

Harry wasn't totally alone anymore.

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## Scottish Highlands (August 10th)...

Hedwig trilled a good morning to him from her perch. She watched him fondly and wished she could help with his healing, but she was still too young to produce healing tears. He held the flap to the tent open so she could easily fly outside and hunt for her breakfast. She did sing for him at night, which helped greatly with his nightmares.

Harry stepped out of his tent and stretched. The last ten days had seen a major change in his life. Voldemort was dead, and they would be picking up pieces of some of his Death Eaters from Privet Drive for weeks to come.

His injuries had been severe enough that he had required a week long stay in St. Mungo's. While there, he had been befriended by the young healer, Emily Watkins. It was Healer Watkins who had told him about all the things going on outside of his hospital room door.

The Order and the Minister had combined forces and were just waiting for the Healers approval to remove Harry to a 'safe' location. Emily told him that from the sound of it, it was going to be one slight step above being arrested. Minister Fudge seemed to think Harry was his ticket to re-election. He wasn't sure what was driving the Order, but he intended to find out.

They had confiscated his wand as a precaution. Apparently, no one had told the Order about his ability to do wandless magic. When Healer Watkins told him he was free to go, he summoned his wand from wherever they were keeping it.

Harry sat outside his tent and bowed his head. Since his escape from St. Mungo's, he had been on an emotional roller coaster. Hedwig helped him enormously, but he was still coming to grips with the idea that he had killed. He was barely able to walk around without pain and he tired very easily. His escape hadn't been magically difficult, but his injuries were still taking a toll on his body. Hedwig sang every night for him, helping speed his healing and ease his nightmares.

Over the summer he had discovered some interesting facts that placed the Order and Dumbledore in an entirely new light. Those new facts made him seriously consider leaving Britain and vanishing into muggle society.

The Dursleys had been charmed to be more abusive than usual. They would have been abusive without the charm, but with it they were ten times worse. The charm reeked of the Headmaster's magical signature.

Harry had started to come into wandless magic at the beginning of the summer. Using the new ability, he had redirected the charm so that the target of the Dursley's ire would be themselves. His wandless magic had been fairly limited, until the battle with Voldemort. Something happened during that battle to change that.

He stretched his legs out in front of him and reached to touch his toes, wincing as some of his injuries caused him pain.



Shaking himself from his memories, he checked his watch. It was nearly noon and he was hungry. He could cook himself something, but it was time for him to reenter the wizarding world and discover if there was still a place for him there.

"Might as well go get something to eat," he said to himself with a bit of a grin. With that, Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Killed-Voldemort, vanished from the hilltop without a sound.

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## Finding Harry Potter, Part One...

He stepped into the Three Broomsticks and the sound level dropped to nothing. He looked around nervously, but Rosemerta rushed up to him and escorted him to a table.

"What will it be, Mr. Potter?" she asked, grinning.

"Can I have the special and a butterbeer, Rosie?" he replied after checking the notice for the daily special. He'd always liked the gruff inn owner and her establishment. It had a homey type of atmosphere.

"For you, dearie, anything you want. One special and a butterbeer, coming right up," she said with a saucy wink, then she sauntered away.

Harry chuckled and shook his head at her antics.

A few minutes later she came back to his table, placing the order down, and a couple newspapers. "I think you might want to read what's been happening since you left hospital," she murmured. "After you've eaten, can we talk?"

Harry eyed the woman suspiciously for a moment, but he nodded reluctantly. He wasn't sure what she wanted, but he knew her well enough to know she wasn't the type to take advantage of him.

He pulled the oldest paper to the top of the pile and started to read.

### *Potter Escapes St. Mungo's Ministry Undecided!*

*Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Won, escaped from St. Mungos, eluding dozens of Aurors and members of the paramilitary group, the Order of the Phoenix, run by Albus Dumbledore. In a bold move that involved St. Mungo's, Diagon Alley and the Ministry of Magic, he left the hospital after some howchanging more than five thousand people to look like him!*

*Healer Emily Watkins, his personal healer, was questioned for several hours under truth serum, but was finally released. She gave the following statement through her husband. "Harry Potter is not some Dark Lord. He is not a criminal. I have spoken extensively with him and discovered to my delight that he is a wonderful young man, kind and humble. He wants nothing more than to live his life without any interference from Albus Dumbledore, who he accuses of controlling and manipulating him since he was a baby."*

*Department of Magical Law Enforcement Director Amelia Bones, when contacted about the charges, had this to say. "Mr. Potter's charges may have some merit. Despite interference from within the Ministry, our investigations have turned up enough evidence to keep us digging. Let me also say this. Despite what Albus Dumbledore says, we are not seeking Harry Potter. There is no warrant out for his arrest and he has committed no crime. The Minister and Dumbledore can speculate all they want, but until they can bring us proof of a crime, our hands are tied."*

*Headmaster Dumbledore, when asked about Mr. Potter's charges, had this to say. "I am confident that once we find Harry, he will issue a retraction of his comments. They were made while he was still recovering and under the influence of pain killing potions. His comments cannot be taken seriously because of that."*

*Reports of Harry Potter sightings are coming in from everywhere. There have been reports of sightings in Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, Edison Street in New York and even reports from Hong Kong and Sri Lanka.*

*Potter, age sixteen, is the youngest Order of Merlin winner ever. He received the award for killing Lord You-Know-Who. He has been missing since August Fifth, when he escaped the heavy security put on him. We at the Prophet are eternally grateful to young Mr. Potter for his bravery in killing Lord Who-Know-Who. And we have to question why the Ministry and Albus Dumbledore are so interested in controlling Mr. Potter's life. The Prophet will stay on this story and report as more details are uncovered.*

He frowned. The paper was from August Sixth, just four days ago. He ate a bit more, then pulled out the paper dated August Seventh.

### *Potter still missing! Why was his parents will ignored?*

*In an exclusive investigation into the life of Harry Potter, the Prophet has uncovered a consistent pattern of abuse aimed at the young man, starting with his placement after the murder of his parents. Despite a will stating that young Harry should not be placed with his muggle relatives, he was sent there by Albus Dumbledore.*

*His muggle relatives began a pattern of abuse, physical and mental, that continued throughout his life. We at the Prophet were shocked and have turned over most of our findings to Madam Bones of the DMLE to aid in their investigation. However, with her permission, we can tell you some of what young Harry endured, thanks to an indifferent Ministry and Albus Dumbledore.*

*At age four his arm was broken by his uncle, and he was hospitalized three times that year for major infections from untreated wounds...*

Harry pushed the paper away from him, nauseated by what he saw. He couldn't read anymore. He lowered his head, unable to stop the tears.

"It's true, isn't it?" said a voice.

He looked up to see Rosemerta sitting across the table from him and he angrily dashed away his tears. Rosie pulled her wand and cast a privacy charm.

"It is true, isn't it?" she asked again.

Numb, he nodded at her.

"So, what will you do now?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. Leave, I guess."

"You're going to let the bastards win?" she asked intently, leaning closer to him.

"What?"

Rosie sighed and leaned back in her chair. "Look, Harry, from what I can figure, you're probably the most powerful wizard seen in a thousand of years. You could easily slip away and start your life over somewhere. Or you could slip in among the muggles and vanish forever. But running away isn't the answer. I know, I tried that. And I don't think you're the type to run from your problems."

She looked at him, her eyes hard. "I grew up with people that didn't want me, either, Harry. And as a girl, there was an added danger that I had to learn to live with."

Harry looked up at her in surprise and she nodded grimly, answering the question he refused to ask.

"Not everyone is against you. Sure, a lot of people you thought were friends turned out to be using you. But you have some very loyal friends, Harry. I've seen them with you when you've come in here.

"You can do one of several things. You can run away from it all. Unlike most of us, you could probably succeed in running away, but that doesn't solve anything. Your problems will always be just sitting over your shoulder, waiting to pounce on you.

"You could try to pretend it didn't happen and that it doesn't hurt you. But that road will drive you mad, turning you into someone nearly as bad as the Dark Lord.

"Or you can face your bullies and your past and push back. Let them know they can't push you around anymore. Take it from someone that has walked in your shoes. Running doesn't work. Burying it doesn't work. You need someone you can confide in, and you need to stand up to the people trying to control you and tell them no."

Harry's expression grew thoughtful.

"I know it's been rough for you, Harry, but I also know you're not alone. You have a lot of people that would love to help you, and I know for a fact that your little muggle born witch would give anything to help you. I've seen the way she looks at you," she said with dancing eyes.

Harry looked up startled. "Huh? Hermione? But she's only a friend!" he protested weakly. He knew that he wanted her to be more, but she had chosen Ron.

Rosie laughed and canceled her privacy spell. Standing, she patted Harry on the shoulder. "Sure, Harry, but just think about what I said, alright? And remember, I'm always willing to listen. I won't betray you."

He smiled shyly and thanked her. She had given him a lot to think about.

Harry left the Three Broomsticks a while later, after promising Rosie that he'd come back and talk with her again. Something about their conversation gave him hope. It was the first time he had ever met someone who'd grown up as he did, and it gave him hope to see that she was reasonably happy. It meant that someday he could achieve the same thing.

He walked around Hogsmeade for a while, doing a little shopping. He had just left Gladrags when he felt a hand on his arm and he was spun around.

"Moony!" he exclaimed.

"What the hell are you pulling, Harry? Leaving the hospital was stupid!" Remus said in an angry tone.

Harry's expression darkened. "Oh, so you're really one of Dumbledore's ass kissers? I'm disappointed in you, Remus."

Remus frowned at him. "The Headmaster has only your best interests in mind, Harry. It's time you grew up and realized that fact."

Harry shook his head. "I almost pity you, Remus. I wonder who my parents would be more angry with? Wormtail for betraying them, or you for betraying me?"

Remus scowled and tightened his grip on him. "You're coming up to the castle with me. Dumbledore will set you straight."

"I don't think so, Remus. I'm not putting up with that bastard and his interference in my life anymore and I'm not putting up with you, either!" he snarled.

As Remus watched, Harry shrank down to nearly half his size and his hair turned blond. He began to twist in the older man's grip, trying to escape.

Remus stared at him incredulously.

"HELP! WEREWOLF! HELP ME, PLEASE! HE WANTS TO BITE ME!" Harry screamed in a childlike voice, attracting the attention of the townspeople.

In a matter of seconds, Remus was hit with dozens of stunners. Harry dashed away and ran around the side of a building, trying very hard not to laugh. Behind him, several townspeople were kicking the prone Order member.

Harry dispelled the glamour around him and watched from a distance for a moment. He saw Minerva and Mundungus run up and chase the people who were kicking Remus away. He looked towards the castle in the distance. Only two of the school's towers were visible from where he stood.

"You want a war, old man? You'll get one," Harry murmured. Concentrating, he vanished from Hogsmeade.

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### Scottish Highlands (August 12th)...

He sat in front of a pile of blank parchment, wondering who he could write and who he could trust.

Rosie's words echoed in his head and he wanted to write Hermione, but he knew, as a friend of his, she would be closely watched by the Order. He couldn't arrange any sort of meeting, or even send her a long note, without putting her at risk.

Hedwig appeared overhead in a flash of flame and glided to a landing on his table. He smiled and scratched around the base of her neck.

"What do you think, Hedwig? Hermione would be in danger if I contacted her, wouldn't she?" he asked.

The bird just trilled a short reply and looked at him as if to say, just write her already.

"Perhaps a short note, then?" he asked.

He stared at the phoenix and for a brief moment it seemed like he was receiving a series of images, comforting him. He blinked in surprise. "We're going to have to figure that out," he said, largely to himself.

Shaking his head, he dipped his quill in the inkwell and began to write.

*Dear Hermione,  
I won't tell you where I am, but I'm recovering from my injuries.*

*I'm fine, really. I hope you will forgive me for such a short note, but I don't dare tell you much in this letter. For now, just know I miss you more than I can say here.*

*Trust no one from the Order, including Dumbledore. This is important, believe me.*

*I will try to send you another letter, but if I don't, I will see you on the Express September first.*

*Love,  
Harry*

He rolled up the parchment and offered it to Hedwig, who eyed him reproachfully. "Yes, I know it's short, Hedwig, but right now I don't know who I can trust. I'm sure I can trust Hermione, but she's probably being watched. Just take this to her and leave immediately. I'll talk to her on the Express. Oh, and I may be gone for a while when you return."

Hedwig trilled softly and bobbed her head, then vanished.

Harry stood and dressed, then donned a warm cloak. A moment later he, too, vanished from the tent.

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### The Grangers...

Hermione entered her room, a towel wrapped around her body. The days since Harry's fight with Voldemort have been filled with worry for him.

At the end of the last term she thought she might be falling for her other best friend, Ron Weasley, but on the train they'd had a fight over her insistence that he do his homework early this summer. They managed to hide the fight from Harry, as well as their budding relationship, but once Harry had left the platform with his relatives, it had blown up again, only this time far worse.

Hermione had said something to Ron and he'd been offended. He'd stepped toward her and raised his hand to strike her. She'd cringed back and her father caught Ron's descending wrist, preventing the blow.

Ron's parents had been appalled by his behavior, and after apologizing profusely to Hermione and her parents, they had dragged the still enraged Ron from the train station.

When Hermione had arrived home, her father sat her down, fully expecting to have to forbid her from seeing Ron, but she had already come to that decision on her own.

It had hurt, but she was sure it was the right decision. She knew her friendship with Ron was over and done with. Now all she needed to do was find out where she stood with Harry.

She was startled entering the room. For a brief second she could have sworn she'd seen flames. Then she saw it. On her desk was a rolled up parchment that was rocking gently back and forth, as if it had been dropped.

Discarding her towel, she hurriedly dressed, then broke the seal on the parchment.

She read the letter several times before putting it down and sighing heavily. She remembered a conversation she had had with her mother only a few days earlier.

*"So, what will you do?"*

*"Well, I'm not going out with Ron anymore, Mum."*

*Emily Granger nodded in acceptance. "Yes, well, I didn't raise an idiot for a daughter. I have to admit that I was surprised when you owed us about dating Ron and that you were keeping it a secret from Harry. Nearly every letter you've sent from school was about Harry, and then suddenly you're dating Ron?"*

*Hermione looked down at her hands in her lap for a moment. "Ron was... safe, Mum. Harry doesn't know I exist, at least not like that. Besides, he's Harry Potter."*

*Emily frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"*

*"He's Harry. He's handsome, he's rich and he's famous. He could have any girl he wanted," Hermione replied with a shrug. "I'm just Hermione, his know-it-all, bookworm friend."*

*"Stop that, Hermione Jane," Emily snapped, as she stood and walked over to her daughter. "You are beautiful and smart. If Harry can't see that, you have two choices. Either live with it and just be his friend, or take the steps needed to let him see it for himself."*

*Hermione looked at her mother uncertainly.*

*"Look, dear, you've said it yourself in the past, Harry seems to be too much of a gentleman to take advantage of those witches lining up for his attention, right?"*

*Hermione nodded.*

*"Well, either be his friend, or show him that you can offer more than just being a friend. Your father is my best friend and so much more. But I had to nudge him a little to get him to notice me," Emily offered.*

*Hermione nodded weakly in understanding and wondered if she could work up the Gryffindor courage to tell Harry how she felt.*

She looked down at the letter again and smiled to herself. He missed her. *Maybe I have a chance, after all,* she mused. Humming to herself, she picked up the letter, planning on showing it to her mother when she got home. The bit about not trusting the Order would need to be explained, of course, but it was time.

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## **Finding Harry Potter, Part Two...**

Harry sipped at the cold soft drink and quietly slipped his new book into his his knapsack. He was indulging in something he always wanted to do; sightseeing. The first stop on his tour was Stonehenge.

Leaving the visitors center, he pulled the new book out of his knapsack and started to read it as he slowly approached the neolithic structure. He walked past the outer ring of stones and into the inner circle, which was the most famous part of the site.

Something about the site called to him.

He walked over to one of the standing stones and leaned against it, placing his cheek against the cool stone.

Suddenly, all sounds around him ceased. Alarmed, he stepped away from the stone and looked around wildly. No one was moving. In the distance, he could make out a bird, frozen mid-flight against the bright blue sky.

He scowled and wondered what kind of magic was at work when the surface of the stone rippled and a cloaked figure stepped out.

Harry took a step back and crouched low. His left hand flared and a ball of fire hovering just above his palm. His right hand burst into a coruscating aura of light, but he didn't cast.

"Who are you?" he asked warily.

The figure turned and eyed him for a moment. Harry could sense immense power coming from under the cloak and he really didn't want to fight him.

"Good, you have learned caution. It is a lesson that will fare you well in your life, young Master Potter," said the figure.

Harry dispelled the ball of fire and relaxed the magic pooling in his other hand. "Who are you?" he asked again.

The figure made a gesture with his hand, encompassing all of the ancient structure. "My name is of no importance. I am just one of the guardian spirits of this place. I came because I sensed your presence and I sensed your disquiet. You have only recently come into your powers and you are uncertain of your path."

Harry frowned. "Why is it every oracle and ancient magic artifact has to speak in riddles?" he asked plaintively.

The figure gestured to a low stone. "Come then, Master Potter. Sit and I shall endeavor to make myself more clear."

Harry followed the figure. Once they were both seated, the figure pushed back the hood of the cloak, revealing the face of an old man.

"For ages I have watched over this place, Master Potter. I have seen people come and go and some, a rare few, have a touch of the old ones about them. Just slight flickers that tell me that the old powers haven't been totally lost. And then you arrived."

"Sir?" Harry asked in confusion.

The old man smiled. "The old powers are strong in you, Master Potter. You have a destiny and you have started your great journey. You yearn to be normal, but you can never be. So instead, revel in your difference and accept what you are."

"So, I should just accept what I can not change?"

"Could you change the prophecy about you and the Dark Lord?" asked the old man.

"No," he replied. He wasn't sure how the spirit knew about the prophecy.

"Then your only choice was to accept it, correct?"

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "What else can you tell me?" he asked.

The old man laughed. "Master Potter, do not mistake me for a mentor or a guide. I am merely a guardian spirit of this place. I sensed your approach and wanted to speak to you. It has been so long since I have spoken with anyone."

"And yet you offered me some good advice," Harry countered.

The old man stood and smiled down at him. "In truth, did you not already know it? Hadn't you already realized that what you could not change, must be accepted?"

Harry nodded sheepishly at the old man and he laughed again.

"I like you, Master Potter. You must return to this place so we can continue our conversation. But for now, you have enemies approaching. Can you not feel them?" asked the old man.

Harry closed his eyes and reached out with his senses, feeling the wizards trying to sneak up on him. He could also feel the anti-apparation ward going up. He smirked to himself, then he looked at the old man.

"Yes, I feel them. I would like to talk more, but right now I have pressing business to attend to. Will you forgive me if I run off before we finish our conversation?"

The old man nodded, waved and then faded from sight.

The world around him returned with a rush and Harry closed his eyes, concentrating for a moment.

With a growing smile, he banished Mad-Eye Moody's leg, causing him to fall. Then he transfigured his eye into a grape.

Tonks he sent to Westminster Abbey, stark naked. The third person, a man he didn't know, sunk into the ground up to his neck and was unable to move.

Harry walked over to Moody and bent over him. Moody fumbled for his spare wand, his expression growing more and more distressed.

"Now, Moody, where would my constant vigilance be if I didn't take away your toys?" he said with a sneer.

"Potter!" Moody said between clenched teeth.

"Enjoy your stay at Stonehenge, Moody. You might even learn something. I know I did," Harry said. Flashing the man a look of contempt, he straightened and vanished from sight.



Later that evening, back in his tent, Harry considered the old guardian spirit's words.

"Accept what you can't change, eh?" he said, half to himself and half to Hedwig. "Well, I can't give up my magic, or what I can do with it. I guess that's one thing I have to accept."

His expression darkened, then. "Along with my past," he muttered, then he looked at Hedwig. "But my future is mine to control!"

Hedwig trilled in agreement and Harry relaxed.

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### **Scottish Highlands (August 17th)...**

*Dear Sirs,*

*Before my battle with Voldemort, I recall receiving a letter from Gringotts. Unfortunately, said letter was destroyed in that battle before I was able to read it, so I have no idea what it contained. I know this is troublesome, but if someone can find out why they were trying to contact Harry James Potter and send another letter back with my phoenix, I would be most appreciative.*

*Yours in profit,  
Harry James Potter*

Hedwig glanced over at his note and made a honking sound that reminded Harry of laughter.

"I know it's not a great letter, but what can I do? The original letter was destroyed," he said with a grimace.

He rolled up the parchment and sealed it. Hedwig looked at him for a moment, giving him 'the look'.

"Alright! You take this and I'll cook you some bacon!" he exclaimed.

The bird trilled happily. Taking the parchment from his hand, she vanishing.

Harry stood and walked over to the kitchen. "The things I do to get my mail delivered," he muttered under his breath.

This had become a bit of a game for them. Harry would bribe and flatter his phoenix and she would pretend to consider his efforts before doing his bidding. Both knew he was still tormented by nightmares of her loss and the deaths he had caused. In a way, the game was a healing process for both of them.

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### **Seeking Harry Potter, Part Three...**

"Now, if you will just step this way, we'll take you into the room containing the current crown jewels used by the Royal Family..."

Harry tuned out the tour guide and looked around. He had always wanted to sightsee in London, and that was exactly what he was doing. He had joined a bus tour and this was their fourth stop of the day.

He paused and tilted his head slightly. Ever since his encounter with the guardian spirit, he was constantly testing to see if any wizards were approaching. One had just apparated in, not to far away. There were another six nearby, but they weren't any problem. It was the close one, the one he recognized.

He tensed slightly and then felt a hand grip his shoulder. He erected wards to prevent apparation and portkeys, then he turned to look up at Albus Dumbledore, who smiled at him benignly.

"You've given us a merry chase, Harry, but it's time for you to come home now," Dumbledore said with his eyes twinkling merrily.

"I don't think so ,Headmaster," Harry replied coldly. "In fact, I know my tour continues to the wax museum and I always wanted to see that."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Perhaps another time, my boy. For now, it's time for us to go to Headquarters before we return you to Privet Drive."

Harry smirked as the old wizard's expression changed to one of shocked surprise. "A combined apparation/portkey ward of my own design. Quite ingenious, if I do say so myself, Headmaster."

In his shock Dumbledore had released him and he stepped away from the old man and turned. He made two quick gestures. A nearby glass case shattered, spraying glass all over the floor and an alarm started screaming.

Before he could move, Dumbledore found himself holding a claw hammer in one hand and a crown in the other.

"STOP THIEF!" Harry screamed as he pointed at Dumbledore. Turning to face the Headmaster, he winked.

Dumbledore blinked in shock and looked down at his hands. A moment later, two burly, heavily armed security guards tackled him to the floor. Dumbledore's wand slid across the rough stone floor, out of his reach.

Whistling, Harry turned and walked out of the room, wondering if he could catch up with his tour group. He really did want to see the wax museum.

He was disappointed to discover that his group would be delayed while authorities tried to discover how the dumbest thief ever to attempt stealing

the crown jewels had entered the building. Shrugging, he cast an invisibility charm on himself and walked out.

He walked away from the tower, laughing at the sound of sirens approaching as more police are called in. Dumbledore would be able to get out of the situation easily enough, but the Ministry would spend the rest of the day obliterating people. Minister Fudge would then have to explain his actions to the Prime Minister, as well as the Wizengamot. All in all, it was a prank worthy of a true Marauder, he thought.

“That one is for you, Sirius,” he murmured. Then he stopped short for a moment, amazed that the thought of Sirius didn't seem to cause as much pain as it used to. He grinned and continued his walk away from the Tower of London.

He didn't have to walk far before he stumbled on a small park and, with a mental shrug, he entered. His only experience with parks had been the one near his relatives home. This park seemed a lot bigger, with a large wooded area and a pond with ducks.

Walking around the pond, he chanced upon an old Chinese gentleman who seemed to be dancing with a wooden sword. His movements were exact, almost as if they were rehearsed. Intrigued, Harry sat on the grass and watched the man for while. Then he stood and moved behind him, trying to copy his movements.

The old man turned and smiled, then he walked over to Harry and adjusted his stance.

“If you want learn Tai Chi, you must learn focus. The movements aids your focus. Be calm, think of just one thought, something that relaxes you, and concentrate on it.”

Harry nodded and thought about the things which relaxed him. Hermione relaxed him, but also excited him at the same time. No, that wasn't something he needed to do here in public!

Finally, he settled on an image of Hedwig and her phoenix song. He looked over at the old man and nodded.

“Good, good. Now, Tai Chi is moving meditation. First, bend knees down. Next, we do simple move. Is called Din Boo...”

The old man placed Harry into a specific position, adjusting his arms and legs.

“Note arms and legs, see position of feet. Now, we move like this, to this position,” said the old man.

He rearranged Harry's arms and legs again. “This called Sui Boo. Then move from Sui Boo to Din Boo, like this.”

For the next hour the old man walked around Harry, straightening his posture and talking him through some very basic steps of Tai Chi. What amazed him was that, for the last quarter hour, the man had him concentrating on his image while moving between just three forms. During that time, everything else seemed to vanish; it was just Hedwig in his mind.

The old man touched Harry, stopping his motion and breaking his concentration. It was only fifteen minutes, but it seemed like it was over in seconds and when he came out of it, he was totally relaxed and more calm, more accepting of himself.

“Yes! You do see it!” the old man exclaimed.

“I think so... It was amazing,” Harry replied softly.

The old man broke grinned. “You practice. Tai Chi teaches focus. To learn Tai Chi means to learn about self.”

Harry nodded and smiled broadly at the old man. “How can I thank...”

The old man waved a hand, dismissing his concerns. “You learn focus, that thanks enough,” he replied. Then he picked up his wooden sword and walked away with a spring in his step.

He shook his head and watched the man moving away from him. With an off key whistle, he decided to find a muggle book store and see if he could learn more about Tai Chi.

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## Diagon Alley (August 20th)...

Harry appeared at the apparation point. His cap covered his blond hair and scar. As hard as he tried, even with Voldemort dead, he couldn't make a glamour to cover his scar.

Stepping into the Alley, he looked around, wondering where he could find what he needed. He wandered halfway down the Alley before he spotted a sign. It was just what he needed!

Pushing open the door, he entered a small outer office with a receptionist.

“Hello and welcome to Harvey, Hurtle and Harbrace,” said the receptionist. “How can I help you?”

“I'd like to talk to one of the senior partners, please. If that isn't possible, then a senior solicitor,” Harry said in a hushed tone.

The receptionist frowned. “Do you have an appointment?”

Harry shook his head, then he decided it was time to try a little gentle intimidation. He allowed his magic to fill in behind his eyes and his power to

resonate in the building.

The receptionist had been about to brush off the boy when she gulped and her stomach lurched. He was staring at her, smiling crookedly, but his eyes were glowing! And if that wasn't enough, the building was rumbling ominously.

"I'll see who is available," she squeaked.

A moment later, a tall man came out of an office and extended a hand. "I'm Duncan Harvey, Mister...?"

Harry glanced around and motioned to his office. "May we speak privately, Mr. Harvey? I promise, I mean you no harm."

Harvey raised an eyebrow, but motioned for the young man to follow him. He walked into his office, holding the door open for Harry, then he closed it and moved to his desk.

Harry pulled off his cap and dispelled his glamour. "I apologize for this unscheduled visit, Mr. Harvey, but I find myself in need of your services."

Harvey sat heavily in his chair. "Merciful Merlin! Harry Potter!" he exclaimed.

Harry rolled his eyes at the surprised man. "I get that a lot these days. But honestly, I don't think I've anything on Merlin," he said with a grin.

Harvey shook his head and grinned sheepishly, then he conjured a tea service. "Tea, Mr. Potter?"

"Light, with two sugars. And please, call me Harry. I'm hoping we'll be able to work together," he replied.

Harvey handed him a cup and nodded. "How can we help you then, Mr... er... Harry?"

Harry opened his knapsack and pulled out a large ledger, which he passed over to Harvey.

"For the past three days I've been trying to figure out what the Goblins are so upset about. This ledger details activity on my accounts, which I have not authorized. I can't claim to fully understand what the goblins are upset about, but I can see people are doing things with the money and heirlooms my parents left me, without my permission. That's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about today."

Harvey frowned and opened the ledger. He put on a pair of glasses and started reading. Ten minutes later, he looked up at the young man seated across from him. "Some of this looks to be outright theft, Harry. We will need to coordinate any actions with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Harry leaned back in his chair and grinned. "See? That's the kind of help I need, Mr. Harvey. I'd like to hire your firm to deal with this and another matter, which may require some delicacy. I think, by now, having just briefly scanned the ledger, you can see that I can afford to hire your firm. From what I understand, there is more money coming my way from my Godfather, but the Goblins are most upset about my parents estate."

Harvey reached into his desk and pulled out a retainer agreement. "I can see why, Harry. Let's set up a retainer contract, then we can talk about everything you need us to do."

Harry nodded and reached for a quill. It was going to be a long morning, but well worth it in the long run.

Nearly four hours later, he left the solicitor's office and stretched. All that sitting had left him with a few kinks that he needed to work out. He walked over to the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies and briefly considered buying a Firebolt X2, but decided against it. Supposedly, there was a new Nimbus due to be released that would make the new Firebolt look slow. He wanted to wait for that.

Spotting Flourish and Blotts, he decided to head over there to see about a gift for Hermione's birthday on September nineteenth. He sighed. It would have been so much fun to ask her to come shopping with him today, but with the Order still tracking him down and trying to drag him to Hogwarts or Grimmauld Place, he couldn't risk endangering her.

Stepping out of the bookstore, he smiled. He'd found two books he knew she'd like; *How to be Head Girl and Still Have Fun* by Brenna McKenna and a special, illustrated, self updating version of *Hogwarts: A History*.

The books were her birthday present, but he wanted to get her something special. He knew exactly what it was, too, when he spotted the stuffed bear in the window of the toy store.

A short time later, he exited the store, already planning the charms he was going to put on the bear. He knew that she was going out with Ron, but he was going to use the bear to explain how he felt. He was sure she'd stay with Ron, but he had to explain, even if it meant losing her as a friend.

Placing the bear in his knapsack, he looked up suddenly. He could feel the anti-portkey and anti-apparation wards going up. From one of the stores exited a bunch of Order members and Albus Dumbledore.

Harry frowned as the group fanned out, getting ready to approach him. Other wizards and witches, smelling trouble, quickly left the street.

"Play time is over, Potter. It's time to come with us," Moody called.

"Nice leg, Moody. How about I send this one to Siberia, with you still attached?" Harry replied with grin. "Did you replace your eye? Ah, you did. Doesn't it come in a different color? That blue is really alarming."

Moody growled and reached for his wand.

Dumbledore, standing beside the retired Auror, grasped his hand, stilling his movement. "Harry, that is quite enough. I must insist that you come with us now for your own good."

Harry ignored him. Instead, he zeroed in on Tonks. "Hey, Tonks. Looking good. You know, you're a lot prettier with no clothes on. I wonder if Moony would like to see the pictures?" he asked with a sneer.

Tonks snarled and stepped forward. She whipped out her wand and it immediately began to dribble flowers.

"Now, that's impressive. Bury them in Begonias," Harry laughed.

"Nooooo!" Tonks wailed and then she was gone, leaving behind all of her clothing, her wand and her Auror badge.

"Harry," Dumbledore chided. "Where did you send Nymphadora this time?"

Harry walked around slowly, noting that he was surrounded. "You might want to check Amelia Bones' office, but I strongly suggest you do so with clothing on. I always liked her, but she strikes me as a tad uptight."

Dumbledore frowned.

Harry looked around, looking for one person in particular.

"I'm rather disappointed, Headmaster. Couldn't you have brought Snape along? I really had an interesting prank for him," he said, then ducked down.

The stunner meant for him whizzed over his head. It hit Hestia Jones in the chest and she collapsed silently to the ground, then vanished. In her place was a large, gaily wrapped box with a sign that read, 'Contents Alive! Do Not Shake!'

Harry smirked and a girl leaning from an open second story window laughed and applauded. He shot her a glance, grinned and bowed.

Two more stunners lanced out and Harry dodged again. Kingsley Shacklebolt was forced to dive to the ground to avoid the stunners. When he did, the pavement turned liquid long enough for him to become embedded in it before it solidified again. Kingsley started struggling and cursing, but he was held fast.

The girl in the window applauded again and whistled. He grinned and blew a kiss at her, then dodged several more stunners.

Each time someone cast a spell, Harry would do something to avoid getting hit, and another Order member would be taken out of the fight, usually in a humiliating manner. Moody had his wand and peg leg switched, and Harry transfigured his eye into a banana. Remus was put into Slytherin colors and a full body bind, then given Snape's face.

Finally, it was down to Albus Dumbledore and his brother Aberforth. Both men fired stunners and Harry, using his magic to give himself a boost, leapt over the spells, arcing high into the air before landing on his feet again. He looked at the two Dumbledores and started laughing. Aberforth had been given a beard as long as his brother's and he had braided the two beards together.

The girl in the window winked saucily at Harry and applauded again. By now he had gained a large audience.

He bowed before them, then apparated away, rather than using his usual method of transporting. The sound of his crashing through the ward was tremendous and the effect on Dumbledore, the caster of the ward, was severe.

He moaned piteously. When Aberforth leaned closer to check on him, Albus vomited, soaking his brother's robe and beard with the foul smelling substance.

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## Seeking Harry Potter, Part Four...

It was a glorious day! The sun was shining and Harry could see the entire battlefield from the low ridge he stood upon. The battle of Hastings was an important event in his country's history. It had taken him half a day to track down apparation coordinates for the area. He might not be apparating, but the coordinates did provide him with an easy way to find places.

He had taken the walking tour of the Battle Abbey and was now sitting on the ridge where the defending Normans had regrouped. He read from the tour book he had bought, then looked out over the battlefield.

He sat at the base of a tree and considered the history, then he sighed heavily. He wondered if the battle had been worth it. For that matter, had his own battles been worth it? Considering the way 'his side' was treating him, he wasn't sure any more.

"I can hear your thoughts, m'lord," said the ghost.

He looked up in surprise to see the ghost of what appeared to be a Norman knight.

"Was it a terrible battle for you?" Harry asked.

The knight turned to look at him. "You have seen the dogs of war unleashed, m'lord. Tis not a pretty sight under any circumstances."

"It's enough to make you wonder why we did it."

The ghost shook his head. "We had our duty, m'lord. In my case, I owed my duty to my liege lord. You had a duty to a higher calling. No warrior can ask for more than that, nor should we want to."

Harry sighed. "It just seems so futile. Is duty all that drives us? Shouldn't there be more? What about those that didn't survive? Did they deserve their fate?"

"There is always more, m'lord. Even I can see that there is more ahead for you. We fight because we have to. We fight to protect those we love and, hopefully, we return from the field to them. You have the look of battle about you, even now. There is no shame in being a warrior and no shame in surviving a battle when so many others have not. Honor the fallen and raise a cup in their memory, but always remember that forward is the only way you can go."

Harry looked over the battlefield, his eyes distant. "Forward. As much as we'd like to go back, we can't." He glanced over to the knight. "No regrets, eh?"

The knight smiled slightly. "Aye, m'lord, no regrets. Find yourself a shapely wench and revel in being alive. Do it for those who cannot."

Harry stood and turned to face the knight. "Thank you, sir knight. Your words are a comfort. I have been trying to understand, to make sense of it all, and your advice has helped."

The knight bowed and started to fade. "Aye, we all try to understand. Remember me, m'lord. We who have fallen are your comrades."

The knight faded away and Harry stood. "I will remember you, sir knight, and those I have lost."

Turning away, he walked down the hill to the apparation point so he could return to his tent.

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### **Gringotts Wizarding Bank (August 27th)...**

Harry sat back on his chair and stared at the Goblin. "I'm what?" he exclaimed.

"Emancipated, Mr. Potter. The Ministry awarded you an Order of Merlin, first class. That automatically conveyed emancipation upon you, over and above what your godfather and guardian expressed in his will," Ragnok replied with a smug grin.

"What does this mean for me?" Harry asked. He glanced around the room.

He was alone with Ragnok, leader of the Goblin Nation and chief manager of Gringotts. Ragnok had requested the meeting shortly after Harry had killed Voldemort. That Ragnok had requested a private meeting was even more surprising. The head of the Goblin Nation routinely refused to see heads of state, and yet here he was, asking Harry for a meeting.

For the past three weeks, since the battle on Privet Drive, Harry had been dogged by Order members. Remus, Tonks, even Dumbledore, followed him whenever he made a public appearance. He had led them on a merry chase, bouncing around the country, rarely staying in one place long enough for them to catch up with him. Even now, a fuming Tonks waited for Harry in the lobby of Gringotts. She had been denied admittance to Ragnok's chambers and escorted to the lobby under guard.

The only place they hadn't found was his little spot in Scotland where he had his tent. And they hadn't found that because he didn't want them to.

Ragnok smiled, showing his pointy teeth.

"It means, Mr. Potter, that you are an adult and therefore all your family rights and privileges become available to you. You are both Lord Potter and Lord Black, a member of both the inner court of the Wizengamot and of Her Majesties court."

Ragnok leaned back on his chair. "After an American named Gates, you are Gringotts second largest depositor world wide. Your assets include controlling interests in one hundred and sixty seven companies and substantial investments in another three hundred plus companies, both muggle and magical. From the Potters, you own twenty two homes in various countries, and another nineteen homes from the Blacks."

"The Black Loan Institution holds the notes and substantial loans to eighty percent of the old pureblood families in Britain alone. That includes the Malfoy's, the Zabini's, the Fudge's and the Parkinson's, to name a few."

Ragnok paused and grinned at Harry, making him feel decidedly uncomfortable. "In short, between your Potter family holdings, your Black family holdings, and the debts owed to you, you control a substantial portion of Wizarding Britain and its economy. Should you decide to liquidate your Gringotts accounts in favor of, say, a Barclay's account, you would devalue the Galleon by over nine hundred percent and throw the economy into ruin."

Harry noted the fear that flickered in Ragnok's eyes and he sat up straighter. "Director Ragnok, let me state right now that I have no intention of removing my family's assets from your establishment. Gringotts has always treated me fairly and I see no reason why that relationship should not continue," he replied.

"Director," he began, looking thoughtful, "would it be safe to assume that, as one of your largest depositors, Gringotts might be willing to offer me services that, well, you wouldn't normally offer to your regular depositors? Something that will be profitable for both of us?"

Ragnok nodded and grinned slyly. The wizarding world was about to get a kick in the pants that would make Riddle look like a kitten. Leaning forward, the head of the Goblin Nation rubbed his hands together with glee. "What did you have in mind, Mr. Potter?"

## **The Hogwarts Express (September 1st)...**

Harry stepped into an empty compartment and closed the door. Hedwig had gone on ahead, and his school supplies were all in his trunk in his pocket. Two conversations he'd had on the platform were very important and had given him a lot to think about.

*He arrived at the train station dressed in his very finest, as befitted the head of two noble houses. He wore an black Acromantula silk cape over a dark blue pants and shirt. The bottoms of his pants were tucked neatly inside his dragonhide boots. His hair had grown long, and in the old tradition, he had tied it back with a white ribbon, signifying he was unattached.*

*He had read up on the old traditions, and while he had discarded a lot of them as being outdated, some, he decided, were exactly what he needed and adopted them wholeheartedly.*

*As the platform filled up with families, he drew a lot of attention from the girls and the older women. But the people he wanted to talk to hadn't shown up yet.*

*He had been standing by the train when Neville came up to him. He seemed hesitant to approach him.*

*"I'm still your friend and fellow Gryffindor, Nev," Harry said with a smile.*

*"Harry... I'm not sure how to say this, but thank you. If you ever need anything, we Longbottoms will stand beside you. We're in your debt," Neville said fervently.*

*Harry blinked in surprise and grinned. "I take it this is about Bellatrix?"*

*Neville swallowed convulsively and nodded.*

*"Neville," Harry said, clapping a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Bellatrix was a stain that needed removing. What I did, I did for all of us. But I hope with all my heart that you and your family can find some measure of peace from it."*

*Neville straightened and looked him in the eyes. "All the same, Harry, we owe you for what you did. You and I have been touched by those monsters more than most."*

*Harry's eyes darkened with remembered grief. "You have no idea, my friend. Someday, I'll tell you the story. But you're right, we have been touched by them. No more though. We're free of them now."*

*"That we are," Neville replied, then he looked around nervously. "Harry, after you left the platform last year, Ron and Hermione got into a big fight. Right in front of her parents, if you can believe it. And when Hermione called Ron lazy, he tried to hit her. Her dad stepped up and blocked his hand. Mrs Weasley was furious and dragged him away."*

*"Ron tried to hit Hermione?" he asked, nearly gaping in shock.*

*When Neville nodded, Harry motioned for him to continue.*

*"There's not much else to say, except that I owed Hermione about some homework questions and in her reply she told me she and Ron had broken up. Her father forbid her from dating him anymore, but I got the impression she had already made that decision for herself," Neville said in a rush.*

*Harry's expression was dark and his magic was barely under control. He was angry, but a part of him was standing up and cheering. He could ask her out now!*

*"Thank you, Neville. Maybe it's time for me to find the Weasleys," he said, his tone seething with anger.*

*Neville blinked at him. "Er... right. I'll just go hide then," he said with a bit of grin.*

*"Neville?"*

*"Yeah?"*

*"The house of Potter is honored to call the house of Longbottom friend."*

*Harry flashed his friend a grin, then he turned away, walking the length of the train, back to the entrance. His cape billowed out behind him and his pace could only be described as implacable.*

*Neville, watching Harry as he walked away, squared his shoulders and lifted his head in pride. Harry had used the old forms, acknowledging his family and calling them friends. Accordingly, the Potters would consider any attack on the Longbottom family as an attack on themselves.*

*Near the entrance, Harry came upon the Weasleys, who were trying to manhandle two trunks and other items towards the train.*

*Ginny and Molly stopped, seeing Harry approach. His expression alone was enough to make them take a step backwards.*

*Ginny's eyes widened as she looked closely at Harry. He looked a lot healthier than previous years and for the first time in a while she wondered what would have happened had she not been dating Dean Thomas. He cut a dashing figure, but more importantly, the air around him roiled as magic poured off him. Harry was seriously pissed off.*

*Harry walked up to Ron and spun him roughly around. "If I ever find out you tried to hit Hermione again there won't be enough left of you to fill a spoon."*

*"Oh, sure, taking her side as always, Harry! Well, I'm not putting up with it any longer. If you think she's that great, you be friends with her, but count me out. My parents punished me all summer because of our little fight and I'm sick of it."*

*"You tried to hit her!" Harry said between clenched teeth.*

*"Oh, come off it, Harry. You've been angry with her yourself, you know," Ron countered.*

*"Yes, I've been angry. I've also been irritated and annoyed with her. But I have never tried to hit her! What is wrong with you? I know your parents raised you better than that."*

*Ron threw his hands up in the air. "I can see how this is going. Fine! Be that way. I don't intend to talk about it anymore. Go be with the mudblood, then." With a final glare, he turned and stepped onto the train and out of sight.*

*Harry turned to Ginny and Molly, noting that both women were pale.*

*Ginny was trembling with rage that Ron would call her best friend a mudblood.*

*"I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything..." Harry began.*

*Molly held up a hand. "No, Harry, you were right. He was raised better than that. I don't know where his head is, but it isn't where it should be," she told him. With a shake of her head, she smiled and hugged him.. "You're looking well fed and rested. I'm sorry about what the Order was putting you through."*

*Harry shrugged and grinned. "It's alright, Mrs. Weasley. In a way, it was kind of fun...for me anyway. I'm sure the Order was annoyed."*

*He wasn't about to tell her about the ten Order members that had been on the platform when he arrived. He had disarmed them and sent them to unused cells at Azkaban. They'd be found in a few days, he was sure.*

*He turned to Ginny and gave her a brief hug. "You're looking great, Ginny. You're going to drive Dean crazy this year."*

*Ginny smiled shyly and stepped out of his hug. For the first time in over a year she was tongue tied around him, and not because she was crushing on him. Between his looks and the magic roiling around him, he was an incredibly imposing figure.*

*"I best get to my compartment," Harry told them both with a brief bow. He turned and walked back up the train toward the engine and vanished into one of the carriages.*

*He closed his eyes, calling up his image of Hedwig and started his meditation exercises. He had picked up several books on Tai Chi and meditation, finding them very helpful. Using the books he had expanded on what the old man had taught him, he now meditated every day.*

*The door opened, admitting Neville, Luna and Hermione. They looked at Harry with varying degrees of shock. He was hovering four inches above the seat and glowing slightly.*

*"Harry?" Neville said.*

*He lowered back to the seat and opened his eyes. Seeing his friends, he smiled. "Hi guys. Come on in."*

*Hermione's feet seemed to be rooted to the floor until Luna nudged her. Shaking herself slightly, she took a seat directly across from Harry.*

*Harry smiled weakly at her, a little hurt that she hadn't given him a hug, as she usually did.*

*In Hermione's defense, it needed to be said that this was a different Harry than she was used to seeing. He was taller and had finally seemed to fill out. An air of confidence and contentment surrounded him; something not usual in her normally reserved friend. All of these changes in him caught her off guard, and she was unsure how to react.*

*"How are you, Harry?" she asked softly.*

*He shot her a worried look and made a decision to talk to her later. For now, he'd keep things casual. "I'm fine, now. My injuries are mostly healed. I've spent the last month sightseeing and backpacking around the country, basically trying to find out who I was."*

*Luna giggled. "You're, Harry, You've known that since before we met you. But I do hope you found yourself. I'd hate to be lost and not able to find myself." Her vague expression cleared and her gaze became sharp as she looked into his eyes. "You've always known what you needed to do, Harry. It's just taken you a while to come to terms with it."*

*"Well, I think you look great, Harry, I never seen you this rested and happy at the start of a term," Neville said, trying to jump in after Luna's odd comment.*

"Yes, well, I didn't have anyone feeding me half a grapefruit once every three days this summer like in the past," he replied easily. A lot of his anger over the Dursleys seemed to have bled away in the last month.

Luna looked up from her magazine and frowned. "Hermione, trade spots with Neville. I want to play some wizard's chess with him."

In short order, Hermione, to her surprise, found herself sitting next to Harry, while the others immersed themselves in their game.

Harry looked at her, still hurt by her welcome. "Are you mad at me, Hermione?" he asked softly.

She looked at him and shook her head. "No, why?" she asked, suddenly feeling very awkward. Her Gryffindor courage was fast slipping away.

"Oh," Harry replied, then he looked down at his feet for a moment. "I really missed you this past summer. I would have written more, but I couldn't give the Order any ideas."

"I missed you, too," she whispered.

Both of them blushed and said nothing when he laid his hand atop hers. She turned her hand slightly and laced her fingers with his. Both buried their heads in a book. Neither wanted to break the contact. Neville and Luna exchanged a very satisfied glance.

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## **Hogwarts, Start of Term Feast...**

Harry looked around the hall and smirked. He had killed Voldemort barely four weeks ago. Almost instantly, the former Death Eater families had started screaming that they were under the *Imperio* us curse and, of course, the Ministry was buying it lock, stock and barrel. Of the twenty plus Death Eaters that had been on Privet Drive, few were from Voldemort's inner circle. And those that were had been escaped convicts, like Bellatrix LeStrange and her husband. The rest had been arrested and released.

There hadn't been a single conviction so far. He knew it wasn't the fault of the Aurors. They had made the arrests, but the Wizengamot refused to convict anyone. If the Ministry couldn't provide justice, then it would have to come from another source.

He smirked because they thought they had gotten away with it. But he knew better. Justice came in many forms.

Draco and several other Slytherins laughed and pointed in his direction. They had gotten away with murder. Harry smiled at Draco. It was a hard smile and didn't reach his eyes.

Draco's expression slowly changed from elation to worry. Potter was up to something, but he had no clue as to what.

"What's your problem, Harry?" Hermione asked. "You look like the kneazle that caught the mouse."

He turned his attention to her and smiled. Ron was at the other end of the table and they both ignored him.

"His loss is my gain," Harry murmured to himself, then his grin widened.

"What was that?" asked Hermione.

He reached across the table and placed his hand atop hers. "If I asked you if you'd like to go out on a date with me, would you be interested?"

Hermione blushed to the tips of her ears and suddenly the sound level in the Great Hall dropped to nothing. Even the sorting paused as everyone strained to hear her reply.

"Why now, Harry? And why me?" she asked, so intent on his answer that she hadn't realized that everyone was listening to them. She wanted to go out with him. She wanted a lot more than that, actually. But she also wanted desperately to know his reasoning. He was Harry Potter! He could have anyone!

Harry shrugged his shoulders and looked her in the eye. "The truth? I love Ron like a brother and knew he liked you. I figured to let him have a shot. But I never expected him to mess it up so badly. Now that he has, I don't have to stand aside for him anymore. And why not you? You're beautiful, and more importantly, you're my best friend in the world and one of the few I trust with my life. Besides, it was killing me to know that you and Ron were together."

Harry looked down at the table. The last part of his reply was nearly a whisper that only she could hear. Somehow it didn't surprise her that he had found out Ron and her dating. They had tried to hide it from him, to her shame. His answer thrilled her, though. Maybe it wasn't an admission of love, but it was still early. From his reply, she gathered there was a lot of hope for their relationship.

Hermione smiled at him. "If you asked me on a date, I'd say yes, Harry. I'd like to date my best friend."

A huge sigh of relief ran around the Great Hall with a few girls glaring at Hermione. Up at the head table, a clean shaven Albus Dumbledore frowned at the pair. At the other end of the Gryffindor table, Ron Weasley turned puce and moved to stand up.

"Mister Weasley, the sorting and feast are not yet over. Sit down," Professor McGonagall told him sternly.

Harry leaned across the table and pulled Hermione's hand up so he could kiss her palm. She shivered at the new sensation. "That will have to do until I can kiss you proper, after the feast," he said softly.



A beam of curse light arced from the Slytherin table towards Hermione's exposed back. It splashed harmlessly against a shield that had been invisible up to that point. Hermione jumped to her feet and she looked at the shield curiously for a moment before turning back to Harry.

He grimaced slightly. "I will protect you Hermione. I may not fight your battles for you, but if I can prevent you from getting hurt, I will."

She frowned, thinking for a moment. She could understand how he felt. In truth, she would do the same for him whenever possible. Sitting back down, she reached for his hand.

"I do expect the staff to investigate and find out who fired that curse," Harry called loudly. "It came from the table of snakes."

"POTTER! Twenty five points from Gryffindor for slandering my students," Snape shouted as he sprang to his feet.

Harry ignored Snape and glared at Dumbledore. "Headmaster, are you or are you not going to investigate who fired the curse?"

Dumbledore smiled benignly, his eyes twinkling wildly. He reached with his mind to see what Harry was thinking, only to be soundly rebuffed.

Harry grabbed his mental probe and violently shredded it. *"STAY OUT OF MY MIND, OLD MAN, OR YOU WILL REGRET IT!"*

Dumbledore rocked back on his chair and massaged his now pounding head. Harry's words echoed and bounced painfully inside his head. He looked up at the young man to see him staring back, his eyes lit with power.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Harry. It was probably a mistake. Someone demonstrating something, perhaps, and it went astray," Dumbledore said in his usual grandfatherly fashion.

Harry stood and glared up at the head table. "A mistake," he drawled as he conjured a crystal vial. A murmur rippled through the hall at his display of wandless magic. He lifted his wand to his temple and pulled a small thin silvery vapor out and placed it into the vial.

Harry's eyes grew distant for a moment, then there was a flash of light. A brilliant white phoenix with black tipped wings appeared and circled above him. Harry lifted up the vial and the phoenix snatched it from his fingers, then vanished.

He turned and smiled at Hermione again. There was a sharp snap and she squeaked as she appeared on his side of the table. "I'd feel better if you sat next to me, Hermione," he said softly.

Hermione nodded dumbly. Everyone had known he was a powerful wizard, but in the span of only a few minutes he had demonstrated abilities no one had known about!

"Harry, may I ask whose phoenix that was? And what you gave it?" asked Dumbledore. The Headmaster didn't like the way this encounter was heading. Harry's attitude towards the Order seemed to be shifting to include the staff. He still wanted to know why he hadn't heard from the Order members he had posted at the train station.

"No, Headmaster, you may not ask. It's private. You'll find out in time, I'm sure, but that's all I'm willing to say for the moment. Perhaps it was a mistake," he replied with a sneer, throwing the old man's words back at the man.

A titter of laughter rippled through the room and Dumbledore frowned.

Dumbledore stared at him in astonishment for a moment longer before turning back to McGonagall and signaling her to continue with the sorting. Harry had spent the last month humiliating both him and the Order and he knew he would have trouble bringing Harry to heel this semester.

"Harry?" asked Hermione in a meek voice.

Harry turned to look at her worriedly. "Please don't be afraid of me, Hermione. I'm still Harry and I would never do anything to hurt you."

Hermione nodded, reassured. "Where did you get that phoenix from?" she asked.

Harry sighed and hung his head for a moment. "That was Hedwig. She died in the fight, saving my life. She flew in front of a curse and vanished in a ball of flame. It seems that a higher power decided her sacrifice was worthy of being brought back as my familiar, only in the form of a phoenix. She found me after I was released from St. Mungos."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears as she heard the raw pain in his voice. This was the first time she had really had a chance to talk to Harry since the end of last year. Even with Voldemort dead, the Order had kept him isolated until he'd been able to break free of them.

She had loved his owl and was a little jealous of the close relationship he had formed with his familiar. That relationship had bordered on magical and now it was obviously so. She reached out and placed her hand on his arm. She knew that the loss of Hedwig, even if it were for a short while, had been keenly felt by her friend.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't know. The Headmaster said we weren't allowed to talk to you because it would endanger you. I tried calling you on the phone several times in early July, but the Order had somehow blocked my calls," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

He turned and her face up with a hand under her chin. "Hey, it's going to be alright. It's going to be better than you can possibly imagine. Voldemort's dead and I'm taking steps to neutralize his followers. For the first time in my life I can look at the future and know I can actually have one. I'd really like that future to include you."

He chuckled at her surprised look and he leaned in to kiss her. It was a soft kiss, gentle and sweet. From the outside it looked like a simple kiss,

lacking in any passion. To Harry and Hermione, it felt as if the entire universe had been reduced to just them. Both shuddered at the flood of emotions they felt passing between them.

Separating, they took a moment to recover. Then Harry turned and began to pick up platters, offering them to Hermione first.

"I wanted to come to you after the battle, Harry, but the Order wouldn't let me. The only way I even found out about your injuries was through the Prophet," she told him. Her opinion of the paper was evident in her tone.

Harry placed a large slab of ham on his plate. "I'm fine, now. I'm still healing and things occasionally hurt, but I'm recovering in more ways than one. The Order has been controlling my life since I was born and I'm putting a stop to that," he replied with a grin.

Her eyes widened. "But, Harry, Dumbledore..."

"Has no authority over me anymore, as you and he will come to learn in the coming days. I can't explain here, Hermione, but please, trust me on this. Tomorrow we'll have dinner and talk in the Room of Requirement. I'll explain it all to you there. It won't be pleasant, for either of us, but I'll tell you anyway."

Hermione eyed him uncertainly, but nodded in acceptance.

After dinner, Professor McGonagall called out for Harry, instructing him to remain behind while the other students left for their common rooms.

Harry smirked to himself and leaned over to Hermione. "Now the fun begins," he whispered, then he gently kissed her on the cheek and nuzzled her ear.

She shivered. What ever had happened to Harry since his battle had been good for him. He seemed more open and more willing to show affection than she thought he would ever be capable of.

Something about Harry made her lose control, unlike Ron. Twice tonight her own body betrayed her, surrendering to sensations and rendering her mind temporarily stunned at the feelings he'd invoked.

He stood and made his way up to the head table, where Dumbledore, Snape, Remus and McGonagall eyed his approach. Remus had turned out to be a disappointment. He had hoped the man would try to step into Sirius' shoes, but he hadn't. He was standoffish and aloof, preferring the role of professor, rather than friend. That he supported Dumbledore was obvious, and it pained Harry to know just how disappointed Sirius would be by it.

Snape sneered at him and looked as though he were examining a bug. Harry restrained the urge to wink at the man. As amusing as it would be to watch the greasy git turn purple with rage, he wanted to find out what Dumbledore was up to this time.

He noted that the teachers were still seated and looked around for a chair. Not finding one, he shrugged and sat down on thin air and arranged himself comfortably.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked. All of his teachers were eying him incredulously. That he was sitting on nothing was extraordinary enough, but he had done the magic without a wand or an incantation!

McGonagall opened her mouth to say something, but Dumbledore stopped her with a look before turning back to Harry.

"Yes, Harry. We've noted in the last few days that your family has disappeared. I was hoping you could shed some light on the subject?" he asked with a twinkle.

Harry shrugged his shoulders and managed to look unconcerned. "They're gone and won't be coming back, Headmaster. I strongly suggest you don't worry about them any longer. I know I won't," Harry replied, then he picked at a nail, trying to get the dirt out from under it.

"Potter, don't take that tone with the Headmaster! Answer him!" snapped McGonagall.

Harry looked at the Professors, smiling for a moment. "Very well. It was wonderful, the most perfect revenge that could have possibly happened. And the best part is that all I did was redirect the spell cast by the old fart here. And anyone checking the illegal spell will find the Headmaster's signature all over it."

Harry smirked at Dumbledore. "I dropped an anonymous tip to the DMLE about the spell used on my relatives before I got on the Express. I imagine by now they have checked for themselves."

Dumbledore paled and stared at Harry incredulously.

"Petunia Dursley is currently in a mental hospital, recovering from injuries inflicted upon her by her soon to be former husband, Vernon. She's also quite insane and spends her day playing with colored paper and bits of string and babbling about ghosts from the past. It seems my dear auntie is seeing her dead sister accuse her of betraying her family. An ironic twist, if you ask me, and it seems to be entirely of her own making. I know I had nothing to do with it.

"Vernon was arrested by the muggle police. During the ensuing fight to arrest him, he killed a policeman. He's under maximum security guard awaiting trial. I understand he's had several potentially fatal accidents while in custody. Pity, that.

"Dudley Dursley, the cause of the entire problem, announced at the beginning of the summer that he was gay. The announcement so enraged Vernon that he went off the deep end. Dudley moved out after my battle with Voldemort. He couldn't take the constant fighting, and he didn't want his parents to know he was HIV infected. Petunia went nuts two days later, when Vernon beat her senseless."

Harry leaned back and looked hard at the Headmaster, his eyes turning to green flecked steel. "You see, Dumbledore, your compulsion charms to force them to beat and abuse me backfired when I redirected it onto them. They couldn't do anything to me, and I sat back and watched them destroy themselves. That was really quite sloppy spell work, you know. Barely acceptable by NEWT standards. If that's your best work, people have greatly overestimated you."

Dumbledore stared at Harry in shock. No one was supposed to know about the compulsion charms, especially not the Department of Magical Law Enforcement!

"But, Harry, they were your family!" protested Remus.

"You're an unconvincing liar, werewolf. Lily Evans nee Potter was the adopted daughter of the Evans. As it turns out, my mother was born Lily McGonagall, part of an obscure branch of that family that had emigrated to America. Her real parents were killed by accident. She was adopted by Frank and Rose Evans and brought back to England.

"My mother knew who she was. So did my father and Sirius. I can't believe you didn't know. It would appear that my parents and Sirius didn't trust you as much as you thought. So you see, Petunia is no blood relation to me. In fact, Professor McGonagall and I share more blood than Petunia and I. But then, the Headmaster already knew all this, didn't you, sir?" Harry asked scornfully.

"Harry, what I did, I did for the greater good," Dumbledore said, trying to get things back on track.

Harry looked at the man in disgust. "Remember those words, old man, because they will be coming back to bite your arse. Now, if you will excuse me, I'd like to go up to my room. Ron Weasley is trying to break into my trunk, probably for my invisibility cloak, and if I don't stop him in the next few minutes, the wards on my trunk will kill him. As it stands, he's already in need of Madam Pomfrey's services."

McGonagall paled as she stood. "I'll get Poppy."

Harry smiled. "Good night, Headmaster, Professors."

He shimmered and vanished, leaving Dumbledore, Snape and Remus staring at the empty space in shock.

"Headmaster?" asked Snape uncertainly.

The boy had leveled some serious charges against the Headmaster, and had exhibited a level of magical control he had never seen before. Even Voldemort hadn't had that type of wandless control. Now that Voldemort was dead, Potter was supposed to help Dumbledore build their idea of what the Wizarding world should be. That couldn't happen if Potter refused to cooperate!

Dumbledore frowned. "I know, Severus. He is increasingly turning against us, and we need to nip his relationship with Miss Granger in the bud before it goes any further. We cannot allow him sully the bloodline by marrying a muggle born."

Remus scowled. "How do you expect to do that, Headmaster? If what he says about those compulsion charms are right, he has every right to hate you and everything you stand for. That includes us, as well."

Dumbledore sighed and looked down at the table. "I should have removed those charms before the end of the last term. But that's water under the bridge. Now we must work on regaining young Harry's trust. I will ask Alastor to look into what's happening with his family, as well. We might need to intervene there."

"Surely you don't think you'll be able to convince him to return to the Dursley's, Headmaster?" Remus asked incredulously.

"I don't know, Remus, but we must take steps," Dumbledore replied sagely.

The three men stood and walked from the Great Hall, each lost in their own thoughts.

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### **Gryffindor Girls Dormitory (September 2nd)...**

Hermione stretched and slowly rolled over on the bed. Realizing she was laying on something soft and lumpy, she frowned. Opening her eyes, she spotted the stuffed animal under her thigh and shook her head. Grabbing it, she smiled when she saw it was a teddy bear with a lightning bolt shaped line above one eye and a small broomstick in one hand. Neatly pinned to the bear was a note.

Unpinning the note, she opened it quickly.

*Hermione,  
I met this jolly fellow and thought you might like him. I've enchanted him with several special charms that will make him totally unique, like yourself.*

*I know you are wondering how I managed to get the bear up to your bed. That's hard to explain, exactly, but I'll try. During the fight with Voldemort and his Death Eaters, I got hit by a curse. I don't know what the curse was, I'm not even sure it's something that you can learn. Remember when we learned how some curses can interact with others to produce unexpected results if the curses meet midair? That's what I think I got hit with. It was strange. Up until that point I had been barely holding my own in the fight and then... pow! I get hit with this weird multicolored light and my brain feels like it's on fire for a second. Then the tables were turned and I won.*

*Something changed in me that day, something changed in my control over it. I can do things that you think are impossible, like delivering a bear to your bed while you slept and not triggering the alarms.*

*And do you have any idea just how cute you look when you're sleeping? Incredible!*

*Sometimes I find what I can do frightening and my power is still growing. Believe me when I say I'm not bragging, but there isn't a person in this school that has anything close to the level of magic that I have. It scares me, Hermione. You're the only person I've told this to and I hope that you'll keep my secret, as well as help me learn to understand this power of mine. You're the only one I trust enough to help me.*

*I know this is a poor excuse for a romantic love letter, but I promise to do better in the future. In the meantime, I do have one question for you. Would you like to be my girlfriend? Officially? Openly? In front of the whole school without having to hide it? With no Voldemort, I don't have to hide who I care for. He's ruined so much of my life and kept me from living, and that stops here. Give your answer to the bear. Your response will wake him and I'll know it.*

*Love,  
Harry*

*P.S. I'll envy the bear every time you hug him, wishing it were me.*

Hermione smiled to herself and reread the letter again. A single tear ran down her cheek. Harry might not think his letter was romantic, but she did.

Tucking the letter away, she turned to the bear. "Yes, I would love to be Harry's girlfriend," she said clearly. Realizing what she'd done, she blushed furiously and looked around, hoping she hadn't woken up the other girls in the dorm.

A movement caught her eye and she turned back to the bear. Her jaw dropped open as the stuffed creature yawned.

The bear rubbed its eyes sleepily and stood up. Crookshanks stood and backed away from the bear, fuzzing up and hissing as he went. Hermione looked at the bear in disbelief, then the bear walked over and grabbed her arm, hugging it. She laughed and picked it up, holding him tightly to her.

The bear made a rumbling sound in his chest and he cuddled with her. She was amazed at the level of magic involved in animating the toy, but more interestingly, she felt Harry when she hugged it. It was something she'd have to talk to him about.

Throwing open the curtains, she slid her feet into her slippers and placed the bear on her bed.

"Hermione, what's with the bear?" asked Lavender. She was eying the thing as it fussed busily with Hermione's pillow.

"Harry gave him to me," she said, trying not to laugh as she watched it.

"Oh, he's wonderful," cooed Parvati. "I've never seen anything like him."

"Yes, he is," Hermione said in a dreamy tone, then she shook her head, embarrassed. The two snickered at her reaction.

"It's finally happened," Lavender said with a laugh.

Hermione turned to look at her suspiciously. "What?"

"You've fallen in love," Parvati answered smugly.

Hermione blinked and stared at them in surprise.

Lavender sat on the bed facing Hermione and Parvati joined her. "Look, Hermione, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone knew that you would fall for either Ron or Harry, although most of us suspected it would be Harry.

"Some of us, like Parv and myself, will go through a dozen guys before we find the one that's right for us. But both you and Harry won't do that. Oh, don't get me wrong. I'd love to date Mister Dreamy Green Eyes, but I'm not his type," Lavender said.

"So what is his type?" asked Hermione. She was curious. She'd never had this type of conversation with her dorm mates before.

"You are," replied Parvati, then she frowned slightly. "Hermione, if what the papers say is true, Harry's had a terrible life growing up. In many ways, he's still that hurt and hopeful eleven year old we met on the train six years ago. He still looks at the world with a sense of wonder that even you've lost. Even I can tell he walks around hoping that someday someone will love him. It's an emotion he has little experience with. But when he looks at you, everyone can see the love and hope in his eyes.

"He needs what only you can offer him," Parvati said after a moment's thought. "Of all of us, Hermione, you're the only witch in the school that can understand how he was raised and what it's done to him. While Lavender and I would be expecting Harry to take the initiative and getting frustrated and mad when he didn't, you'll take him by the hand and show him what to do. He respects you and he'll always put your needs above his own."

"I envy you, Hermione," Lavender said seriously. "He's going to live a life only found in storybooks. I think, someday, he'll be more famous than Merlin, and he's so totally in love with you."

Hermione placed a hand to her chest. "In love with me?" she squeaked.

Both girls nodded.

He is," insisted Parvati. "He watches you, Hermione. Not like the way Seamus watches me, like he's stripping off my clothing. No, when Harry watches you, he looks at your face, your eyes. I watched him when you and Ron started going out last year. He'd sigh and look like someone had killed his puppy, then his expression would go blank, or he'd smile at the both of you. He never wanted either of you to know how much he was hurting, but we all saw it."

Hermione reached out and grabbed her bear, holding it tight to her. "Why hasn't he ever said anything to me?"

"He did last night," Lavender told her. "I think Harry's more afraid of you than he was Voldemort. He wants you on so many levels, but he doesn't understand it and it scares him. If the Daily Prophet was right, no one loved Harry when he was growing up. That has to affect a person."

Hermione frowned and considered what they had told her. Since the battle with Voldemort, the Daily Prophet had run a series of articles on Harry and had done an in-depth examination of how he was raised. The articles explained child abuse in detail and how it could affect children. Child abuse was fairly rare in the Wizarding world, since they were more concerned with blood lines and preserving the family.

"Last night was a big step for him, wasn't it?" Hermione asked.

"I think so. And our hero was probably terrified during every moment of it," Parvati said, grinning.

"So what do I do?" Hermione asked worriedly.

Lavender and Parvati exchanged a brief glance before turning back to her.

"Honestly?" Lavender asked. "I'd sit back and enjoy the ride. You don't need to learn how to catch your man; that's already happened. I think if you learned how to apply a little makeup, he'd appreciate that, but he fell for you as you are. He's opening his heart to you and is hoping you'll do the same. Isn't that what's important? Help him learn to love by showing what you feel for him. He has eyes for no one else but you." She sighed softly. "I wish a boy would look at me that way."

"Oh, and don't forget to kiss him senseless for that bear," added Parvati, winking.

Hermione smiled and looked at the bear in her arms. It looked up at her adoringly, then patted her cheek with one soft paw.

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## Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore sighed and sipped his tea. Before him sat the heads of each house and several other Professors. The customary start of term staff meeting always gave him a headache.

"Headmaster, I'm concerned about Mr. Potter and what the papers had to say about him," Professor Sprout said.

"Now, Ponom, you should know better than to believe anything written in the paper," chided McGonagall.

"Minerva, that boy has killed the greatest dark lord in the last ten centuries, and according to the paper he's been abused all his life! You know what that does to a child! We should be nurturing him, not hounding him. But so far all I've heard today is how we must keep him away from Miss Granger and make sure he behaves himself. Why, the Headmaster won't even lift his Quidditch ban!" sputtered Sprout.

Minerva winced. The Quidditch ban was something she'd tried to get lifted, as well. But the Headmaster was adamant.

Dumbledore frowned. "As much as I would like to continue discussing Mister Potter, we have other pressing matters. Minerva, how fares young Mister Weasley?"

"As Harry stated, he required Madam Pomfrey. He had numerous broken bones and burns. When I questioned Mister Potter, he demonstrated the wards on his trunk. The boy ignored three different warning wards before the trunk's defenses kicked in, which caused the damage. In fact, the Ministry requires only one warning ward on a lethally warded item. Harry had three, and a layered set of wards that caused increasing levels of damage. It's one of the most sophisticated wardings I've ever seen," McGonagall said, shaking her head.

"Poppy says Mister Weasley will be well enough to be released from the infirmary later today," she added.

"There you have it, Headmaster! I hope you will expel that arrogant brat now," Snape said smugly.

"He can't," Minerva countered. "In fact, Potter still has yet to decide if he will press formal charges against Weasley. The warning ward is required by law, and they were foolishly ignored by Weasley. In this case, Harry did nothing that you can expel him over. There are no rules stating students cannot protect their property."

"You're just saying that because you're related to him," snapped Snape angrily.

"I didn't know that until last night," retorted McGonagall uneasily. The fact that Harry was related to her disturbed her deeply. She had known that he was brought up in an abusive household and did nothing about it. To know she ignored the pain of one of her clan brought her deep shame.

"Enough!" barked Dumbledore. "Minerva is correct. We cannot punish Harry for protecting his property. However, I will announce that lethal wards are prohibited. That will prevent this from occurring again. Frankly, I am more concerned over this apparent breach between Potter and Weasley. They were the best of friends until this summer. Now they are fighting over Miss Granger."

"It's none of our business unless it interferes in classes, Albus," Flitwick protested. "Besides, from what I understand, Mister Weasley and Miss

Granger had a fight and Mister Weasley tried to strike her. In front of her parents, no less! Mister Granger was most incensed. He has forbidden Hermione from having any sort of contact with Ronald. From what I saw last night, she agrees with her father. Harry has rightfully come down on Miss Granger's side."

Dumbledore rapped his knuckles on the desk. "Enough! It's time everyone understands that Mister Potter is at a pivotal period in his life. He stands at a cross roads that can either lead him towards the light, or towards the dark. It is our job to ensure that he remains true to the light. We should do everything in our power to encourage that, including pushing him towards someone like Miss Weasley, whose family has been on the side of the light for generations."

"Albus, Miss Weasley is dating Dean Thomas. In fact, I know she was happy that Harry and Hermione are getting together," Minerva said in a soft voice.

Dumbledore waved his hand dismissively. "No matter, we'll take steps to steer him properly. Now, let us get down to breakfast."

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## **The Great Hall..**

Dumbledore stepped into the hall and frowned. Harry sat next to Hermione, and as he watched, the young man leaned over and whispered something in her ear, causing her to laugh and hug him. Ginny Weasley sat across from them, holding hands with the Thomas boy. Breaking them up would have to be a priority.

Dumbledore took his customary seat and surveyed the hall with satisfaction. The war had not affected the school as much as it might have. Although, to be truthful, he'd expected it to last a lot longer than it had. Voldemort's attack on Harry at Privet Drive had resulted in only two deaths on the side of the light, both Order members; Deladus Diggie and Preston Wentworth. There were no other wizard witnesses to the battle that ensued, except for Harry. By the time the Aurors arrived, Harry stood alone on a field strewn with dead Death Eaters and one dead Dark Lord.

Harry's injuries were severe enough to require a week's stay in St. Mungos. Then, against the Order's wishes, he had checked himself out and vanished. The Order had found him in several places and tried to force him to Grimmauld Place, but they always lost him again after embarrassing themselves.

Harry laughed and offered Hermione a bite from his sweet roll. She stopped laughing when she noted several adults standing at the entrance to the Great Hall. Something unusual was about to happen. McGonagall noticed the adults from the head table and she stood.

When the adults walked toward the Professors table, several students stood up, seeing their parents in the crowd.

"What is the meaning of this?" McGonagall asked.

A man stepped forward. "I apologize for the inconvenience, Professor, but I'm Malcolm Parkinson, Pansy's father. I'm here to pick up my daughter."

"Pick up your daughter?" echoed McGonagall in a confused tone.

"Yes. Circumstances are forcing me to withdraw her from Hogwarts," replied Parkinson in a miserable tone. Pansy looked up from the Slytherin table and her eyes filled with tears.

"Here it comes," Harry whispered to Hermione.

She blinked and narrowed her eyes at him. He knew exactly what was going on!

One by one each parent stepped forward and withdrew his or her child or children from the school. The hardest hit were the Slytherins, who lost Parkinson, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Greengrass, Bulstrode, Zabini and twenty others. Also withdrawn were Zacharias Smith, Cho Chang, Marietta Edgecombe and nearly a dozen students from other houses. The house affected the least was Gryffindor, losing just two students.

There was a moment of silence in the hall as the students and their parents filed from the room, some weeping softly as they left.

Harry chuckled and waited for the morning paper to be delivered. Up at the head table, Dumbledore eyed Harry suspiciously, while Snape scowled. He had lost a significant portion of his house, including most of his Quidditch team!

A noise caused Snape to look up in time to see dozens of delivery owls winging into the room. At the Gryffindor table, a Phoenix arrived with a delivery for Harry Potter.

Hermione opened up her paper and scanned it, not quite understanding what she was reading.

Harry pointed to one article. "That will explain it all."

## ***BLI Forecloses on Major Families and Businesses***

*The financial giant BLI, in a move coordinated by Gringotts, foreclosed on several major defaulted loans, it was announced today. BLI called in their markers late yesterday, causing a major scramble among the business world across the UK and Europe.*

*BLI holds notes and mortgages on an estimated eighty percent of the Wizarding world. According to one BLI spokesman, the institute had recently undergone a management change and this action reflected the change.*

*William Weasley, newly appointed BLI spokesman, had this to say. "These were old loans that were not being paid back properly. We offered each borrower the option of buying out of the loan, but they were unable to do so, making this action necessary. We coordinated our efforts with Gringotts so that both institutions might better be able to recover their losses..."*

Hermione looked up from the paper. "I don't understand," she said. "What does this have to do with what just happened here?"

Harry finished buttering his roll before he looked at her. "The students that have left school are all from families that have been affected by this, Hermione. Those families are now bankrupt and can't afford the Hogwarts fees, among other things," he replied, his emerald eyes dancing.

Hermione narrowed her eyes and looked at him closely. "You knew about this. All of those families have at least one Death Eater among them that have gotten away without being tried!"

Harry put a hand over his heart and looked shocked. "Imagine that! Someone punishing former Death Eaters? Amazing!" Then he winked at her.

Hermione sat back on the bench. His comment implied that he knew a lot more than he was telling. She glanced over at the Slytherin table and spotted a blond sitting by himself.

"But Malfoy? Why didn't..."

"Why didn't I go after the Malfoys?"

Hermione nodded.

Harry looked over at Draco, sitting alone at the table. Most of his classmates were missing.

Malfoy looked around nervously. He was aware that he was one of the last few remaining six year students in Slytherin, and he wasn't comfortable knowing he was all but alone.

"I did. He doesn't know it yet, but he's about to find out who's offering to pay for his education and what it will cost him," Harry murmured. Then his eye's lit up, spotting another owl winging in. "But he's about it. Here it comes now," he commented, nodding towards the owl.

The bird stopped in front of Draco, who removed the letter and shooed the owl away. Ripping open the litter, he read quickly, his eyes widening. Standing, his face pale, he trembled in anger. "POTTER!" he roared.

Harry raised a goblet to the outraged Slytherin. "Is there a problem, Draco?" he said snidely.

A hush fell over the hall. Harry never called Draco anything but Malfoy!

"You can't get away with this!" snarled Draco.

"But I have, Draco," Harry replied. "This is merely good business."

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" called Dumbledore.

"No problem, Headmaster. Draco is upset because I have offered to pay for his continued schooling here at Hogwarts," Harry replied loudly.

Draco shook with fury. However, with the Professors involved, he couldn't do anything more than protest vocally.

"Why would he need you to pay for his schooling, Mister Potter?" sneered Snape.

"Haven't you read the news this morning, Professor? Surely you're not that dense? If you'd use your *supposed* intellect, you'll realize who's behind so many of the students being forced to leave."

Dumbledore frowned and stared at Harry over his glasses. "Enlighten us, Mister Potter."

Harry laughed and shook his head. "BLI, my dear Headmaster, BLI. The Black Loan Institute. Owned and operated by the Black Family, of which I am heir and Lord. I called in all the outstanding debts from certain families that were known to be supporting Tom Riddle.

"The Malfoy's are broke, their property confiscated and up for sale. Draco is upset because the Potter Charity Trust has offered to pay for the remainder of his schooling, providing, however, he takes a blood oath vowing to never to harm anyone again, except in the case of self defense. It is far more than he deserves, considering he bears the dark mark on his arm," Harry said. "Had justice been carried out, he would have been kissed. But since he hasn't, I took it upon myself to provide some measure of justice. The Malfoy's haven't got a single knut left to their name.

"The others left because I am not interested in paying for their education and have every desire to see that they remain ignorant and uneducated. Their families are bankrupt, and their lands, homes and businesses have been confiscated by Gringotts and myself. You and the Ministry refused to punish the Death Eaters, so I did."

The silence in the Great Hall was profound following his statement. Dumbledore looked completely surprised by the news. Several of the Gryffindors looked stunned by Harry's announcement.

When Ginny gasped, Harry looked at her. "Don't worry, Ginny. Yes, BLI held the mortgage to the Burrow, but I instructed my people to cancel the debt. As of this morning, your parents own their home entirely, free and clear. I know your family won't accept money from me, so this was the best way I could think of to pay you all back for the love and kindness you've shown me. I would have done more, but I know your parents wouldn't accept

it. I also know your family wasn't helping the Order this past summer.”

Ginny smiled at him, visibly relieved.

“Harry, you cannot simply dictate to people what they can and cannot do,” said Dumbledore. “Mister Malfoy cannot be forced into taking your oath.”

Harry smirked and pointed to the door. “Then he knows where the exit to the school is, Headmaster. The offer to pay for his education is dependent on his taking that oath. If he doesn't, he'll have to leave, like the rest. Unless you want to pay for his education, that is. I'm sure he'd appreciate being in your debt.”

“*Reducto* !” shouted Draco, who had reached his limit.

The curse arced across the hall, then suddenly bent back upon itself. It hit Draco, blowing his wand and his hand to pieces.

Draco wailed in pain and fell to his knees. Four of his fingers were missing, vaporized in the small explosion.

“Damn you, Potter,” snarled Snape. The Potions Professor stood and drew his wand.

“Professor, I have not drawn my wand. If you attack me, I will see you charged and arrested. What happened to Draco was his own fault. Perhaps there was something wrong with his wand?” Harry offered innocently.

Dumbledore moved quickly to Snape's side and placed a hand on his arm, pushing the wand down. “He's right, Severus. He has not drawn a wand. If you attack him now, you would be held responsible for it. Take Mister Malfoy to the infirmary, then meet me in my office.”

Snape nodded and went to Draco. He helped the boy to his feet and walked him from the room.

“Professor McGonagall, Mister Potter, please join me in my office, right now,” Dumbledore said as he walked out of the hall.

Harry turned to Hermione. “Come with me?” he asked.

“But, Harry, I wasn't asked to come.”

“I know, Hermione, but I need a witness. You're the only one I trust, so I'm asking you to come with me.”

Hermione looked torn for a moment, but stood up a moment later. Harry offered her his hand. She took it and he pulled her into an embrace. The couple shimmered and vanished from sight and those left in the Hall broke into excited conversations.

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### Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

“You can't apparate inside Hogwarts!” Hermione exclaimed, then blushed. Her statement made no sense, considering the fact that they'd just done so.

“Actually, it's not quite apparating, so I can get away with it,” countered Harry, smiling. “But I love seeing you get all worked up. Be nice and I'll show you how to do it. It's something anyone can learn.”

He leaned in and kissed her gently. They were alone in the Headmaster's office, waiting for him and the other professors to arrive.

“What happened to you this summer, Harry?” she asked breathlessly.

“Why? Don't you like the new me?” he asked, grinning.

She smiled at him. His grin was infectious and she was forced to admit that she did like what she was seeing. She nodded and he breathed a sigh of relief.

“I'll explain it all tonight, sweetheart. I promise.” he said, then he turned and his eyes glazed for a moment. “The Headmaster is nearly here.”

“You caused Malfoy's curse to turn back on him,” she said in wonder.

“I did,” he replied.

The door opened and Dumbledore skidded to a halt, seeing Harry and Hermione sitting in chairs facing his desk. He quickly recovered and walked around to take his seat.

“Miss Granger, I do not recall asking for you to join us,” he stated in a flat tone. The door opened again, McGonagall and Snape entered.

“She is here at my request. She is my witness to these proceedings,” Harry replied coldly.

McGonagall and Snape paused behind the two, surprised at Harry's reply. They had never heard Harry speak with so little respect.

“Harry...”

“That is Mister Potter, or, if you prefer, Lord Potter or Lord Black. I only allow friends and people I trust to call me Harry,” he said, interrupting the Headmaster.



"Potter, you arrogant arse, you're worse than your father or your mudblood mo..."

Snape stopped in mid sentence. His mouth kept moving, but he made no sound.

"Shorten the leash on your dog, Headmaster, or I'll neuter him," Harry said, his eyes flashing angrily.

"Harry! Enough! Release Professor Snape," commanded Dumbledore.

"As you wish," he murmured and Snape staggered back.

Harry looked at Snape, his expression filled with disdain. "You cannot win against me, Snivellus. I beat your Dark Lord, left him with a hole in his chest big enough to crawl through. Do you honestly think *you're* going to intimidate me?"

"Harry, you will treat Professor Snape with respect..."

"Respect is earned, Headmaster, not commanded," snapped Harry angrily. "This... thing," he said motioning towards Snape, "is universally hated by the students of three houses and the alumni. Had you been smart, you would have let it rot in prison. Now he'll be part of what brings you down."

Snape started to move towards Harry, but Dumbledore stopped him. "Severus! Sit down and remember your place!"

Snape glared at Harry, but he sat on a chair next to Dumbledore's desk.

"Now, Mister Potter, about what happened this morning. You cannot go about forcing students to leave this school..."

"You're wrong, Headmaster. I didn't force them to leave the school, I just forced their families into bankruptcy. It was their parents or guardians who decided to terminate their schooling."

Harry tilted his head slightly and smiled. "What you saw this morning was only the tip of the iceberg, however. Thirty Wizengamot members have been affected, as well as Minister Fudge. All in all, nearly one hundred and twenty families and sixty businesses have been foreclosed on. Even now, Fudge is being escorted from the Ministry building and my proxies have nominated Amelia Bones as interim Minister."

Dumbledore stood and leaned over his desk, glaring at Harry. "You cannot do this. I will not allow it!"

"You can't do anything to stop it, Headmaster. The actions I took were legal and done jointly, in cooperation with Gringotts. If you take action to stop what I've set in motion, you risk another Goblin rebellion, and they'll have at least one wizard on their side," Harry replied smugly.

Dumbledore collapsed back into his chair, his face white as a sheet. "You would destroy us. Do you hate us that much, Mister Potter?"

"Do I hate you? Yes, actually, I do, Headmaster," he replied calmly. "I'm tired of your games and I find myself despising what you represent. You and your Order of the Phoenix are only marginally better than Voldemort and his band of merry idiots. You and your Order prance around, claiming to represent the light, when, in fact, you represent your own interpretation of what you think is right. I reject you both utterly.

"You don't believe in equal rights for everyone. You're only interested in maintaining the status quo. If we went with your vision of the world, we'd be facing a new Dark Lord in twenty years because you refused to punish the pure blood Death Eaters.

"Do I hate the Wizarding world?" Harry shrugged. "Not really. Most of them are sheep and will walk in the direction the shepherd points them. Generally, they're mindless masses without many redeeming qualities. A few, however, are truly exceptional individuals. Those few are, I believe, the future of the Wizarding world. The rest can go hang, for all I care. You allowed the Death Eaters to walk free, still able to spread their poison. I stopped them and I am giving the Wizarding world a new shepherd to follow."

"But you're punishing the children, as well," protested Minerva.

"So? Was I not punished? Didn't the Headmaster deliberately violate my parents will and place me into an abusive environment? One which he routinely reinforced with an illegal compulsion charm on a muggle family I wasn't related to? Where is my justice? Why is it he gets away with what he did and I am vilified for managing a business I own? Don't ask me to care about someone else's children when you have so callously thrown me onto the trash heap," Harry told them all scathingly.

Then he turned to her and glared. "Tell me, Professor, when Hermione graduates, will she be able to work for the Ministry?"

McGonagall flushed and looked down at the floor for a moment. Hermione looked startled.

"She's muggle born, and despite being the smartest student this school has seen in over a hundred years, the Wizarding world will not hire her. That bias will cripple her chances at employment, and you're asking me to care about the children of bigots? Most of those so called children bear the mark of Voldemort. No, I have no pity for them. They should be thankful. They're alive, which is more than I can say for my parents, Sirius or Cedric. They're receiving a very diluted form of justice, if you ask me. Draco's head should be on a pike by the castle entrance.

"As for Hermione," he said, taking his girlfriend's hand and smiling at her, "you should all be more careful around her and more respectful. She's most likely going to be Minister of Magic someday. Perhaps not today, but soon enough."

Hermione shook her head, and smiled at him. How he had known of her ambition was beyond her, but she wasn't going to fight it.

"The Ministry will never elect a mudblood, Potter. Even you should know that," Snape said with a sneer.

Harry stared at Snape and something in his gaze forced the man to look away.

"You still haven't figured it out, yet haven't you?" asked Harry, shaking his head. "Ah, well. You'll learn, just like the Malfoys, Notts and Parkinsons are learning now."

"Learn what, Mister Potter?" asked McGonagall. She couldn't believe the way this was going. Not only was Harry openly hostile to the Headmaster, but he had reason to be.

"Times are changing. In a way, Riddle was right. We have stagnated and things need to change. Riddle's problem was he couldn't think of a way to change things without resorting to violence. I, on the other hand, can think of ways to do things without killing people. The old attitudes about blood purity are going to be burned away. Along with those ideals so, too, will go the prejudices against the other sentient species like House Elves or the Centaurs and Goblins.

"One of the first steps in that direction will be the merger of BLI and Gringotts. I haven't made a formal announcement as yet, but the merger of Gringotts, our largest bank, with the largest Wizarding lending institute will produce the first multi-national Wizarding mega corporation. I will own forty eight percent of the new corporation, the Goblins will own another forty eight percent, with the remaining four percent to go to a muggle trust that will be approved of by both myself and Ragnok," Harry said, then he smirked. "Perhaps I'll ask Hermione's parents to manage the trust. From what I know of Hermione, I'm sure I could trust them."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, appalled. "You can't cede that much power to Goblins!" he gasped.

Harry looked at him scornfully. "Haven't you been listening to me? The Wizarding world, in this case me, and the goblins will both control an equal share. The tie breaking vote will be in the hands of muggles who know about our world. Eighty percent of the loan business and ninety percent of the banking business will be moved under a single banner, one that will look unfavorably upon companies and individuals that practice discrimination."

"So you intend to force people into accepting your policies? Or what? You won't loan them money?" snarled Snape.

"Money is a powerful weapon. It's more effective and less brutal than killing anyone, Snivellus," Harry replied with tight smile. Then he turned to Dumbledore. "Look, we can sit and argue about this all day, Headmaster, and we still won't get anywhere. You created the monster Tom Riddle became. Then, not learning from your mistake, you tried to do the same to me. But I'm not monster, Headmaster. I believe our world should be a fair place for everyone with talent and drive, regardless of their blood lines. Hermione is just one example of that.

"I learned one lesson from you very well, Headmaster, thought I'm sure it's not something you intended to teach me," Harry told him, staring into blue eyes which no longer twinkled. "I learned how to manipulate people into doing what I want them to do, and I learned it from a master. You tried to dictate how I would live my life, with whom and for how long. That stops now. I will live my life as I see fit, and will accept no interference from you or your Order."

Hermione glared at the Headmaster. She knew the man had meddled in Harry's life, but hadn't realized the extent of that meddling until recently. She could understand Harry's anger and accepted his non-violent form of justice.

"Now, unless there is something else you wish to discuss, Headmaster, Hermione and I have class to attend." Standing, he helped Hermione to her feet.

Harry paused for a moment, then turned to Professor McGonagall. "Professor, with your approval, I think I'd like to drop potions and take Ancient Runes, instead."

"But you can't be an Auror without potions," exclaimed McGonagall.

"Plans change, Professor," Harry replied. "I have no need of becoming an Auror anymore. My career path is already set for me. I'm going into business and politics. Besides, my two Wizengamot seats would have made being an Auror unrealistic anyway. I also intend to see Hermione elected Minister. It would be... awkward being an auror under those circumstances."

Harry turned to Snape. "Oh, and Professor? You might want to rethink how you treat people. When Hermione becomes Minister, you might find yourself teaching potions in some mosquito infested banana republic," he said, smirking. When the man's sallow face turned red, he dragged Hermione from the room, leaving behind two dumbstruck Professors and one furious Potion Master.

Outside Dumbledore's office, Harry pulled Hermione into an embrace. "We'll just make our class if we rush," he whispered, then they shimmered and vanished from sight.

Dumbledore looked at his two professors with dismay. "I fear that we are losing Mister Potter faster than I anticipated."

The others could only nod.

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## **The Room of Requirement...**

All day Hermione had been bursting with questions for Harry and now, finally, she was going to get some answers. She had asked a few during the day, but he had mostly rebuffed them, asking for her to be patient until this evening. Now it was dinner time and they were taking it in the Room of Requirement.

Harry smiled and held the door open for her when she arrived. She shot him a shy smile and he welcomed her into the room. He and Dobby had spent the last hour getting things set up just right.

He had helped her into her chair and had started to walk to his seat when he pressed a hand up against his side and hissed sharply.

“Harry? What’s wrong?”

He stood motionless for a moment, then he relaxed and took a deep breath. “Every so often I’m reminded that I fought Voldemort only a few weeks ago. Not everything is fully healed yet. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

Hermione looked at him worriedly. “The paper said you were hurt, but never said how badly.”

“A few broken bones, but the burns were the worst. I still have some areas that are healing and the skin over them is super sensitive. And some new scars,” he said with a bit of a scowl.

She looked upset and he reached across the small table and gripped her hand. “I’m alright now. I’m still healing and sometimes it hurts, but I’m alright. That’s what you need to focus on. Now, let’s eat and we’ll talk.”

Hermione nodded and Dobby appeared, placing platters of food on the table.

“Thank you, Dobby,” Harry said softly.

“Should you be using Dobby like this, Harry?” she asked.

He laughed. “I’m not using Dobby. He’s my employee and probably the highest paid House Elf in the world. He’s my personal elf, and as such, is in charge of all the elves I employ.”

Hermione paused, a fork halfway to her mouth. Her forehead knitted in confusion. “Employ? Do you employ a lot of House Elves?”

“Over a hundred, at last count, but they’re all employees, Hermione. They can quit any time they want. They’re well paid with vacations and time off. I don’t believe in slavery, but there is nothing wrong with hiring servants.”

Her fork dropped to the plate, making a clatter. “One hundred elves? What are you doing with that many elves, Harry Potter?”

Dobby reappeared with drinks, which he poured for them. Hermione took the time to examine him closely. He wore a uniform similar to that of a butler’s, but it had a family crest on the right breast.

“Are you happy, Dobby?” she asked.

Dobby looked up at her and smiled. “Master Harry is great and wonderful wizard, Mistress. He is kind and pays Dobby more than any other house elf. Yes, Mistress, Dobby is happy. I will be happier when Master finally comes home with his family.”

Harry leaned back on his chair. “Let’s start this from the beginning, Hermione. When I turned sixteen, I received an owl from Gringotts asking me to drop in to talk to them about some accounts.” He laughed and shook his head ruefully. “Some accounts. That’s like calling the crown jewels a pile of rocks.”

“Anyway, before I could go to Diagon Alley, Voldemort paid me a visit and we had this rather loud disagreement, which resulted in a week stay at St. Mungo’s. When I got out of hospital, I sort of went a bit crazy. The Order was trying to lock me up and I was busy having too much fun dodging them and playing with my new magic. I’m not going to admit to how many times I banished Mad-Eye’s wooden leg while he was tracking me.

“Nor will I admit to banishing Tonk’s clothing and teleporting her to Westminster Abbey,” he said, his eyes dancing merrily. “She was seriously put out with me after that.”

Sighing, his expression turned serious. “It wasn’t all fun and games. I had a lot of thinking to do. What was my place in our world? Or the Muggle world, for that matter? I had fought and beaten the strongest Dark Lord in centuries. I was a hero to some, someone dangerous and needing to be locked up, to others. But who was I?”

He paused and looked at Hermione with a slight smile. “I spent most of August trying to answer that question.”

“It wasn’t until the end of August that I visited Gringotts and learned that I wasn’t just rich, I was obscenely rich and I was emancipated. Ragnok told me if I were to convert just my liquid assets to muggle money and open an account at a muggle bank, I would devalue the Galleon by over nine hundred percent. He said that I could ruin the Wizarding economy.

“I had become a power, not just magically, but economically. Ragnok and I put our heads together and decided that the Wizarding World needed to be taught a lesson they wouldn’t soon forget.”

He picked up his glass and took a sip, thinking. “You need to understand something, Hermione. It wasn’t until nearly the end of August before I decided to return to Hogwarts, and to the Wizarding world. The paper had run a series of articles about my home life that were spot on. They dug into my background and between that, and the news that most of the Death Eaters were getting off free and clear, I was disgusted with the Wizarding world.

“I’m tired, Hermione. My life is an open book. I can’t walk the streets of Hogsmeade without attracting a crowd. All I wanted was to find my place. I wanted a normal life and someone to love me. Think about it. What witch in the world doesn’t know the name Harry Potter? What chance did I have to find someone who would care about me, and not my fame or my money? I suppose I could change my looks and lie about who I am, but that’s no way to start a relationship.

I thought long and hard about the girls in my life and with only one person who has stood by my side through everything. I may not be muggle born, I'm not even a half blood, but I am muggle raised and she understands what I went through. She's my best friend in the whole world.

"Then, while waiting to board the Express, Neville tells me about your fight with Ron and your breakup. I knew you two were dating and hiding it from me, but I saw my chance. I saw the opportunity to, for once in my life, be selfish and do something I wanted.

"I've loved you since fourth year, Hermione. I'm just sorry it took me so long to ask you out," he finished in a whisper.

Hermione smiled at him. "I think I've always loved you, Harry. I know my Mum seems to think so. She says every letter I've written from school talked about you."

Harry blushed and smiled back at her. "Good, because if I can work it, we're going to be together for a long, long time. Now, you had some questions for me?"

When she pulled out a piece of parchment, he blinked and began to laugh. "Only you would have a prepared list of questions!"

Hermione blushed. "Alright, so I'm organized. Besides, a little organization certainly wouldn't hurt you, Mister Potter."

Harry quirked an eyebrow. "And a little chaos will help you, Miss Granger. But please, ask away."

"About what you said this morning in Dumbledore's office. Are you manipulating me?"

Harry blinked in surprise and wondered about that. Hermione looked at him worriedly when he remained silent.

"I don't think so, Hermione. I don't think you can manipulate someone into falling in love with you. I'm not resorting to potions or spells. However, I could ask the same question of you. When you're not around, I feel incomplete, like a important part of me is missing and it hurts. I can't tell you how much I wanted to come to your home in the past month, but I knew the Order was watching you.

"I didn't want to drag you into that mess," he said, then paused. "Am I manipulating you? Well, maybe, to the extent that we all do when we're falling in love. I don't show you the really bad things about me, like my morning breath or the fact that certain foods give me gas, or that I happen to find that funny."

She laughed and shook her head at his admission.

He looked at her and she was struck by the power behind his eyes, and the openness she seemed to sense in his gaze. "I am not manipulating you, not like I'll be doing with other people. There are things I want from you, Hermione, things I want us to do together. But I want you to want them as much as I do and I will not push you into anything you're not ready for."

Hermione sipped her juice and nodded thoughtfully. His answer relieved her and excited her. There were things she definitely wanted someday from him, someday soon. His comment about a part of himself missing when they were apart struck a deep chord within her. It described exactly how she had felt this past summer without him.

She smiled warmly at him, made a small notation on her parchment and went to the next question. "You said your magic changed because of a strange curse. What kind of change do you mean?"

"It's a lot stronger and I have a greater control over it. Most times I don't need a wand, or even an incantation, I just visualize the effects I want and it happens," he told her. Lifting his hand, a single rose appeared in his palm. He passed the flower across the table to her.

She sniffed at the flower, scribbled something down on her parchment, and moved to the next question. "Do you still need your wand?"

"No, but that doesn't mean I can't use it."

"Was the Prophet really accurate in what they reported, Harry?"

He frowned and looked at the table, refusing to meet her eyes. "Yes, for once they were correct," he replied softly, the pain evident in his voice.

Hermione realized she had touched a very sensitive nerve, so she made up her mind to cut the questions short for now. "Alright, just two more questions for now," she said, rolling up her parchment.

Harry looked up at her warily.

"Harry, I am not going to push you over this. But if we're going to be together, you need to trust me enough to talk about what you went through at the Dursley's. I know what the Prophet published, but I need to hear it in your own words. Will you make that effort, even if it's a little bit at a time? Will you let me help you?"

He could see the plea in her eyes and realized she was right, he did need to talk to someone about it. Why not her? What was it Rosie had said about finding someone to talk to? Why not Hermione?

Taking a deep breath, he nodded. "Alright, Hermione. I'll try."

"Just one last question, then," she told him, refusing to meet his eyes. She twisted the list of questions in her hands nervously, trying to work up the courage to ask it.

Puzzled, he leaned forward. "What is it?" he asked her softly.

Looking up, she blushed. "Do you really think I'm pretty, Harry?" she asked at a whisper.

His expression changed, but she couldn't decipher it.

"How can I answer that without coming off sounding like a sex crazed pervert?" he muttered, trying not to grin. With a shake of his head, his expression turned somber. "You're beautiful, Hermione. To a stranger seeing you for the first time, you're very pretty. But to someone who knows you and understands the depths within you, you're beautiful. You care about things that most would consider a lost cause, like House Elves. You'll help anyone in need. I think you're the prettiest girl in the school."

Hermione's eyes glistened with unshed tears. "That didn't make you sound like a sex crazed pervert. It sounded wonderful," she told him. She heard the truthfulness in his words, but she had trouble picturing herself as he described. She considered herself rather plain.

Harry chuckled. "That's only because I stopped before I could get myself in trouble. I could sing praises about certain parts of you, but I don't want to get my face slapped this early in our relationship."

Doubt clouded her eyes. Seeing it, he smiled.

"Trust me, Hermione. I might not have a lot of experience with girls, but in this relationship, I'm the expert on what this guy wants in a girl. To me, you're gorgeous."

Before she could reply, Hedwig appeared in a burst of flame. She circled the table, then landed on a perch that Harry conjured for her.

"Hullo, girl," he said softly. Hedwig trilled in greeting, causing Hermione to smile in delight.

She reached out and caressed the new phoenix. "Have you been taking care of Harry, Hedwig?"

Hedwig bobbed her head and trilled again.

"She was always special, but she's more so now. I'm still working on ways to communicate with her, but I've learned that she's not just my phoenix. She's the Potter phoenix. She will stay with my family for as long as the bloodline exists and remains true to the light."

Hermione smiled at the thought. It represented a major change from the way Phoenixes bonded. She filed that away for future consideration.

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### **The Great Hall, Breakfast (Sept 3rd)...**

Hermione looked around for Harry. Neville had told her that Harry would catch up with her in the hall, as he had a few things to do first. Now she sat, holding a seat for him and looking around impatiently.

"Can I sit here?" asked Ron Weasley.

Hermione frowned. "I'm sorry, Ronald, but this seat is taken. Besides, I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore. I thought I made that clear," she replied frostily.

Ron stiffened and he turned white with anger. "So, it's true, then. You've decided to whore yourself to Potter. I should have know it would come to this. That bastard gets everything I..." He stopped suddenly and his face contorted in pain.

"Apologize, Weasley, or I'll pull your liver out through your arsehole," hissed Harry, who was standing a few steps away.

All sound in the Great Hall ceased and all eyes turned to the two Gryffindors. Ron's body wracked with spasms. Even though Harry had not pulled out his wand, it was clear that he was doing something to the red-head.

"Apologize," Harry repeated.

"I'm sorry," Ron ground out. Beads of sweat began to form on his forehead.

"It will have to do," Harry said, releasing him. Ron turned and backed away from Harry fearfully.

"You're turning dark, Potter! You killed Voldemort and now you want to be the next Dark Lord!" he said loudly.

"I'm not nearly as dark as you are, Weasley. When I consider your family, you must be even more of a disappointment than Percy. Where is the honor in striking a woman? I'm not dark Weasley, I'm gray, and I'm proud of it," Harry said, then he turned and took the seat next to Hermione, kissing her cheek as he sat.

Ron stared at Harry for a moment and he fingered his wand. When he noticed the number of angry looks he was getting from his own house, he sat down quickly and concentrated on the food before him.

Hermione looked at Harry worriedly. "Are you sure that was smart, Harry? Admitting you're gray?"

He put two links of sausage on his plate and shrugged. "Do you know how many people died in my fight with Voldemort?"

She paused, going through in her mind the few facts she'd managed to pick up about the final battle. Realizing she wasn't sure, she shook her head.

"Two members of Dumbledore's Order died before the battle started. Then Voldemort and twenty four Death Eaters. I never once used a stunner or a full body bind. I realized in that battle that there is no light or dark magic; there is only power and intent. Voldemort was right about that. His problem was that he craved power and used it for the sake of power. I prefer to use it only when I need to, and I don't crave more.

"I'll fight to the death to protect those I love, including that dumb-stick weasel, only because his death would hurt Ginny and the other Weasley's. I don't use my power to inflict pain and suffering unless I'm forced to. That's intent. Most of these people will never understand that. They think only in terms of absolutes. Light and Dark. Declaring myself to be gray confuses them because they don't understand it. The smart ones will think about it, though. Look at Ginny and Neville. They understand."

Hermione looked around the room. She was able to spot a number of people giving Harry thoughtful looks and others that looked at him with fear.

"Ah, here comes the second act," Harry said, motioning to the three adults entering Great Hall.

Hermione winced, seeing Alison Harrington, chief of the Board of Governors for Hogwarts, Madam Bones, Director of the Department of Magic Law Enforcement and interim Minister and a man she didn't recognize.

Dumbledore looked up from his breakfast and he paled, seeing the trio approach the head table.

"Madam Harrington, Madam Bones," he sputtered, standing. He looked questioningly at the unknown man, who smiled benignly at him.

"Duncan Harvey, of Harvey, Hortle and Harbrace," said the man.

Harry smirked. "Wait for it," he murmured.

"Headmaster, yesterday, in an emergency session of the Board of Governors, Mr Harvey presented evidence to the Board of testimony taken from nearly one hundred graduated and current students concerning some of the staff. His firm is prepared to launch a lawsuit that could result in the closing of this school."

A gasp ran through hall and everyone strained to listen to the conversation.

"A compromise has been reached that would avoid the lawsuit and it has been unanimously approved by the Board of Governors. Effective immediately, the contracts of Severus Snape, Potions Professor, Sybil Trelawney, Divinations Professor and Markus Hanford, Muggle Studies Professor, are terminated. Professor Binns will also be replaced."

Dumbledore collapsed back in his chair pale and shaking with shock.

"The Board has already procured the services of some highly recommended individuals to fill these positions."

Snape surged to his feet. "You can't do this! Only the Headmaster can fire me!"

Harrington eyed Snape with disdain. "The decision of the Board is final, Mr. Snape. You are fired. You have until noon today to pack your belongings and vacate the castle," she said coldly. "Considering the evidence we reviewed, you're lucky you're not being sent to Azkaban. It is where you belong," she snarled before turning back to Dumbledore. "Headmaster, Mr. Harvey has one other piece of business for you to deal with."

Harvey stepped forward and laid a parchment on the table before Dumbledore. "This is a notice of intent to file suit, Headmaster. Our client desires the return of all monies and goods removed from his family vaults. The suit also extends to include the willful harm you inflicted upon our client by illegally placing him with his muggle relatives in direct violation of his parent's final wishes. Against our recommendation, our client wishes to seek a civil solution before presenting evidence to the appropriate authorities."

Dumbledore's eyes flickered over to Harry, who smiled and raised his glass in salute.

"Furthermore, Headmaster, you are ordered by her Majesty's courts to maintain a minimum fifty meter distance between yourself and Mr. Potter at all times until ordered otherwise. Violating said order can result in fines, jail time, or a combination of both."

Dumbledore sagged in his chair. All his plans had been ruined.

"The attached sheet outlines the items missing from the vaults, along with the missing money, which, as you can see, is quite substantial. You can avoid most of this suit if you return the missing items and money within seventy two hours, but my client still wishes to sue you for wrongful placement and recover damages therein," Harvey said, then he stepped back.

"Headmaster, until this suit is settled, the Board feels we should allow you a leave of absence so that you can manage your defense. Until that is accomplished, Professor McGonagall will act as Headmistress of Hogwarts," announced Harrington.

Dumbledore looked over at Harry. "Bravo, Harry!" he called unhappily. "You have your revenge."

Harry stood and faced Dumbledore. "This isn't about revenge, old man. This is about the greater good and the fact that you stand in the way of it. If I wanted revenge, I'd see you sent to prison. This way, you get to keep your life, even if it isn't what you envisioned.

"I know exactly what you had in mind for me after Voldemort. You and your pet dog were going to use a mix of potions and Ginny Weasley to control me, to force me into doing your bidding. You were willing to ruin my life, and hers, in order to reshape the world to meet your own twisted view of it."

Ginny gasped and Dumbledore reeled back in his chair and glared at Harry.

"That's not going to happen, old man. Ginny will live life as she sees fit. And I will live mine," he said, placing a hand on Hermione's shoulder, "with the person I choose."

"*Avada Kedavra!*" shouted Snape.

Harry cringed and watched the thin green beam arc out towards him. Voices screamed and time seemed to slow down. He could deflect the beam, but then it would probably hit someone else. With a massive surge of his magic, he pushed everyone in the path of the beam aside and shielded them.

The beam flew down the corridor he had created, while his magic worked frantically to alter the context of the spell hurtling at him. Just as the beam struck him, it changed from green to an off yellow.

He screamed and pitched to his knees, then collapsed. Thirty or more curses were flung at Snape from all over the hall. Snape crumpled under the onslaught, bleeding heavily.

Hermione looked away from Snape, her bone vanishing hex being one of the spells that hit him successfully. She spotted Harry crumpled on the floor.

"HARRY!" she screamed and she dropped her wand. She knelt by his side and felt for a pulse. Her eyes grew huge and she started CPR when she couldn't find it. Seamus leaped over the table and helped her, giving Harry mouth to mouth, while she performed chest compressions.

Silence fell over the hall as the stunned students watched in awe. CPR was virtually unknown in the Wizarding World.

The two worked in silence for nearly a minute, then Seamus leaned back away from Harry. He placed a hand over Hermione's. She was still frantically pumping his chest. She looked at Seamus, then down at Harry, halting her movements.

His eyelids fluttered open and he coughed a few times. He looked up at Hermione, who stared back at him in surprise.

"Harry?" she whispered.

"Hi there, beautiful," he replied in a whisper.

Hermione burst into tears and she knelt over to kiss him.

"Don't you do that again! You nearly left me!" she said, sobbing and wiping at her tears.

"If I have anything to say about it, I'll never leave you," he whispered, reaching up to caress her cheek.

In all the excitement following Harry's recovery from his second killing curse, no one thought to look to Snape, who was not so lucky. The delay in treating him while everyone watched Hermione and Seamus work to bring Harry back from the brink of death proved fatal.

Madam Pomfrey was never able to determine the exact cause of death because of all the curses, but it didn't matter. He had performed an unforgivable in front of witnesses, including the interim Minister of Magic.

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## Epilogue...

He sat at the desk and waited for the class to file in. It had been nearly twenty years since he left Hogwarts. Now he was back as the Defense Professor, a job he had always hoped for.

Dumbledore had never returned to Hogwarts, following the lawsuit. The suit had been held publicly, and public opinion had turned solidly against him as his actions were revealed in court. Eventually, the Board of Governors confirmed Minerva McGonagall as Headmistress, and Filius Flitwick as her deputy.

For Harry and Hermione, their last two years at school enabled them to grow very close. By Christmas of their sixth year, they were engaged. Harry's abilities required special tutoring and he insisted that he and Hermione do it together. With his help, she eventually came to master wandless magic, although never to his level.

Harry spent the summer between their six and seventh year with Hermione's family, taking them on a trip to Australia and the United States. It was during this trip that Hermione finally took Parvati and Lavender's advice. She took Harry by the hand and spent the night with him.

That night surprised them both, as Harry's magic added an additional element to the mix. In a way, they bonded that night, tighter than any marriage ceremony could have done.

By seventh year, they were head boy and girl and inseparable. Both seemed to know where the other was at any given point. It was a talent they grew to rely on. They were married right out of school and, despite rumors that she was pregnant, they waited several years to have children.

As expected, during the years following Hogwarts, Harry had several problems with the children of Death Eaters and former Death Eaters. These encounters hadn't bothered him until someone kidnapped Hermione. The attempt was quickly foiled, but not until Harry had killed all of the Malfoy's, the Parkinson's and the Nott's. After that, no one attacked the Potters again.

Harry looked up as students filed into his classroom. He smiled, seeing the first nervous first year students. Among them were two goblins and one house elf.

"Alright people, let's settle down," he called. "Everyone take a seat and we'll get started."

A minute later, everyone had found a desk. "This is first year Defense against the Dark Arts," he said, pacing the front of the class. "In this class we will start out examining magical theory, wand based and wandless magic. Can anyone tell me why we'll be studying wandless magic?"

A hand went up in the back. "Miss Potter?" he called. His daughter blushed. She looked just like her mother at her age, except for the green eyes, which were quickly becoming a Potter family trait. Her father may be biased, but he thought she was beautiful, like her mother.

"We study wandless because all magical species have the ability, including goblins and house elves, and it allows them to participate in our classes," she replied.

"Excellent, five points for Ravenclaw," Harry replied. Then he turned to Nobby, Dobby's son by Winky.

"Nobby?"

"Wandless magic means we can never be disarmed," replied Nobby. He had been home schooled with Lily Jane, and his language skills were as good as hers.

"Another excellent answer. Five points for Slytherin. Now then..."

Later that evening he relaxed on his favorite chair in the sitting room. Jamie and Siri, age five, played on the rug, while Hermione looked over her notes for a speech she was giving in two days.

"How was your first day as a teacher?" she asked.

He looked up from his own notes. "It went pretty well, actually. Lily and Nobby both picked up five points in class for their answers," he replied, then he shook his head. "I can understand Lily making it into Ravenclaw, but it still blows me away that Nobby went into Slytherin."

Hermione smiled. "Well, you have no one to blame but yourself. You made most of those changes possible."

He reached out and lovingly caressed her hand. "No, we made those changes possible. Without you, I probably would have turned out bitter and as hateful as Tom did. All I did was help you along."

Hermione gave him a look he long ago came to recognize. "In that case, perhaps you'd like to help me with something else?"

He placed his notes back into his briefcase. "Madam Minister, there's nothing in the world I'd like better. Winky will watch the twins."

She nodded and stood, reaching for him. Taking her hand, he followed her from the room.

They had been married nearly twenty years and still she could make him tremble with love and desire. She was as beautiful as the day he married her. His magic had slowed their aging process considerably; something neither of them had expected. Their healer, Ginny Thomas, was sure they had doubled their life spans.

He stopped her on the stairway and pulled her into his arms. "I love you, Mrs. Potter," he whispered fiercely.

"I love you too, Mr. Potter," she replied, wrapping her arms around him. Even after twenty years he could bring out her lustful nature. It was something she reserved for him and him alone.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her up the remaining steps and into their bedroom. Life was good.

**FINIS**