Summary

During the battle at the Department of Mysteries something unexpected happens and a knight from a place far, far away suddenly finds himself in the strange world of Harry Potter. How will Harry, as well as the rest of the wizarding world react to having a paladin thrust into their midst? Evil closes in on all sides, yet the Light still shines in the Darkness. Slight AU.

Notes

Disclaimer: Harry Potter is owned by J.K. Rowling and her various corporate partners. I own nothing, and I am making no profit by my little ventures into the shadowy realms of fanfiction. I do so purely for enjoyment. I would, however, like to thank JKR for allowing us all to play in her sandbox.
"I killed Sirius Black! I killed Sirius Black!"

The crazed witch sang that refrain over and over as she ran toward the exit from the amphitheater that was hewn out of the bedrock deep below London in the Department of Mysteries.

With a vicious cry, Harry wrenched himself out of Lupin's grasp and leveled his wand at Bellatrix.

"Confringo!" he shouted, heedless of the battle raging all around him. Harry's world had seemingly contracted to simply himself and the fiend that stole his godfather from him.

"Confringo!" Harry screamed once again. However, his aim was off. Harry's first spell went wide by several feet, while his second struck the top of the doorway that Bellatrix was running toward. Showing more awareness than Harry thought possible for such a deranged witch, Bellatrix quickly changed direction and dove against the wall just as the ceiling above the doorway came crashing down.

"Looks like wittle, baby Potter came to play!" the witch gleefully shouted as she regained her feet, "but does the wittle baby know the rules? Incendio!"

Harry hastily conjured a shield to fend off the flames hurtling in his direction, but he was unable to dodge the simple tripping jinx that Bellatrix sent following after.

As Harry sprawled out on the floor, Bellatrix took up her chant once again, "I killed Sirius Black!" and ran toward a different doorway.

"She will not get away because of a bloody tripping jinx!" Harry screamed as he scrambled off the floor and took off after Bellatrix. In the back of his mind, Harry heard various shouts for him to wait, for him to stop, but he ignored them all. At that moment, Harry Potter had only one purpose: find Bellatrix Lestrange.

What he would do with her once he found her, well, he could worry about that later.

The stone corridor that he was racing down twisted and turned with scarcely a moment's notice. The torches lining the walls which gave off the little light that was available were few and far between, making Harry's flat-out run into the darkness that much more dangerous as he could barely see more than a few feet in front of his face. But the echo of Bellatrix's hurried footsteps on the cold, stone floor and the taunting refrain of her voice impelled him onward.

A sudden flash of light was warning enough for Harry to throw himself to the ground as a spell crashed into the wall where his head had been just a moment before. Flecks of stone rained down on his back as he painfully slid to a halt against the hard stone wall in yet another bend in the corridor.

"Awwww… the wittle baby fell down," shrieked the madwoman from her ambush, "let's see if we
Spells began raining down upon Harry's position and he hurriedly rolled to the side, desperately trying to avoid being hit. Flat on the floor and seeing no other option, as Bellatrix kept up her steady barrage of hexes and curses, Harry blindly pointed his wand in her general direction and let loose with his own Blasting Curse.

Suddenly, the spellfire slamming into the ground all him ceased. Harry looked up with desperate hope.

*Did I actually hit her?* Harry incredulously thought to himself, only to hear the witch's insane laughter once again.

"Hehehe, He *did* come to play after all!" Bellatrix exclaimed from her end of the hallway. "Catch me if you can, Potty!" she yelled as she once again took off down the dark corridor.

*She's playing with me,* Harry thought to himself, *I'll teach her to bloody well play with me!*

Harry once again scrambled to his feet and took off after the mad witch. He quickly turned a corner only to see Bellatrix duck into the first doorway that they had come across and slam the door closed behind her.

"*Confringo!*" Harry screamed at the door without slowing his pursuit. The barrier to exploded into the room in a shower of wooden splinters. Harry crossed the threshold and dove to the right, just in time to avoid a dark jet of purple light. The anger flowing through his veins allowed him no regard for his own safety and he unleashed an all out assault upon his enemy.

"*Confringo! Reducto! Stupefy! Petrificus Totalus!*" Harry let loose with anything and everything he could think of. Amazingly, it seemed to be working, and Bellatrix was forced to defend herself.

Harry was so focused on his enemy that he barely noticed what was in the room around him. At first glance, the chamber appeared to be floating in the darkness of outer space, as thousands of tiny, bright stars shone all around. A closer inspection would reveal that the "stars" were really countless, glowing crystal pendants, each one hanging from a tiny hook on the pitch-black wall. No other source of light was found in the room besides the strange, shining crystals.

But the two combatants were headless of their surroundings as they continued their duel. Even though he seemed to have her on the defensive, Harry couldn't land a single spell on his enemy; she either countered his spells or dodged and twisted out of the way. Soon, the magical onslaught had the tiny, shining crystals flying and scattering throughout the room. Wherever they landed, tiny flashes of lightning sparked about, shooting brilliant flashes of light into the darkness.

"*Enough!*" Bellatrix screamed, fury overtaking the demented glee that had earlier adorned her face, "playtime is over!" With that she brandished her wand and summoned several of the tiny, glowing crystals to herself. They came together in a brightly shining ball of tiny shards and hovered before her. Another flick of her wand banished them directly at Harry.

"*Protego!*" Harry quickly shouted, only to painfully discover that his shield had no effect whatsoever on the tiny, razor-sharp crystals hurling straight at him. Several of the tiny shards sliced open his arms as he instinctively covered his face while others stabbed into his stomach. Each impact jolted Harry with what felt like an electric shock.

With a grunt of pain, Harry clutched his now bleeding gut with his left hand and crouched down to the floor. He looked up only to see another ball of crystals floating in front of Bellatrix.
"Now it's time for the wittle baby to be punished!" she mocked before banishing another volley, "Depulso!"

Knowing his shield was of no use, Harry desperately cast a hurried Blasting Curse at the shards flying his way, hoping to disperse them or deflect them.

He did not expect the violent explosion.

There was a blinding, white light and a terrifying blast.

Harry was thrown, tumbling through the air before slamming head-first into the wall behind him.

For what seemed like a few seconds, Harry could hear nothing but silence as dust tumbled down from the ceiling in the aftermath of the explosion. The silence gave way to a high-pitched ringing as it became evident that the blast was too much for Harry's ears to bear. He groaned in pain as he tried to sit up, only to see the room spinning around him, and he promptly fell back to the floor. He desperately groped about him, blindly hoping to locate his wand in case Bellatrix renewed her assault.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, Harry found his wand, miraculously it was unharmed, and he somehow managed to make the world stop spinning. He was surprised that during this time he was not subject to a renewed barrage of curses, but looking around, Harry saw no sign of Bellatrix other than a small smear of blood on the wall and a slightly larger pool gathered on the floor just outside the door.

She must've run off again. Great. Bloody well fantastic! Harry cursed in his head. With a groan, he managed to get to his feet, intending to take off after his foe once again. However, he was stopped short by something odd lying on the floor in the middle of the room.

There, in what would have been the center of the blinding ball of magic that exploded when Harry's spell crashed into the flying crystals, was the body of a man.

He looked like some sort of medieval knight, lying face down on the floor, covered head to toe in shiny, plate-metal armor. On his left forearm was strapped a circular shield, polished so brightly that it could have easily been mistaken for a mirror. A few inches from his right hand laid a large, ornate looking sword. The knight wore no helm, which allowed Harry to see his short-cropped, gray hair.

Harry, his mouth falling open in surprise, stared at the man in a moment of confusion. I must've hit my head bloody hard, he thought to himself, now I'm seeing things.

In that moment, the knight moved with surprising quickness for someone covered almost completely in metal. His right hand grasped the hilt of his sword as he lurched to the side and rolled to his knees. The knight appeared to be around fifty years old. A short, graying goatee matched the hair on his head, and few small, faded scars marred his otherwise handsome features. One particularly noticeable scar cut across the bridge of the man's slightly crooked nose. It seemed that the his brown eyes quickly took in Harry's shell-shocked state. His mouth opened in what Harry assumed to be speech, but the ringing in Harry's ears made any attempt at communication pointless.

Overcoming his moment of confusion, Harry growled out, "I don't have time for this! She's getting away!" and with that, he ran through the door with renewed vigor in pursuit of his enemy without sparing another thought for the strange newcomer.
Once more in the dark and winding stone corridor, Harry took off in the direction that he and Bellatrix had originally been heading, hoping to catch her once again. He kept to the hallway, deciding not to veer off into any of the closed doors that he passed by, lest he get lost in the maze of mysterious rooms and corridors. He could only hope that Bellatrix had made the same decision.

After a few moments, Harry finally saw an end to the corridor up ahead. It looked like the stone wall at the end of the hallway had been blasted apart to make an exit. Multicolored lights flashed back and forth from the opening, and the ringing in Harry's ears began to fade just in time to be replaced with the cries of shouted incantations. Harry ran flat out toward the opening and emerged in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic. There he found Dumbledore locked in furious combat with both Bellatrix Lestrange and Lord Voldemort himself.

"Your little schoolboy is dead!" Bellatrix shouted at the aged headmaster as they traded spells, heedless of Harry's emergence onto the scene, "I left him in a pile of blood and broken bones back in the Department of Mysteries!"

"How's this for a pile of bones, bitch?!!" Harry screamed in rage. "Reducto!"

His spell caught the insane witch by surprise as it slammed into her shoulder. With a high-pitched yelp, Bellatrix spun around and went crashing to the floor.

Only then, with Bellatrix down and writhing in agony, did Harry truly register the fact that the Dark Lord was present in the room.

"Well done, Harry," sneered the high-pitched voice of Voldemort, "I didn't think you had it in you."

"Go to hell, you bastard!" Harry shouted as he leveled his wand at the Dark Lord and began furiously casting.

"You can't win here, Tom," Dumbledore said calmly as he continued to engage Voldemort at a lightning-fast pace. "Give up. You're outnumbered and outmatched."

"I am Lord Voldemort!" returned the snake-like being with a crazed gleam in his red eyes, "I cannot be defeated!" And with that, he unleashed a wave of concussive force that lifted both Harry and Dumbledore off their feet and tossed them tumbling through the air.

Harry landed awkwardly on his left arm, and felt a bone snap somewhere near his wrist. Dumbledore somehow managed to keep his feet, and hastily erected a shield between Harry and Voldemort.

"I am the greatest wizard to ever walk the earth!" exclaimed the Dark Lord as he continued spinning and flicking his wand in intricate and exact motions, "you maggots are nothing to me. Nothing!"

"Harry! Get out of here!" Dumbledore shouted to the prostrate student. The effort of trying to protect Harry while simultaneously engaging Voldemort was clearly putting the headmaster at a disadvantage. But Harry paid his mentor no mind as saw Bellatrix once again moving, trailing a steady stream of blood toward the row of fireplaces that would give her access to the Floo Network and freedom.

As Harry was trying to bring his wand around to prevent Bellatrix's escape, the sickly, yellow beam of a Crucius Curs found him instead. Blinding, white-hot agony exploded in Harry's mind. The excruciating pain lasted only an instant, as Voldemort quickly lifted the curse in order to fend
off Dumbledore's next attack, but its effects remained. Harry could do little else but helplessly curl up on the floor, twitching in agony, and watch as Bellatrix disappeared in a flash of green flame.

It seemed to Harry that Voldemort's eyes lit up in triumph as he realized that Dumbledore would be unable to effectively both protect Harry and continue their duel at the same time. Harry could do nothing but watch in despair as it only took the Dark Lord a few moments to maneuver Dumbledore to his advantage. The furious spell casting came to an abrupt halt as bright green chains wrapped themselves around the headmaster's torso and bound his arms to his sides.

Voldemort laughed and bowed grandiosely. "At last… at last I shall put you both where you belong."

The Dark Lord pointed his wand at the helpless Harry Potter who lying bleeding and broken on the ground.

But then a cry came from the hole Bellatrix had blasted in the stone wall. With a loud shout, the old knight leapt into the atrium, his mirrored shield held steadily in front of him and his sword brandished above his head. Without pausing or slowing, the armored knight gestured at Dumbledore with his sword and the chains that held the headmaster captive shattered with a flash of white light.

With a cry of fury, Voldemort turned the attention of his wand toward the newcomer. A jet of red light was sent barreling toward him, only to bounce off his shield and crash into the ceiling where it exploded in a shower of dust and broken stone.

Dumbledore quickly took advantage of the situation and renewed his assault upon the Dark Lord, transfiguring the paving stones beneath Voldemort's feet into quicksand.

While the wizards turned their attention and their wands to each other once more, the knight took up position between Harry and Voldemort, acting as a shield against further assault.

"Can you move?" he asked in a firm, resolved voice.

It took Harry a moment to realize that the knight was talking to him.

"I don't know," Harry wheezed, "I think I can try."

"Make your way back into the corridor," the knight said in a tone that brokered no argument, "you're in no condition to continue this fight. You can find some shelter there. I'll cover your retreat."

Harry obeyed, and painfully began to crawl over to the opening in the wall while the old knight kept his shield between Harry and the Dark Lord. A few times Voldemort tried to cast a spell at them, but each time the knight intercepted it with his shield and sent it ricocheting off in some other direction. Every so often, the knight would gesture with his sword like he had done earlier, and one of Voldemort's spells, curses or transfigurations would be broken in a flash of white light. Had he been of clearer mind, Harry would have probably wondered at the wandless magic that the knight displayed.

Once Harry reached the opening, he crawled over the blocks of ruined stone and turned his attention back to the fight. As soon as Harry had reached some modicum of cover from the battle, the old knight left his position shielding the teenager, and charged Voldemort head-on.

The Dark Lord was taken by surprise, and he barely managed to avoid having his throat slashed open by the knight's shining sword.
"Give up, Tom," Dumbledore calmly spoke in the midst of the battle as his wand continued moving, "you've lost whatever advantage you thought you had."

"This Muggle is nothing! You are nothing, you old fool!" the Dark Lord screamed as he continued to dodge both the knight's sword and Dumbledore's spells.

Voldemort then conjured a thick, steel shield between himself and the knight, and then forcefully banished the heavy object at the old warrior. The impact of the blow knocked the knight off his feet, falling backwards onto the floor.

And then Harry heard the sound of rushing flames. He turned to see the green fire of the Floo Network light up the far side of the atrium. Out of the fireplaces stepped several Aurors as well as Cornelius Fudge, who gaped in horror at the sight of Lord Voldemort returned from the grave.

With a last sneer of hatred, Voldemort let loose another concussive wave of force that knocked back everyone in the room, and then with a deafeningly loud crack, he disapparated, fleeing the Ministry and shattering the battered wards that were straining to survive the magical battle.

With the excitement finally over, Harry was beginning to a bit feel light-headed. He heard the Minister for Magic stupidly exclaim, "He's back!" into the shocked silence that followed Voldemort's departure.

In the background, Harry could hear the sounds of Dumbledore, Fudge and the Aurors as they began hurriedly moving about the atrium, but he couldn't exactly piece together what they were doing. A sharp jolt of pain made Harry look down at his stomach to see that at some point his hands had clasped onto his gut.

"Wow," Harry said to no one in particular, "that's a lot of blood."

He began to feel dizzy as he held up a red hand to get a better look. A shadow fell across his line of sight and Harry tilted his head back a bit further in order to see where it came from. The knight was standing before him, sword still drawn, staring down at him with a look that could probably cut steel.

"Oo look awf'ly shinny. Did'ja know 'at?" Harry slurred to the armored figure.

And then, with his head falling forward, everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there's chapter one. I hope you enjoyed it. The "old knight" that I've obviously introduced to the Harry Potter universe is based upon a character from an old video game that I enjoyed many moons ago. However, I do not think that his "world" will really impact the world of Harry Potter enough to warrant labeling this a crossover. Anything that you need to know about him will be explained in due time. Although if someone can figure out who/what he's based on from the little information given in this first chapter, I'll give you a cookie. In future chapters I'll include his origins in the disclaimer, but for now, in order to keep his identity more mysterious, I'll leave it off. Please don't sue me for this.
This OC will be a major recurring character for the story. However, he will be the only major OC that you'll have to get used to.

I think it's safe for everyone reading to assume that since this clearly starts during Harry's fifth year during the battle in the Department of Mysteries, most of the canon Harry Potter events that took place before this chapter and are found in the first five Harry Potter books remain in effect. However, this is a slight alternative universe (AU) story, so changes will come up. Any relevant deviations from the canonical storyline or timeline will be revealed as the plot progresses. Don't blink, you might miss them!

Updates come as I find the time to write them.

Thanks to all the authors on this site whose works I have enjoyed for many years. You make the world a more interesting and entertaining place.

Please leave a review on your way out and let me know what you think. Thanks for reading!
With a muffled groan, Harry Potter once again became aware of the world. With his eyes still closed, he found that he was lying down on a firm mattress and that the sharp odor of cleaning chemicals hung in the air.

*Looks like I'm in the hospital wing,* Harry thought to himself, *why am I here this time?*

The dryness in his mouth and throat was the next thing to really register in his somewhat confused mind. He let out a parched, rough cough that stung his throat. Before he even thought of searching for something to drink, a straw was placed up against his lips, and Harry took a long pull of cool, refreshing water. Only then did he open his eyes.

Blurry vision sharpened into the familiar features of the Hogwarts hospital wing as someone perched his glasses on his nose. Harry turned his head to the left to discover that someone was one Luna Lovegood.

"Hello Harry," Luna said in her dreamy voice, "it's good to have you back. We were worried that the Nargles would keep you for a while yet."

Harry simply stared at the wide-eyed blonde for a moment before asking, "Luna, how did I… why am I here?"

"Well, Harry," Luna replied in a tone that Harry thought she might use for addressing very small children, "when a mommy loves a daddy very much, and if she doesn't have a headache at the time, and if she hasn't misplaced the key to her chastity belt, then they do what comes natural, just like the birds and the bees do. Although, now that you mention it, I never really understood why the birds and the bees would want to have sex with each other, especially since some birds eat bees. I wonder if it's normal to kill and eat your potential mates…"

"What?" replied Harry, "what are you…? No, not that, I mean, why am I in the hospital wing?"

"Oh, well that makes much more sense. You're here because you almost died in the Department of Mysteries of course."

Harry drew his eyebrows together in puzzlement for a moment, trying to make sense of Luna's statement and the jumble of hazy memories in his head.

And then it all became clear.

**Flying to the Ministry.**

**The Death Eater ambush in the Hall of Prophecies.**

**Furious spell casting and desperate chases.**

**Bellatrix Lestrange.**

**Sirius…**

"Oh Merlin… Sirius…” Harry breathed out as his eyes began to fill. He felt Luna reach out and
clasp his hand. Harry squeezed his eyes tightly shut, not wanting her to see him cry, but a few errant tears escaped down his cheeks nonetheless. Luna remained quiet, simply allowing Harry the time he needed to shed his tears for his godfather.

_Sirius, I'm so sorry._

After a few short moments of silent crying, Harry wrenched his hand out of Luna's, a sudden anger overtaking his sadness. With a sniff he wiped his face and cast a glance around the rest of the hospital wing.

"What about the others?" Harry asked. "Where's Hermione and Ron?"

Luna didn't respond, but rather glanced down to the other end of the hospital wing where two separate beds were curtained off from prying eyes. Her eyes then returned to Harry.

"Neville and Ginny are sitting with them. Neville had it pretty rough for a little while, what with his being put under the Cruciatus Curse and all, but he's feeling much better now. Madam Pomfrey thinks Ron will be alright once he wakes up, but doesn't really know when that will be. Hermione…"

Luna's soft voice trailed off as she once again glanced at one of the curtained-off beds and something clenched in Harry's chest.

"What about Hermione?" Harry insisted.

"I'm sorry, Harry, things don't look very good."

Harry took a moment to really look at Luna. For the first time he could remember, the dreamy, unaffected appearance was missing from her face. It was her eyes, he decided, there were tears in her eyes.

Tears for Hermione.

Harry's mind went back to the Department of Mysteries. _Dolohov's wand slashing through the air as it unleashed a bright purple flame. That violet fire striking Hermione across the chest. Her mouth forming a quiet little "oh" of seeming comprehension before she collapsed to the floor in a silent, unmoving heap…_

Harry quickly sat up in his bed and threw off the thin sheet that was pulled up to his armpits. He ignored the sharp pain in his stomach as he swung his legs around and placed his bare feet on the cold tile floor. With a sense of determination, Harry pushed himself to his feet, only to find the room beginning to spin around. He closed his eyes and reached out with his right hand to steady himself against the bed. He stayed like that for a moment to allow the spinning to come to a stop. And then, clad in his light blue hospital gown, Harry Potter slowly shuffled over to the curtained off bed that Luna had glanced at.

When he arrived, Harry pulled back the curtain to find a sad scene. Madam Pomfrey was in the midst of a whispered but serious conversation with Professors Flitwick and Sprout at the far side of the enclosure. Sitting in a chair and looking very tired was Neville Longbottom. His hair was in complete disarray and dried blood stained the front of his shirt. He was paler than normal, with deep, dark circles beneath his eyes. But Harry only dimly registered these details as he stared at Hermione.

_Hermione Granger, the brightest witch of her generation, was lying pale and motionless in a hospital bed._
Her chest rose and fell at an unnaturally slow rhythm. Around her head were several dimly colored magical lights, no doubt conjured by the matron to help diagnose the girl's condition.

Harry slowly approached the side of the bed and took Hermione's hand.

It was cold.

"Mister Potter!"

Harry dragged his attention away from Hermione to see the three adults staring at him.

"I said," began Madam Pomfrey in a stern voice, "what are you doing out of bed? Those wounds to your abdomen will never heal straight if you go moving about so soon."

Instead of replying to the matron's question, Harry turned his eyes back to Hermione and asked, "What's wrong with her?"

In a somewhat softer tone, Pomfrey replied, "We're not really sure. We can't seem to identify the spell which struck the poor girl."

"When is she going to get better?"

The only thing that met this question was silence.

"I said," Harry repeated more forcefully, "when is she going to get better?!"

"Mister Potter… Harry," began Madam Pomfrey, "we're doing everything that we can, but we just don't know what's causing the problem. We've been able to slow the progression of the curse and the damage that it's doing to her internally, but without knowing more... well, we're at a bit of a loss as to what to do next."

"It was a purple flame," replied Harry. "A purple flame cast with a slashing motion, it hit her diagonally across the chest."

"We know, Harry," said Professor Sprout in a soft voice, "Neville already told us."

"So you'll figure it out, right? You'll be able to stop the curse; you'll be able to fix her, right?"

Once again, Harry's questions were met with silence.

Harry hastily dropped Hermione's hand as if it stung him. He squeezed his eyes shut and balled his hands into fists as anger once again coursed through him. His whole body went rigid with tension.

"Mister Potter, please, you need to return to your bed…"

Harry spun on his heel to face the opening in the curtain. He was met by Luna and Ginny, who had obviously come to see what all the commotion was about. Harry pushed his way between the two girls and began making his way toward the doors of the hospital wing. He would have broken into a run, but the sharp pain in his abdomen wouldn't let him.

Just then the doors opened, and in strode Albus Dumbledore.

"Professor!" shouted Harry, irrational hope filling him at the sight of the aged headmaster, "thank Merlin! You'll be able to fix her, right? Please tell me you know what to do."

Dumbledore looked down at his student with a faint, sad smile on his lips.
"Harry, it's going to be alright."

"I don't care if it's going to be alright!" screamed Harry, as he continued along his emotional rollercoaster and anger filled him once more, "I want somebody to fix her!"

"I assure you, we're doing everything we can to..."

"But there's got to be something else," Harry began pleading, "this is Hermione! She has to be okay. She... it's... not her too. She can't die too."

The old headmaster approached and put his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Harry..."

"Don't touch me!" Harry exclaimed as he violently pushed the old man's hand away as the anger came back again. "Do something useful! Fix Hermione! Why won't you do something useful? Why don't you ever do anything useful?! All you ever do is speak in riddles and avoid giving straight answers. You've been avoiding me all year when I needed your help. Now Hermione needs you, and what? Are you just going to ignore her too? Do something, you bloody bastard! For once in your damn life, do something!"

All eyes in the hospital wing were staring at Harry in the wake of his outburst. All eyes, that is, except for the two that Harry wanted to see open more than just about anything at that moment. But Hermione's eyes remained closed as she lay in her cold, motionless oblivion.

Not wanting to be around anyone anymore, and hating the way their eyes stared at him in shock, Harry resumed his motion toward the exit. He threw open the door, slamming it loudly against the stone wall and made his way out of the hospital wing. He had to just get away from it all.

"Bloody, fucking Dumbledore," Harry seethed as he aimlessly wound his way through the castle, heedless of the fact that he was only wearing a hospital gown, not that he really cared. "Bloody Pomfrey... fucking Sprout... useless, the lot of them... can't even figure out one damned curse."

Harry stopped and suddenly changed direction, deciding to head up to the Astronomy Tower. Hopefully he could get some air up there. Or maybe just scream at the sky until his lungs gave out. Within a few minutes, he was trudging up the stairs at as fast a pace as the pain in his stomach would let him. He didn't really care about the now constant, sharp pain that emanated from his abdomen. All he really cared about in that moment was his anger.

"Fucking Bellatrix Lestrange. Bloody Dolohov and his bloody curse. It's their fault. They did this to Hermione. I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill them all. Every last bloody Death Eater, I'm going to kill them all."

At last, his anger had worked itself into a rage as Harry reached the top of the tower. He threw open the door and stepped out onto the roof. But to his surprise, he was not alone.

A man was standing at the far end of the tower, gazing up at the night sky. The door slamming against the wall drew his attention to Harry. His head snapped over to regard the newcomer, while his hand went to the hilt of the sword strapped to his hip.

Harry didn't recognize the strange person at first. Besides the sword, he was wearing some sort of wide, metal collar over his dark blue but rather nondescript clothing. The collar extended down a few inches to cover some of his upper chest and back. Attached to it were two other pieces of armor that covered his shoulders. His short, gray hair and matching goatee framed a handsome face marred by several old scars. Brown eyes peered at Harry with steely intelligence, seeming to take
him in all at once, and measure him against some unknown standard.

In the end, it was the sword that betrayed the man's identity to Harry.

*It's the old knight,* Harry thought to himself, *Great.* The memories of his chase and battle with Bellatrix came back to him. The old knight appearing in a brilliant explosion of magic. His coming to the rescue during the duel with Voldemort, saving the day. He was the only reason that Harry and Dumbledore were still alive.

But honestly, Harry really didn't care.

"Great! Bloody well fantastic! I can't even get some bloody space to myself to scream at the sky! What the hell are you doing here, anyways? Don't you have a damsel to be rescuing somewhere?"

The old man just raised one eyebrow and continued to regard Harry in silence.

"Typical," continued Harry, "just stand there and stare at me like all the other bloody idiots downstairs. They can't do anything either… useless, the lot of them… just like bloody useless Lestrange. I'm going to kill that bitch when I find her."

Harry paced back and forth on the rooftop, ranting and raving in his, almost oblivious to the presence of the old knight watching him.

"I'll make her pay. I'll make Dolohov pay. I'll kill them if Hermione dies. I'll kill them for taking her away from me…"

As Harry continued his diatribe against anything and everything that came to mind, the demeanor of the old man shifted.

"What's this you speak about someone dying?" the knight asked.

Harry stopped and spun on his heel, facing the man.

"What do you care?" Harry spit out venomously, "Why would you give a damn about my friend, lying on her death bed downstairs because some areshole put her there? Bloody Death Eaters curse a sixteen year old girl an inch from death just because she followed me to the Ministry…"

"Oh God…"

Harry gasped and leaned against the parapet, his rage evaporated only to be replaced by despair.

"She's going to die because of me. She followed me there, even though she knew it was a trap. It's my fault. It's all my fault… Sirius… Hermione… dead because of me…"

Tears began to fill Harry's eyes once again, but he was quickly distracted by the two strong hands that gripped his shoulders and shook him.

"Look at me," said the old knight in a voice that spoke with authority. He moved his hands up to hold the sides of Harry's head and looked him in the face. "Snap out of it and look at me!"

Harry quit fighting and looked into the old man's intense brown eyes.

"Who's dying?" queried the knight.

"Hermione," answered Harry, "my friend Hermione. She was cursed in the battle, and the Healers don't know how to help her. She's going to die."
"Take me to her," ordered the knight.

But Harry didn't respond; he was once again beginning to gaze off into the distance, wrapped up in his own emotions.

"Boy! Snap out of it!" said the knight more forcefully and with an added little shake that managed to recapture Harry's attention. "Take me to your friend this instant."

Harry was confused, dumbfounded really. But the old man's tone brokered no argument, so Harry found himself complying with the order he was given. He turned and led the knight down the stairs and back through the castle toward the hospital wing. The two figures walked in silence, except for the occasional hiss of pain that emerged from Harry's lips. There really didn't seem to be anything to say.

Harry reentered the hospital wing a few minutes later with his new companion in tow to find Dumbledore in the midst of a serious discussion with Pomfrey, Flitwick, Sprout and Snape, who seemed to have come onto the scene during Harry's brief absence.

"I must notify her parents," Dumbledore was saying as they entered the room, "they should really be here should the worst come to pass..."

The words stopped Harry in his tracks.

"It's my fault that she's going to die."

But the old knight didn't pause in his stride, he continued forward to address the aged wizard.

"Headmaster."

"Sir Keldorn," replied Dumbledore, "what brings you to our hospital wing this evening? Is there something you need?"

"No," said the knight, "I thought I might be able to offer my assistance. This boy happened upon me and I learned of his injured friend. He said she was cursed and dying. What is the nature of her ailment?"

"I seriously doubt that a dressed up Muggle like you has anything to offer in the healing of a witch, no matter how polished your choice of clothing might be," drawled Snape before anyone else could respond.

"Peace, Severus," said Dumbledore, "we haven't been of much help ourselves. Poppy, would you please fill in our guest on the nature of Miss Granger's condition?"

"She was struck in the chest with an unknown curse by one of the Death Eaters," replied the matron. "We haven't been unable to identify the particular spell, but it's appearance was that of a purple flame that slashed across her chest. The curse passed through her clothing without disruption and caused no damage to her skin or muscle tissue. But underneath, it has been severely damaging her internal organs. We've managed to slow the effects of the curse and have kept her breathing and her blood flowing with charms, but if it isn't reversed soon, her organs will begin to fail. We've sent for assistance from St. Mungo's and were just about to notify the girl's parents when you walked in."

"Take me to her," said the knight, "I may be able to help. I can, at the very least, try."

With a skeptical look, Pomfrey led the knight to Hermione's curtained off beside. The other
professors came behind and Harry followed last. Inside the private area, Luna and Neville were sitting to one side of the bed. They seemed surprised by the presence of the knight, or perhaps it was at Harry's sudden return. Harry noticed that Ginny was missing, but assumed that she was sitting with her still unconscious brother.

Keldorn unsheathed his sword only to be pounced upon by Madam Pomfrey, "Now see here! I don't know what you were thinking when you said you could help, but I assure you, your barbaric weapons won't be doing any helping in my infirmary!"

"Peace, Madam," replied the knight with a tinge of amusement in his voice, "I mean no harm. The sword of a paladin is not merely an instrument of war. And Carsomyr is no mere sword. You have my word that I will not harm the girl with my barbaric weapon."

With that, he grasped the blade with both hands near the hilt, and held it so that the tip was pointed down to the floor. The knight then tilted the handle in Hermione's direction and there was a small but brilliant flash of light. Harry, as well as everyone else present save for the old knight, squinted and instinctively flinched away.

Harry turned to see Ginny now standing at his side, taking in the strange scene. He turned back a moment later as the knight sheathed his sword and approached the bed.

Gingerly taking a seat near Hermione's shoulder, the old man placed his hands on her head, closed his eyes, and slightly bowed as if in prayer.

Suddenly Hermione gasped for breath, and drew in a great lungful of air. Her back arched off the bed for an instant as if she was in pain. Harry was about to lunge forward and pry the man off of his friend when Dumbledore's hand stopped him.

A moment later the knight was back on his feet, but he seemed a little dizzy with one hand raised to his temple. Hermione was once again lying still on the bed. Harry darted forward past Dumbledore and grabbed for her hand.

It was warm.

Harry stared, eyes almost popping out of his head at his best friend who was supposed to be lying on death's doorstep. It seemed to him that her breathing had become more normal, and that some color had returned to her face.

"Out of my way!" commanded Madam Pomfrey as she pushed her way to Hermione's bedside, her wand already moving in intricate patterns. "Everybody out this instant! I need to see to her."

Harry was about to argue when a hand landed on his shoulder. He turned to see the old knight.

"Come, boy, she'll be alright. I give you my word."

As everyone filed out of the curtained off area, Harry found his voice, "I don't understand. How did you…?"

"The blessings of the Light have been entrusted to me to dispense as I can. It is part of my sacred task to bring healing to those in need, especially to those injured in the fight against the Darkness. But it was not really I who worked this miracle. I merely asked the Grace of the Light to work through me."

"What? That's nonsense," interrupted Snape, "You clearly cast some sort of wandless spell. There's no sense in trying to spin your tales of miracles and Grace and other ridiculous hogwash. Stop
trying to sound mysterious and tell us, *what did you do?*

"I do not appreciate being called a liar," replied the old knight, standing a bit straighter with his hand once again resting on the hilt of his sword, "especially when I have given you no cause to do so."

"Why you…"

"Peace!" interrupted Dumbledore, "peace, please! Severus, it seems to me that we should be thanking our guest for his priceless assistance in tending to Miss Granger. I do not doubt that without him here, things would still be looking quite grim right now. Sir Keldorn, you once again have my thanks, and the thanks of all of Hogwarts for what you have done today."

The knight bowed his head and shoulders in acknowledgement of Dumbledore's words and then relaxed his posture. Snape, on the other hand, looked as though he had eaten something rather sour.

The emotional toll of the past hour suddenly began to press down upon Harry and he found that he was quite exhausted.

"And if I may say so, Harry," continued the headmaster, "I would like to see you back in bed, if not for your own sake, then for the rest of us. Madam Pomfrey will be quite put out with us if she were to have one patient miraculously recovery only to have another collapse on his own two feet and do more damage to his already serious wounds."

Harry made to protest but Dumbledore cut him off, "And don't fret, we will talk soon, as soon as you've recovered enough strength to do so. I promise."

And so, with one last, long look in Hermione's direction, Harry found himself heading back to his hospital bed. He really didn't have the energy to fight about it and thus acquiesced without further argument.

After several hushed words, the adults, including the knight whom Harry now knew to be called Sir Keldorn, left the hospital wing to go about their business.

A short while later, Madam Pomfrey approached Harry's bedside with a Sleeping Draught.

"Alright, Mister Potter, bottoms up."

Harry took the goblet without a fuss, but before downing the undoubtedly foul and horrid tasting potion, he asked, "Is Hermione really going to be alright?"

Pomfrey's lips quirked up in a slight smile as she said, "Yes, Mister Potter. Whatever that man did has worked a true miracle on Miss Granger's condition. In a few days time I dare say she will be right as rain."

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out. I'd like some feedback on this and want to know what you all think, even if it's just "Good story, write more," or "You suck, knights are stoopid."
Thanks for reading!
Chapter 3

The next morning, Harry was able to convince Madam Pomfrey to release him before Ron or Hermione regained consciousness and also before Luna, Neville, Ginny or anyone else for that matter, thought to come and pay a visit.

After he had changed out of his hospital gown and into some of his normal clothes, Harry was making his way out of the infirmary when he saw another occupied bed near the door. In his frenzied state the night before, Harry never even noticed that someone else had been injured in all the fighting and admitted to Hogwarts' medical wing. The sight at first made his blood run cold as his mind quickly ran through the most likely candidates to be lying motionless in one of Madam Pomfrey's sickbeds.

_Hermione and Ron are already here, Harry thought, Luna, Neville and Ginny were released last night. It could be Lupin or Moody, Tonks or Shacklebolt. Surely Dumbledore wouldn't have brought any of the injured Death Eaters back to the school for treatment._

Then his eyes widened as a new thought struck him.

_Maybe he didn't die, maybe they found Sirius and they brought him back…_  

With a new sense of energy coursing through him, Harry hurried over to see just who was lying in the bed in question. His hopes were dashed, however, when he discovered the squat figure and toad-like face of Delores Umbridge.

"Bitch…" Harry whispered to no one in particular. Umbridge was unconscious, unaware of her angry visitor. For a moment, Harry couldn't think of why Umbridge would need to be recovering in the hospital wing, but then he remembered the centaurs carrying her off to who knows where.

"They should've killed you," Harry spat at the unconscious witch, "you don't deserve to be here when Sirius isn't."

With that, Harry left the hospital wing and made his way to Gryffindor Tower. It was still pretty early in the morning, and he managed to make his way up to his dorm room without running into anyone, a fact that Harry was very grateful for. He went to his trunk, and so as not to disturb his slumbering roommates, rifled through its contents as silently as possible in search of two particular items. Once he found his invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map, Harry quietly made his way out of the dorm and exited Gryffindor Tower.

He went down to the Great Hall, hoping to grab a quick bite to eat without running into anyone he knew. He was just placing a few pieces of toast into a napkin to be carried off elsewhere when an unwelcome voice addressed him from behind.

"Potter," began the oily drawl of Harry's least favorite professor, "the Headmaster desires to speak with you. You are to make your way to his office at your earliest convenience."

Harry simply turned and glared at Snape for a moment before nodding his head in silent acknowledgement of the message before turning back to gathering his toast.
With a dramatic swirl of his cloak, Snape left the Gryffindor table. Harry followed suit a few minutes later, albeit in the opposite direction, leaving the Great Hall and the interior of the castle altogether.

He made the long trek to the far side of the lake before throwing his cloak over his head and sitting down to eat his meager breakfast. Harry stayed in that spot for several hours. He passed the time by either staring out at the lake and the castle beyond, or watching the various members of the population of Hogwarts go about their business on the Marauder's Map.

He noticed the new name 'Keldorn Firecam' on the map a couple of times and assumed it to be the old knight that he kept running into. Once, Keldorn was in the Headmaster's office along with Dumbledore, and another time Harry found him near the Gamekeeper's hut along with Hagrid.

Harry also noted that 'Hermione Granger' and 'Ronald Weasley' stayed put in their places in the Hospital Wing.

He found Neville and Ginny visiting the Hospital Wing and its current occupants, and it seemed that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had also made the trip to Hogwarts to visit their injured son.

Luna seemed to occupy her time walking in circles around the Whomping Willow or hiking through the edges of the Forbidden Forest.

Glancing upon names like Malfoy or Umbridge often served to ignite Harry's capricious anger, at which point he would throw down the map and stare out at the lake. In his calmer moments, Harry was curious as to how the mere thought of such loathsome people could now drive him into a rage. Malfoy was definitely a git, and Umbridge was just about as bad as they came, but the mere thought of them had never garnered such a reaction from him before.

It was well past lunchtime when Harry finally stirred himself from his position and made his way back toward the castle. He had no real desire to meet with the Headmaster, but he knew that there was no way that he could put the meeting off for long. Harry was sure that Dumbledore could find him no matter where he tried to hide if the Headmaster really wished to do so.

And so, as the hour was nearing dinnertime, Harry found himself removing his invisibility cloak as he stood before the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office. Harry was scratching his head, at a loss for what the password might be when the statue simply moved aside. Apparently he was expected.

The rotating stairway delivered Harry to the inner doorway, which was already open. Harry slowly walked into the room to find a serene Albus Dumbledore seated behind his desk. His elbows were resting on the tabletop among the many oddly shaped silver instruments which were spinning and twirling in every direction while simultaneously emitting strange noises and puffs of multicolored smoke. The old man's fingers were steepled before his chin.

"Harry, my boy," began the Headmaster with a kind smile, "do come in and have a seat. Would you like a lemon drop?"

No mention of Harry's delay in answering his summons was made.

"No, thanks," Harry replied as he took his seat in the large armchair across the desk from one of the world's most famous and powerful wizards. Harry simply stared at the Headmaster in silence.

The silent staring contest went on for a few moments before Dumbledore finally spoke, "I asked you here today to talk about what happened at the Ministry yesterday."
At this, Harry's eyes left the old wizard in favor of examining the floor.

"I figured you might have some questions for me. Or perhaps you just might want to talk about what happened."

"What's there to talk about?" Harry questioned with some heat in his voice, "I stupidly led my friends into a deathtrap. Now Hermione and Ron are lying in the hospital wing and Sirius is…" Harry's voice trialed off as his throat closed up. "I don't think there's much to talk about."

"Harry, what happened yesterday was not your fault…"

"Save it!" Harry interjected, "I don't want to hear it."

"Voldemort has fooled many…"

"I said save it!" Harry erupted, rising to his feet. "I don't want to hear it!"

Dumbledore fell silent and resumed staring at his student as Harry fumed, his chest heaving. A few moments later, Harry slowed his breathing and retook his seat.

"Well then," Dumbledore started, "what would you like to hear?"

"You're the one who asked for me to come up here. You tell me."

The old Headmaster let out a long-suffering sigh and reached up to remove his half-moon spectacles.

"I'm sorry, Harry, I truly am. If I could take back what happened yesterday I would. If I could undo this entire past year I would. But, alas, such things are beyond even my capabilities. I believe I have failed you this year more times than I can really count, and for that I am truly sorry."

Harry just remained silent, staring down at his own hands clasped in his lap. The silence stretched on, broken only by the noises made by the Headmaster's ridiculous silver instruments. With no response forthcoming from Harry, Dumbledore moved on.

"I thought you might want to know about the prophecy that you retrieved from the Department of Mysteries."

At this, Harry's head snapped up and he looked intently into the old wizard's eyes.

"You once asked me why Voldemort came after you on that Halloween night so many years ago." Harry's heart began racing as Dumbledore continued, "Well, I believe the answer is found within the prophecy that you retrieved but ultimately lost last night."

"But it was destroyed," Harry responded.

"Well," Dumbledore replied, "there just so happens to be another copy of this particular prophecy. Would you like to hear it? You, above all, have the right to know what it contains."

Harry simply nodded his head, and Dumbledore waved his wand to summon his Pensieve. The heavy, stone basin floated over to land upon the desk between Harry and the professor. Several of the silver instruments scurried out of the way on their own.

"Before I show this to you, Harry, I just want to say once more that I am utterly and truly sorry." And with that, Dumbledore tapped the surface of the silvery liquid in the Pensieve with the tip of his wand.
An ethereal, miniature version of Professor Trelawney emerged from the basin and began to speak in a deep, ominous voice.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for in this world such Light and Darkness cannot both long survive... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

As the figure of Trelawney sank back into the Pensieve, Harry squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists.

"You knew," Harry growled out between clenched teeth, more as a statement than a question.

"Yes," replied the old man in a weary voice.

"How long?"

"Professor Trelawney fell into a trance and spoke that prophecy to me during a job interview shortly before you were born. A spy managed to obtain the first two lines of the prophecy and reported them back to Voldemort. That is why he attacked you as a child. But he has never learned the rest of its contents, and his desire to do so led to last night's chain of events."

Harry simply remained silent as he processed this new information. The last day and a half had been nothing but a series of blows to the fifteen year-old boy, one after another, and he wasn't sure how he was supposed to react to this.

"It may be of interest to note that you were not the only possible child that the prophecy might have referred to." Once again Harry's eyes met the Headmaster's. "Your friend Neville Longbottom was born the day before you were, and as such, could have been the subject of the prophecy. It is why his parents were attacked by the Lestranges as they were. It is also the reason why you've had to return to Privet Drive every summer. I was able to extend the protection that your mother's sacrifice gave you by tying it to the blood of her sister, your Aunt Petunia. The wards this magic created kept away any Death Eaters that might have come after you, as they came after the Longbottoms. Your return each year kept the wards charged and active."

Harry's right hand reached up to his forehead and rubbed his scar.

*Marked as his equal*, Harry thought to himself.

Once again, anger began to boil within him.

"Good," said Harry, "I'm glad it's me."

"Harry…"

"I'm glad because I'm going to kill him. I'm going to kill that bastard any everyone who follows him."

"Harry," Dumbledore hastily interjected, "don't go down that road, it only…"

"*I'm going to kill them all!*" Harry screamed, leaping to his feet. "And you don't get to tell me no! You knew this the whole time, and you never said anything! You never *did* anything! This entire year you've ignored me, stood by as the Toad tortured me, or pawned me off to that bastard Snape. You knew about the dreams, you knew he was after the prophecy. All it would have taken was for
you to say, 'Harry, don't go to the Ministry, Voldemort needs you to steal a prophecy.' But no! You never did one fucking thing!"

Harry spun around, picked up the armchair, and threw it with all his strength against the wall. It smashed into a cabinet which in turn spilled out several unidentifiable and apparently fragile magical objects.

Harry remained still and silent for a few moments, breathing heavily and looking at the over-turned chair and the crushed and broken belongings of the Headmaster that littered the floor.

"You're just as bad as they are," Harry whispered without looking at the old wizard. "And you don't get to tell me no."

After a moment, Harry finally turned back to look at Dumbledore. Gone was the visage of the powerful, omniscient wizard and in his place sat a tired, weary old man. Tears stained his cheeks as they ran from his anguished blue eyes down into his white beard.

There didn't really seem to be anything left to say, so Harry left the office, slamming the door shut behind him. He had no idea where to go next. He wasn't hungry and had absolutely no desire to join his classmates in the Great Hall for dinner, so he once again went out onto the grounds, heading in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. He passed Hagrid's hut and stopped about twenty paces from the edge of the forest.

All of a sudden, Harry's wand was in his hand, and before he really knew what he was doing, he had pointed it at the trees and cried out, "Reducto!"

He put so much power into the spell that when it struck the base of a fifty foot tall pine tree, the bottom of the trunk exploded as if it had been hit with an artillery shell. The great tree toppled to the side and landed in the clearing before the forest with a thunderous crash. The effort of putting so much power into a single spell left Harry bent over with his hands on his knees, panting for breath.

"Blimey, Harry," the surprised voice of Hagrid came from behind and to Harry's left, "what'd yeh go an' do tha' fer?"

"Don't ask, Hagrid," the now weary young man replied, "just don't ask."

"Alright Harry, alright. No harm done. But yeh can't jus' go about blowin' up them trees like tha'. Yeh could'a hurt someone."

Harry straightened up and closed his eyes.

"I won't do it again."

Without another word, Harry wandered off, leaving the Gamekeeper puzzled. Harry drifted aimlessly for a while, not bothering to keep track of the time, until well after darkness had fallen. He pulled out the Marauder's Map once more and a quick promise to do no good had him once again looking after the occupants of the castle.

Dumbledore was in his office, pacing back and forth.

Keldorn was at the top of the Astronomy Tower, standing motionless.

Harry discovered that Professor McGonagall had returned to the castle and was walking through the halls, likely on patrol for students out past curfew.
Hermione and Ron hadn't moved from their places in the hospital wing.

With a sigh, Harry cleared the map and put it away. He then ducked under his cloak and began the long trek back to Gryffindor Tower. If he was lucky, he would be able to barricade himself within his four-poster bed without having to speak a word to anyone else.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The next morning, Harry once again rose early and after a brief stop in the Great Hall just long enough to steal a few pieces of toast, he once again found his way out onto the grounds. Unlike the day before, Harry was not content to sit and stare out across the lake. Instead, he found himself aimlessly wandering around the boundaries of the grounds away from everyone else. He counted himself lucky that he had no classes to attend as O.W.L.s were finished and the term would be coming to a close in just a few day's time.

Harry spent the next few days either wandering about the grounds or sitting in some secluded spot, generally avoiding all contact with any other human beings. The little food that he ate was had either out on the grounds, like his morning toast, or taken in the kitchens by himself. Going to bed late and waking up early helped him avoid his housemates.

With ever-growing frequency Harry found himself getting angry. Sometimes the smallest things would set him off. A word or a mere thought could be enough to throw him into a lather and have him ready to start cursing whatever was in range. Thankfully, he had had no further explosive outbursts since he blew up the pine tree near Hagrid's hut, but it was probably only a matter of time.

His thoughts dwelled on the battle at the Department of Mysteries, on the serious injuries that his friends had received, and on Sirius. Rather than make him sad, Harry only found anger. He wanted to break either something or someone.

Hermione and Ron were eventually released from the Hospital Wing. Harry knew this because they had come looking for him on the third day of his self-imposed exile from the Hogwarts community and each day thereafter. Any time he heard them coming or spotted their approach on the Marauder's Map, Harry simply slipped under his cloak and waited for them to leave.

He wasn't really sure why he was doing this, but he did it all the same.

On one such occasion, Harry was hiding under his cloak down by the lake when his two best friends walked by.

"Give it a rest, Hermione," Ron said as the two students came into view, "Harry'll show up when he's good and ready."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," replied the brown-haired girl, "we have to keep looking. We're his friends and Harry needs us."

"What Harry needs is a break from all the trouble that's nagging him."

"Oh really? Is that what I am then?" Hermione shot back as her eyes glinted dangerously. "I'm just out here to nag him and heap more trouble on his back, am I?"

"Come on, Hermione, you know I didn't mean it like that."
"Oh? Then how did you mean it? All you ever do is complain about how I nag you and Harry to do your homework or finish your reading assignments. Who else am I supposed to think you're referring to when you say someone's nagging Harry?"

"Just because you nag us about homework doesn't mean I'm talking about you every time I use the word, you know."

"Gah! You're such, such a… Why don't you just go back to the castle and play Exploding Snap with one of the other idiots in the common room? Get away from the big bad nag!"

Hermione stormed off, leaving Ron standing there shell-shocked. After a few moments, Ron began moving once again, but instead of turning back to the castle, he followed after Hermione. Harry wasn't sure what to make of the exchange, but in the end, he chose not to reveal himself to his worried best friends.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The day before the Hogwarts Express was set to leave, Professor McGonagall managed to trap Harry in the Entrance Hall of the castle. Harry was a bit lost in his own thoughts and reentered the school without first concealing himself with his cloak. McGonagall was waiting for him.

"Mr. Potter," barked the stern voice of Hogwarts' Deputy Headmistress. Harry was startled by his Head of House's appearance, but once he recovered, he simply walked over to her, resigned to whatever punishment he would receive for being out so late past curfew.

"Come with me."

Harry followed obediently as McGonagall led him through the hallways to her office. Once inside the spartan and rather sparsely decorated room, McGonagall seated herself on the hard, wooden chair behind her desk and motioned for Harry to have a seat on one of the wooden stools clearly meant for student use. Harry took his seat and simply waited for the professor to begin.

"Mr. Potter, first of all I would just like you to know that contrary to whatever you may be thinking at the moment, you are not in trouble."

This statement left Harry more confused than anything else. He drew his eyebrows together in puzzlement.

"Then why am I here?" Harry questioned.

"I am well aware of the events which took place during my absence from the school and the role that you and your friends played in them."

Mention of the battle at the Department of Mysteries, even in this cursory way, put Harry on the defensive, but he remained quiet and listened as McGonagall continued.

"For that reason, the Headmaster has asked the staff to be rather lenient with the six of you as you all deal with the repercussions of that night. As such, you are not in trouble for staying out past curfew tonight or during the past few days."

"But that is not the reason I asked to speak with you. The Headmaster believes that it would be in
your best interest to stay here at the castle for the summer holidays. He has even gone so far as to preemptively obtain permission from your relatives. The decision, however, is up to you. If you would prefer to return home for the summer, you may do so, but the Headmaster thought that you might prefer an alternative."

"Oh, so now he thinks it will be that easy for us to kiss and make up, does he? Just offer poor Harry a carrot and he'll be back on the Dumbledore bandwagon!" Harry replied spitefully.

"Do not take that tone with me, young man," McGonagall returned with without pause. "Whatever your quarrel with the Headmaster, you will remember your manners and show proper respect when speaking to me. Understood?"

Harry was instantly cowed by his stern Head of House.

"Yes, Professor."

"That's better."

A few moments later, Harry had another question, this one without his earlier petulance.

"What about the wards, the blood protection that needs to be renewed?"

"The Headmaster believes that you are now old enough to make your own decision as to whether or not the benefits of the wards at Privet Drive are worth the ordeal of returning there. After all, they did not prevent the events which recently took place. The wards here at the castle should be sufficient to keep you safe. Some of the staff will also be staying for the summer, Hagrid and myself included, as well as the Headmaster of course."

Harry sat and thought for a few moments. Staying at Hogwarts really was a better alternative than returning to the Dursleys. And he didn't really feel like staying at the Burrow; that just seemed, well, awkward to Harry for some reason. But did he really want to be within such close quarters with Dumbledore for the entire summer?

In the end, the decision was rather easy; Hogwarts would win out over Number Four any day of the week.

"I think I'd like that," Harry finally answered.

McGonagall nodded her head once, but showed no further emotion at having Harry around for the summer.

"In that case you will still reside in your dormitory in Gryffindor Tower. You may have free reign about the normal areas of the castle, but are expected to adhere to the rules, especially curfew starting tomorrow night. You must also remain within the castle grounds at all times. If you should need to leave at some point, you will need permission from either myself or the Headmaster, as well as an escort. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Professor."

All in all, Harry thought he was making out pretty well in the exchange. A summer free of the Dursleys and he would be able to use his magic since he would be on school grounds. He had no real desire to venture beyond Hogwarts' gates anyways.

"Good," replied the Deputy Headmistress. "I have one more item to discuss with you, however. Normally I would not interfere with the social life of my students, but I believe this to be a rather
special case. To put it bluntly, your friends are very worried about you." Harry squirmed in his seat as McGonagall continued. "Miss Granger in particular is quite concerned. She came to me twice in the last two days, worried that she hasn't been able to find you anywhere in the castle. Might I ask why you've been avoiding them?"

Harry simply remained silent.

After a few moments, McGonagall went on, "Whatever the problem is, avoiding them is likely not the answer. You cannot run away from your problems forever, Mr. Potter."

"They'll be fine," Harry quietly responded to his Head of House without looking directly at her.

"At the very least, I think you should consider wishing them farewell tomorrow, as you won't be traveling on the train with them. I imagine that Miss Granger might become quite distraught if she were to be unable to find you. Merlin only knows what her imagination might lead her to conclude about your unexplained absence from the train."

"I…" Harry began, "could you tell them that I'm staying here for the summer for me? I just… could you? Please?"

At that, McGonagall's face softened as much as Harry had ever seen.

"Alright, Mr. Potter, just this once. But I will not have one of my lions running away from his problems forever. Whatever is off between you and your friends, I expect you to deal with it soon."

Without anything else to discuss, Harry was dismissed and returned to his dormitory for the night.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Note that the exact wording of the prophecy has been changed, so if you skipped over that paragraph, go back and look again. Remember, this story is an alternate universe, so not everything is the same.

So, the paladin is based off the character Keldorn Firecam from the game Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn. If you want to know what Keldorn looks like, just Google his name and you'll find his portrait from the old video game.

Thanks for your reviews. And thanks for reading!
Chapter 4

The next morning, Harry decided against saying goodbye to his friends, relying instead on McGonagall's promise to let them know that he would be staying at Hogwarts for the summer. Harry watched from underneath his invisibility cloak as the students left for Hogsmeade Station. Hermione, Ron, Neville, Luna, and Ginny took the last carriage after waiting around the entire morning. Harry caught Hermione grumbling as Ron and Ginny finally convinced her to get into the cart.

"I'm going to burn that cloak of his when I finally see him," Harry heard her say.

Later that afternoon, Harry was walking along the border of the Forbidden Forest toward Hagrid's hut, when a figure stepped into view in front of him. It was the old knight, with his sword belted to his side and his armored collar and a few other pieces of metal strapped to his neck and shoulders. Harry got the feeling that the knight had come looking just for him.

"Well met," the knight began. "This is the third time we have come across one another, and yet we have not been introduced. I am Sir Keldorn Firecam, paladin and Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart. Who might you be?"

"What do you care?" Harry replied in annoyance. "Can't you see that I'd rather not be bothered?"

"Do the elders on the world not bother to teach proper courtesy to the young?"

"Oh, well, I wouldn't want to be rude, now would I? I'm Harry James Potter," he replied in a tone clearly meant to mock the old knight's own introduction, "student of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and Fate's all-around bitch. Happy?"

The old knight pursed his lips as he continued to study Harry.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'll continue with what I was doing," said the young wizard.

With that, Harry resumed his walk and quickly passed his unwelcome visitor. The old knight's next words, however, stopped him in his tracks.

"I saw what you did the other day."

Harry straightened his back and turned to face the knight once more.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play dumb with me, it won't work. Casting such a dangerous spell at that tree was a damn fool thing to do."

"Yeah? And just what would you know about it?" Harry replied as his anger began to surface once again.

"Tell me this, then," countered the knight with a calm voice, "what would have happened if your little blonde friend was nearby when you so blindly cast your spell? I happened upon her in just about that area earlier that very same day. I believe she said she was hunting for snore cakes or some such thing. Did you even look to see where or perhaps at whom you might be aiming before
throwing such a deadly spell?"

As the old man spoke, Harry's eyes widened, and his anger, as well as most of the color in his face drained away.

_"I could have hurt Luna. I could have killed Luna too…"

"I thought not," the knight said in answer to his own question. "Come with me."

Since Harry couldn't think of anything to say in reply, he simply found himself following the knight's order. Within a few moments, they approached the side of Hagrid's hut; there they found the tree that Harry had so carelessly felled a few days before.

"It does not take a prophet to see that you are full of anger. That anger is controlling you, making you do some rather stupid things." Harry silently glared at the old man. "Unless you learn to control your passions, to channel your energy into something besides destruction, and instead into something productive, you are going to end up hurting either yourself or someone else. And as Saint Tomus the Black Friar has taught us, there are few things more dangerous, not to mention more pitiful and shameful than a man ruled by his passions."

"Yeah? And just what do you know about my passions?" replied Harry in an angry and petulant tone.

"Believe me, I know enough." The knight then walked over to the side of the Gamekeeper's hut and picked up a bow saw and a hatchet. "Instead of throwing another tantrum again today, you are going to put your energy into cleaning up the mess you have already made."

At that, Harry sucked in a quick breath. The mess that came to Harry's mind had nothing to do with the tree lying on the ground, but rather with two people who were recently lying in the hospital wing.

_Hermione… Ron…

_Sirius…

"Nothing helps us to learn to put some reins on our stronger passions more than good, hard work," continued the knight as he gestured with the tools toward the fallen tree.

"And what if I don't want to?"

"Then you will likely do something foolish once again. But tell me, what else have you to do today?"

Unable to come up with a counter argument, and realizing that hacking at a tree was just as good as wandering around the grounds, Harry stripped off his robe, rolled up his sleeves and extended his hands for the tools.

"Good," replied the knight. "Start with the hatchet and clear off all the branches from the trunk. When you are done with that, use the saw to cut the trunk into sections, each about a foot to a foot and a half long."

Harry went to work. After only a few minutes, his arms were covered in sticky pine sap, likely ruining his shirt. Hacking at the branches was no easy job, and Harry was rather tempted to just use magic to get the task over and done with. But something made him think that the knight would not take kindly to such an action. So, Harry continued working.
Sometime later, Harry glanced up to see that the knight had found a wooden chair and was seated near the hut smoking a pipe and reading a book. He had unbuckled his sword and had it propped up leaning against the chair beside him. He was even wearing a pair of small reading glasses on the tip of his nose. For some reason the sight struck Harry as rather comical, not exactly the image of a knight in shining armor that often came to mind, and he snorted in amusement before turning back to his work.

It was slightly past lunchtime when Harry finally finished chopping all of the branches off the tree trunk. The knight had disappeared earlier, likely going to get something to eat. Just before Harry was about to pick up the saw, though, the old man reappeared carrying a canvas sack.

"Time for a break," said the knight. "You cannot work all day without eating. Come."

He tossed the sack to Harry, who opened it to see a small loaf of bread, a wedge of cheese, and an apple as well as a large bottle of water.

"Eat. You'll need your strength in order to cut up that tree."

There was no more conversation as Harry ate his simple meal and then went to work on the tree once again.

By the time Harry was finished sawing the trunk and the larger branches into sections, the sun had fallen quite low in the sky. His right arm, shoulder and back ached with soreness. Even thinking back to his time at the Dursleys', he could scarcely remember ever physically working so hard. His palms had blisters the size of Galleons and his clothes were drenched in sweat and covered with sticky tree sap.

He felt rather good, however, in a tired sort of way, like he had accomplished something worthwhile.

"I think that's enough for today," observed the old knight. "Come back tomorrow morning at an hour past dawn and we'll continue."

Harry wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but he nodded his head in agreement. That night he slept like a rock.

OoOoO

The next morning, Harry was awakened by an incessant tapping at his window. He reached to his nightstand, put on his glasses, and then looked to the window and the lightening sky which meant that dawn was approaching. Hedwig was perched outside, waiting for him to get up. Harry got out of bed and opened the window to let in his owl. He removed the letter tied to her leg and spied the small, neat script of Hermione Granger. Harry paused for a moment, considering whether or not he wanted to read the letter, but in the end curiosity got the better of him.

Harry!

Where in the world are you? What's going on? Why are you avoiding me?

Leave it to Hermione to get right to the heart of the matter without beating around the bush.

I know that things were pretty bad at the Department of Mysteries, but please, don't shut us out like this. It wasn't your fault, Harry, you must see that. You were tricked. You're not alone in being
tricked by Voldemort, he's done it to lots of others. It's not your fault. Please talk to me. I've been
going spare with worry since I was released from the hospital wing and couldn't find you
anywhere. Ron's been beside himself as well. If Professor McGonagall hadn't warned us that you
wouldn't be on the Hogwarts Express I don't know what I might have done. Please, Harry, talk to
me. Let me help. At the very least, please write back so that I know that you're okay.

Love,

Hermione

Harry put the letter down on his bed and stroked Hedwig's feathers for a moment before getting
dressed and leaving for breakfast. As he was heading for the door, Hedwig let out a loud bark
which made Harry stop and turn back toward his owl. The bird in question nodded at Hermione's
letter and then stuck out her leg.

"Sorry, Hedwig, I just… not now. Maybe I'll write back later."

OoOoO

OoOoO

An hour and a half later found Harry and Keldorn once again standing near Hagrid's hut. Harry had
come better prepared than the day before, wearing and old pair of jeans and a faded t-shirt. Hagrid
was also present, and Harry noticed him carrying a rather large piece of wood. It looked like a
cross section of a big oak tree. It was about a foot tall and perhaps three in diameter. He set it down
near the cut-up pine tree that Harry had worked on the day before.

"There yeh go, Harry. Tha' there should do yeh jus' fine."

Harry was slightly confused, but didn't reply since Keldorn approached from the hut at that
moment with a large axe.

"This," said the knight, "is a maul. It is not an axe. Axes are for cutting and chopping. Mauls are
made for splitting wood. As such, they are rather heavier and have a thicker head. Normally, you
should wait for the wood to season before splitting it, but splitting green wood, while a bit more
difficult, works just as well."

With that, he handed the heavy maul to Harry.

"Have you ever done this before?"

Harry simply shook his head in reply. The knight unbuckled his thick leather belt from which hung
his sword as well as an assortment of leather pouches, and propped the weapon up against the chair
by the Gamekeeper's hut. He then took the heavy tool back from Harry and walked over to the cut-
up tree, picked up a log, and stood it up on the large oak cross section that Hagrid had carried over.

"Plant your feet about shoulder width apart," the knight began while demonstrating the proper
position, "hold the maul with your left hand near the end of the handle and your right near the
head. Bring it up over your head and swing it down in an arc onto the log. As you swing, let your
right hand slide down the handle to meet your left at the bottom."

After he had finished explaining, the knight demonstrated the technique with a quick swing,
cleanly split the log in two.

"Tha's a good stroke there, tha' is," commented the Gamekeeper.
"Easy enough once you get the swing of it. Each log should be split into probably six or more pieces, depending on how big it is. You want nice, thin wedges, not something that's too large to easily burn. Here you go, get to it. I'll stay over here to make sure you don't bleed to death if you manage to chop off your foot."

With that, he handed the tool back to Harry, and gestured for him to have a go.

Splitting wood, Harry decided, was much more difficult than sawing it. He kept missing the log or he would bring the maul down with the head slightly turned so that it would glance off to the side and send a painful reverberation through the handle and up Harry's arms. When he did hit the log straight on, he couldn't manage much more than to get the blade stuck in it.

All the while, the old knight and Hagrid sat side by side in two wooden chairs offering occasional advice.

"Bend yer knees, Harry."

"Don't swing so hard. It's not about strength. Let the maul do the work; it will wear you out long before you wear it out."

"Aim fer the split in the grain."

And so forth. Eventually, after what seemed like forever to Harry, he managed to split one of the logs. After that, he got into a rhythm. He would swing at the log and actually succeed in splitting it on every third try or so. He would then reposition it for the next stroke. After the section he was working on was done, he would carry the pieces over to Hagrid's wood pile, before returning to the chopping block and putting another log into position.

Splitting wood, Harry decided, was hard. After only a few minutes, he was breathing heavily and sweating like he was standing in a furnace.

Meanwhile Hagrid and Keldorn seemed to be getting along well enough. Both were smoking their pipes and they seemed find mutual enjoyment in telling stories of different dangerous creatures that they had come across. Hagrid tended to remark about caring for the poor, misunderstood 'little darlin's,' but Keldorn's tales focused more on fighting them.

"My squire Ajantis and I were making our way north to investigate the iron crisis, when we were waylaid by a colony of ankhegs, which burst out of the ground in front of us."

"Err, wha's an ankheg? Ain't never heard o' summat like tha' before."

"They're large, insect-like monsters, covered with a thick, brown shell that's very difficult to pierce. They live underground and prey on cattle and other livestock. Sometimes they'll attack people if they get hungry enough."

"Blimey."

"So there we were, three of the beasts staring us down, foul smelling acid dripping from their jaws. We drew our swords, ready to defend ourselves when Ajantis looks over at me and says, 'You told me the girls were prettier up north!'"

"Ha!" replied Hagrid as he slapped his knee in mirth.

"Turns out we found a blacksmith who was willing to pay handsomely for the shells. Used them to make some rather nice armor I recall."
They took a break around noon and retreated into Hagrid's hut for lunch.

"Don' worry," Hagrid turned to Harry with a wink, "I had the elves bring us down a bit o' summat."

Harry smiled at Hagrid's swipe at his own cooking.

The house elves provided a hearty meal of roasted chickens, potatoes, green beans and fresh rolls and butter. Harry was so hungry from all the hard labor that he ate an entire chicken by himself. Ron would have been proud. Hagrid put away six.

Harry only managed to split less than a quarter of the wood that day. It was rather taxing physically, and Harry still hadn't managed to get the proper technique down on every swing. He went to bed that night with two sore arms and a promise to return once again the next morning.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry made his way down the stairs of the boy's dormitory of Gryffindor Tower just after dawn. He had received another letter from Hermione, much the same as the last one, begging for a reply to be penned soon. It currently sat unanswered in Harry's trunk along with the one from the day before.

As he entered the common room intending to head on to breakfast, Harry noticed that he had a visitor: Dumbledore.

"Ah, there you are," said the old Headmaster from his seat in one of the many armchairs in the room. "Please, have a seat for a moment; there is something we must discuss."

Harry warily approached the aged wizard, all too aware of how their last conversation had ended. Dumbledore, on the other hand, seemed completely at ease.

"You may not like hearing this, but it can be put off no longer. The last will and testament of Sirius Black will be read this afternoon in Gringotts."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut when he heard his godfather's name.

"I'm sorry that we have not managed to hold a memorial service for him as of yet, as that might arouse some unwanted questions. Perhaps we might hold something less formal and more private in the future. But be that as it may, the goblins are getting rather restless and are demanding that the will be executed. As you are apparently named therein, you have the right to be present during the reading."

Harry remained silent, breathing heavily with his eyes closed and his fists clenched.

"Harry, would you like to go to the reading?"

"No." Harry spat as he glared at the Headmaster.

Without another word, Harry rose to his feet and stormed out of the room.

He decided to skip breakfast so as to avoid the other people in the Great Hall, and instead made his way directly to Hagrid's hut. There he quickly got to work on the woodpile.

Sometime later, Harry was interrupted by the voice of Keldorn.
"Skipping breakfast before a day of hard labor is not a very wise decision."

Harry glared at the knight.

"Ah. I see the angry boy has returned. I was wondering when he would make an appearance."

"Piss off!"

"Make me," returned the knight with some amusement.

Harry merely turned back to the chopping block and swung the axe which met its target with a satisfying thunk, splitting the log down the center.

"Tell me, who is it that has roused such anger in you? There aren't very many people staying in the castle these days."

"Why do you care?" Harry asked as he positioned a another piece of wood on the block.

"Let's say that it gives me something to talk about."

Thunk!

"Dumbledore. The man's an arse."

"Really?" queried the knight, "he did not strike me as such. And I'm normally a decent judge of character."

"Yes really. If he would have just told me what was going on, none of this would have happened."

"Ahh, so you speak of the battle waged a few days past."

"Yes, I speak of the battle," Harry said mockingly, throwing the knight's words back at him. "If Dumbledore would have just told me about the damn thing that Voldemort was after, Sirius and Hermione wouldn't be…"

Silence reigned for a moment.

"Your friend Hermione seems to have recovered just fine."

"She should be dead!" Harry screamed, throwing the maul down to the ground. "If it wasn't for you, miraculously appearing out of thin air, Hermione would be dead! And it would be my fault! Just like Sirius is my fault!"

Harry stood there, ramrod straight, breathing heavily, while Keldorn simply looked at him with unbreakable calm.

"She knew it was a trap. She told me, tried to convince me not to go. But I went anyways and she followed," Harry said in a much quieter voice. "And now Sirius, my godfather, my only family, is dead and Hermione should be too. And it's all my fault."

Silence stretched on for a long moment.

"And what does the young lady have to say about this?"

Harry shook his head and looked down to his feet.
"I don't know. I've been avoiding her. I couldn't… I just couldn't stand to have her look at me and…"

"Hmmm… If you truly are guilty of the charges you lay against yourself, which, I might add, seems unlikely…" Harry appeared about to interrupt, but the knight raised one hand, asking to continue. Harry relented. "If you truly deserve the anger that you are levying against yourself, then there are only two ways for you to receive absolution.

"First, there is penance. Make up for the damage you have done. However, this will only take you so far, as any penance we undertake can never truly atone for our misdeeds."

Harry nodded in understanding. No matter how hard he tried, he'd never be able to undo what was already done.

"The second, and the only true source of absolution, is forgiveness."

When Harry didn't respond, Keldorn continued, "Tell me, if she was here, now, and you could not hide, but instead made a heartfelt apology for the grievous hurt that you caused her, what would your Hermione do?"

Harry looked at his feet and stayed quiet for a moment. Instead of answering the question, Harry tried to redirect the conversation as a tear escaped from his eye and rolled down his cheek, "Yeah, but Sirius isn't here any more. I got him killed. I can't ask him for forgiveness."

"Yes," replied the knight, "sometimes it is impossible to ask for or receive absolution. Sometimes there are those who, in the hardness of their hearts, refuse to forgive. In such times we must remember that we all need to be forgiven, that we are all guilty of transgressions of one sort or another. What you really need is to break the hardness of your own heart, and forgive yourself. Only then will you accept the forgiveness of others.

"Ultimately, remember that the Light is merciful. To withhold mercy and compassion is a weapon of the Darkness. You will be forgiven if you so desire it. Your godfather, if he was a good man, and I do not doubt that he was since he gave his life fighting against the Darkness, now lives in the Light. In such Light, there can be no Darkness, there can be no hardness of heart.

"Harry, Sirius has already forgiven you. Hermione will forgive you. You must work toward forgiving yourself."

The old knight gave Harry a moment to collect himself and wipe away his tears before speaking again.

"Come, get yourself some breakfast. The elves will provide for you. It will do none of us any good if you collapse from exhaustion due to hunger. Your penance will keep until you have eaten."

Harry merely nodded and walked back toward the castle. He had a lot to think about.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Thunk!
The log on the chopping block split in two. Harry repositioned the larger of the two resulting pieces and then raised the maul for another swing.

Thunk!
He had spent several days after his conversation with Keldorn splitting wood and thinking. While swinging the maul and moving the logs around was physically exhausting labor, the repetitive nature of the task also provided Harry with ample opportunity to reflect on the past couple of weeks and the things that he had said and done.

He decided that Dumbledore really didn't deserve the treatment he'd given him. Yes, the Headmaster could have acted differently, but then again, Harry should have acted differently too. It seemed that for all his power, learning and mystique, Dumbledore was just a man after all. And like all human beings, he was prone to sometimes choose the wrong course of action and make mistakes. Harry tried to see things from Dumbledore's point of view; if he had knowledge of a secret prophecy about the most evil and dangerous wizard in the world, and if he knew that the dark wizard needed the information in that prophecy at all costs, would Harry have been willing to share that secret with a fifteen year-old schoolboy? Probably not.

But it was just so easy to be angry with Dumbledore. He was supposed to be in charge; he was supposed to make sure that everything worked out alright in the end. And now, when things had gone to Hell and would never be the same again, it was easy to blame the man who was supposed to stop that from happening. But how, exactly, was Dumbledore supposed to stop Voldemort all on his own or with the support of only a small group of civilians and a few schoolchildren? The old wizard was caught between a rock and a hard place, and Harry had held him to impossibly high standards.

Each swing of the maul forced Harry to realize that Dumbledore did not deserve his anger. It hurt to realize that Dumbledore wasn't all-powerful after all, that he couldn't solve every problem. But Harry supposed that realizing your idols were just mere human beings was a part of growing up.

Thunk!
Harry looked over at the old knight sitting by the hut with his feet propped up on a log, reading and smoking as always. Sir Keldorn Firecam was something of a curiosity for Harry. Sir Firecam, as he insisted on being called by one as young as Harry, had spent each day with him down by the Gamekeeper's hut. While Harry worked himself to exhaustion, the knight would read, trade stories with Hagrid, or sometimes just close his eyes. Harry didn't think he was sleeping at those times, as he still seemed to be aware of what was going on around him. It was more like he was meditating.

Harry always thought that knights and warriors would spend more time fighting or training or whatever it was that soldiers did. He never thought of them spending so much time reading like Keldorn did.
I bet Hermione would like to be in his army.

Thunk!

That thought brought to mind his other favorite topic to dwell on: one Hermione Granger. She had continued to send him letters everyday, each one a little more frantic than the last.

And each one went unanswered.

Harry read all the letters of course. He then placed them in his trunk with the others with a mumbled, "I'll write her back later," and that was that. He wasn't completely sure why he was putting off penning a response, but he knew it had to do with the guilt and the anger that he still felt. He knew it was wrong for him to ignore his friends like he had be doing, but he just didn't know what else to do. Like he had told Keldorn a few days previously, Hermione should be dead and it was his fault.

Harry was partly convinced that the girl genius would wise up and realize that fact sometime soon, and then she would want nothing to do with him if he was lucky, and would likely kill him if he wasn't. Harry just couldn't think of anything to say that would repair the damage he had caused to their friendship. You can't take back leading your friends into a deathtrap.

Thunk!

Speaking of death, when he wasn't too angry to see straight or absorbed in his thoughts about Hermione, Ron and the others, his mind would go back to Sirius. Hermione was lucky; she had been miraculously pulled back from the brink of death. Sirius wasn't. He was dead and he wouldn't be coming back. Thinking about Sirius didn't really make him sad, rather, it made him angry. The only problem was he didn't know who he was supposed to be angry with.

Thunk!

Harry had already worked out that it wasn't Dumbledore's fault; the Headmaster was doing the best he could to fight the Dark Lord. But was Harry supposed to be mad at Kreacher for lying to him and thus convincing him to go to the Department of Mysteries, Bellatrix Lestrange for casting the spell that threw his godfather through the veil, or Voldemort for masterminding the whole thing? Harry just wasn't sure. He couldn't really make his anger stick with any of them. He tried. He tried to hate them, but he couldn't do it. Harry was certain that he would go after them for what they'd done. He knew that he would stand up to Voldemort if only because the prophecy dictated that he had to, but in all honesty, Harry wasn't really angry with them.

Harry had brought up his confusing anger with Keldorn the previous night as they were preparing to head back to the castle after a long day of splitting wood.

"Anger is a tricky thing," the knight had replied, "sometimes it is right and just for a man to be angry, and yet at other times it leads him to the very worst things imaginable. Saint Tomus the Black Friar would say that anger is a response to a perceived insult. When someone insults you, it's not really correct to say that you're angry with the person, it's more that you're angry with the insult. We often get angry with people not only when their words are insulting, but more often when their actions are perceived as an insult. You would likely be angry if one of your friends did something to betray you because their actions would be unexpected, at odds with your previous beliefs about that person, and therefore insulting to you and your beliefs.

"It is not unheard of for a man to find it much harder to truly become angry with his enemies, since we already expect and believe them to be likely to take actions against us. More often, people
become insulted and therefore angry when an enemy offers some gesture of peace or kindness. Just think, if your so-called Dark Lord were to suddenly offer to pay for the funeral arrangements of your godfather, you would likely become rather angry, yes? Such an offer would go against the beliefs that you hold about the Dark Lord, and thus you would conclude that he is mocking you, insulting you, and you would be angry.

"However, as unpleasant and terrible as the reality of war is, we expect our enemies to try and harm us, try to kill us and our comrades on the field of battle. Thus, for some, like yourself, it can be difficult to be angry with your enemies for such actions."

Harry wasn't really sure of what to make of the old knight's explanation. It seemed right and yet wrong at the same time. Perhaps Harry just wanted to find a convenient target for his anger.

Thunk!

Because the more he thought and reflected about it, the unhappier he was with the person with whom he found that he was really angry.

Himself.

Bellatrix might have cast the spell, and Voldemort might have set the trap, but it was Harry that blindly charged into an unknown and dangerous situation. Even if his vision was right and Voldemort was torturing Sirius in the Ministry, what exactly had Harry hoped to accomplish by running off to confront him? Did he really think he could take on the most feared dark wizard in history with just his wand and a few friends?

Running off to the ministry was stupid. Leading his friends there was doubly stupid. And Harry was insulted by the sheer stupidity of his own actions. He expected better of himself. Thus he realized that the anger he was flinging in every direction, at everyone and everything that presented themselves to him as an easy target, was really meant for himself.

That realization made Harry feel kind of sick.

"Sir Firecam?" Harry asked as he carried an armful of split logs to the woodpile, "is there any way to, well… is it possible to stop becoming angry?"

Keldorn paused his reading and looked at Harry over the small spectacles that were perched on the tip of his nose.

"Well," replied the knight, "what did we learn from Saint Tomus yesterday? Where does anger come from?"

"From being insulted, yes I got that much. But I want to know if we can stop ourselves from becoming angry entirely. It's… well, the last couple of weeks haven't been very fun, what with my being angry all the time…"

"I see. Well, in truth, the answer is rather simple."

Harry looked up in surprise, not expecting a simple answer.

"If you desire to never be angry, you simply need to stop perceiving things as insults. Actually doing that, however, is anything but easy. You must grow in humility. Insults attack our pride; if you become truly humble, and remove all stain of pride from your soul, then you cannot perceive something as an insult, and thus you will never become angry."
Harry let out a sigh of disappointment at that.

"However," continued the knight, "I do not think such perfect humility is really possible for us in our fallen, darkened nature. Instead, work on becoming as humble as you can, and when you do find yourself becoming angry, recognize it, try to understand who or what you are really angry with, and put the energy you get from your anger into something productive."

"Like splitting wood?" Harry asked with a laugh.

"Indeed," replied the knight as he turned back to his reading. "Like splitting wood."

Later that evening after dinner, Harry found himself standing in front of the gargoyle that guarded the Headmaster's office.

"Err… I don't suppose you'd just let me in?"

After a moment of silence, during which Harry scratched his head trying to think of a likely password, the gargoyle simply moved to the side with the loud sound of stone grinding on stone.

"Thanks."

Harry rode up the stairs and knocked on the wooden door at the top.

"Come in, Harry," came the reply from the other side of the door. It seemed that Dumbledore already knew the identity of his visitor.

Harry entered the office and quietly shut the door behind him. A quick glance around the room saw that the armchair had been put back in its proper place and that the cabinet had been repaired. Its shelves, however, contained the broken and smashed pieces of whatever those mysterious items once were.

"Please, have a seat," Dumbledore said, gesturing to one of the chairs.

As Harry approached the desk and sat down, several of the silver, whirling, noisy things on the desktop scurried back out of his reach. Harry blushed with embarrassment.

"What can I do for you this evening?" Dumbledore asked.

"I err…” Harry started, "I wanted to say I'm sorry."

Dumbledore smiled. "That's quite alright, my boy."

"No, err… it isn't." Harry quickly responded. "Please, just let me say it."

Dumbledore simply raised his eyebrows and nodded.

"I owe you an apology. I shouldn't have yelled at you or broken your things like I did. I had no right to take my anger out on you. You might have made a few mistakes, but so have I. We’re only human after all. You’ve always looked out for me, tried to help me as you could. So I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted, Harry," Dumbledore said with a smile. "And I'm afraid I must apologize as well. This past year hasn't been the best for you, and that is largely my fault. I avoided you, afraid
Harry was kind of embarrassed by the Headmaster's frank admissions. His upbringing didn't exactly make him familiar with accepting apologies. Having Dumbledore apologize to him was just weird.

"Umm… that's okay, err… apology accepted."

"Thank you, Harry. That means very much to me."

The two wizards smiled at each other for a moment before Dumbledore brought up a different topic.

"Tell me, Harry, have you been finding your time with Sir Firecam to be beneficial?"

"How did you know about that?" Harry asked in surprise.

"You will find that there is very little that goes on in this castle that I am not aware of." The twinkle in Dumbledore's blue eyes had finally returned.

"Oh. Well, he's okay, I guess. He's helped me kinda work through a few things. By chopping up a tree no less."

"Excellent. I am very pleased to hear that. I believe that Sir Firecam could prove to be a very valuable ally for us in the coming days. I am confident when I say that I believe you can trust him without worry."

"Do you know, err, where exactly he came from?"

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling for a moment before returning his gaze to his student.

"If you desire to know of his home world, I believe you would be better off asking him in person. If you instead want to know how he ended up in the Department of Mysteries, that is another question, one to which we don't have a very satisfactory answer.

"The room where you were fighting Bellatrix and where Sir Firecam first appeared is known as the Multiverse Room." Harry listened to the Headmaster's explanation with rapt attention. "While it is not common knowledge, it is a proven fact, nonetheless, that our universe is only one of many, perhaps even an infinite number of parallel universes. Each of the small crystal pendants that adorned the walls of that room could allow a person to travel to one of those alternate realities. In my many long years, I've had occasion to visit one or two of them, purely out of curiosity. These worlds can be very similar to our own, differing, for instance, in only what you might have chosen to eat for breakfast that very morning. Or they could be wildly different to the extent that you might never have existed there at all, or perhaps all of England was missing, or perhaps the earth never formed. The possibilities are seemingly endless…"

Dumbledore was now staring at a point somewhere behind Harry's shoulder, lost in wonder as he described the multiverse. A quick shake of his head brought his attention back to his pupil.
"Where was I? Oh yes. In any event, during the course of your battle, something reacted with the crystals which caused Sir Firecam to be pulled out of his world and dropped here in ours."

Harry's face paled.

"I err… I think I did it."

"Indeed?"

"Well, Bellatrix was banishing the crystals at me, and my Shield Charms had no effect on them. So I cast a Reductor Curse at the next group, hoping to scatter them. Instead they exploded in a white ball of magic that knocked me out. When I came to, Sir Firecam was on the floor."

"Most interesting," said the Headmaster. "The sheer amount of magic released in that room has rendered any of the Ministry's attempts to recreate the exact reaction that took place to be quite hopeless. That it was such a random occurrence from a basic spell is even more intriguing. I doubt that the Unspeakables will ever be able to figure it out."

"So, does that mean he's stuck here?"

"Quite."

Harry's heart began racing. Sir Firecam's stuck here and it's my fault! I didn't even realize… I've been so caught up in everything else… I basically kidnapped the man away from everything he's ever known and I didn't even notice!

"I wouldn't worry about him too much though," Dumbledore continued, "he seems to be taking it quite well. He says that it's all up to Providence."

The Headmaster looked straight into the eyes of his student who seemed to be nearing hyperventilation.

"Don't worry, Harry. He and I have talked about this at great length. He doesn't blame you. And even if he did, he is not the type to hold grudges."

Dumbledore then moved to change the subject.

"I am glad that you stopped by to see me, because there is something else I need to tell you."

Harry focused on the Headmaster as he brought his breathing under control.

"I know you might not want to hear it, but I need to tell you the contents of Sirius' will."

Harry simply nodded for the old wizard to continue.

"You were named as the primary beneficiary of Sirius Orion Black, and aside from some small, almost insignificant bequests, you have inherited the entire Black fortune as well as the his old home: the Order's current Headquarters at Grimmauld Place."

Harry didn't know exactly how he should feel about that.

"Err… exactly how much…?"

"You'd have to ask the goblins to be sure, but I'm quite confident in saying that you need never worry about money again, as long as you keep a level head about you. There was some excitement at the reading when Narcissa Malfoy challenged the will, claiming that everything should go to
Draco as he is the nearest male relative by blood." Harry felt his anger beginning to stir upon hearing that. "But don't worry, Sirius and the goblins left no loopholes for the Malfoys to exploit and their claim was rejected. To that end, I have a question for you.

"I would not presume to make use of Number Twelve without its owner's consent. So, Harry, would it be acceptable to you for the Order to continue to use it as our headquarters?"

"Oh," Harry replied, "that's fine." In truth, the whole topic had Harry feeling a bit out of sorts. He'd never have to worry about money? Harry knew that his parents had left him a tidy sum, but he figured most of that would be spent on his education. To now suddenly be wealthy, well, it was a strange concept.

"Well," said the Headmaster, "if there's nothing else you would like to discuss, I'm afraid I must bid you goodnight. I'm an old man and I need my beauty rest."

Harry rose from his chair at the dismissal.

"Right. Thanks for seeing me. Goodnight, Professor."

"No, Harry," the aged wizard returned, "thank you."

OoOoO

OoOoO

The next day saw Harry once more splitting wood. He figured that he would probably manage to finish the job that day. Sir Firecam was in attendance as always; at the moment he was smoking his pipe and watching Harry's labors. Harry's mind was occupied with thoughts of the old knight. He felt sorry for him, stranded in a foreign world with apparently no hope of returning home.

How can he be so calm about it? Harry thought to himself. Why isn't he trying to find a way home?

Harry paused in his work, and turned to address the knight.

"Sir Firecam, I err... well..."

"What is it, boy?" the knight asked with his characteristic desire to speak plainly.

"I'm sorry," said Harry before he had a chance to have second thoughts about it.

"Oh? And just what are you sorry for?" queried the knight as he raised his eyebrows.

"For getting you stranded here. It was my spell that brought you here, and Professor Dumbledore says that they have no idea how it happened or how to send you home. I'm not sorry that you are here, I mean, if you weren't, Hermione would be, well, you know. But I'm sorry that you've been dragged here without a choice."

"I do not believe," the knight began, "that you have anything to apologize for in this instance. However, since you think that you do, I accept your apology. Thank you for your concern. But, like I said, my being here is really no fault of yours. Did you mean for your spell to bring me here?"

"Well, no."

"And there we have it. It was an accident. Such things happen. It is not the first time I have been caught up in circumstances beyond my control."
"And you're okay with that?" Harry questioned.

"Yes," replied the knight in his usual calm tone, "my life, like the lives of all paladins, is at the service of the Light. I go where I am needed. I do not believe that I am here by chance, even if it was an accident that brought me here. Providence is at work here and time will reveal why I have been brought here."

Harry just nodded and went back to work. If the old knight didn't want to be upset with his situation, well, that was his choice. As he raised the maul and took aim at the log on the chopping block, Harry posed another question.

"So what are you going to do now?"

Sir Firecam tapped out the ashes and burnt remnants of tobacco from his pipe as he answered.

"Well, right now I will continue to make sure that you don't bleed to death if you happen to chop off your foot," the knight said with a smile. "After that, I believe that your Headmaster is trying to cook something up for me.

"In any event," he continued as he fished around in one of the pouches on his belt looking for his reading glasses, "I shall ultimately do what I was born to do."

"And what's that?"

"I will stand against the Darkness."

Chapter End Notes

AN: The Multiverse Room and the crystal pendants that allow travel though the different universes are made in homage to Shadow Walks by lorien829. If you haven't read it, go do so now. You can find it on Fanfiction.net. Read everything she's written for that matter.

Please take a moment to leave a review on your way out.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 6

Harry found life to be a bit boring after he finished chopping up the tree. Every day started the same way with another letter from Hermione, which would be duly read, and then placed in his trunk unanswered. Harry would then try to find something to occupy his time. Unfortunately, there just wasn't much to do.

He spent a bit of time flying each day; he had gotten his Firebolt back with the assistance of Dumbledore. But it was difficult for him to just be carefree and soar through the sky like he used to. So much had changed in the last few weeks that flying and Quidditch, while still fun, just didn't have the same attraction as they once did.

Harry had no summer assignments to spend his time on since he had just taken his O.W.L.s and he first needed to know his scores before he could select classes for the next year. That meant he couldn't pass the time doing homework.

I wonder if having no homework is driving Hermione round the bend? Harry thought to himself at one point. He supposed that he could always write to her and find out, but that would mean that he would have to answer her increasingly frantic letters. Besides, Harry just didn't know what to say to her. Replying to her serious and concerned messages with a light-hearted, "so are you surviving without any homework?" just didn't seem right.

He tried to spend some time in the library reading, but being in that room with all the books brought his mind back to Hermione and made him feel guilty about not answering her letters.

At least his anger had mostly abated. It wasn't gone completely, but now that he knew that he was angrier with himself than anything else, Harry was able to process it better. He hoped that Sirius, Hermione and the others would be able to forgive him one day for what he had done to them, but he doubted that they ever would.

Harry also hadn't seen as much of Keldorn since he finished splitting wood. He still ran across him on the grounds every once in a while, or in the Great Hall during meals since there were so few people currently staying at the castle, but it wasn't the same as spending the day working together. Harry found that he missed the old man. There was something about him that Harry simply liked. Perhaps it was his direct way of speaking, or that he never shied away for explaining the reasons why he did something or why he gave a particular piece of advice.

In any event, Harry was bored. And he was a bit worried that he might soon go stir crazy, or even worse, that his anger might come back with a vengeance now that he didn't really have an outlet for his energy.

So, it was with all that in mind that Harry set out to find Keldorn late one evening after dinner. He had searched the Marauder's Map and found the old knight standing at the top of the Astronomy Tower.

Harry made his way up the stairs of the tower, and gently pushed open the door at the top.

The old knight was standing at the far end of the rooftop with his hands clasped behind his back. He turned his head to identify the newcomer, but then went back to gazing at the stars.

"Good evening, Harry."

"Good evening. You seem to spend a lot of time up here," Harry said in reply.
"I suppose I do," the knight responded as he continued to look into the vastness of the night sky.
"Even though your stars are different, I still find looking upon them to be soothing. Such bright points of Light, boldly standing out amidst the Darkness all around them."

Harry tilted his head back to look at the stars. He'd never given them much thought aside from his astronomy classes.

"I suppose they give me hope," the knight continued. The two figures stood in silence for a few minutes. To Harry, the way that the older man spoke of light and darkness seemed to make the words carry much more meaning than they normally did. That moment, with the way the two of them were silently gazing at the bright stars in the dark, night sky seemed weighty, almost sacred.

But eventually Harry broke the silence and brought up his reason for coming.

"I was wondering, err… if you might, well, have any other ideas for things for me to do."

Sir Firecam turned and focused his attention on Harry.

"It's just that, ever since I finished the tree, I've been a bit, well, bored," Harry continued.

"Am I to be your entertainer now?" the old knight asked with one eyebrow raised.

"No, that's not what I meant," Harry answered. "It's just… I don't have any school work for the summer, and I'm stuck here on the grounds with almost no one else around."

"Take up some reading."

"I can really only do so much of that," Harry replied, failing to mention that he had no desire to spend time in the library because it brought up unpleasant thoughts about Hermione. The knight furrowed his eyebrows and looked at Harry intently; it almost seemed like he could tell that he was leaving something out of his reply.

"And like you said," Harry went on before the knight called him out on his omission, "I need something physical to do, something to focus my energy on."

"Well, I can't really fault that reasoning. Perhaps a bit of exercise would do you some good. Very well, meet me tomorrow morning, after breakfast in the clearing outside the doors of the castle. We'll see what strength swinging Hagrid's maul has given you."

With that, the knight turned his attention back to the stars and Harry left him to it.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The next morning Harry made his way to his meeting with Keldorn feeling slightly off kilter. He was anxious to find out just what the knight had in store for him, but he was more worried about something that was missing that morning.

For the first time since the day after the Hogwarts Express had departed, Harry did not have a letter from Hermione waiting for him when he woke up.

Perhaps she got fed up with his lack of response and simply stopped writing. Maybe she finally realized that it was his fault that she was nearly killed and no longer wanted anything to do with him. Perhaps Harry should have written back while there was still some chance of salvaging their
friendship...

Harry tried to put those thoughts out of his mind as he saw Sir Firecam waiting for him. The knight was waiting just outside of the gates and off to the side on a stretch of level, grassy ground. What he was holding made Harry stop in surprise. A round, wooden shield was strapped to his left forearm while his right hand held a wooden sword. His actual sword had been removed, and was propped up against a nearby bench. On the ground next to the bench was another wooden shield and sword.

"Don't stand there gawking, boy, come and pick up your arms."

The knight's words stirred Harry to movement once more and he quickly gathered the sword and shield and awkwardly picked them up. This wasn't exactly what he had in mind when he said he was looking for something to do. He was thinking of some other sort of manual labor, something basic that would occupy his time without much further concern. Sword fighting never even crossed his mind.

"Now then," Sir Firecam began, "You were looking for something to do. Well, I think some swordsmanship might be just what you need. It will teach you some discipline, which you seem to need, and it will definitely use up your excess energy. At the very least, it should alleviate your boredom."

"Are you sure about that?" Harry questioned. "No one's had much use for sword fighting for the past couple hundred years in this world."

"The sword is more than just a weapon for war. The point here is not to prepare you for entering a melee, but rather to strengthen your mind, your body, and your will. Like you said, it is unlikely you will ever wield a sword in battle. I would think that as a wizard, you would be much more likely to wield your wand. Nonetheless, learning the sword might benefit you even there.

"But if you would rather find something else to occupy your time, please feel free. Yet remember, you came to me looking for some task. This is what I have chosen for you. Take it or leave it."

"Alright," Harry replied, "I'll give it a go. What do I do?"

"First, take the shield in your left hand, put your arm through the loop and grasp the handle like so. Now, hold the sword with your right hand. Not too tight, it's not a club. You'll use your fingers to control the finer movements of the blade."

"It's a bit heavier than I expected for a wooden sword," Harry remarked.

"Yes, it's weighted to be even heavier than the real thing. Sword work requires strength. Strength demands that you exercise your muscles. The weight of the sword will help with that."

Harry nodded in understanding.

"Now then," the knight continued, "look to your feet. Keep them shoulder-width apart and bend your knees. Put you weight on the balls of your feet with your left foot forward. Present your profile to your opponent and hold your shield firmly in front of you. Hold your sword up to the right in a guard position. Point the tip toward your opponent's face…"

The knight continued on in the same vein, pointing things out, repositioning Harry's arms or legs when they were incorrect, and making observations.

Eventually, once he was pleased with Harry's stance, he proceeded to order Harry to move forward
and backward, as well as side to side, all with deliberate, precise motions. He kept a sharp eye out for even the slightest imperfections and was quick to point them out and correct them.

"Don't cross your feet."

"Is that where your thumb is supposed to be? I thought not."

"Keep your knees bent!"

The hardest part, Harry quickly discovered, was keeping his knees bent. After only a few seconds, his thighs would begin to burn with the strain. Constantly holding the heavy sword and shield with his arms bent was no picnic either.

When he agreed to the knight's plan, Harry had initially thought that learning how to sword fight would involve more, well, sword fighting. After what must have been two or three hours, all he had done was footwork and trying to keep his arms, back, head, fingers, and the rest of his body in the correct positions. Harry was beginning to see how this could teach him some discipline.

"Alright, take a break."

Harry sighed in relief as he dropped his weapons and flexed his arms and legs, trying to work some of the soreness out.

"Is that how you treat your equipment?! Just drop it on the ground like a sack of bricks when you're done?! Does this look like a pig farm?!"

Apparently even taking a break could be done incorrectly.

"A warrior is only as good as his equipment," the knight continued as Harry scrambled to pick up his sword and shield and carefully place them down by the bench. "Treat it well and it will take care of you. Neglect it, and it will fail when you need it most. You might not be training for combat, but you will act like you are as long as I'm teaching you. I've made squires muck out stables with their bare hands for doing less than what you just did."

It seemed that Sir Firecam as a drill sergeant could be a bit demanding.

After lunch they got right back to it. Keldorn brought out a wooden dummy from the Defense classroom for Harry to use as a target.

*Finally, thought Harry, I'll at least get to swing the sword around a bit.*

"While the type of longsword you're using can and is used to cut, for now we will focus on thrusting. So no silly sword-waving."

*Or not.*

The knight then positioned himself in front of the dummy while holding his own wooden sword and shield.

"With your shield held at the ready, take a half step forward with your front foot and at the same time thrust your sword arm out, across your body to full extension." He demonstrated the proper technique. "Strike hard, with force behind it. The dummy is on a spring, so it will yield without you having to worry about breaking your sword or your wrist. Now then, you try."

Keldorn got out of the way and Harry moved into position. Once he was set, he stabbed the
dummy with his sword resulting in a quiet tap!

"Strike it like you mean it, boy! Again!"

Tap!

"Fix your thumb. Again!"

Tap!

"Don't lower your shield. Again!"

Tap!

And so it went for quite some time. The knight varied things a little bit by having Harry aim for different areas on the dummy, but after two hours of repeatedly stabbing the wooden dummy, Harry's thighs and arms were aching, and his mind was getting a bit numb as well.

"Well, what have we here?" the knight said rather unexpectedly.

Harry was a bit confused when this question replaced Keldorn's expected "Again!" He was about to turn around to see what could have distracted his teacher when a loud, feminine voice pierced the air.

"HARRY JAMES POTTER!" Hermione Granger shouted, "what the bloody hell is wrong with you?!"

Harry dropped his sword in surprise and spun around to see the irate witch storming directly at him with her wand drawn. His eyes widened and his face paled as he swallowed hard. If he was closer, he was sure he would be able to see fire in her eyes.

"You… you… Accio wooden sword!"

Harry's forgotten sword flew into Hermione's waiting hand as she continued to stride toward him. He had just enough presence of mind to raise his shield above his head before the livid witch stepped up and began raining blows down upon him. Harry was certain that the shield was all that stood between him and a fractured skull.

"You! Bloody! Inconsiderate! Git!" Hermione punctuated each word with a hard and fast swing of the sword which made a loud thwack! upon his shield. "What. Is. Wrong. With. You?!!"

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

"Did you forget how to write?!!"

Thwack!

"I've been going out of my mind!"

Thwack!

"How could you ignore me like that?!!"

Thwack!

"Me?!!"
"Thwack!"

"After everything we've been through!"

"Thwack!"

By this point Harry was forced down onto one knee, holding his shield up with both hands, and praying that it held together under the sheer weight of Hermione's fury. Luckily for him, Hermione seemed content to simply beat him over the head. If she decided to change the angle of her attack and, say, swipe at him from the side, he was in for some trouble, and probably quite a few broken bones.

Finally the assault stopped, and after a moment Harry peaked out from behind his shield. Hermione grabbed the wooden barrier, threw it to the side, and pulled Harry into a crushing hug.

_Perhaps she's given up on trying to beat me to death and wants to try suffocating me, Harry_ thought.

When she pulled back from the hug a few moments later, Harry noticed there were tears in her eyes.

"You are _such _an ass!" Hermione screamed at him before pushing him away, spinning on her heel and storming off to the castle.

Harry, dumbfounded, simply dropped onto the ground and watched Hermione stomp away.

"You deserved every bit of that for dropping your sword," the knight said from his position a few feet away.

"Thanks."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go after her. I'll clean up."

"Go after her? Are you daft? She'll kill me! And you said she'd forgive me."

"Well, I've been wrong before. But you'll never know until you've actually apologized."

When Harry remained where he was, Keldorn tried a different tactic.

"I didn't know you were a coward. She's just a girl."

Harry glared at the knight.

"Just a girl who happens to know more curses and hexes than the rest of the school put together."

"If she wanted to hex you, she probably would have done so already. She had plenty of opportunity. Now go after her before I show you how to really strike with a wooden sword."

Harry reluctantly got to his feet and made his way to the castle. He surreptitiously drew his wand and held it against his leg just in case Keldorn was wrong about Hermione's desire to curse him.

She wasn't in the entrance hall, so he decided to try the Gryffindor Common Room. If she wasn't there, he could stop by his dorm to find her on the Marauder's Map. Either that or lock himself in and barricade the door…

As he crawled through the portrait hole, Harry heard the sound of sniffling, and once he emerged
into the common room, he found his best friend sitting on one of the couches. She looked like she'd been crying. Harry cautiously approached and sat down with her on the couch, although leaving plenty of space between them.

He had no idea what to say, so he just remained silent. He figured Hermione would say something eventually.

"I'm sorry Harry," Hermione whispered after a few moments.

Whatever it was that Harry had expected her to say, this wasn't it.

"Err… that's okay," he replied. "You didn't really even hit me, so—"

"Not about that," Hermione interrupted, "I'm sorry I failed you. I'm sorry that I wasn't what you needed when you needed me most…"

Now Harry was really confused.

"Err… what? What in the world are you talking about?"

Hermione finally looked up at the young wizard. Her eyes were red and puffy, but she had a look of determination on her face.

"The Department of Mysteries. You needed me; you needed me to keep my head and figure things out and fight by your side. But I got careless and sloppy and wound up getting hurt and I was useless to you and then everything went to pieces and now you've been ignoring me because you've finally realized that you don't need me after all—and—"

"Hermione," Harry interjected into her rambling, "you're not making any sense."

This was apparently the wrong thing to say, and the witch in question glared at him. He hurriedly continued before she decided to unleash her fury again.

"I mean, er, why on earth would I be mad at you because you got hurt? You're the one who's supposed to be mad at me."

Hermione looked at him like he just told her that he'd fallen in love with Draco Malfoy and was having his lovechild.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being ridiculous!" Harry shouted as he stood from the couch, his anger starting to come out. "I led you into a death trap and you know it. If it wasn't for the miraculous appearance of Firecam, you would be dead right now! You should be dead! Just like Sirius is dead! And it's my fault!"

"Harry…"

Hermione reached out to him only to have her hand swatted away.

"No! I just… Merlin, Hermione, how can you even look at me?" Harry fell back down onto the couch and dropped his face into his hands.

"I just couldn't face you afterwards," Harry continued in a softer voice. "I just couldn't bear to see the look on your face when you realized that I should've gotten you killed. That's why I avoided you and didn't write back. I just couldn't."
"Oh Harry!"

Hermione practically leapt from her side of the couch to engulf Harry in another bone-crushing hug.

"I don't blame you, Harry. That thought never even entered into my mind."

Hearing those words made something break inside of Harry.

"I'm so sorry…" he mumbled into her hair as he started to cry. A few tears quickly became sobs. Harry cried for Hermione. He cried for his friends and for Sirius. He also cried for himself, for the guilt and blame that he had forced himself to bear. It took him a while to realize that Hermione was crying too, sobbing just as hard as he was. They remained there for a long while, clinging to each other and weeping for past mistakes."

When they finally calmed down and separated, Harry wiped his nose and then looked into Hermione's eyes.

"I'm sorry, Hermione."

"Oh Harry. I suppose you're just going to keep apologizing until I forgive you. Well I do. Of course I forgive you, Harry. And I'm sorry too, for everything."

"Err… that's okay," Harry replied before forming a little smirk, "I'm just glad you kept hitting the shield instead of my skull."

Hermione flushed red, embarrassed by her earlier actions, but she then met Harry's eyes with a smirk of her own.

"Yes, well, just you remember that the next time you try to avoid me instead of talking to me."

That comment made both of them break into full-blown smiles.

"Oh don't worry, I won't forget, especially since you actually swore."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh yes you do," Harry's eyes danced with mirth, "you swore a whole bunch of times. Just wait 'til I tell Ron!"

"Harry James Potter! Don't you dare!"

"So you admit it?"

Hermione glared at her best friend.

"Fine. But just wait until I tell Ron that you got beat up by a girl."

"Oi!"

"And I didn't even have to use my wand either. It was all muscle. Pure, unadulterated Granger. And I beat you into the ground!" Hermione then flexed her biceps for added emphasis.

Now it was Harry's turn to glare at his best friend.

"Truce?" Hermione offered.
"You don't tell anyone about you beating me up, and I won't tell anyone that you swore."

"Deal."

The two teenagers smiled at each other, glad to be back on familiar footing after the past few weeks.

"Merlin," Hermione muttered as she wiped at her eyes and nose, "I must look absolutely dreadful."

Harry might have been clueless around girls, but he wasn't going to touch that comment with a ten foot pole.

"Not that I'm not glad that you're here, but what exactly are you doing at Hogwarts anyways?"

Harry asked instead.

"Well," Hermione answered, "when somebody, who shall remain nameless, refused to answer my letters, I kind of started to go a bit spare, what with being stuck in my house, unable to find anything out. So last night I wrote Professor McGonagall and I asked if you were still here and if so, if I might be allowed to come visit. She wrote back and this morning I took the Knight Bus."

"Ah."

"My turn. What exactly were you and Sir Firecam doing with those wooden swords and shields when I arrived?"

"You already know him?"

"He introduced himself to me while I was still in the Hospital Wing. Now answer the question."

"Yes, ma'am. He was teaching me how to sword fight." Harry could tell that this response had her a bit puzzled, so he explained further. "During the past few days I've had some, well, issues with anger. Sir Firecam said I needed an outlet. He first had me splitting wood, but since I finished that, we've moved on to sword fighting. He says it will teach me discipline as well as help use up some energy."

"Well good luck to him," Hermione cheekily replied.

"Oi!"

"Why did he start you off with chopping wood?" Hermione asked after a moment of thought. Harry blushed and looked away.

"I kind of got really angry and then sort of… blew up a tree."

"You did what?"

"I cast a really strong Reductor Curse and knocked over a tree."

"Harry that was really dangerous, someone—"

"I know!" Harry interrupted before she could start a full-blown lecture. "I know how dangerous and stupid it was. I've got the blisters and sore arms to prove that I've learned my lesson. It won't happen again."

Hermione nodded sharply, like she'd just finished disciplining an unruly first-year.
"Good."

Silence fell for another moment but then Harry spoke up again.

"Thanks, Hermione. You're a good friend."

"You're welcome, Harry." She smiled in reply. "You're welcome."
Later that evening, Harry and Hermione made their way down to the Great Hall for dinner.

"So how long are you staying?" Harry asked as they passed through the corridors.

"I suppose I'll leave either tonight or tomorrow."

"Oh," Harry responded a bit dejectedly.

"Coming here was kind of a spur of the moment thing. I didn't even bring a change of clothes with me."

"Well, I suppose you have to go back home anyways, spend time with your parents and all that."

"Would you rather I stayed?" Hermione asked.

"Well, err… I mean, it has been a bit lonely around here, what with everyone gone. Dumbledore and McGonagall are around, but I don't really fancy hanging around with them too much. I've spent a lot of time with Hagrid and Sir Firecam, but, well, I have to admit, it would be nice to have a friend around."

Hermione smiled at him.

"Well, I'll at least have to go home to get some things, and I suppose I'll need permission from Professor McGonagall, but I think I could manage to pay you a visit."

"But don't you want to stay with your parents?" Harry asked a bit confusedly. He couldn't really fathom that anybody who actually had parents wouldn't want to see them all the time.

Hermione looked away.

"Don't worry, they'll be fine."

They arrived at the Great Hall and entered. They passed by the long, empty house tables and made their way to the staff table. With so few people currently in the castle, everyone was invited to sit together during meals at the same table. Professor McGonagall and Sir Firecam were already present, but Dumbledore's chair was conspicuously empty.

The old knight rose from his seat and politely bowed his head as the two students approached.

"Good evening, my lady," he said, addressing Hermione.

"Good evening, Sir Firecam, Professor McGonagall. I'm sorry that I didn't give you a proper hello earlier, but I was a bit preoccupied," Hermione said with a quick, sideways glance at Harry.

"I trust that everything is settled in that regard then?" McGonagall asked, her eyes skipping back and forth between the two Gryffindors as everyone took their seats.

"Err… yes," Harry answered, "everything's fine now."
"Ha!" laughed Sir Firecam, "I should hope so. After the walloping that this young lady gave you earlier, I would fear for your sanity if you didn't mend things right quick. Even the most dimwitted of fools knows to keep his skull intact."

Harry and Hermione both flushed crimson while McGonagall raised an eyebrow in question. They were saved from further embarrassment in front of their Head of House by the arrival of Hagrid.

"Evenin' you lot," He greeted as he pulled his massive chair up to the table. He then spotted Hermione at the table and broke into a smile. "Hermione! What're yeh doin' back here at the castle so soon?"

"Oh you know," the young witch replied, "someone has to keep Harry out of trouble."

"Ain't tha' the truth. Right, Keldorn?"

"I would have to agree," the old knight replied as he returned to his meal. Harry merely grumbled under his breath as he filled his plate.

"Professor McGonagall," began Hermione, "I was wondering, would it be alright for me to come and stay at the castle this summer?"

"And just why, Miss Granger, would you want to do that?" the Deputy Headmistress countered.

"Well, we do have N.E.W.T.-level courses starting this fall and I figured I could use the library to get a head start. I could also start my research into the enchantment project that we talked about last year. Besides, Harry mentioned that it's a bit lonely here with everyone gone. I figured we could keep each other company."

McGonagall looked back and forth between the two teenagers.

"I trust nothing untoward would be taking place in Gryffindor Tower during your stay?"

Harry was a bit confused by that statement, but Hermione seemed to recognize what the professor meant as she turned a bright shade of red.

"I… of course not!" Hermione stammered in reply, "I mean, we're not…" Hermione gestured back and forth between herself and Harry while trying to find the right words. "We're just friends!"

Oh! Harry thought as he finally cottoned on to what McGonagall was referring to. Now it was his turn to do a tomato impersonation.

"Very well. You'll need permission from your parents of course. And I'll have to speak with the Headmaster before making a final decision. But I have no reason to believe that he would object. Students have stayed over the summer before in order to work on special assignments. You'll also have to abide by all the normal rules, including curfew, and will require permission as well as an escort should you wish to leave the grounds.

"And just so we're clear, Miss Granger and Mr. Potter, if I detect anything going on that I would deem to be improper, you can kiss your chances of being Head Girl or Quidditch Captain goodbye. Am I understood?"

"Yes, professor," the two embarrassed teens responded in unison.

Great, thought Harry, I hadn't even thought of Hermione that way before. Good luck getting that out of your head now. And we'll be staying in the tower by ourselves too. Bloody hell!
Dinner went on in silence for a while. The two students were too embarrassed to really say much, while Hagrid and Sir Firecam seemed highly amused by the situation and were content to watch the teenagers squirm in their seats. Eventually, Hermione had had enough and decided to move the conversation onward.

"Sir Firecam," she addressed the old man, "when you introduced yourself to me, you mentioned that you were a paladin and a knight. What exactly did you meant by that?"

The question caught Harry's attention and he looked up and over to the old man. Harry hadn't really given Sir Firecam's status much thought. To Harry, being a knight either meant you were a Muggle who had been honored by the Queen for some kind of achievement, or you were a soldier that wore armor and carried a sword. It probably had something to do with horses as well, but it didn't seem all that important. Harry had no clue what a paladin was.

"Well, Miss Hermione, a paladin is a warrior who has been consecrated in the Light."

"What do you mean by 'consecrated'?" the young witch asked.

"Someone who is consecrated is set apart; they are entrusted with special blessings and graces by the Light. The actual consecration of a paladin takes place during a ritual wherein the Light is invoked and called down upon the candidate, filling him or her, and transforming him into an instrument and servant of the Light."

"Transforming? Is there an actual change that takes place?" Hermione continued her interrogation.

"Yes," replied the knight. "The Light grants its paladins special blessings, abilities and benefits unknown to others. There are of course duties and requirements that go along with consecration as well."

Hermione looked ready to ask another question but Harry beat her to it.

"What is the 'light' that you keep talking about? I've heard you mentioned it before, several times, in fact," he asked.

"The Light is the source of all life, of all creation, of everything that is good. But it is more than just a source; it is alive, it is truth and mercy and faithfulness and above all, it is charity and love."

"So it's some sort of divinity then?" Hermione questioned.

"Well, I don't know if I would use that word. Where I come from, the false gods, demons who are really slaves of the Darkness, are sometimes referred to as the 'divine ones' by their subjects. We tend to avoid that word due to its associations."

"And what is the Darkness, then?" McGonagall interjected into the conversation. "Is it the opposite of the Light? Two forces holding each other in balance?"

"No," Sir Firecam answered definitively. "The Darkness is not equal to the Light. It is not a balance. The Light is the creator; the Darkness is a part of creation that has become warped, twisted and perverted into evil. You see, the Light created a whole hierarchy of beings, we men and women fall somewhere in the middle of that order. Above us are the luminous guardians of the heavens, beings of radiant power who live closest to the Light. Long ago, the highest, the greatest of these rebelled against the Light. He was not content to serve his brethren as the Light intended, and so he and those he had seduced were cast out of the Light to forever after dwell in Darkness. The demons now live only to destroy, to sow hatred, lies and evil. They cannot harm the Light itself, so instead they try to corrupt or destroy those who are of the Light."
"So, yeh're some sorta holy warrior, fightin' this Darkness, then?" Hagrid asked.

"I believe that sums it up nicely, Hagrid."

"That sounds a lot like some of the religious creation myths that exist here in this world," Hermione observed. "How do you know that the Light really exists? And if it does, do you think it exists in this world too?" It seemed to Harry that Hermione's inherent curiosity had found a new specimen to examine during her stay at the castle for the summer.

"Well," the knight replied with a smile, "I should think it obvious; after all, I was able to heal your injuries through the grace of the Light."

"Right, but perhaps what you would call 'the Light' in your world is just what we would call 'magic' here," Hermione argued.

"That could very well be the case, Miss Granger," said Albus Dumbledore. Everyone was startled by the voice of the newcomer and turned to see him standing a few feet away from the table.

"Please forgive my eavesdropping, but this is a fascinating topic, and I did not wish to disturb the conversation. I would like to note, however, that in our own investigations of the multiverse, it seems that what we might call magic is treated and can even work differently in other universes. I think it likely that our magic is related to Sir Firecam's Light."

"But magic isn't alive," Harry countered.

"Isn't it?" Dumbledore responded as he took his seat at the table. "In truth, what is more magical than life itself?"

"Indeed," Keldorn continued, "Further evidence would be that I have felt the presence of the Darkness here as well. Your so-called Dark Lord reeked of it during our brief battle. Some of the spells that he cast were like dark holes opening into the void."

"We do speak of the difference between everyday magic and the dark arts for a reason after all," Dumbledore said. "It is not just the intent of the spell that matters, as some would have you believe; some magics are dark in themselves. Using them twists your soul, deforming you and binding you to evil."

"In any event," Keldorn said, "we paladins vow to defend the good people of the world from the encroachment of the Darkness and its slaves who, because of their hatred, constantly try to tear down whatever is good. Most paladins operate on their own. Those who recognize that they are called to serve seek out a master who forms them and when and if he deems them ready, consecrates them. However, in my homeland, there is a special order of paladins: the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart. Over three thousand years ago, the founders of our Order, seven paladins who were so immersed in the Light that their hearts were said to shine from within their bodies, banded together to fight the Darkness as one. Those of us who are found worthy to be admitted to this Order are known as the Knights of the Radiant Heart."

"Fascinating," Hermione commented with a gleam in her eyes. "Imagine, three thousand years of history…"

"Ha!" Harry laughed. "Sorry everyone, but Hermione was eyeing Sir Firecam like she would a first edition of Hogwarts: A History."

"I was not!" the witch protested while she reddened once again.
"Don't worry, my girl," said the knight, "I'll look through my things later on. Perhaps I can find something interesting for you to read."

"Now you've done it," Harry kept on laughing as Hermione turned back to the knight, her brief indignation forgotten, "Hermione and a book that no one in the world has ever read before. Well, it was nice knowing you for a little while, Hermione!"

OoOoO

OoOoO

Hermione spent the night in Gryffindor Tower and left the following morning. She promised Harry that she would return soon, probably after a couple of days with permission from her parents to remain at the castle for the summer.

Harry spent the morning doing sword work with Sir Firecam. He refused to call it 'sword fighting' as there wasn't any actually fighting. The old knight seemed content to have Harry practice his footwork for what must have been at least an hour before moving on to poking the dummy with his wooden sword. Actually learning how to use a sword seemed to have little to do with the swashbuckling seen in the movies.

That evening he wrote letters to Ron, Neville, Luna and Ginny, apologizing for avoiding them during the last week of school and letting them know that he was staying at Hogwarts for the summer. He kept the letters short, merely wishing them a pleasant summer holiday, and sent Hedwig off to make a round of deliveries.

Hermione returned to the castle as she promised with her school trunk in tow. Harry went down to meet her at the gates so that he could help her carry her things up the pathway to the castle. Hermione smirked when he moved to pick up the heavy container and pulled out her wand.

"We're at Hogwarts, Harry," she said as she levitated her trunk. "We can do magic here, remember? Although the thought was very sweet of you."

They quickly fell into a routine over the next few days and weeks. Harry would spend the mornings with Keldorn doing sword work. He was surprised and amazed when his teacher changed things up a bit after few days and had him begin to whack the dummy with the edge of the wooden sword instead of merely stabbing it all the time. Harry thought he was doing rather well, but the old knight was always able to find something wrong with his technique.

After a while, Harry's thighs stopped burning from constantly being in his on-guard stance, and his arms got used to bearing the weight of the sword and shield. He figured that he was probably in better shape than he'd ever been before, not that that was really saying much. Hogwarts did provide a first-class magical education, but it left a lot to be desired on the physical side of things. Casting spells could be physically demanding as it took up a lot of energy, but it didn't exactly help build muscle tone or endurance. And riding a magical broom for Quidditch didn't exactly require much physical fitness either.

Hermione spent her mornings reading either in the library, or if she felt like it, out on the grounds while Harry practiced what she teasingly referred to as "poking the wooden dummy with his overgrown stick." Harry had tried to get her to join him in the sword lessons, but she had categorically refused, citing her need to prepare for N.E.W.T.s or the reading that had to be done.

"Harry, if you want to spend your time learning to sword fight, that's fine, just leave me out of it. I'd rather read a good book during my time off. After all, Harry, I'm a lover, not a fighter."
Harry wasn't really sure what to make of that statement.

Hermione did tell him that she found the book that Keldorn had loaned her to be absolutely fascinating. The *Codex Luminis*, as it was called, was part history, part moral code of conduct, and part theological treatise. Hermione was enthralled by the strange and foreign culture that she found within its pages, and often had to be cajoled by Harry into taking a break for lunch.

The two friends spent their afternoons out on the grounds, either visiting with Hagrid or wandering about. After everything that had happened at the end of the previous school year, including their frenzied revision for O.W.L.s, even Hermione was happy to have a bit of time to relax.

OoOoO

OoOoO

On an evening about half-way through July, Harry approached the Headmaster with his desire to hold a memorial service for Sirius. Dumbledore agreed and so late one night down by the lake, Harry gathered along with Hermione, Dumbledore, Hagrid, McGonagall, and Keldorn to remember his godfather. Hagrid had built a sizable bonfire that burned brightly and reflected off the glassy surface of the water.

They decided not to invite anyone else in order to keep word of the gathering from getting out. Sirius' status as a wanted criminal had never been overturned and they didn't want anyone to start asking any unwanted legal questions.

Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Hagrid all took a moment to say a few things in memory of Sirius. McGonagall surprised Harry with the fondness with which she spoke of one of the Marauders' infamous pranks.

"I never told him, but I thought that it was simply marvelous when Sirius and his friends charmed all of the suits of armor in the castle into Gryffindor red and gold after we won the Quidditch Cup during his sixth year," the normally stern Deputy Headmistress said wistfully. "And for the week that followed, whenever someone tried to return one of them to normal, they would all start to sing Gryffindor fight songs."

After everyone else had finished speaking, Harry cleared his voice.

"Sirius was my godfather, and even though I barely got to know him and hardly spent any time with him, he was the closest thing to a real family that I've ever had. Sirius, I hope you're in a better place now. I'm going to miss you. And I'm sorry."

With those simple words, Harry waved his wand and a small envelop address to Sirius Black floated over to the bonfire and was consumed by the flames.

"Eternal rest, grant unto him, we pray," began Sir Firecam, "and let perpetual Light shine upon him. May his soul rest in peace. Amen."

Hermione simply held Harry's hand through it all.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry awoke bright and early on the morning of July thirty-first. He was excited for the day, not only because it was his sixteenth birthday, but also because a few of his friends were coming to
Hogwarts to celebrate with him. They would be arriving for lunch and then staying for a few hours in the afternoon.

Harry rose from bed and quickly went through his morning routine. Bounding down the stairs, he was met by an excited Hermione Granger.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" she exclaimed as she practically jumped onto him to give him a hug. "How does it feel to be sixteen?"

Harry laughed. "You should know, you've been sixteen for almost a year now."

"Yes, well… are you excited to see everyone?"

It seemed to Harry that Hermione was more excited for his birthday than he was.

"Sure, it should be fun."

The two Gryffindors went down to breakfast and then made their way outside for Harry's daily appointment with Sir Firecam. All the while, Hermione kept up her happier than usual demeanor. There was definitely an extra bounce in her steps.

"What's got you so cheerful today?" Harry asked as he set up the wooden dummy for his training session.

"Can't a girl just be happy that it's her best friend's birthday?" Hermione responded with a smile.

"I suppose."

"Besides, I guess I'm just looking forward to seeing everyone. Not to say that I haven't enjoyed the last few weeks just you and me, because I have, but I think it will be nice to catch up with the others. You may or may not know this, but I am a girl, and you, Mr. Potter, are sorely lacking when it comes to girl-talk."

"I'm well aware that you're a girl, Hermione. And besides, isn't it a good thing that I can't do girl-talk?"

"Maybe."

Hermione seemed to drop the conversation, so Harry let it slide. Keldorn showed up a few moments later, but instead of his normal clothing and scattered pieces or armor, he was wearing what looked like a thick, quilted jacket as well as a padded glove on his right hand.

"Good morning, Harry, Miss Hermione, I trust you are well rested?" the old knight said in greeting.

"Good morning, sir," Harry responded while Hermione simply waved.

"I thought we might progress a bit further today, if you can manage not to trip over your own two feet too much during the footwork, that is."

"Sounds good to me," Harry replied.

Hermione conjured herself a simple, wooden stool as Harry picked up his sword and shield and took his guard position. He noticed, however, that the witch hadn't yet produced a book to read.

"Erm… aren't you going to read or something?" Harry asked her.
"Oh, I thought I would just watch this morning. See if there's anything worth-while to observe," Hermione answered.

"Alright then."

Harry managed to make it through the round of footwork drills with minimal correction needed. Keldorn eventually halted the exercise and instructed Harry to put down his weapons. Harry did so carefully, having learned his lesson about not taking proper care of his equipment.

The old man then reached into a small pouch on his belt and pulled out another thick, quilted jacket like the one he was wearing.

"Oh my!" Hermione exclaimed, "do you have an Undetectable Extension Charm on that pouch?" she asked in a moment of unrestrained academic curiosity.

"Well, I'm not sure what you would call it here," the knight responded, "but where I am from, we call this a 'Belt of Many Things.' Its pouches are enchanted to have many times more the carrying capacity of normal belt pouches. Most paladins use them due to our itinerant nature. If you are simple enough in your lifestyle, you can carry everything you own on your very person this way."

"That's amazing!" the young witch replied, "would you mind if I took a look at it while the two of you are practicing?"

In response, the knight simply detached one of his other pouches and tossed it to Hermione.

He then handed the jacket to Harry and instructed him to put it on. It was a bit of a struggle for Harry as the jacket was fastened by a series of straps that went up the center of his back. In the end he had to divert Hermione's attention from the magical pouch for a moment and get her assistance. Meanwhile, Keldorn retrieved two padded, wicker helmets from his belt along with another padded glove.

"Be sure to thank Professor McGonagall the next time you see her for making this equipment for us. She is quite good at transforming one thing into another."

He then put on one of the helmets and instructed Harry to do likewise, also handing him the protective glove.

"Right," the knight began. "I think you've spent enough time working on your fine control of the blade to move on. Today you will start learning to parry your opponent's attacks. Obviously, using your shield is the best option, but it is necessary to use the sword for defense as well. There are several different parries that you must learn, just as you've learned several different ways to strike your opponent.

"Which parry you use is dependant on where and how your opponent attacks. If he attacks in-line, you need only deflect his blade enough so that the point will miss. Wildly swinging your sword or shield to batter his out of the way merely wastes your energy and leaves you open to attack…"

Keldorn spent the next twenty minutes or so explaining and then demonstrating different ways to move and position the shield and then the sword in order to parry an opponent's attacks. The parries each had a particular, odd name like 'Sixte,' 'Quarte,' and 'Tierce.' Keldorn would attack Harry and then call out the proper parry for Harry to use in response. They started off rather slowly, but after about half an hour, they gradually began moving faster.

Harry was often too slow with his parries, which he learned meant that the knight would follow through with his attack and hit him. He was grateful for the protective clothing and for the fact that
the knight was clearly holding himself back, but the hits still stung a bit. As always, Keldorn demanded that Harry's form and technique were perfect and gave a constant stream of corrections. Harry also found that he needed to remember to keep his feet in position and not give in to the temptation of letting his legs straighten.

Hermione split her attention between watching Harry and examining the knight's magically extended pouch.

"Right, that's enough for today," the knight said as the sun moved toward midday. "Take the sword and shield with you and practice your footwork, blade control, and parries as often as you can. The only way to learn is through repetition. Now go clean yourself up and get ready for your party."

OoOoO

A short while later, Hermione and a freshly showered Harry made their way down to Hagrid's hut since the Gamekeeper had graciously offered to host the small birthday party. The kind half-giant had two long picnic tables set up outside, one for seating for the guests, with the other serving as a buffet and was covered with a wide selection of different foods. There was fried chicken, hamburgers, sausages, potato salad, pasta, baked beans, and several bowls of different types of crisps, to name a few of the dishes available as well as many different types of beverages. Harry guessed that Hagrid had once again talked the House Elves into cooking for the gathering.

They arrived just in time to see several heads of red hair come around from the other side of the hut.

"Harry!" Ginny exclaimed, as she ran over to give him a quick hug. "Happy birthday!"

"Alright, Gin, let the guy breathe," Ron said as he approached. Once Ginny had relinquished her hold, the youngest male Weasley slapped Harry on the back and said, "Happy birthday, Mate!"

Harry was also treated to a suffocating hug from Mrs. Weasley as well as a handshake from the Weasley patriarch before he was ambushed by the twins.

"Harry!"

"The little brother we never had," began the twins, taking turns speaking,

"Sixteen years old,"

"My, my, time goes by so fast, can you believe it Fred?"

"Wait a minute, I thought I was Fred."

"No you're George, I'm Fred."

"No, I was George yesterday, that means today I get to be Fred."

"But I want to be Fred; everyone knows he's the handsome one."

"Boys, behave," Molly interrupted, "don't make me regret bringing you two along."

"So how's the summer going at Hogwarts, Harry? Hermione keeping you locked in the library all day?" Ron asked with a smile. That question earned him a glare from Hermione and a smack to the back of the head from Ginny.
"Don't mind him," said Ginny, "he's been even more of an idiot since he decided 'Accio brain!' was a stellar decision."

"Oh har har, Gin-Gin."

Neither of the youngest Weasleys noticed the sober expression that crossed Harry's face at the mention of the battle at the Department of Mysteries. Hermione, however, reclaimed his attention from his memories by grabbing his arm and pointing to the pathway.

"Harry, look!" she exclaimed, "Neville and Luna are here."

The two newcomers walked up to the party together. Neville shook Harry's hand while Luna merely stopped in front of him and stared at him with her large, silvery-grey eyes.

"Hello Harry Potter," she said in her usual melodious tone, "Happy Birthday. I've never been to a birthday party at Hogwarts before. Do you think we'll play any party games? I hope so. I've been practicing my caber tossing just in case. I hope there's pudding too."

Dumbledore and Sir Firecam also arrived and eventually everyone sat down to eat. Lunch finished with Hagrid producing a large cake topped by sixteen candles.

"Made it meself," he told Harry with pride, "happy birthday!"

Everyone ate dessert while Harry opened a few gifts, mostly sweets from his friends and a few pranks from the twins.

"You need to stop by the new shop in Diagon Ally," Fred said.

"You'll have a blast," added George.

Hermione surprised him with a book on fencing.

"I thought it was appropriate, what with your new hobby."

"Wha obby id at?" Ron asked around a mouthful of cake. Hermione rolled her eyes, but it was ultimately Keldorn who answered.

"I've been teaching young Harry here a bit of swordsmanship this summer."

Neville seemed to perk up with interest at that, but Ron commented before anyone else could get a word in.

"Blimey!" he said after he'd swallowed his cake. "What d'ya need to know how to sword fight for?"

"Well, there hasn't really been all that much fighting involved," Harry answered with a smile and a glance at Sir Firecam, "more like learning how to move my feet and poking at a dummy with a wooden sword. It's not quite as glamorous as you would imagine."

"I think it sounds interesting," said Neville.

"Me too," said Ginny.

"It really is quite fascinating," Hermione interjected. "Not that I've participated myself, but I have watched a bit. It seems to have a lot of history attached to it and it takes a lot of concentration and precision. Harry's been quite disciplined in his efforts, I would say."
After dessert was finished, Dumbledore bid everyone farewell and departed to take care of some business. The boys were discussing the possibility of putting together a quick pick-up Quidditch match and the girls were beginning to talk amongst themselves when Hagrid interrupted by clearing his throat.

"Err, pardon me, everyone, but there's summat I'd like to show Harry here. You lot can come to if you'd like."

The Gamekeeper led the group a little ways away to the series of barns and outbuildings that were usually used to house different magical creatures at Hogwarts. There, in one of the fenced in pens was a familiar grey hippogriff.

"Ooo, he's very pretty," said Luna.

"Buckbeak!" Harry exclaimed as he quickened his stride and entered the enclosed space. He bowed to the large creature, which bowed back in return. Harry then walked up to the hippogriff and began to pat it on the neck.

"How'd you get here?" Harry asked the creature who seemed to be rather enjoying Harry's attention.

It was Hagrid that answered, "Well we couldn' jus' let him stay at headquarters all alone anymore, an' Dumbledore thought no one would really recognize him anymore 'round here. So, here he is, our Beaky's back ter stay!"

"A magnificent animal," Keldorn said as he ran his hand over the hippogriff's flank. Harry was a bit surprised that the knight was able to approach the creature without going through the bowing ritual first, but he supposed that Keldorn knew what he was doing.

"I've known knights that have rode hippogriffs like this one into battle. A fearsome sight they were too, swooping down out of the sun to terrorize the enemy. Very noble and intelligent creatures, hippogriffs."

Buckbeak seemed to stand up a bit straighter at the knight's words. It almost looked like he was trying to present himself as the noble warrior that Keldorn described other hippogriffs to be.

Unlike Keldorn, Hermione was careful to bow to the hippogriff before approaching. Once she was acknowledged, she came forward to stand next to Harry and hesitantly placed a hand on the creature.

"It's been a while, Buckbeak," she said, "no offense, but I hope you don't have any flights in store for me any time soon."

OoOoO

OoOoO

Sometime later, after they had all caught up with Buckbeak, the teenagers left Hagrid and Keldorn with the animal and headed as a group toward the Quidditch pitch, while Molly and Arthur went for a walk around the lake. The girls sat in the stands and talked while the boys started a half-pitch Quidditch match. Ron played keeper while Harry teemed up with Fred to take on Neville and George. They tried to get the girls to play as well, citing the need for more players for a better game, but the ladies were having none of it.

"Hermione has been cooped up here with no female companionship for quite some time. We have
some important things to discuss," Ginny authoritatively stated. "Now go away before I start to get annoyed."

As the sun lowered toward the horizon, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley reappeared and summoned everyone to them. It was getting late and it was time to return home. So with a few hugs and final 'happy birthdays,' the visitors departed and Harry and Hermione made their way to dinner.

Later that night in the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry sat down next to Hermione on the couch in front of the fire.

"Thanks again for the fencing book, Hermione. The first chapter's pretty interesting. Fencing is pretty different from what I'm learning, but there's some similarities too."

"You're welcome, Harry," the young witch said in reply. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

They chatted for a few minutes before Harry stood up from the couch.

"Well," he announced, "I'm off to bed. Thanks again for the book."

Hermione stood as well.

"You're welcome, Harry."

Then she did something she had never done before, she walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek.

"Happy birthday, Harry," she whispered in his ear.

And before the stunned wizard could form a reply, Hermione escaped up the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

Chapter End Notes

So, to clear up a point about Keldorn Firecam in case anyone is confused: I am well aware that Keldorn is a paladin of the god Torm in Baldur's Gate II. I'm very familiar with both the BG series of games as well as the Forgotten Realms. I have, however, decided to change that aspect of Keldorn's canon history in order to make him work better in this story. For the purposes of this fic, the gods of the Forgotten Realms do not exist. After all, would a paladin's special abilities even function in a world where his deity had absolutely no presence? Would Harry Potter be interested in associating with or following someone who was devoted to a polytheistic god from a world that he will never see?

So, in order to cut down on worrying about questions like this that really have no impact on the story whatsoever and would only serve to make it more convoluted, and also to make the story flow better, I changed Keldorn's religious devotion to the more monotheistic 'Light' that could be interpreted to exist across the different universes. Paladins need to have some sort of deity to be associated with. Thus, I note in my disclaimer that I've taken some liberties with his character and I decided not to label this as a crossover. So, for the purposes of this story, just pretend that Torm, Bane, Tyr, Cyric, Mystra and all the rest never really existed or that they are demons passing
themselves off as gods. Or maybe that the good gods were saints of the Light, like perhaps Torm is the Patron Saint of duty, not its god. All the clerics in Toril either worship the Light or the demons. Does that make sense and clarify the point?
The first two weeks of August continued in much the same vein as July. Harry spent his mornings with Keldorn working on his sword and shield skills. After about eight weeks of work on his technique, Harry was finally allowed the chance to test himself against the knight himself in a few bouts, but that was only if Harry was able to satisfy his teacher during the initial rounds of footwork, baldework and parries that occupied at least the first hour of practice each morning. Keldorn was obviously going easy on him, but even with that advantage, Harry found it downright impossible to land a touch on his opponent.

"Do not fret, young Harry," the old knight would say, "I have been a swordsman for decades and you are just beginning. If you were able to challenge me it would not speak so much of your skill but my incompetence. You are doing well."

Still, it would have been nice to be able to spar with someone that was closer to his own skill level. Hermione was adamantly against joining the sword training, although she did often come to watch. She would faithfully cheer for Harry, but often broke into laughter when he was disarmed or thoroughly trounced. Truth be told, Harry was glad that Hermione refused to take part in learning swordsmanship; he didn't want to spar with her. Something about the thought of squaring off against Hermione with a weapon in his hand made Harry very uncomfortable, almost ill.

After spending so much time on martial arts training, Harry did notice a decline in his anger. While he had greatly improved after Hermione's first appearance of the summer and their subsequent discussion, Harry still found himself getting angry at times. But the constant exertion as well as the mental and physical discipline required in learning to handle a sword seemed to be keeping Harry's anger in check.

Hermione spent most of her mornings reading outside where she could keep an eye on Harry and Keldorn. Harry wasn't sure why she preferred to be outside with him instead of remaining in her usual domain of the library, but part of him knew it had something to do with the way he had avoided her at the end of the previous school year. Hermione wasn't going to let him out of her sight much more than she absolutely had to.

Hermione finished the *Codex Luminis* after a little more than a week of reading and had moved on to other topics. She was currently doing reading for a combined transfiguration and enchantment project that she had discussed with Professor McGonagall and was well over Harry's head. Harry had borrowed the *Codex* out of curiosity after Hermione finished with it, but he had yet to make it past the first chapter.

The two Gryffindors spent most of their afternoons together, occupied in some leisurely activity or another. Harry was secretly impressed with Hermione's willingness to put her books down and simply spend time with him.

One such afternoon found them down by the lake lying on the soft, green grass near the water. Harry had a small pile of pebbles next to him and he would occasionally pick one up and toss it into the lake, creating a soft *plop* that broke the silence.

"I wonder if Ron is going to get together with Lavender this year." Hermione suddenly said out of nowhere.

"Where did that come from?" Harry asked in response. It wasn't like Hermione to begin conversations about the teenage romances that pervaded Hogwarts other than to complain about
having to break up randy couples during her prefect rounds.

"Oh, Lavender and Parvati were talking about him a lot toward the end of the year. You can't be roommates with those two without overhearing their conversations about boys more often than you'd like. Apparently Lavender is quite interested in our red-haired friend."

"Oh."

"They were always trying to devise strategies for getting Ron to notice her and ask her out."

"Like what?" asked Harry.

"Oh just simple things really; spend more time around him, show an interest in the things he's interested in, and be supportive of him. You know, subtlety let him know that she's interested in him in that way."

"Good luck with that."

"Why do you say that? You don't think Ron would like her?" Hermione responded.

"No, that's not it."

"Then why don't you think it would work?"

"Well, Ron's not really all that observant, is he? I don't think he would notice the subtle approach. Most blokes probably wouldn't for that matter."

Hermione looked away from Harry at that point and grumbled something under her breath.

"What was that?" Harry asked.

"Nothing."

"Well anyways, I think that if Lavender really wants to get Ron's attention, she should just ask him out. Or maybe snog him in the middle of the common room."

"Harry!"

"What? It's true! No bloke in his right mind would turn down a nice snog."

"No girl in her right mind would want to do something like that. It would make her look desperate. Girls want the guy to make the first move."

"Well that's hardly fair."

"Life isn't fair, Harry, but that's the way it is. If a guy fancies a girl, he's supposed to make the first move and ask her out on a date."

"What's got you so interested in Ron's love life all of a sudden anyways? Do you fancy him?"

"No way! Could you even remotely see that working out? Ron's a good friend, but I wouldn't want to spend every other minute arguing with my boyfriend."

"Well, why're you so worried about it then?"

Hermione let out a long sigh.
"Never mind," she said, letting the topic drop. The two lapsed into silence once again.

Some time later, Hermione suddenly sat up, pointed to the sky and exclaimed, "Harry, look! There's two owls heading our way."

"So?" the young wizard questioned.

"So, it could be our O.W.L. results! They're supposed to be coming in sometime soon! What if it's them?" Hermione asked, working herself into a near panic.

"Well, I suppose we'll take a look at them then," Harry responded.

The owls were indeed heading for Harry and Hermione and as they landed they extended an official-looking envelope to each of the teenagers.

Harry quickly untied his envelope from the bird's foot while Hermione approached hers with something bordering on reverence. Harry was about to rip his open to see his scores when he noticed that Hermione was simply staring down at her envelope with her hands slightly shaking.

"Hermione?" he asked, slightly concerned.

"Oh, Harry! What if I've failed them all?!"

"Umm, I really doubt that you failed all your O.W.L.s, Hermione."

"I just can't look," the witch said as she thrust her results into Harry's chest. "You open it for me and tell me if I failed everything."

With a roll of his eyes, Harry put his own results aside and tore open Hermione's. Harry's eyes widened as he looked over her results.

"That's not good…" Harry said quietly.

"What?! What's not good?!" Hermione shrieked, now in a full-blown panic as she ripped her results out of Harry's hands so that she could see them for herself.

"Oh you only got ten O.W.L.s," Harry laughed, "nine O's and one E. The look on your face…"

"Harry Potter! You are a huge prat!" Hermione said before punching him in the shoulder. When this failed to make the wizard stop laughing, she hit him three times more.

"Ow! Okay, okay, I'm sorry!"

"You better be… making me think I failed out of school. You shouldn't tease me like that. Well, go on then, open yours up, let's see what you've got."

Harry ripped open his envelope and pulled out the results.

_Astronomy: A_

_Care of Magical Creatures: E_

_Charms: E_

_Defense Against the Dark Arts: O_
Divination: P
Herbology: E
History of Magic: D
Potions: E
Transfiguration: E

Harry then handed his scores over to his best friend as he knew that she would be almost as curious about his scores as she was about her own.

"Oh, well done Harry!" Hermione said as she leaned over to give him a hug. "Seven O.W.L.s is a really good showing.

"Not as good as ten," he shot back, making the young witch blush.

Hermione then leapt to her feet and started pulling Harry up by his left arm.

"Come on, Harry! Let's go read up on the N.E.W.T. courses that we'll be able to take," she said as she dragged him toward the castle. "The library has lots of information that will help us get a head start!"

Harry didn't argue, but simply smiled as he allowed himself to be dragged off to the library.

OoOoO
OoOoO

A few days later, Professor McGonagall handed an envelope to each of her two resident Gryffindors during lunch. It was only the three of them at the meal that day, as Keldorn had said he had things to attend to that afternoon. Dumbledore and Hagrid were also missing.

"Here you are, Miss Granger and Mr. Potter, your Hogwarts letters and booklists for the next term. And Mr. Potter, I would like to be the first to offer my congratulations."

Harry was a bit puzzled by his Head of House's statement as she added no further clarification, so he opened up his letter to see what she was talking about.

"I've been named Gryffindor Quidditch Captain," Harry stated to no one in particular.

"Oh well done, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed as she leaned over to give him a hug. "I knew you'd get it. And you'll be able to use the prefect's bathroom now too!"

"Just remember, you two," McGonagall said from across the table, "I don't want to see any inappropriate behavior while you're staying alone in Gryffindor Tower. If I do, I can easily find another Quidditch Captain."

The two teenagers quickly separated and both turned red. Though it seemed that Hermione couldn't help but send a few glances in Harry's direction in spite of once again being embarrassed by the Deputy Headmistress.

Harry cleared his throat and looked over his booklist.

"Well, at least I won't need to buy Advanced Potion-Making by Libatius Borage," Harry said in an
attempt to move the conversation to a different topic.

"Why ever not, Mr. Potter? You can't be thinking of dropping Potions if you still want to become an Auror," said McGonagall.

"Well, I thought you needed an O in your Potions O.W.L. to get into Snape's N.E.W.T. class," Harry replied.

"True," the Deputy Headmistress responded, "but Professor Snape will not be teaching Potions this year." This pronouncement caught both Harry and Hermione by surprise. "The Headmaster has granted him his wish to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. Your Exceeds Expectations will therefore be sufficient for you to continue your potions classes."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Harry groaned. "Please tell me you're taking the mickey, Professor."

"I'm afraid not. Professor Snape will be teaching DADA while Horace Slughorn will be returning to the staff to teach Potions once again."

"Great, just great," Harry muttered.

"Don't worry, Harry," Hermione said as she gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder, "I'm sure it will be fine."

"In any event," McGonagall carried on, "you two need to give some thought to which N.E.W.T. courses you would like to take this year. We can get your courses scheduled now instead of on the first day of term if you'd like since you're already here. I suppose we'll also have to arrange for you to visit Diagon Ally."

After a few moments of silence, Hermione suddenly grabbed Harry's arm as her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Harry, look!" she exclaimed while waving her letter about, "the school's offering an optional riding elective this year!" She then turned her attention to the Deputy Headmistress, "Please tell me it's a horse riding course."

"Among other things, but yes horse riding will be included," McGonagall responded.

"Why is Hogwarts offering a horse riding course all of a sudden?" Harry asked.

"The Headmaster decided to add the elective in order to offer Sir Firecam a place on the faculty. He is supposed to be a very proficient rider, among his many other talents, or so I am told."

Harry might have been seeing things, but he was certain that he caught the hint of a smile form on McGonagall's lips as she spoke of the old knight.

"Oh Harry, please say you'll take riding with me!" Hermione pleaded as she once again latched onto Harry's arm.

Harry looked at his best friend in surprise.

"I didn't know you liked horseback riding so much."

"Well, I don't really know if do, like it that is. But I always wanted to learn how to ride as a little girl, but my parents never let me. Please say you'll take it with me."
Harry found his current situation to be a bit odd. Hermione had never pleaded with him to take a
course with her before. But here she was, looking at him with puppy-dog eyes and pouting lips.

_Why didn't she do this back in third year to try and get me to take a real elective like
Ancient Runes instead of Divination_, Harry thought to himself. _She does look kind of cute like
that…_

He then remembered the fun he had riding Buckbeak and the thestrals, which, along with the look
Hermione was giving him, made his decision easy.

"Alright, I'll take riding with you."

This statement earned him another hug.

The rest of the meal was spent deciding what other courses the two students would take.
McGonagall said she would duly record their selections for them and that they would be excused
from the course selection meetings on the first day of term.

OoOoO

A few days later found Harry and Hermione in Diagon Alley. They were being escorted by Tonks,
Hagrid and, to Harry's surprise, Keldorn. They traveled by floo from the Headmaster's office to the
Leaky Cauldron. Harry was a bit dismayed to see how empty the tavern was and once outside, how
deserted Diagon Ally itself seemed. It appeared that the Ministry's public acknowledgement of the
return of Voldemort had a lot of people too scared to leave the relative safety of their homes.

Several of the shops were closed and boarded up, including Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor and
Ollivander's wand shop. Harry questioned Tonks about the closed stores.

"Why are so many places boarded up?"

"People are scared, Harry. After Fortescue and old Ollivander went missing, a lot of the shop
owners decided staying open wasn't worth the risk with the Death Eaters around and all. But don't
worry, there's still plenty to do here in old Diagon Alley."

Tonks' bright and cheerful words were somewhat belied by the way she kept herself on constant
alert, always glancing about for any sort of trouble. Keldorn also seemed to be on his guard,
although his demeanor was much subtler than the young Auror's.

The small group managed to get to Gringotts and then make most of their purchases without any
incidents. The heavy sense of disquiet that pervaded the alley made none of them wish to remain
any longer than necessary. Hermione was even convinced to leave Flourish & Blotts after only
moderate prodding. Everyone was agreed, however, that they needed to pay a visit to the newly
opened Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

"Harry!" Fred shouted as they entered the bright and colorful storefront. "Georgie look! The great
Harry Potter has deemed to visit our humble place of business!"

George made his way through the crowded store to greet the newcomers.

"Well now, Fred, if it isn't our favorite investor."

"Not to mention our only investor."
"Be that as it may, he's still our favorite."

"Right as rain that is."

"We'll have to set him and his lovely lady up with some samples then, won't we?"

Hermione colored a bit while Harry interrupted the twins before they could really get going.

"This place is great. And there's so many people here. The rest of the ally is basically deserted."

"Well, people need a good laugh when things are getting tough, as my mum always said," George answered.

"Mum never said that," his twin replied.

"Never you mind what she didn't say, just focus on what she might have said."

"She might have said a lot of things, especially that time she caught you and Angelina in dad's shed."

"Oi! You keep quiet about that! You'll be giving poor, innocent Hermione and Harry-kins ideas you will."

"I'm sure they've had 'ideas' aplenty already, what with them being all alone together in Gryffindor Tower this summer."

"Well," Hermione interrupted rather loudly, her face bright red, "I think we'll just have a look around then. It's good to see you, Fred, George." With that, the embarrassed witch scampered off to look through the store.

"Bit touchy, that one," said Fred.

"Well anyways, have a look around, Harry," said George. "Help yourself to whatever you please. Your money's no good here. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be in business."

The group separated to peruse the store. Harry thought that the Decoy Detonators might come in handy and was highly amused by the signs advertising "U-No-Poo." He came across Tonks laughing hysterically near the fake wands as someone vainly attempted to fight off one of the prank wands as it tried to beat them about the head. He even noticed Keldorn laughing as he tried on one of the Headless Hats and looked at himself in the mirror. Harry also spied Hermione chewing her lip as she looked at a display of love potions before she shook her head, turned, and walked away.

In the end, Harry tried to pay for a few Decoy Detonators, but true to their word, the twins wouldn't accept his money. Instead they loaded Harry and Hermione's arms with an assortment of different items, Portable Swamps, Fanged Frisbees, firecrackers, and more, before pushing them out the door without listening to any objections.

"Goodbye you two," said Fred.

"Don't do anything we wouldn't do," George added.

"Which admittedly isn't much."

"Especially if Alicia Spinnet is making eyes at you."
"Oi! Quiet you!

Tonks helpfully shrunk down the assorted wheezes so that Harry and Hermione could add them to their other purchases in their pockets. The group then began walking back toward the Leaky Cauldron.

The alley was still quite deserted as they walked down the cobblestone street. Keldorn was eyeing a group of rough looking wizards when he suddenly drew his sword. Harry looked to see that the five black-robed wizards reacted by drawing their wands and pointing them at him and his friends.

"To arms!" Keldorn shouted as their attackers began to send bright bursts of spellfire their way. Harry watched as shining plate armor somehow unfolded from within the few pieces that the old knight always wore around his collar and shoulders, and within a moment covered the knight in gleaming metal plates. His mirrored shield appeared on his left arm as he ran toward their attackers.

"You two!" Tonks yelled as she drew her wand and set up a shield, "get over by that building and get down! Find some cover if you can!"

Harry and Hermione drew their wands and moved to do as the Auror ordered them. Hagrid meanwhile was swinging his fists at one of the dark wizards as various spells bounced off of his thick, half-giant skin.

Suddenly the ground burst with a deafening blast as a deadly green curse impacted in front of Harry and Hermione, showering them with shattered bits of rock and tossing them backwards. "Hermione!" Harry frantically shouted as he looked over to her. His attention was diverted, however, when he noticed the two wizards that had likely cast the spell were headed his way. Anger began to course through him as he pointed his wand at the one on the left.

"Stupefy!"

"Stupefy! Confringo! Tarantallegra!" Hermione cried as she rose to her feet. The two wizards were able to dodge her first two spells, but one of them was caught by the third and began dancing uncontrollably. Harry and Hermione used the opportunity to sprint to the side of one of the buildings and ducked around the corner for cover.

Once there, they looked back to the alley and prepared to cast again. However, their two assailants had apparently thought better of pursuing the teenagers and had instead turned their attention to the other members of the group.

Harry saw that Tonks was frantically trying to duel three wizards at once while Hagrid was lying on the ground, bound from the knees to the waist in thick, heavy chains. One wizard cast a dark purple spell at Keldorn who simply blocked it with his shield. The spell bounced off of the mirrored surface and returned to strike the caster in the face, who then dropped his wand and went down to the ground, howling and writhing in pain. Keldorn then gestured toward Hagrid with his
sword, and with a flash of white light, the chains binding the half giant shattered.

"I'm going to help Tonks, stay here," Harry said before stepping out into the street. He was quickly yanked back around the corner by Hermione.

"Tonks told us to stay here!" the young witch shouted.

"She needs help! I'm not going to hide while she's fighting three of them by herself!"

"Then I'm coming too!"

"No!" Harry vehemently screamed, "it's too dangerous!"

"I can take care of myself!" the now indignant witch replied.

"There's no time for this!" Harry cried in anger and frustration. He quickly pointed his wand at Hermione's legs and shouted, "Incarcerous!" A thin rope wrapped around her lower legs from her ankles to her knees. The unexpected spell made her lose her balance and tumble to the ground.

"Harry!" she screamed in anger, but the wizard made use of her incapacitation to leave her behind and sprint out into the battle, shooting off spells as he ran.

One of the wizards that had been fighting Tonks was now lying motionlessly on the ground, but Tonks was clutching a bloody right shoulder with her off hand and seemed to be faltering under the assault of her two remaining opponents. Keldorn had managed to close the distance with the other wizard that was still standing, and Harry saw the knight's sword, now shining brilliantly with golden light, slash through the man's midsection before he dropped to the ground in a heap.

Harry stopped running and took careful aim at one of the two wizards that were still standing.

"Stupefy!" he shouted. His target was aware enough to erect a shield that blocked his spell, but this pulled his attention away from Tonks. Hagrid and Keldorn began running toward the two wizards that now suddenly found themselves outnumbered and on the defensive.

The attackers seemed to realize that they were going to lose, and with a quick nod to each other, reached into their robes and then disappeared.

Tonks, her left hand still holding her bloody shoulder, quickly sent Stunners into each of the three downed wizards before binding them with magical ropes.

All in all, the skirmish probably took less than two minutes.

Keldorn sheathed his sword and approached Tonks while Harry as well as Hagrid also made their way over.

"Where is Hermione?" the knight in shining armor quickly asked.

"She's fine. I left her behind that corner," replied Harry as he gestured blindly behind himself.

Keldorn looked at Tonks' bleeding shoulder and then asked, "Is anyone else injured?"

"No," Harry replied as Hagrid simply shook his head.

Nodding, the old knight then laid his hands on Tonks' head and closed his eyes. After a moment Tonks stiffened and gasped. Keldorn backed away, and Tonks inspected her shoulder to see that the bleeding had stopped and the wound was closed, not even leaving a scar.
"How'd you do that?" the surprised Auror asked.

Harry, however, missed the reply because he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see who was behind him only to have a fist slam into his face. Harry dropped, sprawled out on the ground, clutching at his throbbing left eye. He looked up to see Hermione with fists clenched and angry tears in her eyes. Her entire body was shaking with rage.

"Harry Potter!" she screamed down at him. "You are an utter ass!" She then turned on her heel and stormed away.

Keldorn, Tonks, and Hagrid stood there stunned, eyes moving between the wizard lying on the ground with the clear beginnings of a swollen and bruised eye, and the retreating back of the irate witch who put him there.

"Bloody hell, Harry!" Tonks exclaimed, "What'd you do to Hermione?"

Harry didn't reply. Instead, he simply sat on the ground and watched Hermione stalk away from him. As he began to hear the tell-tale popping of Aurors apparating to the scene of the disturbance, Harry found himself dreading his eventual return to Gryffindor Tower.
Chapter 9

The next few days weren't all that great for Harry Potter.

After the Aurors took the three captured wizards into custody, Harry along with the other members of his group had to go to the Ministry to make formal statements about the incident. They were there for several hours and the fact that Harry's eye was swollen and bruised didn't help his mood one bit. In his anger, Harry flat out refused medical treatment, a decision he would soon regret as he later found out that Madam Pomfrey was on vacation and thus no medical attention was available at Hogwarts. If Hermione's red, swollen hand had bothered her, she made no mention of it. She was, however, smart enough to accept a few healing spells.

The next morning's *Daily Prophet* didn't help to alleviate Harry's volatile emotions. He saw a copy left on the table in the Great Hall and picked it up.

**DEATH EATERS ATTACK DIAGON ALLEY!**

**CHOSEN ONE & KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR FIGHT THEM OFF!**

*By Rita Skeeter*

Witnesses report that a battle took place in Diagon Ally yesterday. Sources say that Harry Potter, known to most as the Boy Who Lived or more recently as the Chosen One, and a group of companions were attacked by several Death Eaters while shopping in London's landmark wizarding district.

Rather than turning tail and running like a coward, as some might have tried to label him in the past, Harry Potter was witnessed fighting back against the Death Eaters, just as he did in the reported battle at the Ministry's Department of Mysteries this past June. This time, however, Potter did not fight alone. With him was an honest-to-Merlin knight in shining armor. That's right ladies, sources say that a tall, handsome man was witnessed on the scene wearing a set of medieval armor and brandishing a sword and shield. It is also claimed that this as of yet unidentified knight took down two of the Death Eaters himself while our very own Harry Potter handled the others.

When the Aurors finally arrived, three Death Eaters were on the ground and quickly taken into custody, while two escaped despite the efforts of Potter and his armored companion.

Just who is this new anonymous hero? Where did he come from? Is he a new ally of the Chosen One or just a passerby that was in the right place at the right time? And perhaps the question most important to our readers' hearts, is he already taken, or is he single and available like his comrade in arms and the Daily Prophet's Number One Heartthrob Harry Potter? Readers want to know.

For more on the battle, see page 4.

For interviews with witnesses of the battle, see pages 5-6.

For a look back at June's battle in the Department of Mysteries, see pages 9-11

For speculation on Harry Potter's love life, see pages 15-21.

Harry threw the paper down to the table in disgust. The article made him out to be some sort of hero when he barely did a thing. He didn't even land a single spell on any of the Death Eaters. Tonks, who had taken on three of them by herself wasn't even mentioned and neither were Hagrid
or Hermione. The paper only served to ignite Harry's anger once again.

To make matters worse, ever since she had so eloquently called him an "utter ass" and punched him in the face, Hermione Granger hadn't said one word to Harry Potter. If he entered a room where she was she would either ignore him or get up and leave. She also started going to meals early so that she wouldn't have to sit with him at the table.

Harry's fallout with Hermione hurt much more than his black eye ever could. They had been getting along so well that summer; he really thought that their friendship was better than it ever had been before. He had felt extremely close to her, spending so much time together just being with each other. And now she apparently wanted nothing to do with him. Harry had no idea what to do. This was exactly the situation he was afraid of after the Department of Mysteries, but with her unwillingness to even speak with him, there didn't seem to be much he could do to fix it.

Harry still spent his mornings learning to sword fight with Keldorn, and he took to it energetically. He had to channel all of his anger into something after all. But it was strange not having Hermione's silent support there with him. The old knight seemed aware of the strained relationship between the two teenagers, as did the other summer residents of the castle, but they never said anything about it. Harry wasn't sure if that was good or bad; he was glad he didn't have to talk about it, but he was also sure that he could use some advice. Unfortunately, all of Harry's father figures were either dead and gone like Sirius, or too busy taking care of other things to worry about two squabbling teenagers like Dumbledore.

All in all, Harry was miserable.

OoOoO

OoOoO

"Quinte!" barked the old knight.

Harry, however, moved his blade into the wrong position.

"I said 'Quinte,' boy, not 'Quarte!'" Keldorn shouted as he sharply rapped Harry on the side of the head with his wooden sword. Thankfully, Harry was wearing his protective wicker helmet.

It was five days after the skirmish in Diagon Ally and Sir Firecam thought it would be a good idea to try working on fighting without a shield. Harry was therefore learning a new set of parries to use when he was wielding his sword two-handed. It didn't help that these new parries had the same names as the others he had already learned, but were in slightly different positions. So far it wasn't going very well.

"Stop!" Keldorn cried before removing his helmet. "I do not enjoy wasting my time. Where is your head today?"

Harry removed his own helmet before thinking of a reply.

"I don't know. I just can't concentrate."

"Let your concentration slip like that with slaves of the Darkness around and you might not walk away."

That comment only served to make Harry angry.

"I'm well aware of what makes someone unable to walk away from Death Eaters!"
Keldorn simply stared at Harry for a moment before walking over to the bench and sitting down.

"Sit down, boy," the knight said, "you've been angry since we came back from the alley and the exercise isn't helping it. So tell me what's bothering you and get it off your chest."

"What do you care?" Harry replied in the way that only surly teenagers could manage.

"Are you angry because you've turned into a petulant child? Because that is certainly bothering me."

Harry sighed. He considered making another snarky comment, but then thought better of it. He had wished for a father figure to talk to, after all.

"It's Hermione. She won't speak to me. Won't even look at me."

"What exactly did you do in the alley to make her angry enough to hit you like that? You never told us and your eye is still black and blue."

"Tonks told us to take cover," Harry began telling the story, "and we did. But once we got around the corner I saw that while you were fighting two of them, Tonks was taking on three by herself. I knew she couldn't last long doing that, so I decided to go back out and fight. Hermione wanted to come with me and I told her no, but she wouldn't listen. So I, well…"

"Yes?"

"So I cast a binding spell on her legs so she couldn't follow me," Harry said with his head bowed.

"Well that was a damn fool thing to do, boy."

"Obviously," Harry said pointing to his eye.

"No, you fool, you could have gotten her killed!"

That made Harry take pause.

"You mean to tell me, that in the middle of a pitched battle, you cast a restraining spell on not only your ally but your friend while deadly magic was being thrown about? Are you a complete fool?"

Harry swallowed; he'd never seen the old knight get this angry before.

"You took away her mobility in the middle of a life-or-death fight! If you had done that to me, you would not have gotten off with only a black eye and the silent treatment!"

"But she was going to…"

"I don't care what she was going to do! You do not behave with such stupidity in the midst of combat!"

Keldorn stopped, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. When he reopened them he seemed to be calmer, but it was obvious that there was still some anger in him.

"I do not teach fools to wield dangerous weapons. If this is how you act in battle, you cannot be trusted to hold a sword. Our lessons are suspended until Miss Granger tells me that you've apologized and learned your lesson."

With that, he stood up, gathered the wooden swords, and left Harry to ponder his actions.
The next morning Harry woke up extra early and staked out a seat in the Gryffindor common room near the portrait hole. He decided to wait for Hermione and was determined to make her hear him out, even if he ended up with another black eye in the process.

At few minutes past seven, Harry heard footsteps coming down the girl's staircase, so he stood up and took his position in front of the exit. Hermione would be forced to deal with him in one way or another. When she emerged into the room, she took two steps forward until she noticed that the exit was barred. She stopped, glared at Harry, and took a deep breath.

"Move," she commanded.

"We need to talk first," Harry replied.

"I don't want to talk to you. Now move."

With that, Hermione started marching toward him. Harry put his hands up in defense.

"Hermione, wait, I'm sorry."

The witch halted her forward motion once again. She didn't say anything but appeared to be listening. So Harry continued.

"You're right to be angry with me and I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" the angry witch questioned.

"Err… for casting that Incarcerous on you." Once again Hermione remained silent, so Harry went on, "I shouldn't have done that. It was really dangerous to bind you like that in the middle of a fight. You could've gotten seriously hurt. So I'm sorry."

Hermione huffed.

"That's why you're sorry?" she asked.

"Umm… yeah."

Once again, Hermione resumed her march toward the exit.

"Get out of my way, Harry."

"What? Wait, Hermione! I said I'm sorry, what else do you want me to do?"

"I'm not angry at you for putting me in danger, you big git!" Hermione yelled at him. "So your apology isn't worth anything. I'm still angry with you and I will be until you apologize for what you did to me!"

Now Harry was confused.

"Err… well… if it's not that, then, well… why are you angry with me?"

"I'm not just going to tell you!"
"Why not? Come on, Hermione, just tell me what I did wrong. I'm really sorry. Just tell me what to do to make this better."

"No."

With that Hermione stepped forward and pushed Harry to the side so that she could duck through the portrait hole.

Harry despondently watched her leave.

At least I got her to speak with me, Harry thought. And she didn't curse me or try to throw a punch. That's got to count for something.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Later that night, Harry was sitting in the common room staring into the fire. He spent the day trying to figure out why Hermione was really angry with him, but he just came up with nothing. Suddenly Hermione's voice broke the silence.

"Was it a lie?"

Harry turned to see her standing at the other end of the room, staring at him.

"Was what a lie?" Harry responded, standing up.

"When I first came here, earlier this summer, I told you I thought you were angry with me for failing you at the Department of Mysteries. I thought you were angry because you didn't trust me to be there when you needed me, couldn't rely on me to help you fight. You said that I was wrong. That I didn't fail you. That you still trusted me.

"Was it a lie?"

Her tone was deadly serious.

"Of course I didn't lie to you."

"Then why wouldn't you let me fight beside you?!" Hermione screamed across the room. "Why didn't you trust me to help you?!"

"It wasn't about that—" Harry started only to be interrupted by Hermione.

"Yes it is! It's absolutely about that! You didn't trust me to help you fight the Death Eaters! What am I? Some airhead who doesn't know one end of her wand from the other?"

"I didn't want you to get hurt again!" Harry shouted back at her. "You almost died at the Department of Ministries, and I wasn't about to let that happen again!"

"I can take care of myself, thank you very much."

"I know you can, but that's not the point! I just couldn't let you rush out there into the fighting. I just couldn't let you get hurt again."

"I'm not some sort of damsel in distress that needs you to protect me all the time, you know. I'm a perfectly capable witch."
"I know you are, and I never meant to say that you weren't."

"I could have helped you. We could have fought them together. We could have watched out for each other."

"Yeah, but it all turned out alright."

"It doesn't matter if it turned out alright!" Hermione yelled, her anger working itself up into a blaze again. "What about next time? The Death Eaters aren't just going to stop. Are you just going to stun me again and shove me off into some corner like a piece of furniture?"

"That's not what I did!" Harry responded.

"Like bloody hell it isn't! How am I supposed to help you fight Voldemort if you won't let me?!!"

"Well how am I supposed to keep you from getting killed if you won't let me?"

"It's not your job to protect me!"

"Yes it is! It was my fault that you almost got killed, so it's my job to make sure it doesn't happen again!"

"Arrgh! You are impossible!" Hermione yelled before turning and stomping up the stairs.

"Yeah, well, so are you!" Harry shouted back.

Hermione's only response was the loud slamming of her door.

OoOoO

OoOoO

It wasn't until two days later that Harry decided to try and talk to Hermione again. The two days that had passed weren't like those previous to their shouting match - this time Harry borrowed Hermione's approach and pointedly ignored her too. He was so angry with her for not even trying to understand his point of view. But after the first day, he calmed down enough to want to try and patch things together again. The summer was quickly coming to a close, September the First was only three days away, and Harry didn't want the term to start with the way things were. They had spent such a great time together at the castle that summer and he didn't want the memory to be ruined by a fight at the end.

So, Harry was in the common room late at night, watching Hermione on the Marauder's Map. She had spent most of her time in the library since the skirmish in the alley, and Harry was now waiting for her to call it quits and come back to Gryffindor Tower.

Finally her little dot began moving, and when she was got close to the portrait hole, Harry closed up the map and waited. A tired looking Hermione entered the room a few moments later.

"Hermione," he said to grab her attention as she came out of the portrait hole, "hang on a second."

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked with a sigh. "I don't really feel like having another row right now."

"Neither do I, so can we try just talking? How about we promise not to yell at each other?"

"Fine," she replied as she made her way over to one of the armchairs near the fire. Harry took a seat
across from her on the couch.

"I've been thinking," Harry began after a moment, "we've had a really great summer, don't you think? I'd thought we were better friends than ever. We can't let the summer end like this. I don't want to let the best summer of my entire life end like this."

Hermione looked down at her shoes but didn't speak.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. But try to see things my way for a bit. You told me before that I have a bit of a saving people thing, right? Well you were right, I do."

That brought Hermione's attention back up to Harry's face, but she let him continue.

"And, well, I guess you're just kinda high on the people Harry Potter needs to save list."

"Harry, I don't want to be on the people you need to save list. I'm not a princess locked in some tower. I want to help you. I want to be your friend, not your liability."

"I know, and I'll try to be better. But it's not going to be easy, Hermione. I can't just stand there and let you get hurt again."

"I'm not asking you to. But I won't be tied up and left at home while you go off to fight. I've got as much at stake in this as you do after all."

Harry momentarily thought about the prophecy, but then thought better of mentioning it to Hermione at that moment. He might have some prophecy hanging over his head saying that only he could defeat Voldemort, but Hermione was right, she was a Muggleborn and had everything to lose if the Death Eaters got their way.

"Okay," Harry said, "I'll try. It won't be easy, but I'll try to stop protecting you so much. And I promise not to cast an Incarcerous on you again before running off to fight."

"And I promise not to just throw myself into harm's way without a care. But really, Harry, why would I do that? I'm the smart one, remember?"

That brought a smile to Harry's lips.

"Friends?" he asked.

"Of course we're friends, you goof!" Hermione responded, standing up and motioning for him to do the same. As soon as he was on his feet, Hermione wrapped him up in a crushing hug.

"We'll always be friends, Harry. Just because we had a little fight, or even a big fight, doesn't mean we're not friends anymore. You couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

"That's good to know," Harry replied as he reveled in the hug. Making up with Hermione made him feel like a great weight was lifted off of his shoulders. Once they separated, Harry sank back down on the couch and Hermione sat down next to him.

"Do you think you could do me a favor?" Harry asked after a moment.

"What's that?"

"Could you tell Sir Firecam that I apologized and that I have your permission to start sword training with him again?"
"Why on earth would I need to do that?"

"Well… when he found out what I did to you during the battle, he got royally pissed at me and told me off. Said I couldn't train anymore until you told him it was okay."

"So that's why you apologized, huh?"

"Yep," Harry said with a smile. "It had nothing to do with being miserable from missing my best friend. I just wanted to be able to spend time with that cranky old man again."

"You really are a git, you know that?" Hermione said as she shoved his shoulder.

"Kidding! Just kidding! No need to get physical! I don't want another black eye."

Hermione blushed at that.

"Sorry about that, I shouldn't have hit you like that."

"Don't worry, I deserved it."

"Yes you did."

"Oi! You said you were sorry!"

"I'm sorry because punching your hard head really hurt my hand!"

"Oi!"

"And just think, you got beat up by a girl again! That's twice I've knocked you on your bum, Potter."

"Yeah, well, that makes it twice that I've heard you swear like a sailor."

The two broke into laughter for a little while before Hermione scooted over close to Harry and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Seriously, Harry, I'm sorry too. I don't like fighting with you. I've been miserable all week."

"Well that makes two of us."

"And don't worry, I'll tell Sir Firecam that you're in the clear tomorrow at breakfast."

"Thanks."

A little while later the two teenagers decided it was time to be off to bed. Hermione reached out for one more hug as they parted to go up their separate stairways.

"Goodnight, Harry," she whispered, leaving a small peck on his cheek.

Harry watched her ascend the stairs with a grin on his face.

"Goodnight, Hermione."
Chapter 10

September the First dawned bright and early at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In an astounding feat of logic that probably only made sense to the staunchest traditionalists in the wizarding world, it was determined that Hermione and Harry would need to travel to King's Cross and then take the Hogwarts Express back to the castle along with the other students. Harry saw how that might make sense for Hermione, since she was a prefect and was supposed to patrol the train, but Harry had no such duties and was at a loss when it came to understanding why he had to spend his entire day traveling to a destination that he had already reached. But apparently tradition was tradition. At least Harry was able to convince McGonagall that they didn't need to take all of their belongings with them and could instead leave their trunks in their dormitories.

But before taking the Portkey that would drop them on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, the two students found themselves eating a late, final summer breakfast at the staff table in the Great Hall along with Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid and Keldorn. Harry was a mix of emotions - he was excited to see his friends once again, but he was also a little sad that the best summer of his life was coming to an end. Hermione, on the other hand, was positively brimming with excitement for the start of another academic year.

"Oh, I just can't wait to start out N.E.W.T. classes," she told the table at large, "just think of all the new topics to delve into and explore…"

"Only you, Hermione," Harry said with a smile.

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry as if he was the silly one.

"And I can't wait to really get started on my special project," the young witch continued. "Speaking of which, Sir Firecam, I was wondering if it would be possible for me to take a closer look at your armor sometime."

"And just why would you need to do that, Miss Granger?"

"Well, even among all the excitement in Diagon Alley, I noticed how your armor simply appeared when you needed it. It almost looked like it grew out to cover you. I was thinking of trying to recreate something similar for my N.E.W.T. project."

"Yeah," Harry interjected as he turned to address the knight, "I noticed that too. How's that work?"

"Ah, well, I suppose that wouldn't hurt," Keldorn answered. "The most important part of my armor is actually rather ancient, and once belonged to Saint Jorg the Dragon Slayer."

Hermione's eyes sparkled with interest.

"And who was he?" she inquired.

"Saint Jorg was a soldier in an ancient, heathen army long ago. He saw the Light and converted his life and eventually became a great paladin. It is said that he slew a great black dragon single-handedly. His life was so fraught with constant danger that whenever he tried to remove his armor in order to rest, he would be attacked by an enemy who saw his lack of armor as their needed opening and advantage. So, the Light blessed St. Jorg and bestowed on him the gorget that still bears his name," Keldorn said as he tapped the wide metal collar that he always wore around his neck. "When the Gorget of St. Jorg is worn with any suit of armor and the command words are spoken, as much or as little of the armor desired by the one wearing it will retract into the gorget."
Likewise, when a different command is uttered, some or all of the armor will unfold, ready for
battle. That way he would never be caught at disadvantage again."

"That's amazing!" Hermione exclaimed. "If it's that easy, would you mind demonstrating it for me?
Please?"

"I'd just do it if I were you, sir," Harry said to the knight, "I've learned that in situations like these,
it's best not to stand between Hermione and the knowledge she's after."

Hermione glared at Harry and gave him a shove on the shoulder. But once she had silenced her best
friend, she turned her expectant look back upon Sir Firecam.

"Well, I don't see what it could hurt," the knight said. He then turned to the Headmaster, "With
your permission?"

"Like our dear Miss Granger, I find myself quite intrigued," Dumbledore replied, "please go right
ahead."

Keldorn stood from his seat and moved away from the table.

"To arms!" he shouted and immediately his bright, shining armor expanded out from within his
gorget to cover him from head to toe. Even his mirrored shield appeared on his left arm. Harry
noticed that while the armor covered the knight's clothing, it somehow managed to make its way
underneath his belt so that it and the sword hanging from it would still be accessible. Harry also
saw that Sir Firecam was now wearing a metal helmet, something he hadn't worn in either the
battle at the Ministry or in Diagon Alley.

"Why weren't you wearing that helmet in the alley?" Harry asked.

The old knight his lifted the visor that covered his face before answering.

"I find the helm to be too restrictive. One can barely see or hear a thing with it on. I find that being
able to see my enemies is more important than the protection that the helm might provide, so I
normally forgo wearing it."

He then slowly turned in a circle so that everyone could see the entire suit of armor before barking
another command.

"Return to the Gorget!" he said, which made the armor fold up and disappear into the metal collar.
Once again, the knight appeared in his simple blue clothing with the gorget around his neck, a few
left-over pieces of armor on his shoulders and his sword strapped around his waist.

"So what are those," Harry asked, pointing to the pieces of metal that remained on the knight's
shoulders.

It was Hermione who answered.

"Those are spaulders, which is simply the name of the piece of armor that covers the shoulder. My
guess from what he's told us would be that Sir Firecam merely likes to keep those out when he
recalls the rest of the armor. There must be something about the magic of the gorget that allows the
wearer to choose exactly how much of his armor appears or disappears upon activation."

"Right you are, Miss Granger," said the knight.

The young witch turned to see Harry staring at her incredulously.
"What?"

"How do you know so much about armor?" the wizard asked in surprise.

"I do read you know," Hermione responded. "I figured that with a living, breathing knight walking around in our midst, I should at least know a little bit about medieval arms and armor."

"A little bit?" asked Harry somewhat skeptically, "like what?"

"Well, the styling of the armor was a bit foreign to traditional European armors, and thus would be hard to date. But Sir Firecam was clearly wearing a gorget, curiass, plackart, faulds, the aforementioned spaulders, rerebraces, cowters, vambraces, gauntlets…"

"Okay, okay, I get it," Harry interrupted her before she went through and named every piece of armor.

"Well you asked."

"Seems a bit bulky ter me," Hagrid said. "Doesn' all that get in yer way when yeh're fightin'?"

"You might think so," Keldorn answered, "but plate armor is not as restrictive as it appears. And this suit in particular is special. While the rest does not compare with the Gorget of St. Jorg, my armor is blessed and enchanted so that my movements never become restricted or otherwise burdened, either by the armor it self or by restraints."

"Blimey."

"So, you mean to say that you simply cannot be tied up while wearing your armor?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, the blessings upon my armor would not allow it," Keldorn answered.

"Would you be willing to demonstrate that as well?" Dumbledore asked as a follow up question.

"I don't see why not. To arms!" he said and once again Keldorn was encased in armor.

Dumbledore rose from the table and pointed his wand at the knight.

"Incarcerous!" the old wizard exclaimed. Thick ropes shot out of the Headmaster's wand and quickly wrapped themselves around the knight. But just as quickly, the ropes seemed to lose their hold and slid down his body to pool at his feet.

"Remarkable," said Dumbledore.

"Please, Sir Firecam," Hermione pleaded, "you have to let me inspect it at some point. Just think, if I could replicate the enchantment on your gorget alone!"

"You're in for it now," Harry commented.

"I'm sure we'll find time for that at some point, Miss Granger," the knight replied.

"But not today," McGonagall interrupted. "You three must be leaving for King's Cross soon or you'll miss your Portkey."

"Sir Firecam's coming too?" Harry asked.
"Of course," the Deputy Headmistress answered, "it's tradition for new faculty to ride the train with the students."

"Right you are, Madam," Keldorn said before he once again dismissed his armor. "Come, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, we don't want to be late."

And with that they left the Great Hall to find their Portkey.

OoOoO

OoOoO

They arrived at the platform rather early. Harry and Hermione left Keldorn and went to find a compartment near the rear of the train. They were soon joined by Neville Longbottom who quietly greeted them and took a seat across from where Harry and Hermione were sitting side by side. They were interrupted a few minutes later by a light tap on their door. Harry stood up and opened the door to find Luna Lovegood standing there wearing a strange pair of eyeglasses that had wide, colorful frames.

"Hello Harry Potter," the odd girl said in greeting.

"Err… Hi Luna," Harry managed to say despite being a bit taken aback by the witch's choice in eyewear.

"Would it be alright if I joined you for the ride? All of the other compartments are full of Nargles. And while I normally don't mind riding with the Nargles, I'd rather ride with you. I would imagine that you, Hermione, and Neville will probably make for better conversation. Although the debate I had with the Nargles on the train ride at the end of last term about Japanese whaling boats was quite fascinating. Did you know that the Nargles have been in a blood feud with the whales for the past three hundred years?"

"No," Harry replied, somewhat befuddled.

"Oh, well, that's alright. I suppose I can sit somewhere else."

"What? Err… wait!" Harry said as Luna made to turn and leave. "I meant that I didn't know that about the Nargles. Of course you can sit with us, Luna." Harry waved his arm toward the seats for emphasis.

"Oh. Thank you, Harry," Luna said as she entered the compartment and sat next to Neville. "Hello Neville, hello Hermione."

"Hi Luna," Hermione responded while Neville simply waved in greeting.

"How is your 'project' going, Hermione?"

Harry thought there was something odd about the way that Luna gave the word 'project' special emphasis and even used her fingers to make quotation marks in the air.

"It's fine, Luna." Hermione said through clenched teeth while glaring at the other girl. Something was definitely up with those two.

"Oh goody," the blonde replied, "I was worried about having to avoid lots of sexual tension. That always gives me a runny nose."
"Luna!" Hermione exclaimed while giving the younger girl a pointed look.

"What? It really does do awful things to my sinuses."

"Excuse us," Hermione said as she jumped to her feet and then dragged Luna out of the compartment with her.

"What was that about?" Harry asked.

"No idea," Neville responded with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Girls."

The two witches returned a few minutes later along with Ron and Ginny in tow.

"Wow," said Harry, "the Weasleys made it here with time to spare? It's only quarter to eleven!"

"Har har, Mr. Chosen One," Ron responded as he moved to sit on the other side of Hermione. Ginny sat next to Luna and Neville. "I'll have you know that without the twins messing things up, we Weasleys can be quite well organized. If only Ginny would take less then an hour in the bathroom, we could have been here ages ago."

"Shut it, Ron," his younger sister replied, "it's not my fault that you don't care what you look like when you leave the house. Some of us don't want to look like an utter slob all the time."

"Oi! I don't look like a slob. Do I, Hermione?"

Hermione seemed a bit surprised by the question.

"Well…" she began, "you could have put on a shirt that wasn't so wrinkled… and you might have shaved this morning… and you could have combed your hair…"

"Oi!" Ron said again, getting defensive, "Harry's always got messed up hair! Why don't you pick on him?"

"See, Ron? You're a slob," said Ginny.

"Yes, well, Harry's hair is different," Hermione replied.

"Hey, don't bring me into this," Harry tried to interject.

"How is his hair being messy any different from mine?" Ron asked somewhat indignantly.

"Harry's messy hair is supposedly very cute," Luna answered. "It apparently makes you want to just run your fingers through it. Or so I'm told."

"Luna!" Hermione shouted.

"Oh, right. Sorry," the blonde replied sheepishly.

Ginny seemed to find Luna's comment and Hermione's reaction to be highly amusing as she was grinning ear to ear. Neville, on the other hand, seemed to be at a complete loss as to what was going on.

"Well fine then," Ron said with an affronted air, "I'll just have to find a girl who knows a real, red-blooded man when she sees one."
"Good luck with that. And let me know if you see any real, red-blooded men while you're out looking." said Ginny.

Ron just glared at his sister before turning to Harry.

"Can you believe these birds? Us wizards gotta stick together! Right, Harry? Neville?"

"Like I said," Harry replied, "don't drag me into this mess."

"Don't look at me," Neville added.

"Cowards, the lot of you," Ron grumbled. That comment was enough to make the compartment erupt into laughter.

OoOoO

The train arrived at Hogsmead Station without any incidents except for an argument that broke out between the two Weasleys when Ginny announced that she was going to go look for Dean Thomas. The argument was settled by Ginny threatening her brother with her wand and Ron surprisingly being smart enough to back down. After she left though, Ron kept grumbling about having a "chat" with "that git Thomas."

Ginny had yet to return from finding Dean, so the four Gryffindors and their Ravenclaw add-on took a carriage to the castle without her.

Hermione sat next to Harry at the Gryffindor table while Ron sat across from them. The tall, lanky redhead was really starting to get worked up about his missing sister when Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil pushed Neville out of the way and plopped down next to the youngest male Weasley.

"Hello, Ron, how was your summer?" Lavender began.

After shooting a questioning glance at Harry, Ron responded.

"Fine. How was yours, Lavender?"

"Oh, it was just wonderful!" the blonde witch replied. "My family and I went to the French Riviera and I spent quite a bit of time working on my tan. How do you think I look?" Lavender struck a bit of a pose for Ron.

"Err… you look fine, Lav," he replied.

"Thanks, Ron!" Lavender beamed, "Maybe next time we can take you along with us, I could've used your help to rub lotion on my back."

Harry was distracted from the interaction across the table by Hermione's elbow jabbing him in the side. He glanced over to her to see Hermione giving him a significant look, almost as if to say, see, I told you so.

Harry's mind, however, soon found itself elsewhere. Thoughts of Lavender on the beach soon changed into thoughts of Hermione on the beach, asking him to rub lotion on her back.

Whoa, Harry thought, where did that come from? Well, I know where that came from, but really? Hermione?
His thoughts were interrupted however by Professor McGonagall who brought out the Sorting Hat and began to call the first years forward.

As the first years went to their new houses and everyone else applauded politely, Harry found his thoughts back on his best friend. He was of course aware of the fact that she was a girl, but now he was looking at her in a new light. The little comments that McGonagall kept making about inappropriate behavior during the summer now came back to him and made Harry take a moment to consider the young witch that he had spent so much time with.

She's not as pretty as Cho, he thought, but she's not bad either. Besides, Cho was a disaster, and I should probably try to avoid girls like her anyways. Hermione's definitely grown up a bit - no longer the skinny little first year that used to yell at us to stay out of trouble. Her hair's still crazy, but she wouldn't really be the same without it, and she does have some nice 'assets.' Harry surreptitiously glanced at Hermione's backside. Does this mean I fancy Hermione?

Harry's thoughts about Hermione continued on and off throughout the feast and were only interrupted once the food disappeared and the Headmaster stood to speak.

"Good evening one and all," Dumbledore began, "and welcome to another year at Hogwarts. Before we all go off to retire for the evening, I'd like to introduce some new faces to you. First is Professor Horace Slughorn," the Headmaster gestured to a short, fat, bald man with a thick, walrus-like mustache. "Professor Slughorn has agreed to return to us to take up teaching Potions once again, as our dear Professor Snape will be your instructor for Defense Against the Dark Arts this year." Snape's name was met with several groans from the student body.

"And this is Sir Keldorn Firecam," Dumbledore continued as he gestured to the old knight who stood in acknowledgement. "Sir Firecam is here to offer a new elective course this year, Riding and Magical Mounts. Please join me in welcoming our new instructors."

Everyone applauded and then listened to the normal announcements about forbidden items and the start of classes.

As the students began leaving, Harry was stopped by a tap on his shoulder. It was Keldorn.

"Mr. Potter," the knight began, "who is that Slytherin boy with blond hair?"

Harry turned to where Keldorn was facing and saw Draco Malfoy.

"You mean Malfoy? The one with the pointed face and is constantly flanked by the two gorillas?"

"Yes. I suppose that is him. Although I don't think the juvenile insults to the boy's companions are necessary."

Harry shrugged his shoulders at the knight's admonishment.

"Well, anyways, that's Draco Malfoy. Son of Death Eater Lucius Malfoy who, I am glad to hear, is now rotting in Azkaban for his role in the Department of Mysteries."

"The son of a Death Eater, you say?"

"Yep. Why all the questions about Malfoy?"

Keldorn looked intently at Harry for a moment before replying.

"There is a sense of malice about the boy. He has some intention in mind that is of the utmost
Harry sobered immediately upon hearing that and looked back at Malfoy as he left the Great Hall.

"How could you tell?" the young wizard asked.

"All paladins can sense the evil intentions in those around them. It is one of the blessings bestowed upon us by the Light. The malice in Mr. Malfoy, while not the strongest I have felt by far, is still rather significant."

"So what do we do?"

"You, Mr. Potter, need not do anything. I will handle this. I merely needed a name to match with the face."

Harry quickly stamped down on the surge of anger that tried to surface. After all, Keldorn was supposedly a consecrated warrior of the Light, sworn to fight evil; if Harry could trust anyone to take care of Malfoy it was him.

The two began walking toward the doors of the Great Hall when Keldorn brought up another topic.

"Have you given any thought to continuing your lessons in swordsmanship during the school year?"

Harry thought for a moment before responding.

"Well yes, I guess I'd like to continue," Harry answered, "but I obviously won't have as much time for it, what with classes and Quidditch and all."

"Ah yes, Quidditch. I'm quite interested to finally see this game of yours that Minerva keeps going on about. I take it you're one of the players then?"

That got Harry thinking. Since when is Sir Firecam on a first name basis with the Deputy Headmistress? But he caught himself after a moment's consideration. Well, perhaps some thoughts are best left unexplored.

"Yeah, I'm actually the captain of the Gryffindor team this year. But back to the sword lessons, I've also thought of asking one of my friends to join. I thought it would be nice to have someone closer to my skill level to spar against."

Keldorn nodded. "We'll work something out for once or twice a week then. Let me know who you are thinking of asking to join before approaching them with the idea. I will observe them and then give you permission to approach them if I am satisfied. I do not teach just anyone how to handle a deadly weapon."

"This entire school is built around children learning to handle deadly weapons," Harry countered while holding up his wand as evidence.

"I suppose you are right in that."

Harry and Keldorn separated in the Entrance Hall and bid each other goodnight. As he made his way up to Gryffindor Tower, Harry's mind was full of questions. Who should he look for to join his sword lessons with Keldorn? What exactly was Malfoy up to this time? And perhaps most importantly to the teenager, why exactly was he thinking about Hermione Granger in such a less than platonic way?
The first day of classes was okay in Harry's book. But that morning's Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson left Harry highly disappointed. What should have been his favorite class due to his natural proclivity for the subject matter was once again spoiled by the professor. Snape simply informed them that they would be studying silent casting and then had them attempt casting various hexes and shields without uttering a sound. The greasy git didn't bother to give any direction or advice, and unsurprisingly, no one managed to successfully cast a silent spell.

Potions that afternoon was another story. Professor Slughorn spent the first ten minutes fawning over Harry, much to the latter's discomfort, before moving on with the lesson. The professor had the class brew a complicated potion with a vial of Felix Felicis set aside as a prize for the student who produced the best results. To no one's real surprise, Hermione walked away with the tiny bottle of liquid luck and a light skip in her step.

Tuesday afternoon saw Harry and Hermione waiting near the stables for their first Riding and Magical Mounts class. As the students arrived in small groups, Harry noticed a slightly disturbing trend: most, if not all of the students taking the new riding course were girls.

Of the sixth years present, Hermione, Lavender, and Parvati made for a unified front for Gryffindor, Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones represented Hufflepuff, Mandy Brucklehurst, Su Li and Padma Patil were there from Ravenclaw, while Millicent Bulstrode, Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass rounded out the Slytherins. There were no seventh years in the class since they had all chosen their N.E.W.T. courses the year before and didn't have the opportunity to change, but to Harry's surprise, there were several fifth years present. Harry didn't know most of them, but he did recognize Ginny and Luna.

It appeared that the only wizards to sign up for the riding course were Harry, a very nervous looking Neville Longbottom, and Wayne Hopkins, a Hufflepuff that Harry couldn't recall ever speaking to.

"Why are there so many witches here and almost no wizards?" Harry asked Hermione.

"Well," the witch in question replied, "Today, it could be argued that horseback riding is a predominantly female pastime." Upon seeing Harry's face quickly drain of color Hermione hurried to continue, "But don't worry, there are still plenty of men who ride of course. I mean, the class is being taught by a man after all."

"It doesn't hurt that Professor Firecam is easy on the eyes too," Parvati Patil chimed in, "even with all those scars, he's one fine wizard."

"I think the scars make him even more attractive," Susan Bones mentioned as she wandered over to their group and joined the discussion about Hogwarts' new heartthrob professor. "Those scars let you know that he means business and that that sword of his isn't just for show."

"Maybe I can get my horse to take off at a run so he'll have to come and save me," offered Su Li, "I can play the damsel in distress if need be," she said with the back of her hand raised to her forehead in a fake swoon.

"I do not think that will be necessary," the voice of the old knight cut in. A few of the girls almost jumped out of their skins in surprise while nearly all of them blushed crimson at being overheard by the object of their conversation. Harry saw that even Hermione was blushing, but he thought
that it was more likely that she was embarrassed at the thought of being numbered among her gossiping classmates than that she had a crush on the old knight. At least he hoped that was the case.

"Right then," began Keldorn, "by way of introduction, I am Sir Keldorn Firecam, paladin and Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart. I am a paladin and a knight; I am not a professor, so there is no need for you to refer to me as such. You may call me 'Sir Firecam' or simply 'sir' if you wish."

Harry noted that Keldorn had the rapt attention of all of the witches present.

"You may have noticed that this class is a mixture of both fifth and sixth years," Keldorn. "As this is the first year in many generations that riding of any sort is being taught here at Hogwarts, I saw no point in offering different levels of instruction. You are all beginners, thus there is only need to separate you into manageable numbers."

So that explained the presence of the fifth years. It looked as if Riding and Magical Mounts wasn't really going to be a N.E.W.T. course, but more of a general elective.

Keldorn began pacing back and forth in front of the assembled students as he talked. The image of the old knight addressing a group of soldiers in the same manner came to Harry's mind and made him grin. Hermione shot him a disapproving scowl for his lack of attention.

"There will be no foolishness in this course," the knight stated with steel in his voice. "The horses and other creatures that you will be riding, while tame, are still dangerous animals. If spooked, they may very well injure you, perhaps quite severely. I have dealt with many dangerous foes in my time, a petulant or unruly teenage witch or wizard does not frighten me in the slightest. Do not test me here; you will regret it if you do."

Harry noted to his own amusement that that statement had many of the previously dreamy-eyed witches looking to be much more serious. Harry was well aware of Keldorn's no-nonsense approach to teaching.

"Starting next class, you will leave your school robes behind in your dormitories. They are much too bulky to wear while riding and would only serve to get in your way. You will come dressed in the riding breeches and boots that were listed in your letters as necessary equipment for this course."

"We will start off with horses, and progress to riding other creatures as time and your skill levels permit. For now, I want all of you to pair up and we'll get started."

Harry thought of perhaps asking Neville to be his partner, as the boy looked absolutely terrified of being by himself among so many witches, but before he could even move, Harry's arm was latched onto by Hermione. Clearly the witch expected him to be her partner. Neville surprisingly ended up with Hannah Abbott while the Hufflepuff's almost inseparable best friend went to work with Wayne Hopkins.

They did not do any actual riding that day. Instead, they spent their time learning a little bit about horses in general and then familiarizing themselves with their future mounts. The students entered the fenced off area behind the stables and went to the horses in pairs. They learned how to approach the animals and interact with them as well as the basics of brushing and tending to them.

Harry in particular learned that horses really did not smell very good at all.

Hermione looked like she was having the time of her life, or so it seemed to Harry. The young
witch really did seem to enjoy not only learning about the horses, but interacting with them as well. She never got so excited about the creatures that they encountered in Hagrid's classes, but then again, it was difficult to enjoy spending time with monsters that were constantly trying to kill you. Harry supposed that part of Hermione's enthusiasm was that she was finally fulfilling her childhood desire to learn horseback riding. In any event, Harry was pleased to see her so happy outside of the library.

OoOoO

OoOoO

On Saturday evening Harry was summoned to the Headmaster's office. He approached the gargoyle, gave the password, and rode the stairs up to the cluttered room. Upon entering, Harry noticed that the shattered pieces of the magical items that he had broken in his anger at the end of the last term still remained in their place on a shelf in a side cabinet.

"Good evening, Harry," Dumbledore began.

"Good evening, sir," Harry replied.

"Harry, I've asked you here for a very simple, and yet a very serious reason," Dumbledore said getting right to business. "As you are now aware, because of the prophecy you are a very important person in the war against Voldemort and his Death Eaters. I have asked you here tonight to give you a chance to become more involved in this fight. The choice, however, is up to you."

It didn't take Harry long to respond. The way he saw it, there really wasn't much of a choice.

"I'll fight," Harry responded to the Dumbledore's proposition.

The old wizard sighed and smiled sadly.

"I thought you would say that. I find it to be a shame, nonetheless, that one so young as you has had this burden thrust upon him. I wish that you could occupy yourself with your studies and perhaps with thoughts of some young lady or another. But alas, I guess it is not to be so."

With a swish of the Headmaster's wand, the Pensieve that Dumbledore kept in one of his cabinets floated over to the desk and landed amidst the scurrying silver instruments.

"Knowledge is power, Harry. In order to fight a war, you must first know your enemy. So tonight, I propose to start a series of lessons for you, just the two of us. We will not be discussing charms or hexes, however. We will be learning about Voldemort. I propose to help you know your enemy. What do you say to that?"

"I, err… I suppose that would be good," the young man replied.

"Excellent," Dumbledore said as he then reached into the locked cabinet behind his desk. He removed a crystal vial containing a smoky, white liquid. Dumbledore poured the contents of the vial into the Pensieve and then gestured for Harry to proceed into the memory.

That evening, Harry and Dumbledore watched the curious interactions of the Gaunt family, and after emerging from the memory, the Headmaster explained the origins of Tom Marvolo Riddle as well as the circumstances surrounding his birth. Harry thought it all was interesting, but wasn't exactly sure how it would help him defeat a dark lord, and so he voiced his concern.

"Not that I don't appreciate this," Harry said, "but how is learning about Voldemort's family going
to help me fight him?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, Harry," the Headmaster replied. "But then again, I do not know how you are to go about defeating Voldemort either. I have no hidden agenda in showing these things to you. I am merely trying to help you understand your enemy, and perhaps come to a better understanding of him myself. Exactly how this knowledge might be of use is beyond my sight."

"Oh," Harry said somewhat dejectedly as the weight of reality sank upon his shoulders. He was prophesized to either kill or be killed by one of the most powerful dark lords that had ever lived. Voldemort was a wizard that had decades of skill and experience that Harry would never be able to match.

"Sir," Harry began, "do you think I can beat him?"

Dumbledore didn't answer right away. He merely took a moment to study the young wizard seated before him.

"I honestly don't know, Harry. I cannot tell you what the future holds. I can promise you that we will be working together on this. I'm afraid that even with all my learning and power, I still don't have all the answers. Life is not that simple. If it was, I would like to think that I would have stopped Voldemort long ago. You might be the one prophesized to face the Dark Lord, but that does not mean that you need to take every step along the way on your own. I will help you as I can."

"Okay," the young wizard replied.

"And speaking of prophecies," the Headmaster said, changing the topic, "I was wondering if you might have told anyone about the prophecy."

"No," Harry answered, "I didn't think it was something to go telling others about."

"That was a wise decision, Harry. Although I do not think absolute secrecy is necessary here. After all, I can only imagine that carrying the weight of such a thing by yourself would be a heavy burden. Might I suggest that you share the prophecy with those you can trust?"

Harry nodded once in response. He wasn't sure if he would tell anyone or not, but he would at least think about it.

"Also," Dumbledore continued, "I think that you should spend some time pondering the prophecy itself. Have you given any thought to what 'the power he knows not' might be?"

Harry shook his head.

"No, I've really no clue. What do you think it is?"

"I'm afraid, my boy, that I am in much the same boat as you are in that regard. If I knew or even had a guess as to what this power might be, I would tell you. As it is, I do not. If you come up with any ideas, no matter how silly or unlikely they might seem, I would be more than happy to discuss them with you."

"Alright."

"Well, Harry, it seems the hour has gone quite late. I will need some time to prepare our next so-called 'lesson,' so I will summon you in a few days or weeks when it is ready."
"What will it be about?" Harry asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Dumbledore replied. "That's the thing about this, Harry, I know just as little as you do. It will take quite a bit of research on my part to piece together the scant information that is available about Tom Riddle. I do have some memories available, but how to best present them and understand them is another question entirely.

"Now, unless there is something else, I think I shall bid you goodnight."

Harry moved to leave at the Headmaster's dismissal.

"Goodnight, sir," the young man said as he left the office.

"Goodnight, Harry."

OoOoO

OoOoO

"This class is brilliant!" Harry said to no one in particular as he bounced along in the saddle.

It was a nice, clear, autumn day, and Harry found that he really enjoyed horseback riding. His initial trepidation about being one of only three boys in a class full of girls was quickly dashed on the second day when all of the students arrived in their riding gear. As a teenaged male, Harry was quite thankful to whomever it was that designed female riding breeches to be so tight and form-fitting. The normal school robes left a lot to the imagination, but the breeches that the girls were now wearing were quite an eye-opener for Harry. And if he happened to linger a step or two behind Hermione on the walk to class, well, He didn't think that anyone really noticed.

Aside from the somewhat distracting clothing of his female classmates, Harry found the course itself to be interesting. The second class, which had taken place on the previous Friday afternoon during the first week of classes, was spent going over the various types of bridles, saddles, and other riding equipment as well as discussing the basic methods of riding before the students simply spent some more time with the horses.

The second week of classes, however, saw the first session of actual riding. While most of the students seemed to have a bit of trouble understanding how to mount and stay balanced on their horses, Harry took to it like a natural. He was currently walking his horse around the enclosed yard anxiously awaiting permission from Keldorn to spur his horse into a trot or a canter. However, the old knight was busy working with the students who were having a bit more trouble with their first time on horseback.

Harry wanted to ride. He wasn't really content to just remain seated on the back of his horse while it slowly walked about the yard. He wanted to spur the beast into a gallop, to see just how fast it could run, to feel the wind whipping his hair back out of his face.

Perhaps all the time Harry spent darting about on a broomstick had made him a bit of a speed demon. The experience of riding a horse was somewhat like riding a broom, but it was also different. It was somehow more primal; it took Harry's mind back to the past, to the early days of mankind. It made him want to gallop across the grounds of the castle chasing after the ghosts of the past. He was, however, smart enough to realize that Sir Firecam would not take kindly to him doing so without permission.

Hermione also seemed to be a natural on horseback. Harry supposed that all of her childhood longing must have somehow prepared her for this moment. It was also likely that she had read
more than a few books on the topic over the years. Hermione spent the first few minutes of the class whispering with Ginny, Lavender, Parvati and Luna before deftly perching herself in the saddle and taking control of her horse. The young witch was now guiding the animal around the yard with an ear-to-ear grin plastered on her face.

The biggest surprise, however, was Neville. The normally shy, bumbling boy was the first to quickly mount his horse and take off across the enclosure. He looked like he was born to be in the saddle.

Aside from the three Gryffindors, only Su Li and Daphne Greengrass seemed to be able to handle their mounts with natural ease, and both of them admitted to having taken riding lessons before. Daphne even owned her own horse and certainly didn't need to learn the basics of horseback riding. She'd taken the course because she reasoned that it would give her the opportunity to engage in her favorite pastime while at Hogwarts.

"Oh, Harry, isn't this wonderful?" Hermione exclaimed as she maneuvered her horse alongside his. "This is just so much fun!"

Harry laughed.

"I never thought I would hear you say that without a book in your hands," the young wizard replied.

Instead of reprimanding him, Hermione just threw back her head and laughed.

"I know! Just look at me!" she said with a grin, "bookworm Granger, enjoying the great outdoors with nary a thought of homework!"

Hermione's laughter was infectious and the two found themselves cracking up together as they walked their horses around the yard.

"You know, I should thank you," Harry said after a few minutes, "signing up for this course was a great idea."

Hermione turned to her best friend with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

"You're just saying that because you get to be around all these witches in their tight riding breeches."

Her remark took Harry completely by surprise and he started coughing and sputtering in the saddle as his face became hot enough to melt lead.

"Don't think for a moment that I didn't notice you lingering behind me all the way down to the stables," Hermione continued while leaning a bit closer to him. "I know what you were doing."

Harry was at a loss for what to say. He didn't know if he should apologize or deny the accusation completely. The teasing tone in Hermione's voice also added to his confusion. In the end, Harry elected to just remain silent and stare down at the back of his horse's neck as his face became hot enough to melt lead.

"Don't worry," Hermione whispered while leaning almost completely out of her saddle so that Harry could hear her, "I didn't say that I minded. Or that you had to stop."

With another laugh and toss of her head, Hermione urged her horse slightly faster and left Harry behind.
After the class was finished, it was Hermione who seemed to keep herself a few paces in front of Harry on the walk back to Gryffindor Tower. Whenever Harry attempted to move up beside her, she would simply smirk and skip ahead a few steps. Harry wasn't completely sure, but he thought that she had also added a bit of a wiggle to her stride as well. He was sure, however, that his face would likely be bright red for the rest of the night.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The next day found Harry somewhat frustrated. He had decided to tell Hermione and Ron about the prophecy, but he was having trouble getting them alone to let them know. Hermione wasn't really the problem, as she seemed to be around him more often than ever, but surprisingly it was Ron who was providing to be difficult. Actually, that wasn't completely true; it wasn't Ron so much as it was Lavender Brown who was the problem.

At every meal Lavender (and Parvati of course) would plop down next to Harry's red-haired best mate and proceed to chat away about this or that inconsequential thing.

"Ron, I decided to use a new nail polish today, what do you think?"

"Ron, do you think my hair looks better pulled back or let down?"

"Ron, what do you think about the Cannon's chances this year?"

It was comments like the last one that really struck Harry as odd. Lavender had never really shown much interest in Quidditch before, but now she would take just about any opportunity to talk about the Chudley Cannons with Ron.

Ron seemed to bask in the attention he was receiving from the blonde Gryffindor. He eagerly engaged her in talking about any of the topics she broached, but was especially enthusiastic about the Cannons of course. It seemed like he had even finally learned to swallow his food before speaking whenever Lavender was at his side.

Hermione simply wore a smug little smile during most of these interactions while occasionally elbowing Harry in the side to bring his attention to some particular comment or action that either Ron or Lavender had made on the other side of the table.

Harry was simply baffled by it all.

That night in the common room, Harry decided that he was going to have to use the direct approach and interrupt the two if he was ever going to be able to speak to both of his best friends at the same time. So he approached the couch where Ron and Lavender were currently seated side by side.

"Oh, I don't know, Ronny," Lavender was saying, "it's never good to underestimate a witch in a fight. We can be quite determined, you know."

"Yeah, but I still think Jenkins would demolish her, hands down," said Ron.

"Err… excuse me," Harry interrupted.

"Hi Harry," said Lavender.

"What's up, mate?" asked Ron.
"Umm, I was wondering if I could have a word with you, Ron."

"Sure," the young wizard replied without making any attempt to rise from where he was on the couch.

"In private," Harry added with a glance at Lavender.

"Oh," Ron said. He then turned to Lavender, "Don't worry, Lav, I'll be back in a tick."

"Don't take too long, Ronny," Lavender responded, "I might get lonely."

Harry rolled his eyes as he made his way over to Hermione who was studying at one of the tables in the corner.

"Hermione?"

"Harry, you really should be working on your Transfiguration homework, you know," the witch said in acknowledgment of Harry's presence. "Why don't you sit down next to me and we'll do it together?"

"Err… right, maybe later," Harry responded. "Look, right now I really need to speak to you and Ron. Somewhere a bit more private."

That caught Hermione's attention and together they dragged Ron off to find an empty classroom.

Once the door was closed and locked, Harry turned to his two anxious friends.

"What's up, mate?" Ron questioned, looking a bit more focused now that he wasn't sitting next to Lavender.

"What's going on, Harry," Hermione added in a serious tone as she became aware of Harry's nervousness.

"Err… look," Harry began, "I don't really know how to tell you two this, so I guess I'll just say it. It's about the prophecy, you know, the one from the Department of Mysteries."

Hermione's eyes widened while Ron swallowed hard.

"It's about me and Voldemort."

"But I thought it was destroyed," Hermione interjected.

"Well yeah, it was," Harry answered, "but Dumbledore had another copy all along. He showed it to me the day I got out of the hospital wing."

"What does it say?" the young witch asked while beginning to get worked up.

"Basically, it says that I'm the only one…" Harry paused for a moment before looking back at his friends. Talking about the prophecy out loud, telling his two best friends about it, suddenly made it seem a whole lot more real, and Harry was surprised at how difficult talking about it became. "It says that I'm the only one that can beat him. That one of us is going to end up killing the other."

Hermione looked like she was about to burst into tears, but she instead launched herself at Harry, throwing her arms around him and squeezing him as hard as she could.

"Bloody hell, mate," said Ron.
Hermione didn't even bother to correct her other friend's language as she continued to hold onto Harry. Harry heard her sniffle once or twice before she pulled back just far enough to look him in the face.

"We'll help you, Harry," she said with a thick voice and watery eyes, "I'll help you. You're not in this alone."

Ron walked up and laid a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Yeah, mate. You can count on us," said the tall, red-haired wizard.

Harry didn't bother to argue; he didn't bother to tell them that when the time came, he didn't really want their help. If Voldemort won, which he was likely to do, Harry didn't want either Hermione or Ron anywhere near by. He didn't say that there was no real point in their helping him as he was probably just going to end up dead. No, for the moment, he just accepted the support of his friends.

"Thanks, guys."

After another tight squeeze, Hermione pulled away from Harry and wiped at her eyes.

"Right," she said, "now tell me exactly what the prophecy said."

"Err… something about marking me as his equal," Harry began while pointing to his scar, "and being born at the end of the seventh month. There was the bit about one of us was destined to kill the other, and something about me having a power that he knows not. I've no idea what it all means really."

"No, tell me the exact wording," Hermione responded, "the precise phrasing in true prophecies can be very important. A single word or two can vastly affect the meaning. What exactly did it say?"

"Oh, well, err… I'm not so sure about that. I was kind of, err… angry when Dumbledore told me, so I might have forgotten some of the details."

Hermione simply stared at him with a look of disbelief.

"But I'm sure we can get him to show it to us again," Harry hastily added in order to placate his best friend.

"Bloody hell, Harry," Ron said once again, "that's a raw deal, that is."

"Yeah, well, that's what I wanted to tell you. So you can head back to the common room now. Sorry to be such a downer, but I thought you two should know. Just don't go telling anyone else; it's kind of a secret that we don't want Voldemort to know about."

Ron gave Harry another pat on the shoulder.

"You can count on us mate," he said before unlocking the door and wandering out of the room.

Hermione, however, didn't leave, she instead used her wand to close and relock the door before pulling Harry into another hug.

"What am I going to do with you?" the young witch mumbled into his shoulder. "This isn't fair. Why does it always have to be you? Why can't we just be normal for once?"

After a few minutes of shared silence, Hermione suddenly pulled back from Harry, unlocked the door with a determined swish of her wand, grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him out of the room.
"Right, Harry," she said as she marched through the corridors of the castle, "let's go see Professor Dumbledore. I want to know exactly what that prophecy says so I can figure out what to do about it."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

"But what about our Transfiguration homework?"

"Really! How can you think about homework at a time like this? I don't know how you've managed with this weighing on you all this time, but I'm not just going to go back to doing my schoolwork without at least trying to figure this out. Transfiguration will just have to wait."

"Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Granger?" Harry asked with a bit of mirth coming back into his voice. "Hermione would never consider putting off her assignments!"

"Oh, don't give me that," the witch responded but with a small smile, "I've put off assignments for things in the past. Mainly because you've gotten yourself into trouble again!"

"Trouble? Me? Never!"

As they continued on toward the gargoyle that guarded the Headmaster's office, Harry wasn't sure if it was such a great idea to be bothering him just before curfew. But he was happy to see Hermione so determined to help him figure things out and help him get through it. Even if the task before him was practically impossible and the likely outcome of the prophecy would be Harry's death, in that moment, Harry was content. After all, he had a determined Hermione Granger by his side.
Chapter 12

After viewing the Pensieve memory of Trelawney making the prophecy, Hermione spent the next couple of days holed up in the library whenever she wasn't in class or asleep. If it wasn't for Madam Pince refusing to allow her to remain in the library after hours, Harry was sure that Hermione would have cut into her sleep schedule as well. Harry took it upon himself to force Hermione to come to meals, even if those appearances were rather brief affairs.

He couldn't be angry with his best friend for ignoring him in favor of spending her time in the library, however, because she was putting all of her energy into researching anything that might have to do with prophecies and divinization. Harry wasn't sure just what the girl thought she would discover in all of the dusty tomes she was consulting, but he let her work nonetheless.

Wednesday evening saw the first of Harry's swordsmanship sessions with Keldorn during the school year. Keldorn dismissed the possibility of continuing to practice outside for the twofold reason that the odd demonstration would likely attract a crowd, which would only be distracting, as well as the fact that the weather would soon be turning colder which would require an indoor facility anyways. After a bit of thought, Harry proposed using the Room of Requirement, which was where they were currently headed.

"You say this room can become whatever you desire it to be?" the old knight asked.

"Well, I suppose that it technically becomes whatever you need it to be," Harry answered.

"And it can provide materials as well?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good, I look forward to seeing it."

They rounded the final corner close to the entrance to the Room of Requirement only to run into Draco Malfoy.

"Watch where you're going, Scar Head," Draco venomously spat.

"What are you doing so far away from the dungeons, Malfoy?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"None of your business, Potter."

The two students glared at each other while Keldorn watched the interaction with interest.

After a moment, Draco seemed to realize that there was nothing to gain from his staring contest with Harry, so he made to leave.

"I think I've had enough Gryffindor stench for one night," he said as he moved past the other occupants of the hall.

"I am watching you, Mr. Malfoy," Keldorn said, finally breaking his silence.

Draco stopped and turned back to the knight.

"Watching me do what?" the blond wizard asked.

"I know of your intentions," Keldorn answered, "and I advise you to give up now before you have
gone too far into the Darkness. You will not like what you find there."

"You know nothing about me or what I'm doing," Draco said contemptuously, "you're just a sword-waving, barbarian Muggle who's risen beyond his station."

"That will be twenty points from Slytherin and detention every night for the next week for disrespecting a member of the staff," the knight answered without being fazed by the arrogant student's insults.

Draco simply sneered in return before turning on his heel and marching off in the direction of the closest stairwell. After Draco left, Harry decided that Keldorn would likely not be forthcoming about anything he might know about the Slytherin, so he chose to simply continue on to the Room of Requirement in silence.

When he reached the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and his dancing trolls, Harry instructed the knight to wait while he passed back and forth in front of the opposite wall three times, concentrating on his need for a room to practice swordsmanship. On the third pass, a door appeared which Harry opened to reveal a square room with a high ceiling and a wooden floor. There was even a wooden training dummy near the far wall.

"Remarkable," Keldorn commented as they stepped into the room and closed the door.

The old knight quickly removed the needed equipment from his belt pouches before setting Harry to twenty minutes of footwork followed by twenty minutes of accuracy drills against the dummy. All throughout, the knight acted completely normal, without any hint of their earlier interaction with Draco. Harry's thoughts about his Slytherin nemesis were quickly driven from his mind by the demanding tone of his instructor's orders.

The last fifty minutes of their time in the Room of Requirement was spent on parrying drills, both with and without the use of a shield. As they were getting ready to leave, Harry stopped the knight with a question.

"Sir, I was thinking about who I could ask to join the lessons," he said as he gestured with his sword. "What would you think of me asking my friend Ron Weasley?"

"Weasley… the tall, red-haired boy?" the knight queried.

"That would be him."

"Honestly, Mr. Potter, I do not think he would accept your invitation."

"What? Why not? He's my best mate!"

"Your best mate he may well be, but that does not change the fact that I have observed him to be a bit, shall we say, lethargic when he is not working for something that he sees to be important."

Harry couldn't really argue with the knight's assessment of his friend, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

"Besides, Mr. Weasley seems to be more concerned with his new female companion than with his studies or other pursuits," Keldorn continued.

Harry was about to object but the knight waved him off.

"You may ask him if you wish, but do not be surprised when he turns you down in favor of
spending more time with his young lady. Such is the choice of most young men your age."

Harry nodded in response. At least he had permission to ask Ron if he was interested.

"When your friend turns your offer down," said the knight, "might I make a suggestion as to who you should invite next?"

"Okay," Harry said while warily nodding his head.

"Young Neville Longbottom has impressed me in our riding course."

"Neville?" Harry asked with a bit of incredulity.

"You think there is something wrong with Mr. Longbottom?"

"No, I mean… don't get me wrong, Neville's a great guy, but, well… he's a bit… slow."

"Slow?"

"Yeah. He's always the last to catch on to learning a new spell or he's causing some disaster or another in Potions."

"That may be, but the boy has a good heart and I believe that he would benefit from some added discipline."

"What do you mean he has a good heart? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Mr. Potter," Keldorn began in a patient tone, "you know what I am. I am a paladin, a servant of the Light and a sworn enemy of the Darkness. I would not teach anyone to wield any sort of weapon if I was not confident of their overall good intentions. I've told you before that I can sense the malice within people; I can feel their evil intentions as all paladins can. I would not teach young Mr. Malfoy how to wield a butter knife let alone a real blade.

"Mr. Longbottom, on the other hand, has no such malice within him. I think the sword work would do him some good, especially if he were to excel at it as he has with riding. He may not be the best wizard or the best spell-caster in this school, but that does not discount his worth as a man.

"The Light will judge us on our virtue, Mr. Potter, on our attempts to stay true to the Light in the face of Darkness. Whether or not we fail in our endeavors has little to do with our worth as men. As Saint Tarese would likely tell us, we are called to be faithful, Mr. Potter, not merely successful."

Harry nodded along with the words that the old knight spoke. He didn't really expect this conversation to turn into a philosophical discussion, but it had nonetheless. Surprisingly, Harry found that what the old man had to say struck a cord deep within him in a way that he could not readily identify.

"So, Mr. Potter, you ask why I think Mr. Longbottom would be a good candidate for sword work? It is because I believe he is free of the poison of malice, but above all because I believe he will be faithful in the endeavor."

The student and his instructor parted ways outside the Room of Requirement as the doorway disappeared and melded back into the wall. As Harry quickly walked back to Gryffindor Tower so as not to be caught out after curfew, he couldn't help but mentally go over his last conversation with Keldorn. He was probably still going to ask Ron about the sword lessons first before turning to Neville, but that wasn't what was weighing on him. No, it was the fact that the old knight's words
had touched something inside of him that bothered him as he walked back to his dormitory.

_We are called to be faithful, Mr. Potter, not merely successful._

Faithful. What did that mean? And what did it matter if you were faithful but failed in the end? Perhaps he was so taken with those words because of the almost complete hopelessness of his prophesized confrontation with Voldemort. The Dark Lord had decades of experience on him; Harry could never really hope to match him in raw magical power or skill. His likelihood of successfully defeating Voldemort was almost nil.

But perhaps if he was faithful to his task, perhaps if he fought against the evil of Voldemort and his Death Eaters with everything he had, perhaps if he gave everything to hold back the Darkness for just a little while longer, maybe, just maybe it wouldn't really matter if he succeeded or not.

Maybe the Light that Keldorn so often spoke about would find a way to keep shining in the Darkness even if Harry ultimately failed. After all, there would be others who would pick up the battle cry after he was gone. Voldemort couldn't last forever, even if he did manage to conquer the world, he would eventually be defeated.

Harry felt a new resolve, a new certainty as he made his way through the portrait hole and into the common room. He found that he could draw courage and purpose from the words that Keldorn imparted to him. The task placed before him no longer seemed quite so daunting, so impossible. He might not succeed, he might not win in his fight against the Dark Lord, but he would try, he would give it everything he had, he would be faithful and fight until the bitter end.

He would keep the Light shining in the Darkness, and the Darkness would not overcome it.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry approached Ron the next day after classes were finished to ask about him joining the sword lessons. Once again, Ron was in the common room sitting with Lavender.

"Hey Ron, Lavender," Harry said as he approached his two classmates.

"Hey, mate," Ron replied.

"Hi Harry," Lavender greeted, "you're not going to try and steal my Ronny away from me again are you?" She playfully wrapped her arms around the red-haired wizard as if to keep Harry from dragging him away. Ron seemed to find the situation to his liking, judging by the grin on his face.

"Err… no, I'm not going to steal him," Harry said.

"Good," said Lavender, although she refrained from removing her arms from the boy.

"But I did have a question for you, Ron," Harry continued.

"Oh, okay," Ron said.

"Well, you know how I've been studying swordsmanship with Sir Firecam for the past few months?"

"Yeah," Ron said while narrowing his eyes in thought.

"You've been learning to sword fight?" Lavender asked in surprise. "What are you doing that for?"
Lavender's questions caught Harry somewhat off guard. He didn't really expect to be having this conversation with her, but it seemed that she now considered Ron's business to be hers as well. Harry didn't really feel like explaining to the blonde about his need to control his anger or find some discipline for his life. So he decided to give a safer answer.

"Well, it's kind of fun," Harry said.

"Fun?" the blonde witch asked.

"Yeah, it's fun," Harry responded.

"I would have thought that you already had enough on your plate, what with N.E.W.T. classes, being Quidditch Captain, and Hermione," said Lavender.

"Well, yeah, I'm busy but… wait, what do you mean about Hermione?" Harry asked, turning the questions back on Lavender.

"Oh nothing…" she said somewhat mysteriously.

"Anyways," Ron said in an attempt to break the glare that Harry had focused on Lavender, "what did you want to ask me about the sword fighting?"

Harry turned his attention back to his best mate.

"Well, I was wondering if you wanted to join in. I could use someone at my own skill level to spar against."

"Oh, err…" Ron began, only to be cutoff by Lavender.

"Well, that's a nice thought, but I think Ron's too busy already." She then turned to address Ron directly, "I mean, you've got classes, your prefect duties, tryouts for the Quidditch team and we just came up with our new study schedule."

"Study schedule?" Harry questioned.

"Err, yeah, mate. Lavender's gonna help me study this year. That's what we were doing when you got here."

Harry looked at the table in front of them as well as around the area where they were sitting but found a distinct lack of textbooks and notes.

"You're not studying," Harry responded.

"Of course we are," Lavender said while Ron tried to non-verbally communicate something to Harry with a series of looks and head bobs. Harry thought Ron looked like he was having some sort of seizure.

"Anyways," Harry said, "What do you think, Ron?" Harry hoped that the added emphasis would keep Lavender from interrupting again.

Ron looked at the blonde witch for a long moment before turning back to Harry and responding.

"Err… sorry mate, but I just don't think I'll have time this year. You know, studying and Quidditch and all."

"Right," Harry responded, "well I'll let you two get back to 'studying.'"
Ron approached Harry later on that evening in their dorm room.

"Look, err, Harry," Ron began, "about earlier…"

"Don't worry about it, Ron," said Harry, "I get it."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I do. You've got something in the works with Lavender and you want to spend your free time with her."

"Well, yeah, I mean it doesn't mean that we're not still mates or anything, but, you know…"

"Like I said, I get it, Ron. I'm not angry. Sir Firecam didn't think you'd take me up on the offer anyways, so I kinda figured you're turn me down. But I thought I'd ask anyways."

"He thought I'd say no?"

"Yeah, he said you'd want to spend your time with, quote, 'your young lady.' He's pretty observant for an old man."

Ron colored a bit at hearing that one of the staff members was keeping his eye on his budding relationship with Lavender.

"So, Lavender, eh?" Harry queried.

Ron's face split into a grin.

"Yeah, mate, she's great!"

"Really? Lavender 'use your inner eye' Brown? Trelawney's biggest fan?"

"Well, yeah," Ron responded, "she can be a bit, err, flighty at times, but have you seen how she's filled out? She's one fit witch, she is."

"I'll give you that," Harry said. "So what the hell does she see in you then?"

"Oi! I'll have you know I'm quite the catch, I am," Ron said while he puffed out his chest.

"Sure you are."

"Yeah, well, not all of us can have witches lining up around the block to get a piece of us, oh great Mr. Chosen One," Ron shot back with a laugh. When he saw Harry's smile falter a bit, he tried to backtrack. "Err… sorry about that, mate, I kinda forgot about the, well, you know for a minute there."

"Don't worry about it, Ron. I don't want you walking on eggshells around me anyhow."

After a moment of silence, Ron changed the subject.

"So what's up with you and Hermione?" the red-haired wizard asked.

"What do you mean? Lavender mentioned something about Hermione earlier too."
"Well you know," Ron replied.

"No, I don't know. What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"Well, it's just that, the two of you, err, seem to be hanging out a lot recently."

"Ron, it's Hermione. We've always hung around each other."

"Yeah, but this is different."

"How so?"

"You know," Ron said with a waggle of his eyebrows which finally made Harry catch on to what his best mate was asking.

"Oh don't be ridiculous."

"Oi! See? You're even starting to sound like her!"

Harry was about to respond with a clever retort along the lines of, "I do not!" but then stopped to think.

*That did sound like something Hermione would say, maybe Ron has a point. And Hermione did look really good in those riding breeches...*

"So, err, would you be okay with it, if... you know... me and Hermione?" Harry asked a bit hesitantly.

That question made Ron grin like the cat that got the canary.

"Harry wuvs Hermione! Harry wuvs Hermione!" he started singing.

"Shut it, you git!" Harry said with his eyes shooting toward the door, making sure no one else was close enough to overhear.

"You wanna *snog* her! Ha!" Ron laughed. "You wanna do each other's homework! Ha!" Ron fell back onto his bed in laughter.

"Oi!" Harry shouted, his face heating up, "like you and Lav are any better!"

"I never said we were," Ron replied once he recovered, "but at least I have the bollocks to admit it." Ron looked over at his glaring best mate, "but seriously, Harry. Go for it. If you want to snog our high-strung, bossy, schoolwork-obsessed best friend, I won't stand in your way. Just get ready to write a three foot essay on proper snogging technique if you do."

"You're such a great help," Harry replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Glad to be of service!"

OoOoO

OoOoO

In the end, Harry wound up asking Neville to join his swordsmanship lessons with Keldorn. The quiet Gryffindor was hesitant at first, but once he realized that Harry was serious, he graciously accepted the offer.
On Saturday morning, Harry held tryouts for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He was surprised by the large crowd of students that showed up for a chance to win a spot on the roster. The fact that most of them were witches was a bit bewildering too. One student in particular left him dumbfounded.

"Hermione? You're trying out for the team?"

"Oh don't be ridiculous," the witch in question responded with a small grin. "I've no delusions of playing Quidditch. I'm here to show my support, oh captain my captain. Besides, I thought I could help."

"Oh?"

"Sure. I thought I could take notes for you or help you organize things," Hermione gestured to the pitch with the notebook she was holding.

"That's a great idea! Thanks, Hermione!" Harry said. "I'll probably really need your help too. I mean, look at all the people here."

"Oh, I doubt they're all here to try out, Harry."

"They why would they come?"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Come on, Harry. I know you don't follow the papers, but really. With the way the *Daily Prophet* has been going on about you being the 'Chosen One,' I'd be surprised if most of the witches in the castle didn't show up to catch a glimpse of you. You've become quite fanciable, you know."

Harry seemed to pale at that explanation. Hermione just grinned.

"Don't worry, Harry," she said while taking a step closer to him, "I'll keep all those mean old witches away."

*Is Hermione flirting with me?*

"Err…"

Harry was saved from having to reply by a rather loud seventh year.

"Let's get this show on the road, Potter!"

Harry and Hermione started things off by separating out the students that came to actually try out for the team from those just there to watch. The latter camp made up the vast majority, with quite a few students from other houses. Harry was even surprised to see a sprinkling of Slytherin green amidst the group that was sent to the stands.

In the end, picking a team wasn't that hard. Harry kept Ginny and Katie Bell from the previous year's team as Chasers, and added Demelza Robins to the line, a third year who was particularly good at dodging Bludgers. Ritchie Coote and Jimmy Peakes were selected as the Beaters; Harry hoped that they would be a great improvement over the previous year's disastrous duo of Kirke and Sloper. At the very least, they couldn't be any worse.

Choosing a Keeper was the hardest decision of the afternoon. Ron put on a good show, but he was evenly matched by the loud-mouthed and arrogant seventh year Cormac McLaggen. It the end,
Harry chose Ron, not necessarily because he was a better Keeper, but because he wasn't sure he would be able to put up with McLaggen on the team.

"Right, that's a wrap," Harry said as the tryouts finished. "I'll post the results on the bulletin board in the common room once I've finalized them."

As the crowd wandered away, Harry pulled Hermione aside for a private word.

"Thanks for coming out to help. You were great."

"You're welcome, Harry," Hermione replied.

"I know that you'd probably rather be in the library researching like you've been all week, so, yeah. It means a lot to me that you came."

Hermione blushed and looked at the ground.

"Can I tell you something, Harry?"

"Of course."

"Promise not to laugh."

"Okay…" Harry replied with a bit of suspicion.

"I didn't really get any useful research done this week in the library."

Harry wasn't sure what he was expecting her to say, but that certainly wasn't it.

"Err… what?"

"I mean, I kind of ignored you all week to research in the library but I didn't really get anything done. So I'm sorry about that."

"Oh. Well, that's okay." Harry was puzzled.

"I think it was more of my way of coping with, you know, that thing you told me about."

"Oh."

The prophecy.

"Yeah. I felt like as long as I was doing something, that I could find an answer that would fix everything. Find a solution to the problem. Like it was an Arithmancy assignment or something. But I realized that the answer wasn't just going to pop out of a book. This isn't that simple, is it?"

"No," Harry said in a quiet, serious tone, "it isn't."

"So I decided that I should have been spending my time with you instead of with all those dusty old books."

"Did Hermione Granger just insult the library?" Harry asked playfully.

"Don't you dare tell Ron that I said that!" she responded.

"Don't worry, he'll be too busy with Lavender wrapped around him to notice even if I did tell him."
"I told you those two were going to get together."

"Correct as always, Miss Granger."

"And don't you forget it. You should listen to me more often."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Good," Hermione said as she looped her arm through Harry's and started guiding him back towards the castle. "Now let's go back to the common room and get started on our Charms essays."

"But those aren't due for two weeks!" Harry protested, dragging his feet.

"Well there's no time like the present!"

As he was dragged off to do his homework, Harry could just hear Ron mocking him in his head.

*You wanna snog her! You wanna do each other's homework!*

Surprisingly, the thought just brought a smile to Harry's face.
The next few weeks passed by without incident. Quidditch practices generally went well except for when Ron became too self-conscious and would then go off his game, which made Harry a little worried about how his best mate would fare in front of the entire school during a real match. Hermione stayed on in her role as assistant to the team captain, taking notes during practice and generally helping Harry run things. He was quite sure that having her help kept him from overdoing it and demanding too much from his players like Oliver Wood used to do.

Neville joined the swordsmanship lessons and was doing rather well. Keldorn treated the newcomer much like he had initially treated Harry; making him do nothing but footwork before eventually letting him have a go at the target dummy. Neville didn't argue, but instead followed the old knight's orders as best he could. Harry was slightly disappointed that he hadn't yet had a chance to spar with Neville, but he supposed they would do so when Keldorn deemed them ready.

Professor Slughorn held an invitation-only party for several students near the beginning of October, a gathering which the students quickly began referring to as "the Slug Club." Apparently the portly professor liked spending his time rubbing elbows with influential people and helping to create connections between them. The students that were invited to the gathering either had prominent family members or Slughorn expected them to grow into rather important members of society themselves. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny all received an invitation to the first party. Ron didn't.

Initially Harry flat out rejected the idea of going to a party so that he could be fawned over by his Potions professor, but Hermione saw the party differently and really wanted to go.

"Just think, Harry," Hermione had argued, "we might meet some really interesting people there."

"No thanks," Harry responded.

"Oh, come on, you might enjoy yourself."

"Not interested."

"But I won't have nearly as much fun if you're not there," she said, switching tactics.

"I'm sure you've had fun without me around before."

"Maybe. But I'm certain I'll be all sad and lonely without you there next to me."

Harry hesitated a bit at the pleading look that Hermione was giving him.

"But…"

"Please?"

"Oh alright!"

"Thank you, Harry!" Hermione said with a smile as she leaned up to give him a quick kiss on the check.

And so it was that Harry had a smile on his face when he agreed to go to the Slug Club.

The gathering itself wasn't nearly as bad as Harry had feared. Professor Slughorn only spent a few
minutes fawning over Harry when he arrived before he switched to fawning over Hermione and generally giving each of the students in attendance much the same treatment. Harry had to admit that the meal was very good - roasted pheasant and potatoes, along with rice and mushrooms served with elf wine. Harry had never really had wine before, but he found that he rather liked the drink provided by Professor Slughorn.

As he sat down to dinner, Harry was surprised to see Keldorn taking the seat right next to him.

"Sir Firecam?"

"Good evening, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger," the knight replied in greeting.

"Good evening, Sir Firecam," a smiling Hermione responded.

"What are you doing here?" Harry continued his questioning, unable to fathom that the old knight would want to attend something like a Slug Club party.

"Well, I suppose I'm preparing to dine with those present. Is there something odd about my being here?"

"Err, I guess not," answered Harry, "but I just didn't take you for the type to go to dinner parties."

Keldorn smiled and let out a short chuckle.

"Believe it or not, Mr. Potter," the knight replied, "but my status as a paladin and even more so as a knight has seen me at quite a few 'dinner parties' as you call them. Although, back in Athkatla, we more often called them 'banquets.'"

"Really?" Hermione asked, "tell us about them."

"Well, very often some lord or nobleman or another would find a reason for hosting a banquet in his palace. He would of course invite his friends and family, but etiquette would demand that he should also invite the rest of the nobility, as well as the leading members of society. I might not have told you before, but the Order of the Radiant Heart is quite prestigious, and as such my fellow knights and I regularly received invitations to the banquets held in Athkatla and the surrounding countryside. Professor Slughorn's gathering this evening is a lot like the banquets of my homeland, if not as lavish and on a much smaller scale of course."

"But why would you want to go to a party with a bunch of stuffy noblemen?" Harry asked, still at a loss as to why a warrior would be spending his time rubbing elbows with simpering politicians.

"Why wouldn't I, Mr. Potter? Just as etiquette demands that certain people are invited to a banquet, so too does it demand the acceptance of such invitations unless there is a good reason not to. And besides, accepting someone's graciously offered hospitality is the right and good thing to do. Accepting a gift or an offered place at table gives honor to the giver. Rejecting an offer, on the other hand, can be seen as a dire insult, something that you should not do lightly or without due cause. Remember that, Mr. Potter."

This was something that Harry had never really thought about before. Why did life have to be so complicated? If he didn't want to go to a party, why couldn't he just say he wasn't going without everyone getting offended?

"It is important, however," the knight continued, "to treat all such invitations in the same manner. I would accept invitations from rich and poor, nobleman and peasant alike. As a paladin and a servant of the Light, I would not want to give the impression that the wealthy are worthy of my
attention while the common folk are not. I can truly say that some of the more gracious and hospitable hosts I have met have been very poor, and yet they still invited me to their table in thanks for some service."

"But wouldn't your time as a paladin be better spent out in the world, fighting the Darkness?" Harry asked.

"There are more ways to fight the Darkness than just swinging a sword," Keldorn answered. "A kind word or a small act of charity can sometimes do more to drive back the Darkness than an entire legion of soldiers. The true battleground is within," Keldorn said as he tapped his chest above his heart. "Helping the Light to shine within a man or woman's heart is a greater victory than any deed that can be accomplished with the force of arms. Sometimes the mere presence of a truly good person at a banquet or a dinner party can be enough to turn the tide."

Harry sat in pensive silence and thought about the old knight's words while Hermione went on to interrogate Sir Firecam about the different customs of his homeland. Harry supposed there was a lot about life that he just didn't know. He never realized how important things like going to the Slug Club could be. He looked around the table to see that everyone was having a good time for the most part. Ginny was laughing with a Ravenclaw witch that Harry didn't know; Cormac McLaggen had his head bent, whispering with a seventh year Hufflepuff, and Professor Slughorn had the rapt attention of the students seated nearest to him as he told some boisterous story.

When he thought about it, Harry had to admit that even he was having a good time. The food was good and he did get to meet Gwenog Jones before they sat down to eat. Slughorn did gush over him being the Boy Who Lived, but it wasn't too much, and in general the Potions Professor found something to gush over everyone about. Besides, he was with Hermione who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself and Harry found her feelings to be infectious. Perhaps if he didn't start out looking at the party as something to be avoided he would have been having an even better time.

Sometime later, Slughorn skillfully grabbed everyone's attention and began a single conversation for the entire group by addressing Keldorn from across the table.

"Sir Firecam," the portly Potions professor began, "I was wondering if you might tell us all a bit about your homeland?"

"Tell us what it's like to be a knight," Ginny added.

"I'm afraid, Miss Weasley, that most of what makes up being a knight is not all that exciting, and the moments that are exciting would not make for very pleasant dinner conversation," Keldorn replied.

"Have you ever slain any dragons?" asked a Ravenclaw that Harry didn't know.

"Perhaps," Keldorn answered with a small smile.

"Come now," said Slughorn, "there must be something you can tell us."

"Well, I suppose I could tell you a story," the knight who now had every face at the table turned in his direction responded. "Several years ago, my squire Ajantis and I were in a small village a few days' journey west of Athkatla in the Umar Hills called Imnesville. We were there to seek out the cause of a few mysterious disappearances that had plagued the townspeople. The mayor of the sleepy little place thought that the blame could be laid at the feet of a band of Ogres that had taken up residence in the caves just north of the village. It was a natural assumption since Ogres are, for the most part, quite bloodthirsty creatures. So we set out to find them."
"It wasn't very difficult, as Ogres do not tend to be very subtle. Ajantis wanted to attack on sight and slay the beasts for their obvious crimes. I, however, insisted that we speak with them first, for while Ogres are very dimwitted creatures, they are able to converse. It was a good thing we did so too. As it turns out, the Ogre clan had experienced the same type of mysterious disappearances that were plaguing the town.

"In the end, after the mystery was solved, that particular clan of Ogres turned out to be a peaceful bunch, and I was even able to help them establish a trade agreement with the town. To this day they are the only clan of Ogres in all of Amn that openly trades with humans. I believe that the moral of such a story would be to always try for a peaceful solution before resorting to violence."

"So what was making people disappear then?" asked Cormac McLaggen.

Keldorn hesitated for a moment before answering.

"The culprit turned out to be a Shade Lord, a type of undead spirit that was preying upon the living in an attempt to gain power. Ajantis and I sent it back whence it came."

"Undead?" a Ravenclaw asked.

"Slaves of the Darkness that continue on in a cursed existence after death. Some are mere tools, corpses animated by foul sorceries. Others, like the Shade Lord, willingly chose their living nightmare, thinking that the Darkness would grant them power or immortality or some other such nonsense. Fools, all of them, to purchase damnation at the cost of their very soul."

Harry shivered at the memory of another undead spirit inhabiting the body of his Defense Against the Dark Arts professor during his first year.

"Where is your squire Ajantis now?" Hermione asked, no doubt trying to pull to conversation away from such a terrible topic.

Keldorn smiled sadly.

"He now rests in the Light, having died some years ago. He was a good man, and became a fine paladin. He fought valiantly, but ultimately fell in battle. But I do not think that is a tale to tell here."

Talk of death and undeath effectively put a damper on the conversation for a little while until Slughorn was able to skillfully change the subject.

All in all, once Harry moved past his initial aversion to being part of the Slug Club, Harry found that he had a rather nice evening.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The days slipped by as Harry fell into a routine of classes, Quidditch practice, swordsmanship lessons with Keldorn and Neville, and spending the little free time had had left over with his friends. However, that time was increasingly spent with just Hermione as Ron seemed to always be hanging around with Lavender.

The last weekend in October saw Gryffindor playing against Slytherin in a rather brutal Quidditch match. The Lions were flying well for the most part, the sole exception being one Ronald Weasley. Ron had started off alright, but once the Slytherins launched into their chorus of "Weasley Is Our
King" his confidence and subsequently his concentration began to falter. Soon nearly every shot taken by the Slytherin Chasers was making it through the goals. It was only Harry's desperate dive for the Snitch that managed to save the game for Gryffindor, and just barely at that, the final score being 320 points for Gryffindor over Slytherin's 300.

As the Gryffindor team made their way back to the tower, Harry lagged behind alongside a dejected Ron. The red-haired wizard hadn't said a word since the end of the match and Harry was worried for his best mate. They had just entered the common room when Ron finally turned to Harry.

"Harry, mate," Ron began, "I think I—"

"Ronny!"

Whatever he was going to say was cut off by the shout of an enthusiastic Lavender Brown. The blonde witch squealed as she threw herself at the young wizard, her arms clasping around his neck. Ron in turn had to wrap his arms around her waist to keep her from falling to the ground.

"You did wonderfully!" Lavender said.

"Are you daft?" Ron asked. "Did you actually see the game? I was pathetic!"

"Nonsense," Lavender replied. "You just need some more confidence. And I know just the thing to give it to you."

"What's that?" a confused Ron asked.

"This."

Lavender then proceeded to fuse her lips to Ron's. The hoots and cheers from the rest of the house seemed to have no impact whatsoever upon the two sixth years that were apparently trying to see how far down each other's throats they could reach.

Harry turned away from the sight to look around the common room. His eyes fell upon Hermione only to catch her staring at him. Her face became bright red as she quickly looked away. Harry made his way over to her, pushing through his housemates who were loudly encouraging Ron and Lavender.

"Hey," Harry said when he finally made it to Hermione's side.

"Hi," Hermione somewhat shyly greeted him in return, her face still bright red. Harry was confused by Hermione's suddenly timid manner - that wasn't really like the girl he knew so well.

"Er… so, Ron and Lavender, huh?" Harry said in an attempt to break the awkwardness.

Hermione looked over at the energetically snogging couple before glancing back at Harry. Her face seemed to become even brighter, if that was possible. She cleared her throat before speaking.

"I told you those two were going to get together," she replied. "You should listen to me more often."

"I always listen to you," Harry said.

"Pfft," Hermione huffed with a roll of her eyes, "sure you do."

Ginny chose that moment to come bounding over to them with a grin plastered on her face.
"Oh Hermione! Isn't this great?" the short redhead asked. She looked at Harry somewhat playfully for a moment before turning back to Hermione, "so far, Operation Quidditch is proceeding according to plan."

"Ginny!" Hermione growled through clenched teeth.

Ginny, however, was unfazed.

"Something the matter, Hermione? the younger witch asked.

"What plan is this?" Harry asked in confusion.

Hermione once again reddened and inspected her shoes while Ginny smiled mysteriously.

"Oh nothing. We girls have merely been in collusion about getting certain wizards to open their eyes."

"Ginevra..." Hermione once again growled, albeit this time with much more danger laced in her voice.

"What?" Ginny asked innocently. "I was just going to tell dear Harry here that we, the lovely and beautiful witches of Gryffindor, have been plotting to get Ron and Lavender together, which seems to have worked rather spectacularly. Wouldn't you agree, Harry?"

"Err, yeah, I guess so," Harry replied. "They certainly seem to be out to prove that they're quite the couple."

"No, not about Ron and Lav," Ginny said before throwing her arm around Hermione's shoulders. "Don't you agree that Hermione and I are lovely and beautiful witches?"

Harry sputtered and choked before answering.

"Err... I mean, yeah, err, yes," Harry said as his face started to heat up.

"Yes what?" Ginny asked with predatory smile on her face.

Harry shook his head and gathered his bearings before saying what he knew Ginny wanted to hear.

"Yes, Hermione and you are very lovely and beautiful witches."

"Hear that, Hermione?" Ginny asked as she turned her devious grin to the witch next to her. "I might have to snag this one up before someone else takes him. Oh wait, I already have a boyfriend."

Hermione didn't respond, but instead took on a crimson complexion once again.

"Seeing Ron and Lavender go at it like that makes me wonder where Dean is," Ginny continued. "I could use a good snog myself. How about you, Hermione?"

Hermione simply pushed the redhead away from her before lifting her nose into the air.

"I think I've had just about enough of this," she announced. "Harry, I'll see you later." With that, Hermione turned and made her way up to the girls' dormitory.

"Alright, Gin, what was that all about?" Harry asked.
"Oh noting," she responded. "Sorry, Harry, I've got to go find Dean. Bye!"

Girls. Harry thought as he shook his head. He had no idea what Ginny was up to, but it probably wasn't going to end up in his favor. As the redhead went off to find her boyfriend, and as the cheering in the common room became louder as Ron and Lavender continued their show, Harry's eyes wandered over to the empty girls' staircase.

Girls.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The first Saturday in November was set for a visit to Hogsmeade, which found Harry and Hermione in the Entrance Hall waiting for the remaining member of their trio before setting off for the village. After waiting for a few minutes, they finally spied the tall wizard running over to them with his now constant goofy grin on his face.

"Hey Harry, Hermione," Ron said by way of greeting.

"Ron," Hermione said.

"Right then," Harry said. "Let's go."

"Err… about that," Ron replied, "sorry, but I can't go with you two today."

"What?" Harry asked, dumbfounded.

"Sorry, but Lav and I've decided that this would be our first date," Ron answered.

"You mean Lavender decided," Harry responded.

"Well…"

"Fine," Hermione interrupted with a roll of her eyes. "Go on. Shoo. Lav Lav's lips might be getting cold without you."

"Oi! There's no call for that now," Ron said. "Besides, maybe you should find yourself a bloke for a snog or two. Do you some good, it would."

"Oh would it?!" Hermione asked with a glare as she drew her wand. "Do you have any other advice for me, Ronny?"

"Err… nope," said the young wizard as he backed away before turning to Harry. "Have fun today!"

Ron then turned tail and ran before Hermione decided that she wanted to put her wand to good use.

"You going to use that on me?" Harry asked while gesturing to the wand that was still clenched in Hermione's hand.

"Oh don't be ridiculous," she responded as she put her wand away and turned to face Harry. "I guess it's just the two of us then."

"Looks like."

They rode down in comfortable silence and arrived to see the small wizarding village overrun with
students.

"Well, I guess you'll want to go to Scrivenshaft's," Harry said.

"Actually," Hermione began with a bit of color coming to her face, "I was thinking of going to Gladrags."

"Oh. Right then, let's go."

The two arrived at the clothing store and entered. Harry was a bit confused because Hermione had never really wanted to go clothes shopping before, at least as far as he could remember. She normally only wanted to check out the stationary shop and the bookstore.

"So, err, what were you looking for in here?" Harry asked.

"Well," Hermione answered without looking at her companion, "Ginny told me that since the riding class started, Gladrags has started carrying some different outfits to wear for horseback riding. I thought I'd check them out."

"Oh."

They separated and Harry wandered about the store for a little while. A few minutes later Harry was looking at a pair of boots when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned and his eyes widened when he saw Hermione dressed in a short, white jacket along with a pair of tight, red, riding breeches. She turned to the side to let him get a good look at her profile before she looked at him over her shoulder.

"Well, what do you think?"

Harry coughed and it took him a moment to calm down to the point where he could speak.

"Err… what?"

Hermione smirked at him.

"I said, what do you think? Do you like the red breeches?" she asked as she slowly spun in a circle. "I wanted something that was, you know, 'Gryffindor.'"

Harry was finding it hard to concentrate, especially with the way that the tight breeches accentuated Hermione's behind.

"Err… I think you look great. I mean, they look great."

Hermione continued to smirk at him.

"Thank you. Now wait here," she said as she slowly walked away from him with what Harry thought was a bit of extra wiggle in her step. "I want to know what you think of the yellow breeches too."

Harry's mouth went dry. In the end, after she modeled both the yellow and then the red breeches for him once again, Harry told Hermione that she should take both. He also insisted on paying for them, a gesture to which Hermione only put up a token resistance.

They left the clothing shop and Hermione threaded her arm through Harry's as they made their way down the street.
"What do you say we get something to drink?" Hermione asked.

"Sounds good."

They made their way into the Three Broomsticks, which was as crowded as ever. They found an empty table for two and ordered two butterbeers when Madam Rosemerta came over.

"Thank you for shopping with me today, Harry," Hermione said once they had sipped their drinks.

"My pleasure," Harry responded.

Hermione smirked at him once again.

"I bet it was," she said softly.

Harry didn't know how to respond to that, so he just stayed silent. After a moment, He spoke up to change the topic.

"I wonder what Ron and Lavender are up to. You think they ever made it down to Hogsmeade or are they taking advantage of the empty common room?"

"For the sake of the first and second years, I would hope not," Hermione responded.

Harry grinned.

"Yeah, no need to scandalize the munchkins."

Hermione grinned back at him.

"Don't worry, I'm sure Lavender has him well in hand."

Harry laughed out loud at that.

"I can't believe you said that!" he replied.

Hermione blushed.

"I didn't mean it that way…"

"But still…"

"Let's not talk about Ron and Lavender," Hermione said.

"Why not?"

"Because. What's wrong with that? Don't you like spending time just with me without worrying about Ron?" Hermione asked while pouting at him.

Since when did Hermione start pouting?

"Of course I like spending time with you."

"Good."

They lapsed into silence once again. A moment later, Harry felt something nudging against his foot. When he saw the coy smile on Hermione's face, he realized that it was her. So he nudged her back, and with full blown smiles they both started a little game under the table. It was fun.
Sometime later, just after Harry had ordered a second round of butterbeers, he noticed Keldorn sitting at the bar, laughing alongside Hagrid. He nodded in their direction.

"Look. Hagrid's over at the bar with Sir Firecam."

Hermione glanced over before turning back to Harry.

"Those two do seem to spend a lot of time together," she replied.

"Yeah, looks like the old knight's found a friend."

Hermione smiled, "I'm happy for him. It must be difficult being so far from home."

"Yeah," Harry said, "just think about it. Being pulled into a different world, where no one knows you or anything about you. I'd never even heard of a paladin before he showed up."

A look of surprised realization appeared on Hermione's face as Harry was speaking.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Harry!" Hermione began in the hurried, excited voice that she often used when she had finally figured something out. "Oh my! No one knows anything about Sir Firecam! Could that be it? Come on, we've got to go see Professor Dumbledore!" she exclaimed as she jumped to her feet and pulled Harry out of his chair.

"Right now?" Harry asked in confusion. "Why does no one knowing Sir Firecam mean that we have to run off to Dumbledore? I was kinda having fun here…"

"Oh I know. I was having fun too, Harry. Don't worry, we'll do this again. But this is important."

"Alright," Harry acquiesced as he threw some coins onto the table. Hermione then latched onto his arm and pulled him across the room, out the door, and up the road toward the castle.

"This had better be worth it," Harry grumbled as they trekked back to the castle.

"Don't worry, Harry," Hermione replied, "it is. I promise you'll understand when we see the Headmaster."

"Oh alright."

Harry was a bit disappointed that his day in Hogsmeade with Hermione was being cut short, but he supposed it could be worse. He did get to watch her try on those tight breeches after all.
Chapter 14

Shortly thereafter, Harry and Hermione arrived at the gargoyle which guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office. The statue, however, refused to budge.

"I don't suppose you know the password?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry answered. "We could always guess though."

"I don't think guessing is going to work. Dumbledore's too smart to pick an easy password," Hermione replied.

"Lemon Drop," Harry said.

"Besides, he might not even be in there."

"Ice Mice."

"Maybe Professor McGonagall knows where he is…"

"Blood Pop."

"Oh… why is there a password to the Headmaster's office anyways?"

"Cockroach Cluster."

"Shouldn't he be available to students at all times?"

"Acid Pop."

"I mean, what if there was an emergency?"

"Chocolate Frog."

"How are we supposed to let the Headmaster know if something is terribly wrong if there's a stone statue barring the way to his office all the time?"

"Licorice Wand."

"Oh, this is just infuriating!"

"Sugar Quill."

The sound of stone grinding on stone resounded in the hall as the gargoyle stepped aside.

"How did you do that?" Hermione queried.

Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"It was 'Sugar Quill," he said.

"You mean to tell me that the greatest wizard alive uses *sweets* as the password to his private office?"

Harry just nodded.
"As far as I can remember, the password's always been some sort of sweet. I figured I would guess it eventually," he replied.

Hermione shook her head incredulously.

"Unbelievable."

"After you, my lady," Harry said with a sweeping bow.

"Oh, you're such a gentleman," Hermione said with a roll of her eyes as she stepped onto the magical staircase.

"Hey! Why're you mad at me? You're the one who cut short our day in Hogsmeade to run back to the Headmaster!"

Hermione sighed, "You're right. I'm sorry, Harry. I'm not mad at you. I just can't believe that the password was so easy to guess."

"Well, you did just say how the students should have access to the Headmaster's office. Maybe this is his compromise - easy-to-guess passwords."

They arrived at the top of the stairs and Harry knocked on the heavy oak door.

"Come in," Dumbledore sounded from within.

Harry held the door open for Hermione before following her and closing it behind them.

"Good afternoon Harry, Miss Granger. What can I do for you?"

Harry just pointed to his best friend who was standing beside him.

"You'll have to ask her. I've no clue why we're here."

"Well, then, have a seat," the old wizard said while conjuring a second armchair in front of his desk. The two students took their seats before Hermione launched into her explanation.

"I think I know what the 'power he knows not' is," the witch said.

Harry's mouth fell open in surprise.

"You figured that out while we were playing footsie in the Three Broomsticks?" he asked.

Hermione blushed at Harry's mention of their activity in front of the Headmaster.

"Never mind what we were doing," she responded, "the point is I think I might have figured it out."

"Do tell, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eyes.

"It's Sir Firecam."

"I think you'll have to explain a bit more, Hermione," Harry said.

"Just think," she continued, "he's a paladin, a type of holy warrior that our world as a whole has no experience with. He has magic-like abilities that have never been seen before by anyone. For example, the way he healed me was almost miraculous. Who knows what else he's really capable of? Certainly not Voldemort. Thus, the new abilities that Sir Firecam has brought to our universe
Dumbledore leaned back in his chair in silent thought with his fingers steepled in front of his face. Harry, however, was quick to bring up an objection to Hermione's theory.

"That's all fine, Hermione," the young wizard began, "but *I'm* the one mentioned in the prophecy, not Sir Firecam. *I'm* supposed to be the one with 'the power he knows not,' not Sir Firecam."

Hermione wasn't deterred in the least by Harry's objection. Instead, she smiled as she looked over at him.

"And that's why we get him to teach you how to be a paladin," she replied.

"Don't be daft," Harry said, "do I look like a knight in shining armor to you?"

Hermione actually blushed a little bit before answering.

"That's beside the point," she replied. "Remember, Sir Firecam has mentioned on several occasions that being a *knight* is different than being a *paladin*. He's a knight because of the order that he's in, but he was a paladin long before he joined his order."

"We don't even know if I'm capable of doing the things he does," Harry said as his temper started to rise a bit. "Do the things he does even work through magic like ours? You might as well try teaching a fish to breathe on land!"

"But it *could* just be a different way of accessing the same magical foundations that underlie the multiverse. There has to be a common set of laws that governs everything. And if that's the case, it's likely that he would be able to teach you in whatever way he would teach any other new paladin on his home world."

Harry was not convinced. In fact he didn't like the idea at all, but he couldn't think of any other arguments against Hermione's idea. She was the brightest witch of their generation after all. Harry had no delusions that he could actually argue with her and win about a real, important topic. So he instead turned his attention to Dumbledore to see what the old wizard thought.

The Headmaster had clearly been following the discussion between his two students but had made no interruptions. He only spoke up when Harry and Hermione both finally turned to him.

"I think," Dumbledore began, "that Miss Granger's idea might have some merit."

"I said *might*, Miss Granger, and I meant it. We do not know if Harry here, or anyone else from our world for that matter, would be able to learn to wield the type of magic employed by Sir Firecam. It may be possible, but then again it may not."

Hermione's grin faded a bit at that but didn't disappear entirely.

"I certainly see no difficulty in asking him if he thought you could learn his type of magic, Harry," Dumbledore continued, "or if he would even consider taking you on as a student."

"Great," Harry grumbled, "I get to sign up for even more classes."

Dumbledore merely smiled enigmatically, his ever present twinkle sparkling in his eyes.

"If our dear Miss Granger is in fact correct, Harry, I do not think that this will be something to
grumble over. Rather, it could be the key to saving our world. Besides, we can worry about your class schedule when the time comes. You certainly wouldn't be the first student in Hogwarts' history to have an odd course of studies."

"But how is learning how to miraculously heal someone going to help me fight Voldemort?" Harry protested.

"Harry," Hermione responded, "there's more to what Sir Firecam can do than just healing people. He's a warrior after all. He's sworn to fight against the most evil and vile beings in the world. And from the few stories he's told, it sounds like his world has even more dangerous magic than our own. He's got to know a thing or two that would be helpful in our fight."

"Besides," said Dumbledore, "this theory seems to fit in well with some of Voldemort's recent activities. You already know of Professor Snape's role as a spy for the Order. Well, he has discovered that this past summer's attack on you in Diagon Alley was not really aimed at you, Harry, but was rather meant to test Sir Firecam. It appears that Voldemort was quite disturbed by our friend's appearance and abilities during the battle at the Department of Mysteries. I believe that Voldemort has become rather hesitant with this new opponent about whom he knows almost nothing.

"In any event," Dumbledore continued, "I do think that the idea is worth investigating. It is certainly a better candidate for 'the power he knows not' than anything I've been able to come up with."

"Great," Harry grumbled once again. Hermione narrowed her eyes and glared at him but didn't say anything.

"Harry," Dumbledore went on, "I think you should approach Sir Firecam about this idea, and I think you should do so soon. We don't know how long Voldemort and his Death Eaters will remain inactive after all."

"Right," Harry said as he rose to his feet, "well if that's all, I suppose we should be on our way then."

Once the two students had said their goodbyes to the Headmaster and were back in the corridors of the castle, Hermione grabbed Harry's arm and spun him around to face her.

"What exactly was your problem up there?" the irate witch asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry responded.

"I'm talking about the fact that I had an idea that just might help us fight Voldemort and all of a sudden you're completely opposed to it. What's so terrible about it?"

"I just don't think it will work."

"Why not? Professor Dumbledore thinks it has merit. I thought you liked Sir Firecam and that you'd jump at the chance at learning more from him. You certainly seem to like learning swordsmanship and riding from him."

"Yeah, well, whatever."

"Don't you 'whatever' me, Harry James Potter!" Hermione shrieked.

"You're not my mother," Harry responded rather petulantly.
"What has gotten into you?!"

Harry looked down to his feet and fumed in silence for a few moments.

Hermione took a step closer to him and reached out to lay her hand on his arm.

"Harry?" she asked in a much softer tone of voice, "what is it? What's wrong? Tell me what's really bothering you."

Harry glanced up at her for a moment before looking back at the floor and allowing his anger to deflate.

"Why did you have to bring this all up now, today?"

"I don't understand, Harry."

"We were having such a good time in Hogsmeade. It was fun, you know, just spending the day with you. Why'd you have to cut it all short and come back here to talk about the bloody prophecy?"

"You're angry because I brought you back to the castle to talk to Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes!" Harry exclaimed to the ceiling before looking down at his feet and continuing in a softer voice. "I'm always thinking about that damned prophecy. But today, in Hogsmeade, well, I was kind of able to forget about it for a while. It was almost like I was normal. Just a kid out in the village spending time with his… friend."

"And then I ruined it all by dragging you back here to talk about it. Oh Harry, I'm sorry!" Hermione said as she wrapped her arms around his neck in a tight embrace. "I didn't mean to ruin our day like that. I guess I could have waited until tonight, or tomorrow for that matter. But you know how I get sometimes - I get an idea and I just have to act on it right then."

"Yeah, I know," Harry sighed as he returned the hug. "You wouldn't be Hermione if you didn't rush off to research in the library or run your ideas by a professor."

Hermione pulled back just far enough to look Harry in the eyes.

"So do you forgive me?" she asked.

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Thank you, Harry," she said before leaning up to give him a light kiss on the cheek which brought a small smile to Harry's face. "I guess I'll have to make it up to you somehow."

"Oh? And just how do you intend to do that?"

"I have no idea really," she said as she looped her arm through his and began walking in the direction of Gryffindor Tower. "Do you have any suggestions?"

That's not something a pretty girl should ask a teenage guy, Harry thought to himself.

"None that immediately come to mind," was what Harry actually said.

"Well, I suppose I'll just have to think of something then," Hermione answered as she leaned her head against Harry's shoulder. "And just for the record, I had a wonderful day today too, Harry. I'm sorry I cut it short. You can be surprisingly fun when you're not either being all sulky or swinging
"an overgrown stick around," Hermione said mischievously.

"Oi! You're supposed to be nice to me right after apologizing." Harry said with mock indignation.

"Oh fine."

"That's better. Now let's go see if Ron and Lavender are terrorizing all the firsties by snogging in the common room."

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry's next riding class started off normally enough. Hermione decided to wear her new red breeches, which put a goofy grin on Harry's face. Hermione seemed rather pleased with that as well.

The students were all waiting near the stables for class to begin when one of the other girls came over to Harry.

"Hi Harry," said a Gryffindor girl that Harry didn't immediately recognize.

"Hi, err…"

"Romilda, Harry," the dark-haired girl said as she batted her eyelashes, "my name's Romilda Vane."

"Err… nice to meet you," Harry responded.

"Thanks, Harry. I asked Sir Firecam if I could switch to this class instead of the one for third and fourth years. It's at a better time for me, not to mention that there are so many more interesting people to talk to."

"Oh really?" Hermione asked as she walked up to Harry's side.

Romilda only spared the older witch a glance before addressing her response to Harry.

"Well, I can think of at least one person in this class that I could talk to all day and all night if need be."

"Err…"

"What do you think of my new breeches, Harry?" the younger girl asked as she spun around. "Gladrags had a sale you know. I think these are much better than my old pair - they allow for much more movement. Did you know I'm rather flexible? I can quite easily bend down and touch my toes."

And with that, Romilda turned her back to Harry, bent over, and touched her toes right in front of him. Harry's eyes widened in surprise at the rather brazen display put on by the young witch.

Hermione, on the other hand, narrowed her eyes into a frightening glare and then grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him to the other side of the barn, grumbling all the way.

"Stupid cow… Who does she think she is?"

"Umm…” Harry began, "not that I mind you manhandling me like this, but what was that all
about?"

Hermione turned her glare on Harry before answering.

"That... that... witch is a stupid cow who's severely lacking in common decency! Not to mention that she probably couldn't string a coherent thought together if her life depended on it!"

"Whoa there, Hermione. Where's all this suddenly coming from?"

"Oh don't be obtuse, Harry. She was clearly trying to come on to you. Bending over in front of you like that. She and the rest of the witches like her are only interested in you because you're 'the Chosen One.'"

"What do you mean 'the witches like her'?"

"Harry," Hermione took a deep breath and then began in a patient tone, "surely you've noticed the attention you've been getting from Hogwarts' female population lately?"

"What?"

"You mean you haven't noticed all the looks they've been giving you? The smiles and giggles when you walk by?"

"No."

"Well, they're there. Trust me."

"Well, what should I do about them?" Harry asked as he glanced back over to see Romilda pouting at him.

"Ignore them," Hermione said. "Like I said, they're only interested in the Chosen One. They don't know and they're not interested in the real Harry, not like..." Hermione stopped herself from saying whatever it was she was going to say and looked down to her feet.

"Not like?" Harry asked in a whisper.

But, their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Keldorn who called for attention.

"Right," the old knight began, "get your horses saddled and out into the yard. I want to see everyone at a canter in fifteen minutes or less. Potter, Granger, Longbottom, Greengrass, Li, and Abbott, come with me."

While most of the students went into the stables to see to their horses, the six students named by Keldorn followed the knight to another building.

"You six have already proven yourselves to be quite capable on horseback." Hermione smiled radiantly at her instructor's praise. "So I think it's time you moved on. This course is called Riding and Magical Mounts for a reason. Today, you will be starting with the hippogriffs." Hermione's smile faltered and her face paled while Harry grinned. "Hagrid tells me that you should already know how to approach a hippogriff from your Care of Magical Creatures course, so today I want you to pick a hippogriff from those in the yard behind this barn and familiarize yourself with them, much like you did with your horses. As you should already know, hippogriffs are extremely intelligent but also extremely proud animals. So treat them with proper respect or you will regret it. Any questions? No? Then get to it!"
Harry walked through the barn to see several hippogriffs in the yard beyond. He quickly spied the one he wanted and walked up to it. Harry bowed low, a gesture that was immediately returned by the creature.

"Hello, Buckbeak," Harry said. "How've you been? You want to be my mount for the next few classes?"

The hippogriff made a low chirping noise that Harry took for an affirmative.

Harry enjoyed that session spending time with Buckbeak, learning how to care for a hippogriff and the interesting harnesses and equipment that a person could use for riding one of the creatures. He was excited for the next class when he would hopefully get to take Buckbeak up into the sky.

Hermione, on the other hand, didn't seem to be enjoying herself all that much. It seemed to Harry that his best friend would much rather be riding her horse than worrying about hippogriffs. He supposed that the girl's aversion to flying had something to do with her overly cautious approach to the creatures.

After the class was finished, Harry stayed back to speak with Keldorn.

"You can head back to the tower, Hermione," Harry said to his best friend, "I'm going to stick around and talk to Sir Firecam about, well, you know."

"Alright, Harry," she responded, "just don't take too long. I want to know what he says."

With that the bushy-haired witch started walking back to the castle.

"You just wanted to watch her walk away," said a voice from behind him that startled the young wizard. Harry turned to see Ginny standing there with a smirk on her face. "Go on, admit it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry replied. However, he did turn back to watch Hermione as she made her way to the castle entrance.

"Yes you do," said Ginny. "You just like watching her cute little bum in those tight riding breeches."

"Ginny!"

The petite witch threw her head back and laughed.

"Just admit it, Harry. You fancy Hermione."

"Shouldn't you be off snogging Dean somewhere?" Harry said sarcastically.

"Shouldn't you be off snogging Hermione somewhere?" Ginny shot back.

Harry glared at her, but she just laughed again.

"Seriously, Harry. Go for it. I highly doubt that she would object to a little tonsil Quidditch with you."

"If you'll excuse me, I need to speak with Sir Firecam."

"Oh alright. Be stubborn. Just don't be too stubborn, Hermione might move on. Then where will you find a girl that likes you for you and isn't just some fan girl?"
Harry strode away from the teasing Weasley to find Keldorn looking over the tack and harness in the stable.

"Sir Firecam?" he asked, "can I ask you a question?"

"What is it, Mr. Potter?"

"Well I was wondering, err… that is, Hermione had an idea."

"Yes?"

"Well, what did Professor Dumbledore tell you about me and Voldemort?"

Keldorn's demeanor shifted as he realized the seriousness of the conversation.

"Not very much, Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced around to make sure they were alone.

"You've probably heard people calling me 'the Chosen One,' right?" the knight nodded. "Well there's some truth to that. There's a prophecy, you see, that says I'm the one that can beat him. But it also says that I'm supposed to have a 'power that he knows not.' Hermione had the idea that you are that power. Or I guess that being a paladin is the power. So we were thinking, well, could you teach me to be a paladin like you?"

Keldorn regarded Harry for a long, silent moment before finally speaking.

"No."

"What? Why not?" Harry asked in surprise at the knight's short, negative answer. He'd thought that he would at least consider it for a while before turning him down.

"You know nothing of what you ask."

"But you could teach me!"

"Mr. Potter, consecration as a paladin is not a means to an end. I will not set you upon a sacred path simply so you can fight Voldemort."

"What do you mean, 'simply to fight Voldemort'? He's the darkest, most evil wizard in the world! I thought you of all people would want to use every advantage to fight him!"

"I will not consecrate you just to fight one man."

"Why not?" Harry nearly shouted as his temper started to rise.

"Fine. Let's say that I do consecrate you and you do go on to defeat him. What then?"

"What has that got to do with anything?!"

"It has everything to do with it, boy!" Keldorn said, his voice rising sharply to the point that he too was nearly shouting. "Becoming a paladin is not something that you can turn off. Once you're consecrated, there is no turning back. You will be sworn to fight the Darkness for the rest of your life. You will never be able to quit."

"That's fine with me."
"Is it? What do you even know of the life of a paladin? I've told you something of my order; you know that it is a very prestigious, honorable thing for a man to be inducted into it, yes? I've said that very few paladins are ever given this honor, yes?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Do you know what the requirements are for becoming a member of the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart?"

"No."

"You must be a paladin who has served the Light faithfully for ten years. That is all."

"So what's your point?"

"My point, Mr. Potter, is that very few paladins survive beyond a handful of years after their consecration. The fight against the Darkness claims us all, without exception. Most die before their first year of consecration is finished."

Harry just stood in silence as he couldn't possibly respond to that.

"Mr. Potter," Keldorn continued in a much calmer tone of voice, "I will not consecrate you, I will not lay such a heavy, sacred burden upon you, merely for you to fight one enemy, no matter how evil and powerful he is. I will not see your life destroyed as a means to an end.

"Any paladin would join you in standing against Voldemort. But you cannot become a paladin simply to make that stand. This life is a calling, it is a holy and sacred vocation. Only those who were born for the purpose of standing with the Light against the onslaught of the Darkness can take up the mantle of the paladin. The war we are fighting will never end until the Final Battle at the end of time. Becoming a paladin cannot be done for the mere sake of defeating one enemy.

"Are you ready to lay down your life, to sacrifice everything you hold dear and forever after stand against the Darkness? Are you ready to dedicate the rest of what would likely be a very short life to the service of the Light in almost constant battle? Are you willing to die at a moment's notice in whatever task, great or small, is needed to stem the tide of evil?"

Harry didn't answer. He merely looked down at his feet.

"I know you mean well, Mr. Potter. I know that your desire is good. But I will not consecrate you simply for the fight against Voldemort. The paladin's calling must be much, much more than that.

"So, Mr. Potter, my answer to your question is no."
Harry was a mix of emotions as he walked back to Gryffindor Tower. He wasn't really sure if he should be angry, sad, happy, or relieved that Keldorn had refused his request to learn how to become a paladin. He was a bit upset that the old knight had rejected him out of hand, but also relieved that he wouldn't need to go through with it. He was nervous about how Hermione would react to the news, and a bit embarrassed to know that he would have to tell her and the Headmaster that he'd been rejected. It was all very confusing.

As soon as he came through the portrait hole, Hermione pounced on him.

"Well?" she asked, "what did he say?"

Harry glanced around the crowded common room before returning his gaze to Hermione.

"Not here," he said.

"Oh, right," the young witch replied. "Sorry, you know how I get when I want to know something. Let's go find somewhere more private."

With that, Hermione grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him back out into the corridors. She led them a little way down the seventh floor hallway to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy where she paced back and forth three times to make the door to the Room of Requirement appear.

Harry followed Hermione into the room to see a miniature version of the Gryffindor common room, although with a few alterations. There was only one sofa - a small loveseat that could barely fit two people. The loveseat faced a fireplace with a roaring fire, and a bearskin rug was spread on the floor in front of the hearth. The room had very soft lighting.

It was quite the romantic setting.

Harry looked over to Hermione and cocked an eyebrow.

"What exactly did you tell the room you needed?" he asked.

Hermione blushed slightly.

"I just thought, 'I need a room to be alone with Harry…'"

Harry didn't respond, instead he went over and took a seat on the couch. Hermione sat down next to him.

"Well," she said, "what did Sir Firecam have to say?"

Harry looked down to his lap, unable to meet her eyes.

"He said no," he admitted in a soft voice.

"What do you mean he said no?"

"I think that's pretty obvious. He said that he wouldn't train me to be a paladin."

"But... how... I don't understand!" Hermione exclaimed, rising to her feet, "how could he just say no?! This could be the only way to defeat Voldemort!"
"I told him that. He didn't seem to think that was a good enough reason for me to become a paladin."

"That's ridiculous!"

Harry just shrugged his shoulders.

"What exactly did he say?" Hermione continued.

"He said that being a paladin is more than just a way to fight Voldemort. It's a whole way of life. I'd have to swear to fight the Darkness for the rest of my life. He said that most paladins die within a year of their consecration and that he wouldn't put that burden on me just to fight Voldemort."

Hermione sobered a bit after hearing the knight's reasoning and sat down next to Harry once again.

"What do you mean most paladins die within a year?" she asked.

"Sir Firecam said that becoming a paladin basically guarantees an early grave," Harry answered. "They swear to literally dedicate their lives to fighting for the Light against the Darkness, which means most of them quickly get killed in the process."

"But Sir Firecam is at least, I would say sixty years old! He's been a paladin for decades."

"Yeah, he's apparently the exception to the rule. You know that order of knights that he's in? Well apparently the only requirement for joining is being a paladin for ten years. He said that there aren't very many members."

"That's… Oh Harry, that's so sad."

"Yeah. I'm not sure if I should be relieved that he won't let me become one, or angry that he doesn't think I'd make it."

Hermione didn't respond, she just sat staring at the fire for a long time. The two Gryffindors lapsed into silence together.

Eventually Harry broke the silence.

"Maybe I should tell him about the 'either must die at the hand of the other' bit," he said. "Maybe he won't worry so much about me getting killed if he knows that the prophecy says I'm probably going to bite the dust anyways."

Hermione responded by hitting him on the shoulder. Hard.

"Don't joke about that!" she said vehemently, "that's not funny."

"It's true though," Harry replied while rubbing his shoulder.

"No it isn't."

"Come on. What chance do I really have against a dark lord?"

"You're going to beat him, Harry," Hermione insisted.

"Be realistic, Hermione…"

"Stop it!" she shouted. "Just stop it already! You are not going to die. You're going to beat him.
We're going to beat him. Together. I'm not going to let you die. So stop acting like you're already dead."

"Hermione…"

"No! We'll find a way. Maybe we can think of something to convince Sir Firecam to teach you. If not, I'll think of something else. But I am sure as hell not going to let that monster take you away from me!"

Hermione was breathing rather heavily by the end of her rant. Harry noticed that there were unshed tears in her eyes as well. After a moment, she looked away from him and then stood up from the couch, ready to flee the room.

Harry didn't let her. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down into the seat next to him.

"Let go of me!" the irate witch shouted.

"No," Harry replied.

"Harry James Potter, if you know what's good for you, you'll let go of me this instant!"

"No. If you get to insist that Voldemort isn't going to kill me, well, then I get to insist that you don't get to leave."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Yes it does! If you want to be in this together, then stay and help me figure this out."

Hermione sat quietly for a moment before responding.

"Fine. You can let go of my wrist. I won't run away."

"Promise?"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I promise."

Harry loosened his grip on Hermione's arm, but didn't let go completely. Instead, he let his hand slide down into hers.

"I'm sorry for talking about dying like that. I didn't really mean it."

Hermione sighed.

"It's okay, Harry."

"It's just that…" Harry went on, "it just seems so impossible sometimes. But thanks for reminding me that I'm not alone in this."

"We'll figure something out," Hermione said as she smiled at him. "We always do."

The two Gryffindors sat in silent contemplation for a little while before Hermione spoke up again.

"You know, just because most of the paladins on Sir Firecam's world die young doesn't mean that they would here."
"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"Just think, the way he's described his home world the few times he's talked about it, he's made it seem like there were all sorts of evil monsters and villains out to cause trouble. We don't have too many ogres attacking villages here."

"This coming from the girl that was almost squashed by a mountain troll in her first year?"

"Well, I mean, okay, we do have some of that in the magical world. But it doesn't seem to be nearly as rampant as in his world. Besides, we tend to look at creatures like trolls and dragons as animals that need to be protected and controlled, instead of monsters that need to be fought."

"I don't think it's that simple, Hermione. There's still plenty of evil in the world that a paladin would have to fight. I think that was Sir Firecam's point - a paladin doesn't get to choose whether or not to fight, he has to. He's not allowed to ignore the evil he comes across."

"Yes, but practically speaking, how often would you really come across a dangerous evil that you were required to physically fight?"

"Umm… have you been at Hogwarts with me for the past five years or not?"

"Well, yes, you have a point. We haven't exactly been idle, have we? But I think our experience is far from the norm. Not all of the students are fighting trolls and basilisks in their spare time."

"You make it sound like it was all so easy…"

"Hush. Anyways, I was saying that it's unlikely that you would need to fight something or someone very often in our world. Our society doesn't really look at violence as an acceptable way of dealing with conflict except in extreme circumstances. Here it wouldn't really be right for you to just attack an enemy. The good thing to do is to talk with them first."

"I don't know if that will convince him. It doesn't seem like he'll let me in on a hypothetical condition or technicality of what might happen here."

"I suppose you're right."

Harry and Hermione stayed in the Room of Requirement for a few hours. They were trying so hard to either come up with a way to convince Keldorn to train Harry, or with some other idea for what 'the power he knows not' might be that they completely missed dinner. In the end, they left without an answer, and made their way back to Gryffindor tower just before curfew.

OoOoO

OoOoO

That weekend, Harry received a note from the Headmaster to join him in his office after dinner for another private lesson. This time Harry brought Hermione along with him.

"Good evening, Harry," Dumbledore said in greeting as the two Gryffindors entered his office. "Miss Granger, is there something I can do for you this evening?"

"I asked her to come along," Harry replied. "I'm just going to end up telling her everything anyways, and she's much smarter than I am. I figured that it would just be easier to have her here to see things herself."
Dumbledore smiled.

"I think that is a marvelous idea," the old wizard replied. "It is always good to have allies that you can trust completely and with whom you can go over your ideas. I am glad that you have found such a confidant in Miss Granger."

The Headmaster then turned to address Hermione directly.

"Miss Granger, I trust that you understand the seriousness of the topics that we will be discussing this evening and in any future 'lessons.'"

"Of course," Hermione replied.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "Well then. Let's get to it, shall we?"

The three companions spent the evening viewing Pensieve memories about Tom Riddle's childhood upbringing in a Muggle orphanage. They witnessed Dumbledore's first meeting with him as he delivered his Hogwarts letter to the future Dark Lord. They spent some time afterwards discussing the personality of the young Tom Riddle and how the things they had seen might pertain to the current incarnation of Lord Voldemort.

It wasn't until a few hours later that the topic of Harry becoming a paladin finally came up.

"He said he wouldn't teach you, did he?" Dumbledore asked.

"Pretty much," Harry replied.

"Hmmm…" the old wizard hummed to himself as he leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers in front of his chin. After a moment of silence, he finally spoke up again.

"I have been pondering this idea quite a bit since our last gathering. I'm at a loss to think of any other likely theory for 'the power the Dark Lord knows not.' So, I would advise you to try again with our good Sir Firecam. Perhaps he just needs a bit of convincing."

"Err… he was pretty adamant about saying no," said Harry.

"Be that as it may, perhaps you could try a different tactic, come up with a different argument."

"We've tried," said Hermione, "we haven't been able to come up with anything convincing."

Dumbledore just smiled.

"Did you really expect to find the answer so quickly? I've often found that solutions to real problems are hard to come by. This isn't a homework assignment, Miss Granger. Just because the answer isn't easy to find doesn't mean it's not out there somewhere. You'll just have to keep looking until you find it."

"Couldn't you convince him to teach me, sir?" Harry enquired.

"Oh I highly doubt it," the Headmaster answered. "While Sir Firecam and I have a good understanding of one another, I do not think that my interference in this matter would be beneficial in the slightest. Besides, I have my hands rather full at the moment with other pressing concerns. No, this is a matter that I must trust that you will be able to handle yourself."

Harry just nodded.
"On another topic, I have some news from the Order that I thought I would share with you this evening. Professor Snape tells us that Voldemort has been rather unsettled as of late. I believe that the presence of our friend Sir Firecam has Tom quite concerned. He is apparently spending much of his time locked away doing research on some obscure topic that our spy has been unfortunately unable to discern. In any event, I think such news is welcome for the time being, as it also means that the Death Eaters have been rather inactive without direction from their master."

Harry nodded his head again, but Hermione asked a question.

"Do you have any idea what he might be looking for?"

"It is a dangerous game to start asking questions like that without more information. Our guesses could be far off the mark and lead us astray with disastrous results if we allow such thoughts to prejudice our thinking. So, in the meantime, I will make no guesses until we know more."

Without anything else to discuss, Dumbledore bid his two students goodnight and dismissed them for the evening.

OoOoO

Tuesday's riding class was the third session in which the six 'advanced' students worked with their hippogriffs and the first time that they actually rode the creatures. Unlike Hagrid's approach from years before, Keldorn had a much more conservative method in that he made his students thoroughly familiarize themselves with the creatures before they hopped on for a ride. They were also given clear instructions to keep their hippogriffs on the ground for the day.

Harry found that riding a hippogriff on the ground was pretty similar to riding a horse. The rhythm of the Buckbeak's movement was a little different, as the hippogriff was naturally much lighter and quicker on its feet, but otherwise it was very much the same. Hermione even seemed to overcome her initial hesitation and was once again riding alongside Harry on a dark grey hippogriff named Aristotle as they skirted the border of the Forbidden Forest. Harry supposed that the old knight's order to keep the beasts firmly on the ground went a long way to boosting his best friend's confidence as she didn't have to worry about flying just yet.

A few other students had 'graduated' from riding horses to familiarizing themselves with the hippogriffs, among them were Ginny and Luna, but neither of them had been cleared for riding just yet.

"Did I mention that Sir Firecam finally let me examine his enchanted gorget yesterday?" Hermione spoke up from beside Harry.

"No, you didn't," Harry replied.

"Yes, well, I think I'm going to try and recreate the enchantment to see if I can get similar results with normal clothing for a special project with Professor McGonagall," Hermione explained. "Just imagine, all you'd have to do is put on a shirt or a hat, say a command word, and poof! you're instantly wearing your finest dress robes!"

"So you think that might help you cut down on the time you need to get ready every morning?" Harry asked with a grin. "I swear, I have to wait longer and longer each day for you to come down before we can go to breakfast."

"Hush you. Don't you know that waiting on a woman is good for a man?" Hermione replied with a
cheeky grin of her own.

"Oh is it now?"

"Absolutely."

"Girls," Harry responded with a shake of his head, "I'll never get you lot figured out."

"Nor should you," said Hermione, "We're supposed to keep you guessing."

"Hey Harry, Hermione," Neville greeted as he rode up beside them on his own dark brown hippogriff. "Isn't this great? I think taking this course was the best idea I've ever had."

"You're just saying that because Hannah Abbott keeps asking you for help getting down from her saddle," Harry shot back with a smile.

Neville blushed.

"Harry, be nice," Hermione chastised.

"Yes, dear," Harry replied.

Hermione's hippogriff tossed its head in annoyance at something and Hermione responded with a gentle pat on the side of its neck.

"Easy there, Books," she said.

"Hermione, why do you insist on calling your hippogriff 'Books'?" Harry asked. "His name is Aristotle, for Pete's sake!"

"Well, I think 'Books' fits him rather well. Besides, he likes it. Don't you, Books?"

The hippogriff actually chirped in response.

"See?" Hermione said with a smug grin.

Whatever retort Harry was about to make was cut off by a loud scream from somewhere up ahead. The three Gryffindors stopped their mounts and looked up to see a hippogriff take off into the air with its rider dangling halfway out of the saddle. The creature flew out low over the Forbidden Forest. It was flying erratically, and soon enough its rider was thrown off into the treetops of the forest.

"Where's Sir Firecam?" Harry asked no one in particular as he stared at the forest, trying to estimate how far in he had seen the girl fall.

"I think he took Romilda to the hospital wing," Neville replied. "I saw her spook her horse earlier and it kicked her in the leg."

"Right," Harry said with a decisive nod, "I'm going to go into the forest and find whoever that was. They're probably hurt and it's dangerous in there. We need to get them out."

"Harry… are you sure you should do that?" Hermione asked. "Shouldn't we wait for a professor?"

"We don't have time!" Harry said emphatically. "Who knows what might happen to whoever that was while we wait around. I'm going in. Hermione, go find Sir Firecam and tell him what's happened."
"Oh no you don't, Harry Potter!" Hermione replied. "You're not going in there alone. If you insist on this I'm going with you. Someone has to keep you out of trouble."

"Hermione, don't argue…"

"I'll go find Sir Firecam," Neville offered.

Harry glared at the other boy.

"See, that's settled," said Hermione.

Harry shook his head but decided not to argue any further.

"Fine, let's go."

With that, Harry and Hermione spurred their hippogriffs into the forest.

Even though it was the middle of the afternoon, the forest's thick canopy cut off most of the sun's light, creating a dark and foreboding atmosphere. It was unnaturally quiet - no birds or other small animals could be heard at all. The two Gryffindors readied their wands as they rode deeper into the forest in the direction that they'd last seen their classmate.

The trees were planted close together, ruling out the possibility of urging the hippogriffs to spread their wings and take off into the air if the need for a quick exit arose.

"I don't like this, Harry," Hermione whispered.

"We'll be fine," Harry whispered back. "We just need to find whoever that was and leave as quickly as possible."

A few minutes later, Hermione's hippogriff started to act a bit skittish.

"It's okay, Books," Hermione said, trying to soothe the animal.

Buckbeak was much calmer, but would let out a quick snort every once in a while as his eyes darted left and right.

"Something's not right here," said Hermione.

"There! Up ahead! I can see her!" Harry said as he urged Buckbeak to go a bit faster. Hermione quickly caught up with him as he jumped down from his saddle to land next to an unconscious Daphne Greengrass. The Slytherin girl's left leg was bent at an odd angle, clearly broken, and there was blood on her face.

"Hermione, come closer. I'll pick her up and put her across Aristotle."

"Did you hear that?" Hermione asked as Harry lifted the unconscious girl into his arms.

"Hear what?"

"I thought I heard a clicking sound."

"We'd better hurry then."

Harry had just slung Daphne over Aristotle in front of Hermione when he heard the noise. It sounded like a bunch of fast, loud clicks, almost as if someone were tapping dozens of stones
together. He quickly cast a Sticking Charm to make sure that the injured girl wouldn't fall and then went back to his mount.

Buckbeak snorted loudly and began scratching at the ground.

"That's not good," Harry mumbled as he scrambled back into his saddle.

"What's not good?" Hermione asked a bit hysterically.

"Acromantulas."

All color quickly drained out of Hermione's face as her eyes widened.

"Let's go, Hermione!" Harry shouted, trying to get moving before it was too late. Hermione snapped out of her daze and together they spurred their hippogriffs back toward the castle as fast as they dared.

Just then, one of the huge, hairy, black spiders leapt down from the trees and landed on the path in front of them. Hermione screamed, but Harry reacted by pointing his wand.

"Reducto!" he shouted. The spider dodged out of the way but Harry's spell cleared the way before them.

"Come on, Hermione!" He shouted as they raced for freedom. "Come on, Buckbeak, go faster!"

Harry looked back over his shoulder to see several of the grotesque, giant spiders following on their heels. The hippogriffs were faster than the hideous creatures, but just barely. And there were many, many more of them.

"Reducto!" Harry shouted with his wand pointed behind him. He wasn't really aiming to hit the creatures, but to slow them down. If he could create enough of a gap between them and their pursuers, they might just be able to get away. Harry frantically started throwing spells out behind him.

"Reducto! Confringo! Displodo!" He shouted.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Hermione was likewise casting spells at their pursuers, only instead of Blasting and Exploding Hexes, she was shooting volleys of icicles at them or freezing the ground in the hopes that the spiders would slip and fall.

Suddenly, both Buckbeak and Aristotle skidded to an abrupt halt and reared up on their hind legs, letting out shrill cries. Amazingly, both Harry and Hermione managed to stay in their saddles as Harry looked ahead to see that the path was once again blocked, but this time by at least a dozen Acromantulas.

The sound of dozens of hungry, scurrying spiders filled the air as Harry and Hermione were quickly surrounded.

"Crap."
"Oh bugger!" Hermione exclaimed as she frantically cast her eyes around at the swarm of huge Acromantulas that surrounded her and Harry. "Bugger me! Bugger, bugger, bugger!"

Harry only barely registered Hermione's uncharacteristic use of foul language as his mind raced for an idea that could get them out of their deadly predicament. Buckbeak and Aristotle, the two hippogriffs that they had ridden into the forest to rescue Daphne, were loudly screeching at the spiders and continually rearing up on their hind legs, flailing their sharp front claws at the beasts.

So far, it seemed like the spiders were hesitant to approach, but Harry knew it was only a matter of time. He knew he needed to do something fast or they were dead meat.

"Oh screw it! Reducto!" Harry shouted as he began to cast into the mass of swarming Acromantulas. "Confringo! Displodo! Reducto!" He desperately hoped that his Basting and Exploding Hexes would drive the spiders back a bit and buy them some time.

A few of his spells struck the spiders, who shrieked in agony as their exoskeletons were blasted apart and thick, green gunk splattered onto the ground. Most of his hexes missed, however, and instead slammed into the ground, tearing up great fountains of dirt and stones with a thunderous roar.

Harry's spellcasting seemed to stir Hermione into action.

"Harry!" she shouted. "Fire! Use fire spells to hold them back! Incendio!"

A jet of crimson flame shot out of Hermione's wand and washed over the ground in front of a group of spiders. The Acromantulas screamed in rage, and fled from the burning flames. Harry switched to Hermione's more effective tactic and together they held the spiders at bay with a wall of fire cast in a wide circle around them.

"We need to make an exit!" Harry shouted. "We won't be able to hold them off for long!"

Just then one of the largest spiders in the swarm leaped down from the trees and landed with a crash in between Harry and Hermione. Hermione's hippogriff bucked wildly, and threw her from the saddle. The young witch screamed as she flew through the air and landed with a crunch on the ground. Harry looked over to see the monster moving to loom over his defenseless friend.

"HERMIONE!"

Harry aimed his wand and let lose with a Blasting Curse.

"Reducto!"

The spell, however, only bounced off the spider's thick shell and didn't even divert its attention from the girl on the ground.

At a loss for what else to do, Harry spurred Buckbeak forward and charged headlong at the beast with a scream of rage. Harry's cry was joined by a scream from Buckbeak as they crashed into the side of the giant spider. The hippogriff used its sharp beak and claws to tear at the creature, while Harry cast spell after useless spell at its unyielding armor.

With a shake of her head, Hermione began to come to, only to scream in terror when she saw the
Acromantula looming above her. She scrambled out from beneath it just as Buckbeak lowered his head and slammed the beast aside. The spider turned, and readied itself for another attack while Harry cast his glance around the clearing. The ring of fire was dying down and soon the swarm would be upon them.

With a sudden movement, the spider shot a burst of wet, sticky webbing at Buckbeak's legs. The hippogriff toppled over with a shrill cry and threw Harry to the forest floor, the impact driving the wind out of his lungs. He thought he heard Hermione shout something, but the pain in his chest and the blood pounding in his head made it difficult to tell.

Harry blinked to clear his vision, only to look up and see the arachnid standing over him. Thick, green venom dripped from its mandibles and its clustered eyes seemed to glint with malice. It opened its jaws wide to deliver a killing strike, but Harry thrust his wand up and with all his might sent a Blasting Curse directly into the beast's mouth.

"Confringo!"

The spider's head exploded in a shower of blood and gore, covering Harry as its massive body collapsed to the ground.

"Harry!" Hermione shouted as she frantically pulled him to his feet. "Oh, Merlin, Harry!"

"I'm alright," he said as he took in their situation. The spiders were still held back by the ring of fire, but that was dying down with every passing second. Things were not looking good.

"Where's my wand?!" Hermione desperately asked. "I lost it when Aristotle threw me."

Harry sent a Cutting Curse at the webbing that was wrapped around Buckbeak's legs, freeing the creature before looking for his companion's wand.

"Accio Hermione's wand!"

The short length of vine wood flew into his hand and he quickly tossed it to Hermione.

Aristotle still had Daphne slung across his back while he and Buckbeak paced back and forth.

Harry and Hermione stood back to back as the ring of fire faltered.

"Harry," the distressed girl said as she groped for his hand, "I'm glad I'm with you."

The flames went out and the spiders were just about to surge forward when a bright light and a loud cry pierced the darkness of the forest. Harry whipped his head to the side to see Keldorn charging through the spiders on the back of a powerful horse. His armor sparkled and his blade shone like the sun as he swung it about him, cutting a wide swath of fury through the mass of arachnids. The paladin's sword blazed with light so bright that Harry had to shield his eyes. The spiders, used to living in the perpetual darkness of the forest and fearful of such wondrous light, retreated before the onslaught of the knight's brilliant weapon.

"Get back on your mounts!" the knight commanded as he cleaved through the head of a spider that was too slow to flee.

Harry quickly obeyed and helped Hermione into the saddle before climbing onto Buckbeak.

"Ride for the castle!" Keldorn shouted, "Ride!"
The two students didn't need to be told twice and spurred their hippogriffs through the opening that Keldorn had created as fast as they could possibly go.

Harry looked over his shoulder to see the knight cut down one last, humongous arachnid before turning and following his two students. The spiders scattered and dispersed, fleeing from the wrath of the armored warrior.

A few moments later, the two hippogriffs and their passengers burst through the tree line, followed shortly thereafter by Keldorn and his horse.

Harry pulled back on his reigns to slow his mount only to be rebuked by Keldorn as he rode up beside them.

"Don't stop. Go straight to the infirmary."

Harry didn't respond, he simply obeyed the command of the man who saved both his and Hermione's lives once again.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Later, still covered in dirt and gore, Harry and Hermione sat side by side on one of the beds in the hospital wing as the school matron bustled about the room. Hermione was shivering, and Harry doubted that it had anything to do with the cold or with the hairline fracture in her lower left leg. After a moment of hesitation from fear that she would just push him away, he decided to put his arm around her shoulders. Far from pushing him away, Hermione leaned into him, seeming to seek shelter and protection from the outside world as her shivers continued unabated. Madam Pomfrey was attending to Daphne first, as the girl's injuries were likely much more serious, but she promised to look them over soon.

Hermione reached up with her right hand and grabbed the front of Harry's shirt in her fist. Harry looked down at her face, buried in his shoulder as her shivers turned into sobs. He wrapped his arms around her protectively as she cried.

"I thought we were going to die," Hermione whispered once her tears stopped.

"I know," Harry quietly responded, "so did I."

"When that spider was standing over me, looking down at me with those horrible eyes," she continued, "I thought that was it. I thought that was the end. I can't believe that you actually charged into it like that. You saved my life."

"I think it was Sir Firecam that saved both our lives," Harry responded.

"True, but I'd still be dead if it weren't for you. I can't believe you attacked it like that."

"What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, Harry. Merlin knows I'm not angry or upset that you did it. I just can't believe it. I can't believe that you would throw yourself at a monster like that for me."

Harry looked into Hermione's red, puffy eyes. Her face was blotchy from crying and there were tear tracks running down her cheeks.
"I'd do anything for you."

Hermione didn't respond, she simply planted a long kiss on his cheek, wrapped him in a tight hug, and refused to let go.

A fair amount of time passed before the door banged open while Madam Pomfrey was tending to the two Gryffindors. Professor McGonagall strode into the room followed by Sir Firecam who had sheathed his sword, but was still wearing his armor. The Deputy Headmistress was obviously in a towering rage as she approached her two students.

"Whit waur ye bairns thinking?!"] McGonagall asked, her speech reverting to her thick Scottish Brogue in her anger. "Ye coods hae bin killed runnin' aff loch 'at!"

Hermione seemed to shrink, burrowing into Harry's side under the withering gaze of her favorite professor. But Harry met the professor's eyes straight on. He wasn't really sure how to react, given that he could barely understand a word she was saying.

"Ne'er in aw mah years hae Ah seen sic' a reckless display! I'll hae ye tois in detention scrubbin' floors until th' moon falls frae abune!"

"I think that's enough for now, Minerva," Dumbledore said as he calmly strode into the room. "Besides, I doubt that young Harry and Hermione are well versed in Scottish."

McGonagall glared at the Headmaster, but ceased her yelling as she visibly tried to calm herself down.

"Now," Dumbledore continued, "I understand you two ventured into the forest and had a run in with some of the wildlife there."

Hermione shivered while Harry responded.

"Well, that's certainly one way of putting it."

Dumbledore smiled.

"Yes, I find that putting things lightly sometimes helps to keep the darker thoughts at bay," he replied.

"It was a very brave thing that these two did," said Keldorn. "Reckless and foolish maybe, but brave nonetheless. I think it is safe to say that without their actions, Miss Greengrass would no longer be with us."

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "I think some sort of reward is in order. Don't you agree, Minerva?"

"Ye cannae be serioos!" the Deputy Headmistress responded, the strength of her accent making it obvious for everyone to know that she was still furious. "They need tae be punished fur their actions!"

"I think that their experience in the forest is punishment enough," Dumbledore said. "I highly doubt that either Mister Potter or Miss Granger has any desire to venture back into those woods any time soon." Both Harry and Hermione quickly shook their heads. "Besides, they did save Miss Greengrass' life at the risk of their own. I think one hundred points to Gryffindor for each of them as well as an award for special services to the school to be presented at a future date should suffice. What do you say, Harry, Hermione?"
The two students just looked at their professors in shock. Hermione eventually nodded her head.

"Well, that's settled then," said Dumbledore. "Minerva, please arrange things for the award. Now then, let's check in with Miss Greengrass and then I think I could use a nice cup of tea. Would you like to join me, Minerva?"

With that, the two professors left to see Daphne on the other side of the infirmary. Keldorn remained, however.

"That really was a brave thing you did today," the old knight said. "Especially since I understand that that two of you have been in the Forbidden Forest before and know firsthand of the dangers therein."

Harry just shrugged his shoulders while Hermione maintained her hold on him.

"Thank you for saving us," Harry said.

"I merely did my duty," Keldorn responded. "You are both students under my charge. I could have done no less. You two, however, were under no such obligation to risk your lives for a classmate. That you did so makes me proud to say that I know you. Well done. May the Light shine on you always."

After Keldorn had left and Pomfrey had healed Hermione's leg and generally finished with them, the matron dismissed the two Gryffindors.

"But before you leave, Miss Greengrass has asked to speak with you," Madam Pomfrey said as she gestured to one of the beds that was surrounded by privacy screens.

Harry and Hermione approached the bed and entered the private area. Daphne was lying on the bed, her legs covered by the thin, white sheet. Her head and torso were wrapped in thick bandages and there were several open vials sitting on the nightstand. Daphne stared at the two Gryffindors shyly for a moment before speaking.

"Pomfrey said that you two saved my life."

"Err… yeah." Harry replied with his usual elegance.

"I don't really remember what happened," Daphne continued, "one minute I was riding the hippogriff and the next it just took off and then I was falling into the trees. That's all I can remember. She said that you saved me from the Acromantulas?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" the injured girl asked.

"What?" Harry asked in confusion.

"I thought you two hated all the Slytherins."

"Oh don't be silly," Hermione replied, "Just because Malfoy is a pompous brat doesn't mean we hate all of you."

"Besides," Harry added, "I couldn't even tell who it was that fell into the forest. I would have gone after anyone really."

"You're such a Gryffindor," Daphne said with an attempt at a smile, "and I mean that as a
compliment. Thank you for saving my life."

"You're welcome," Harry said.

"Come on, Harry," said Hermione, "Let's let Daphne rest a bit."

They left the hospital wing and slowly wandered back toward their dormitories. Harry was really looking forward to a shower.

"I can't believe it," said Harry.

"What, that we're still alive?" Hermione asked.

"No, not that. I can't believe that your response to being surrounded by Acromantulas was to say, 'Bugger me! Bugger, bugger, bugger!'" Harry replied with a teasing smile.

"Oh, be quiet you."

"I mean, I never took you for that kind of girl."

"Prat."

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry and Hermione were presented with their award for special services to the school on the following Friday during dinner. Harry was rather embarrassed to be paraded in front of the school. It wasn't like he put much thought into the process or decided that he should act heroically, he just saw someone in danger and he reacted. The fact that he had to fight off a colony of Acromantulas was beside the point.

Nevertheless, the Headmaster called Harry and Hermione forward during the evening meal and had them stand in front of the assembled student body while he gave a short and rather heavily edited version of the events that transpired in the Forbidden Forest. The giant spiders were mentioned, but the fact that if it wasn't for the timely arrival of Sir Firecam the school would be currently planning three funerals was glossed over. After he was finished, Dumbledore presented them both with a bronze plaque. Harry quickly read what was inscribed on it.

Awarded to

HARRY JAMES POTTER

for

SPECIAL SERVICES TO HOGWARTS SCHOOL
OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

for

Courageously saving the life of a fellow student

at the risk of his own.

Harry glanced over at Hermione's to note that it said exactly the same thing, except for her name in
place of his of course. He was happy that he wasn't being singled out for the award and that Hermione was being given the recognition that she deserved as well. After acknowledging the polite applause of their peers, with surprising enthusiasm coming from the Slytherin table, they handed the awards back to the Headmaster so that they could be added to the school's trophy case.

It was the next morning at breakfast that things got interesting. Harry was just digging into his fry-up when the owl post arrived. A few moments later Hermione grabbed his elbow to get his attention.

"Look, Harry!" she exclaimed. "We made the paper!"

Harry groaned.

"Just what I needed, another article in the Prophet," he responded. "What did I do this time? Did I go 'round the bend again?"

"Oh honestly, Harry. It's about the award from yesterday."

"Great. All I need is another reason for people to stare at me." Nevertheless, Harry leaned over to read the article along with Hermione.

HARRY POTTER FIGHTS OFF SWARM OF SPIDERS!

CHOSEN ONE AND GIRLFRIEND SAVE SLYTHERIN STUDENT'S LIFE!

By Rita Skeeter

Witnesses report that Harry Potter, known to most as the Boy Who Lived, or more recently as the Chosen One, has recently been given an award for special services to Hogwarts. He and his current love-interest, one Hermione Granger rode into the Forbidden Forest to save the life of their classmate Daphne Greengrass, a sixth year student from Slytherin house.

We here at the Prophet are told that Greengrass was unconscious and helpless as a swarm of at least one hundred gigantic Acromantulas descended upon her after an accident that left her stranded in the forest. All hope was not lost, however, as the Gryffindor Duo literally rode onto the scene on the backs of two hippogriffs, casting spells left and right to drive back the monstrous creatures. Potter and Granger fought side by side and back to back and managed to force the creatures to retreat.

The question that most readers will want to know is, of course, just who is Hermione Granger - the witch who fought along side our hero? Attentive readers will recall that Granger has been romantically connected with Potter before. Two years ago during the Tri-Wizard Tournament speculation was rampant that Granger was at the heart of a love-triangle that pitted Potter against international Quidditch star and fellow Tri-Wizard Champion Viktor Krum in a battle for her affections. It seems to this reporter that the battle for the lovely lady has been definitively won by Potter as Krum is nowhere to be seen. Witnesses report, however, that Granger is constantly at Potter's side.

Has Potter finally picked a young lady at Hogwarts to shower his affections upon? Is Granger to be the heroine that will fight alongside our hero? Is she to be the Chosen One's chosen one? How exactly did she win the heart of the most eligible wizard in Britain? What does this mean for all the other witches in the world vying for a chance to become Mrs. Potter? Readers want to know.

For more on Potter's battle in the Forbidden Forest, see page 3.
"But! How? Oh… that woman! I knew I never should have let her out of that jar!" she exclaimed.

"If it wasn't Skeeter, it would just be someone else," Harry commented.

"Speculation on my love life!" Hermione continued her rant, heedless of the many faces that were now turned to scrutinize the wizarding world's newest celebrity couple. "Chosen One's chosen one indeed! How dare she?!"

Harry felt bad for Hermione. While he was used to all the media attention to a certain extent, the experience of having your life detailed in the paper for all to see was something that he would have shielded Hermione from if he could. Even though she wasn't exactly new to the experience as she did get a taste of it back in their fourth year.

Harry also felt a bit guilty because he actually liked reading the speculation about him being paired up romantically with Hermione. He wasn't exactly glad that it was printed in bold across the front page of magical Britain's leading newspaper, but it did give Harry a little warm feeling nonetheless.

"Hello Harry Potter. Hello Hermione."

Harry was brought out of his musings and Hermione from her rant by the arrival of Luna Lovegood.

"I'm glad to see that Operation Quidditch is going so well for you, Hermione," the blonde continued. "Or was that Operation Spinach? Which one was it again? Were you the one that was trying to crossbreed Crups with Snorkacks, or was that daddy? Perhaps you could help with that anyways, because we never really could figure out what to do with all that spinach…"

The attention of the Gryffindor table was momentarily diverted from Harry and Hermione's love life due to the confusion delivered by the fifth year Ravenclaw.

"Anyways," Luna continued, "daddy wrote an article about you two. I thought you'd like to read it."

With that, she placed a fresh copy of *The Quibbler* on the table. With some trepidation, Harry and Hermione scanned the cover page for any mention of their names. They skimmed over headlines such as *Snorkacks Break Speed Limit, What is Scrimgeour Doing with All Those Chickens?* and even *I Spent the Night with Fungus-Man: Turns Out He is Highly Overrated* before becoming even more confused.

"Err… Luna," Harry tentatively began, "where exactly is the article about us?"

"Oh. Don't you want to read about Fungus-Man first? It really is a lovely exposé."

"Maybe later."
"Okay. Your article is on page twenty three."

Hermione quickly turned the pages to find the article in question.

**HARRY POTTER SAVED FROM BLOOD RITUAL BY ACROMANTULAS!**

By Xenophilius Lovegood

Sources close to Hogwarts report that Harry Potter was almost used as a human sacrifice in a rare, magical blood ritual. The ritual’s performer and well-know girl genius is none other than Hermione the Granger. (How exactly one goes about 'granging' is a topic that will be examined at length in our next issue.)

Sources report that the blood of the last Potter was to be used to rig the academic rankings at Hogwarts, placing Draco Malfoy in the top position. Thankfully, the ritual was interrupted by a passing colony of Acromantulas. The gigantic spiders, which are most well known for their choreography, were able to convince the Granger of the error of her ways. Thus tragedy has once again been averted.

Other sources say that the interrupted ritual then became a wedding ceremony by default (as interrupted rituals are wont to do) and that Potter and the Granger are now married. The veracity of this statement is yet to be confirmed.

For more ways to unintentionally get married, see page 17.

For more on my night with Fungus-Man, see page XXXIV.

For reactions from the Acromantula colony, see page rhombus.

"Well that certainly wasn't what I was expecting," Hermione mumbled.

"I think I like The Quibbler's version better," Harry added.
"Hey, Mate," said Ron as he walked up to where Harry was sitting with Hermione in the common room late one evening at the end of November. "Fancy a game of chess?"

"Err… sure," Harry replied after a moment.

Ron took out his chessboard and began setting it up on the floor. Harry sat down across from him while Hermione continued reading a rather thicker than normal book.

"Not that I'm complaining," Harry said as he moved one of his pawns forward, "but why aren't you with Lavender?"

"Oh, she and Parvati are finishing their Divination homework. She told me to bugger off for a bit," Ron replied as he made his own move on the board.

"Oh."

The two friends continued to play in silence. Harry hadn't really been hanging around with his best mate as much as he used to during the past few months due to Ron's budding relationship with Lavender. They still spent plenty of time together in their classes and during Quidditch practices, but most of Ron's free time was now dedicated to his girlfriend. Harry didn't begrudge Ron the fact that he was spending so much time with Lavender; after all, if he had a pretty girl that was willing to snog him, he'd probably jump at the chance as often as Ron did.

The silence was broken by Hermione suddenly snapping her book closed and then rummaging through her book bag.

"Oh, where did I leave that copy of Rudgert's Ridiculous Runes? Maybe it's upstairs. I'll be right back." She quickly got up from her place on the couch and left to search for her book.

"So," Ron said as he instructed his bishop to skewer one of Harry's knights, "how are you and Hermione doing?"

Harry looked at him in confusion.

"We're fine."

"No," Ron replied, "I mean, how are you doing?"

"What?"

Ron just waggled his eyebrows.

"Oh," Harry said looking back at the board. "Err… haven't really done anything about that."

"Why not? I think you two could use a good snog. I bet our Hermione's just brimming with pent-up energy that would make for some very entertaining times together."

"Ron…" Harry growled in warning.

"Alright, alright. But seriously, what are you waiting for?"

"Well, err… I'm not really sure how to go about, you know, asking her out," Harry answered.
"Just man up and do it," said Ron.

"Oh like you'd know anything about that. You didn't even have to do anything to get your girlfriend. Lavender just walked up to you and latched onto your face!"

"Oi! No need for that, now."

"Besides," Harry continued, "we've got bigger things to worry about."

"Like what?" Ron asked in confusion.

"Like what?!" Harry replied incredulously, "did you forget about Voldemort and the prophecy?"

Ron ducked his head as his ears turned pink.

"Oh, right. Yeah, I guess that's pretty important."

They went back to concentrating on the game for a few minutes before Harry spoke up again.

"So, err… if I was to ask out Hermione, well, how do you think I should do it?"

"No idea, mate," Ron replied. "Like you said, Lav just started snogging me, remember? I didn't have to do anything."

Harry sighed.

"I doubt that Hermione is likely to do that."

"I could always tell her to if you'd like."

"Ron," Harry answered with a glare, "if you want to live to see Christmas, you won't utter one word about this to Hermione."

"Oh come on, I bet she'd do it with a little bit of a push in the right direction!"

"Not. One. Word."

"Fine," Ron said. "Why don't you be then one to start it then?"

"What?"

"You start the snogging. You know, she walks into the common room one day and boom! just snog her brains out."

"Ron…"

"And with Hermione there's a lot of brains to snog out, so you'll be at it for a while too."

"I don't think Hermione would appreciate me snogging her in front of the entire house."

"You never know until you try it, mate."

Harry sighed.

"Come on, be serious, Ron."

"I am being serious. Just jump her when she comes back from looking for her book."
"There's no way that would work."

"Fine," Ron replied, "you're on your own then."

Their conversation was cut short by Hermione's return. Ron kept shooting strange glances at Harry and Hermione, no doubt trying to get him to make a move on their bushy-haired best friend, but Harry was having none of that and instead concentrated on trying not to lose to Ron too badly.

About twenty minutes later, Harry was being thoroughly trounced by Ron when Hermione cleared her throat and spoke up.

"Harry? I have an idea."

Harry looked up and turned to face her, but his eyes landed on Ron first, who was smirking and wagging his eyebrows again.

"Oh shut it, Ron," Harry said.

"What was that?" Hermione asked.

Ron barked out a quick laugh.

"Nothing. What was your idea Hermione?" Harry asked.

The young witch looked at her two friends with suspicion for a moment before launching into an explanation.

"I think I might have an idea about how to convince Sir Firecam to teach you to be a paladin."

"Oi! Since when do you want to be a bloody paladin?" Ron demanded.

"Language!" Hermione interrupted, "besides, if you didn't have your tongue shoved down Lavender's throat at every opportunity, you might've already known about Harry wanting to become a paladin."

"Oi! There's no call for that," Ron responded. "No need to be jealous, Hermione."

"Jealous? Jealous!" Hermione nearly shouted as her temper started to work up, "what in the world do I have to be jealous of, Ronald Weasley?"

"Err…" Harry tried to interrupt and stop the developing argument, but his attempt was overridden by Ron.

"Well, I'd say that you're just jealous of me an' Lav's relationship. Bit of snogging would do you some good, I'd say. Maybe untwist your knickers a bit."

Hermione's glare turned dangerous.

"Why you…"

Ron, apparently heedless of the approaching eruption of Mount Granger, and doubtlessly thinking that he was helping Harry and Hermione get together, continued his commentary.

"I'm sure there's someone around here who wouldn't mind givin' you the old tour of the Hogwarts broom closets."
That remark was apparently too much for Hermione to bear for she quickly whipped out her wand and pointed it at the floor beside Ron.

"Sciuri Impetum!" she shouted. Six conjured squirrels suddenly appeared on the floor and immediately leapt onto Ron. In a flash, the rodents were crawling all over him, biting and scratching their way under his clothes and across his face.

"Gah! Geroff me!" Ron cried as he flailed around, vainly trying to swipe at the creatures.

Hermione, in the meantime, grabbed Harry by the elbow, pulled him to his feet and marched him out into the corridors. She was grumbling to herself as she strode down the hallway to an empty classroom where she quickly pulled Harry inside. The young wizard was a bit hesitant about being alone with his still angry friend.

"Alright there, Hermione?"

"Who does that git think he is?" Hermione said. "Untwist my knickers! Honestly!"

"Err…"

"I don't know where he gets off speaking to me like that. Just because he and Lavender have no sense of comportment or decency doesn't mean that the rest of us need to give into every one of our baser urges! Who does he think he is?"

"I don't think Ron really meant it like that…"

"Oh, so you're going to defend him now, are you?" Hermione asked with a glare.

"No!" Harry quickly backtracked, "I don't think he should have said that, but you know Ron. He always speaks first, thinks later."

"Yes, well, he's lucky I only conjured squirrels this time. Next time I'll think up something better. Wasps, maybe…"

Harry winced at that.

"Go easy on him, would you, Hermione?"

"Oh fine."

The two teenagers stared at each other for a moment as Hermione calmed down.

"So, err…" Harry began, "what did you drag me out here for?" In the back of Harry's mind dwelt a vain hope that she did drag him away for a bit of impromptu snogging.

"Oh, right," Hermione replied, "before I was so rudely diverted, I had a thought as to how you could convince Sir Firecam to train you."

"Oh," Harry said with a touch of disappointment. "Well, what is it?"

"We simply tell him about all the things you've already done."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"How is my life story going to convince him of anything?"
"Don't you see, Harry? That's exactly the type of thing that would convince him! He told you that being a paladin had to be about more than just fighting Voldemort. It has to be about fighting all evil and protecting people in general. Well, you've been doing that since you were eleven years old and jumped onto the back of a troll!"

"I don't know…"

"Think about it. He said that a paladin has to confront evil whenever he sees it. Harry, isn't that what you've already been doing? And I think we should tell him about the prophecy too, those lines about light and darkness can't be coincidence."

"Are you sure about this?" Harry asked.

"Well, what could it hurt?" Hermione asked in return, somewhat affronted that Harry was objecting to her plan.

"I don't really like talking about all that stuff."

"Oh, come on, Harry! It's not like you have to lay it all out there for the papers to print! Just tell Sir Firecam so he'll agree to teach you!"

"I'll think about it."

Hermione stepped up close to him.

"I know this will work, Harry," she said as she looked up into his eyes.

"I said I'd think about it."

Hermione smiled.

"You'll come around," Hermione replied as she then lifted herself up onto her toes and planted a quick peck on Harry's cheek. She then grabbed his hand and turned toward the door. "Now let's go check on Ron and see if those squirrels are still bothering him."

OoOoO

The next day was Sunday, the first of December. Like most of the other students at Hogwarts, Harry had a bit of a lie-in before he wandered down to breakfast. He was enjoying a light conversation with his friends and contemplating a second helping of eggs, when the owl post arrived. It seemed to Harry that there were a few more owls than normal that morning. He was slightly surprised when a plain brown owl landed in front of him and extended its leg. Harry relieved the bird of its burden and offered it a few table scraps before turning his attention to the cream-colored envelop he was now holding. His name was written on the front in bright purple ink. He tore it open to find a card inscribed with more purple ink.

Dear Mr. Harry J. Potter,

Prof. Horace E. F. Slughorn

respectfully requests the honor of your presence

at a gathering of friends and associates
Harry looked up from his invitation to see that Hermione had also received one. She looked at him and he quickly looked away, a sudden nervousness coming over him. Harry knew who he wanted to ask to be his date to the party, but he still had no idea of how to go about asking her.

It was in times like these that he could have really used the advice of his father or godfather. Dumbledore might have fit into some sort of grandfatherly-like role in Harry's life, but this topic really didn't seem like something that he would be comfortable discussing with the Headmaster. And Ron had already proven himself to be of little to no help when it came to talking about his feelings for Hermione, so he was out. If he were to talk to Dean or Seamus, news about him confirming the Daily Prophet's speculation about him and Hermione would be spread around the school and likely into the papers by the next morning. And Neville was even more hopeless with girls than Harry was.

Looks like you're on your own, old boy, Harry thought to himself. Now, how to go about asking her… I guess I should probably wait a day or two, don't want to seem too anxious…

Harry's thoughts were derailed, however, when he noticed that Terry Boot at the Ravenclaw table was holding a similar card and had his eyes locked onto Hermione. When Harry saw Boot begin to rise from his seat, he started to panic.

"Hermione! I need you to come with me right now!" he exclaimed as he leapt to his feet and grabbed a hold of Hermione's arm.

"Wha…? Harry! What's going on?" the confused witch asked.

"No time, just come with me."

"Alright, just let me grab my bag…"

"No time!" Harry shouted as he realized that Boot could be approaching at any moment. "We've got to go, now!" He then proceeded to unceremoniously drag the baffled witch out into the Entrance Hall and into a small, secluded alcove.

"Harry!" Hermione admonished, "what's gotten into you?! I don't appreciate being dragged around like a rag doll, you know!"

Harry was about to apologize when a different thought struck him.

"Hey! You get to drag me all over the castle all the time! How come I can't do it to you?"

Hermione actually blushed at Harry's accusation.

"Never you mind that. Well, since we're here, what was it that you needed me for so urgently?"

"Err…"
Hermione just looked at him.

"Well, you see, it's…" Harry continued but trailed off. He was starting to sweat and his heart was pounding at about ten thousand miles per hour. Pulling Hermione out of the Great Hall had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now he was at a loss for how to proceed.

*Maybe I should just try snogging her like Ron suggested,* he thought.

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione's question brought him back to the present.

"Well, I was wondering… Oh bloody hell! Why is this so difficult?!"

"Harry! Language! Now what's so difficult? What's wrong? Did you have another vision or something? Should we go see Dumbledore?"

"No, no, no, it's nothing like that."

"Are you sick?"

"No."

Having ruled out anything dangerous, Hermione seemed to be getting a little impatient.

"Well, what is it then?"

"I, err… I noticed you got an invitation too," he finally said.

"Oh. About the Christmas party?"

"Yeah."

"Why would you…" Hermione trailed off and her demeanor shifted. All appearance of impatience left her and she smiled at Harry. "What about the party, Harry?"

"Well, err… you know that the cards said that we could, you know, take a date, right?"

"Yes, that is what they say."

"Well," Harry said, "I was just, you know, sitting there, thinking about that. Taking a date I mean. And I was wondering about how to actually go about asking a girl out, and that I didn't really know who to go to ask about it."

The smile disappeared from Hermione's face.

"Harry Potter," she said somewhat coldly, "did you drag me out here to ask me for advice as to how to ask out some other girl?! Unbelievable!"

"What? No!" Harry responded with some confusion. "That's not what I meant!"

"Then get to the point already!"

"Fine! Will you go to the party with me?!" Harry shouted at her somewhat angrily.

Hermione simply stared at him for a moment.

Embarrassment began to creep into Harry's demeanor as he awkwardly stood with Hermione in the alcove.
Did I really just shout the question in her face like that?

The smile had at least returned to Hermione's face, so Harry took that as a good sign.

"I'd love to, Harry," she said in response.

Harry's shoulders sagged in relief as it felt like a ton of bricks had been lifted off of his back.

"Although," Hermione continued, "can I ask why you thought you needed to drag me out into the hallway like this with such, well, urgency?"

"Oh," Harry replied. "Well, you see… heh… I saw Terry Boot looking at you, and I figured that he was going to come over and ask you. So I kind of panicked, I guess, and brought you out here to ask you first."

"Harry, Terry's been dating Parvati for about two weeks now. She was sitting right next to me. He was probably looking at her."

"Oh."

"Were you really that nervous that someone else would ask me first?" Hermione asked a bit shyly.

"Err… yeah."

"You're sweet," she replied before leaning up to place a kiss on his cheek.

Harry broke out into a goofy grin. He loved it when she did that.

"Let's go back and finish breakfast," Hermione said as she grabbed Harry's hand.

Harry merely nodded and followed her as she pulled him back to the Gryffindor table.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The cold December wind whipped through Harry's hair as he soared through the air on Buckbeak's back. The heavy winter cloak that he was wearing to ward off the freezing temperatures fluttered uselessly behind him, but Harry couldn't possibly care less; he was having the time of his life. Riding a hippogriff through the sky was very different from riding a broom - it was so much better. Brooms were artificial, they had a sterile quality to them that Harry couldn't exactly find words for. But Buckbeak was alive - he was born and bread to soar, to twist and turn and dive through the clouds. At first Harry didn't think that the rather large hippogriff would be able to compete with a good racing broom, but after only a few moments, he would've been willing to bet his last Knut on Buckbeak beating a Firebolt any day of the week.

With a bit of training and with the proper tack and harness, the experience of riding a hippogriff was much different from what Harry remembered from his third year. He had been riding bareback the few times that he took to the sky with Buckbeak in the past, and because of that, he had needed to be extra cautious not to fall from his perch. Now, however, with the proper equipment, he had no such concerns and he felt almost invincible. He barely even needed to hold on as he guided the beast with his knees.

Harry looked down to his left - there on the ground far below, Hermione sat astride Aristotle her hippogriff, or Books as she had taken to calling him. The girl still had yet to take off from the
ground, but Harry knew that she would have to do so sooner or later if she wanted to pass the course. And Hermione always wanted to pass her courses.

The clear note of a horn pierced the air - Keldorn's signal that class was nearing its end and that all riders needed to return their mounts to the stables. Harry prodded Buckbeak in the side with his knee and shifted his weight in the saddle, and the winged creature rolled to the right and dove. The hippogriff pulled its wings in close to its body, picking up speed as it plummeted toward the ground. Harry instinctively leaned as far forward as he could, minimizing his air resistance and thus adding a bit more speed to their descent. At the last possible moment, Harry dug his heels into Buckbeak's sides and the creature responded by rearing back and spreading his wings, changing their direction, and pulling them out of the dive in order to race along only a foot or two above the ground at a speed many times faster than any horse or even some cars could possibly hope to match.

Eventually they slowed and landed, covering the last several yards to the barn at a brisk run. Harry dismounted and patted the hippogriff on the side of its powerful neck.

"Great flying, Buckbeak," Harry said, "you were magnificent up there as always."

"Isn't it bad enough that you give me a heart attack every time you zoom around on that broom of yours?" Harry heard Hermione ask from behind him. "Do you have to go into dives like that in our riding class too?"

"Absolutely," Harry responded with a grin. "Buckbeak and I were born to fly, Hermione. A little bit of gliding ten feet above the ground isn't enough for guys like us, we need to fly."

Buckbeak let out a low chirp and bobbed his head as if in agreement.

"See?" Harry said, "Buckbeak agrees with me."

Hermione merely shook her head and muttered under her breath as she went back to tending to Aristotle.

Harry spent about fifteen minutes removing the tack and harness from Buckbeak, wiping him down, and making sure he had plenty of raw meat and water before saying farewell and departing. He found Hermione outside the stables with her cloak wrapped tightly around her and he smiled before turning toward the path to the castle.

"Not so fast," Hermione said, "I think we should talk to Sir Firecam."

Harry groaned.

"Come on, Hermione," said Harry, "I don't like talking about all that stuff."

Hermione was not to be deterred, however, and simply grabbed his hand and pulled him off to find the knight.

"Who's treating who as a rag doll now?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Hush," was Hermione's only response.

They found Keldorn lighting his pipe on the side of the barn and they quickly made sure that no one else was around before approaching him.

"Sir Firecam," Hermione began, "do you have a moment?"
"I suppose, Miss Granger. What can I do for you?" the knight answered.

"I think you should reconsider teaching Harry to be a paladin."

"Not much for beating around the bush, are you?" Harry mumbled under his breath.

Keldorn raised one eyebrow and removed the pipe from his mouth.

"Told you about that, did he?" Keldorn asked.

"Actually, it was my idea in the first place," the young witch answered.

"I see," said Keldorn, "but whoever had the idea does not bear upon my decision. I will not consecrate Mr. Potter just so he can defeat Voldemort. To do so would be extremely unwise and dangerous."

"Yes, I understand that," said Hermione. "You said that you wouldn't teach him because becoming a paladin can't be just a means to an end, right? That being a paladin is a complete way of life, coloring everything that a person does, right?"

"That's correct, more or less anyways."

"Well, I think if you knew Harry better, you'd see that he fits the bill perfectly!"

"Is that so?" the knight asked before taking a long pull from his pipe and turning his gaze to the young wizard.

"You see, Harry's—"

"There's a prophecy," Harry quickly cut her off in the hope that the prophecy alone would convince the knight and they wouldn't need to talk about the supposedly 'heroic' things that he had done, "about me and Voldemort. It says that I'm the only one that can kill him. That it's either I kill him or he kills me. I'm supposed to have a power that 'he knows not' and the forces of Light and Darkness are mentioned too. So Hermione thinks that it means I'm supposed to become a paladin."

Hermione glared at Harry for interrupting her while Keldorn regarded them in silence for a moment.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Potter," said Keldorn. "It is no easy thing to bear the weight of destiny on one's shoulders. I have known a few others in my time with similar burdens. However, this does not change my decision. If you do defeat Voldemort, what then? I will not impose a lifetime of constant struggle and battle against the forces of Darkness upon you simply for you to defeat one foe, no matter how powerful he is. Now if that is all..."

"Wait," Hermione said, "that wasn't what I was going to say." She then turned to the wizard beside her, "let me tell him about what you've done, Harry."

"Fine," Harry begrudgingly acquiesced.

Hermione turned back to meet the old knight's eyes.

"Harry has been fighting against the Darkness long before he knew that he would have to fight Voldemort," she said. "He's always been looking out for others, protecting them and coming to their help whenever he saw someone in need. In our first year Harry led the way when he, Ron, and I stopped Voldemort from stealing the Philosopher's Stone and regaining his body. In second
year, Harry fought and killed a fifty foot basilisk without his wand, and he did it in order to rescue Ginny Weasley who had been kidnapped. In third year he fought off scores of Dementors to rescue his wrongly accused godfather, and he saved my life in the process. Last year he organized a resistance group against the corrupt ministry official who was teaching here at Hogwarts, and he ran off to rescue his godfather once again even though he knew he was walking into a trap."

Harry huffed and turned away when Hermione mentioned the debacle at the Department of Mysteries, but he didn't interrupt her.

"He's faced down evil wizards, dragons, Acromantulas, selkies, werewolves and hordes of other creatures bent on destruction simply because it was the right thing to do. And he's been doing it his entire life! He was only eleven years old and didn't know any spells that would have been of any use when he jumped onto the back of an enraged mountain troll to save a poor, lonely, and friendless girl from certain death. I've never seen anyone do anything so brave or selfless in my life before or since, and he did it without a single thought of his own safety."

Hermione was becoming visibly worked up as she continued to describe her best friend to the old knight. She was adding strength and emphasis to her words that both embarrassed Harry and made Keldorn raise his eyebrows in surprise.

"You think that Harry becoming a paladin will put him at risk, will condemn him to a life of constantly fighting evil. Well, Harry's already been living that life since he was a little boy. And he isn't going to stop. Because that's who he is. He isn't the strongest or most fearsome warrior, he doesn't know the most spells or have years of experience, but he's always done what's right. He doesn't do it because he wants to or somehow thinks that he'll benefit from it or become famous. He does it because the thought of not helping someone in need, the thought of not standing up for what's right, would never even cross his mind. He's put his own life on the line time and again because someone else was in trouble, because someone needed him. I reprimanded him once for having a 'saving people thing,' for always rushing off to help others without thinking of himself, but that's just who he is. He's never been able to sit back while others are in trouble or when he sees a wrong that needs righting. He just has to help."

"You keep wondering what will happen after Harry defeats Voldemort, well I'll tell you. Harry will keep fighting to make the world a better place because he wouldn't know how to do anything else! I've known him for over five years now, and I know him better than anyone else. I probably know him better than he knows himself, and I'm telling you that teaching him how to be a paladin won't change his life, won't condemn him to anything that he isn't already doing, but it will give him the tools that he'll need to confront the evil that's out there."

"Harry Potter is the noblest, kindest, most courageous and loving man that I've ever met. And if that doesn't qualify him to become a paladin, well, then no one is worthy of the title!"

Hermione snapped her mouth shut and lifted her nose into the air, taking on a posture of defiance, as if to dare the old knight to try and refute the points that she made. Her face was slightly pink, probably out of embarrassment for saying so much about what she thought of Harry right in front of him, but otherwise she didn't show any weakness.

Keldorn stared at the young woman for a long moment before shifting his eyes to Harry. He eventually let out a sigh and proceeded to tap out the ashes from his pipe. When the knight was finished and had put the wooden instrument back into one of his pouches, he looked back up at the two students standing before him, Hermione with her posture of confidence and defiance, and Harry who was diligently studying his shoelaces.

"In the short time that I've had to get to know you, Miss Granger, you've shown yourself to be a
remarkable young lady," the knight finally said. "You're very intelligent and hardworking, but also conscientious, respectful, and kind. The fact that you would chose to say such things about Mr. Potter does indeed say much about his character. Perhaps I have underestimated him.

"Mr. Potter, if you have been able to win such admiration from a young woman like Miss Granger, well, maybe there's more to you than I first thought. It's obvious what Miss Granger thinks you will do with your life, but I must ask you, Mr. Potter: would you be willing to spend yourself, to pour out your life to the last drop of your blood in service of the Light, in standing against the Darkness?"

Harry looked up into the scarred face and the piercing eyes of the paladin standing before him. He held the old man's gaze for a moment before looking away.

"She makes me sound like something I'm not," Harry said in response. "Hermione makes it sound like I had all these noble intentions when I did those things, like I'm some sort of hero. The truth is, I didn't really think about that at all, I just did it. I'm sorry Hermione, but I don't think I'm the guy that you've been talking about."

Hermione glared at him as if he had betrayed her, but Keldorn simply let out a brief chuckle before speaking.

"Well, she did say that she knows you better than you know yourself. And I think she's right. It is often the case that our deeds seem very different to us than they do to others. What comes naturally to you, Mr. Potter, might be seen as heroic to others. In my long life, I have found that a true hero very seldom finds any heroism in his deeds. But does that make them any less heroic? Nonetheless, you did not answer my question. Would you spend yourself, lay down your life in order to stem the tide of the encroaching Darkness?"

Harry looked at the old knight, a man who had done just that: spent himself, surrendered his life to fighting the forces of evil wherever he went. He turned and looked at Hermione, his best friend, a girl who apparently thought better of him than he had ever known, a girl that meant more to him with each passing day. She had a higher opinion of him than he deserved. He didn't want to disappoint her, but he couldn't bring himself to lie either.

"I don't know," Harry finally responded while looking back down to the ground. "I don't know if I could do it."

"But would you commit yourself to the task regardless, not knowing whether or not you would succeed?"

Harry thought of Voldemort and the Death Eaters and all the people that they would hurt if he didn't stop them. He thought of the prophecy and the role that he was destined to play in the struggle. He thought of Dumbledore and the hope that the old wizard apparently had placed in him. He thought of the Weasleys, and Neville, Luna, Tonks, Sirius, and all the others and everything that they had been willing to sacrifice and give up in the fight against Voldemort.

And he thought of Hermione, of the fact that she was a Muggle-born and that Voldemort would be coming after her for something that she had no control over - unless he stopped him.

He thought about the things that Hermione had said about him, about how highly she thought of him, and he didn't want to let her down even though he knew that he wasn't half as good as she apparently thought. He found that he wanted to be the man that Hermione described just so that he wouldn't let her down.
Harry looked back up into the battle-worn face of Sir Keldorn Firecam.

"Yes," Harry said, "I would."

"Good," the old knight said. "Then I will take you into my service as my squire. I will teach you to live in the Light and to fight against the Darkness. We will see, together, if you shall be consecrated as a paladin. Does that sound agreeable to you, Mr. Potter?"

"I suppose."

"Then kneel, Harry Potter," Keldorn commanded as he unsheathed his sword, "and grasp the tip of my sword."

Harry got down on his knees and did as he was instructed while Hermione looked on with rapt attention. When he held the tip of the sword between his thumb and forefinger, he felt an immense power radiating from within the blade, seemingly just barely contained within the hard steel.

"And so I, Sir Keldorn Firecam, paladin and knight of the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart, ask you, Harry James Potter, do you freely swear to dedicate yourself to the study and pursuit of the Path of Light during your time as my squire?"

"I do," Harry responded.

"Do you freely swear to obey my every command to the best of your ability during your time in my service until you either chose leave my service, are dismissed by me, or are consecrated to the service of the Light as a paladin?"

"I do."

"For my part, I swear to do my utmost to teach you to be a vessel and herald of the Light amidst the Darkness, and to be fair and just with you in all things.

"Now rise, my squire," Keldorn said as he sheathed his sword, "and take your place at my side."

Harry rose to his feet and looked over at Hermione, who seemed to have tears in her eyes, before moving to stand at Keldorn's right.

"Come, Harry," the old knight said, "we must speak with the Headmaster about what has taken place today. Your life is about to become very different. You may join us, Miss Granger, if you wish."

No one said another word as they walked off in the direction of the castle and the Headmaster's office. Harry simply fell in line behind his new mentor. Hermione took her place at Harry's side, and with a look of pride in her eyes and a smile on her lips, she slipped her hand into his as they went to find Dumbledore.
The room was cold.

Only the flickering flame of a lone candle provided any sort of heat to the chamber. The scant light illuminated an old tome of nearly forgotten wizarding lore. The room was silent save for the ragged breathing of the deranged witch Bellatrix Lestrange. The wound that she had suffered in the battle at the Department of Mysteries had nearly cost Bellatrix her life. The Reductor Curse had blasted apart her shoulder and rendered her left arm nearly lifeless. More than that, it had forced slivers of broken bone into her lungs, wounds that had been slowly drowning the witch in her own blood. If her master hadn't found her as quickly as he had, there was no doubt that she would have died. This fact only served to deepen the fanatical devotion that she had for her Dark Lord.

Voldemort closed the tome he was reading with a sigh and rose from his seat.

Bellatrix stood a little straighter in her place in the corner of the room. She tried to quiet the wheezing noise that her breathing created but without much success. While her master's magic had saved her life, he couldn't actually heal her. Healing wasn't something that really interested the Dark Lord. He was able to keep her from dying, but painful, labored breathing would be Bellatrix's constant companion for the rest of her life.

Her eyes followed the Dark Lord as he crossed the room and opened the wooden door. Bellatrix turned and followed him through it without uttering a word.

She had followed her Lord without a second thought for as long as she could remember. It wasn't her place to question his actions or motives. She was aware that some of the other, less avid Death Eaters had begun grumbling about the Dark Lord's activities of late. They couldn't see why he was spending so much time in research. They wanted to be out causing trouble. While Bellatrix enjoyed savoring the pain of lesser beings as much as the next person, she would never question her master's supposed inactivity.

The Dark Lord had his reasons for what he was doing, and that was good enough for Bellatrix Lestrange.

As they walked down the dark corridor, Bellatrix began to hear the screams emanating from the room at the end of the hall. Her heart began to beat faster as she drank in the wails of anguish.

Oh how she loved listening to the sounds of suffering.

She followed her master into the room to find a man covered in blood and strapped to a table. His abdomen was sliced open and his intestines were strewn about the table around him. Strips of flesh had been peeled away to hang loosely from his arms and legs and black scorch marks marred the muscle that had been slowly roasted beneath.

Yet he was still alive.

Bellatrix raised one eyebrow in appreciation and looked over to Alecto Carrow, who was sporting a pleased grin.

"Well?" the Dark Lord questioned.

Alecto bowed her head before responding.
"I think you'll find him much more manageable now, my Lord," the Death Eater said.

Voldemort turned his attention and his wand to the man on the table.

"Let's see how the vaunted Occulmency of the Unspeakables holds up now," the Dark Lord said.
"Legilimens!"

Bellatrix watched with rapt attention as the man writhed in silent agony on the tabletop.

After several long moments, the Dark Lord lifted his spell and with a puzzled look, turned to leave the room.

"He is yours, Bella," he said as he passed.

A smile erupted on Bellatrix's face as anticipation flooded her. Her pupils dilated and her breath quickened as she raised her wand and took aim.

"Avada Kedavra!" she hissed and then watched as the bright green light stole the unfortunate man's life.

Bellatrix closed her eyes, tilted her head back and giggled as she savored the euphoria that filled her. Only the knowledge that her master was walking away from her was able to pull her back to the present. With her steps unsteady as she reveled in the bliss of casting the unforgivable curse, Bellatrix turned to follow her Lord.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Bellatrix looked at the glassy-eyed security guard in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic with disdain. The fool was so easy to exploit. He didn't even deserve to bear the name of wizard. Someone who could lose their will to the Imperious Curse so very easily deserved whatever fate that befell them.

The Imperious Curse. It was surprising to some that it was not one of Bellatrix's favorite spells. No, it was too easy and too unfulfilling. It failed to provide the euphoria that the other Unforgivables did. It was too mechanical to simply subvert someone's will with a mere spell. Using pain as a motivator, on the other hand, now that was truly enjoyable. It brought far more pleasure to Bellatrix to know that her victims were completely aware of what they were doing. She liked to savor the pain she inflicted, and bask in the triumph of driving someone to betray their most deeply held principals to simply bring an end to their suffering.

That Bellatrix normally provided the end to the suffering with a quick flash of delightful, green light was another source of pleasure entirely.

Bellatrix eyed the security guard as if he was a wasted opportunity, but continued on her way nonetheless.

The Ministry of Magic was almost deserted as she wound her way through the various levels and hallways. Few of the government's fat, bureaucratic employees bothered to put in even an extra minute of overtime once the day came to an end. The fact that the Ministry relied on one easily Imperiused security guard as their sole measure of protection spoke volumes of the government's incompetency. They didn't deserve to rule. Thus they would rightly fall whenever her master chose to subject them.
Bellatrix made her way into the Department of Mysteries and traveled down a long, twisting corridor. She finally stopped in front of a relatively new wooden door and took a moment to glance down at a dirty, brown rat near her feet. Bellatrix suppressed the urge to quickly stomp on the creature. She hated Peter Pettigrew. He was weak. But killing him here and now on a whim would displease her master.

So instead, she merely whispered, "We are here."

With that, the Dark Lord appeared at her side.

With a wave of his wand, the door opened and he stepped through. Meanwhile, the rat grew and took on the form of a short, balding man with a pasty complexion. Pettigrew kept his eyes on the floor as he first waited for Bellatrix to follow their Lord before he too entered the room and closed the door.

"I can feel the magic still in the air," Voldemort whispered as he took in the dark little room. There were fewer glowing crystal pendants to be found hanging on the walls at this point. So many of them had been destroyed in her fight with the Potter brat.

The Dark Lord moved to stand in the center of the room, extended his hand and closed his eyes.

Bellatrix's attention was drawn to a small whimper that she heard in the corner. She glanced over to see Pettigrew, cowering like the simpering fool he was. Oh, how she wished that her master would let her play with him while they waited. She would make him scream in the most delicious of ways.

Instead, she closed her eyes and concentrated on quieting her labored breathing. It would not do to disturb her master's concentration.

Bellatrix was unsure how much time had passed when the Dark Lord finally stirred again.

"Bella," he said as he turned his attention and his wand to her, "look at me."

Bellatrix glued her unblinking gaze upon her master's red eyes. She was well aware of what was coming.

"Legilimens!"

She lowered her defenses even as the pain began to throb in her skull. She did not fight as the Dark Lord ravaged and raped her thoughts.

It was his right to do so, after all.

Soon the pain spread from her mind to her body. Her breathing became difficult and tortuous. But she would not fight the invading presence in her mind. She would rather die where she stood than displease her master.

Finally, he relented. Bellatrix doubled over, her hands on her knees as she struggled to fill her damaged lungs with air. When she was finally able to look up again, she saw her master placing a large, bright crystal on the floor in the center of the room. He stood back a few paces and leveled his wand as he began to chant in some long-dead tongue.

As the chant grew louder and faster, the crystal began to throb with light. Finally, with a dramatic flourish, a bright yellow beam of light burst from the Dark Lord's wand to connect with the crystal.
Immediately the stink of sulfur enveloped the room. A great roar of noise filled the chamber as a powerful wind whipped at their robes. Peter's fearful whimpers were lost to the noise as the Dark Lord's chanting turned to shouting.

Finally, with a deafening boom, Bellatrix as thrown from her feet. When she looked up, she saw triumph on her master's face. She was therefore filled with glee as she turned to see the gaping hole that hovered in the centered of the room. It appeared to be a tear in reality itself. Small bursts of lightning danced around the jagged edges of the unnatural opening. Nothing could be seen within except a brightness that brought pain to her eyes.

"You first, Wormtail," the Dark Lord stated as if he had simply commanded his servant to bring him a cup of tea.

All color fled the cowardly Death Eater's face as his gaze shifted between his master and the gaping hole in reality.

Bellatrix snarled at the other man as he hesitated. He wasn't worthy of such an honor.

"Do not make me order you again."

With a whimper, the fat man walked up to the portal. He slowly reached out a hand, only to draw it back with a painful yelp as the lightning arced out to meet him.

Pettigrew cast one last look behind him at his now impatient Lord. He took a deep breath as if steeling himself, and then leaped into the bright opening.

The Dark Lord stood still, staring at the tear in reality for a moment. He watched as the opening slowly began to shrink before striding forward and quietly slipping into the unknown.

Bellatrix followed immediately after without hesitation. Wherever her master went, she would follow without question.

As she crossed the jagged edge of the portal, every nerve ending in her body exploded with pain. It was like the Cruciatrustus Curse, but a thousand times more intense. Her breath was ripped from her and her mind was laid waste. Bellatrix allowed her laughter to bubble up from within her before all conscious thought was surrendered to darkness.
"Come on, Harry."

Hermione led a dazed Harry Potter through the corridors and into the Gryffindor common room. Once inside, she guided him over to one of the couches by the fire and had him sit down. They had just finished talking with Keldorn and Dumbledore about Harry’s new status as the paladin’s squire and how that would impact his life at Hogwarts. To say that Harry was a bit shocked about the consequences of his new position would be an understatement.

"Do you want me to get the others?" she asked.

"I can't believe it," Harry whispered, seemingly unaware of her question.

Hermione sat down next to him and took his hand.

"I know this is hard to swallow, Harry. I know this wasn't what we were expecting when we decided to try and get Sir Firecam to teach you to be a paladin, but we'll get through it."

Harry just shook his head in disbelief.

"Harry," Hermione tried again, "do you want me to get them so we can tell them now and get it over with? Or would you rather wait a little while? We can't wait too long, they'll figure out that something’s up by tomorrow."

After a moment of silence, Harry finally responded.

"I suppose we'd better get it over with," he said. "Ron's going to kill me."

"He'll understand," Hermione replied.

Harry just gave her an incredulous look.

"Well, he'll eventually understand."

The young witch then stood up and went to gather the people that Harry needed to talk to. While he waited for the group to assemble, Harry's mind couldn't help but go back to the meeting in the Headmaster's office.

"As my squire," Keldorn said, "Harry will be required to devote much of his time to my service and to his training."

"That's understandable," Dumbledore replied.

"Normally," Keldorn continued, "squires would not be permitted to be enrolled in any other sort of training or education at the same time."

Harry and Hermione found themselves in a sudden panic when they heard this, afraid that the knight was about to pull Harry out of Hogwarts. Harry was about to interrupt when Keldorn's next words somewhat alleviated his worries.

"However," Keldorn said, "it is clear that his training as a wizard will be essential to his life as a paladin in this world. He should not lightly dismiss any tools that are likely to be an aid to his fight against the Darkness."
Harry exhaled and almost collapsed in relief and he noticed that Hermione visibly slumped down into her chair as well.

"But the fact remains that Mr. Potter's schedule here is far too busy. He would never be able to meet the demands of being a squire as well as a fulltime Hogwarts student. He would be dead on his feet within days."

"What then do you propose?" Dumbledore asked.

"Several of his courses will have to be dropped," Keldorn replied. "Anything that is not absolutely necessary for the fundamental understanding of magic and the ability to use it in this world will have to go."

Harry was okay hearing that, after all, fewer classes meant less homework. Hermione, on the other hand, looked like she was starting to panic again. Meanwhile, Dumbledore waved his wand and a piece of parchment flew over to his desk from a small cabinet.

"Well," the old wizard said, "here is Harry's schedule, let's have a look, shall we? Harry here is taking Charms, Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Potions, Care of Magical Creatures, Astronomy and Riding and Magical Mounts."

"And which of these would be the bare minimum for being capable of wielding magic against the slaves of the Darkness in this world, Headmaster?" Keldorn asked.

Dumbledore thought in silence for a moment with his fingers steepled in front of his chin.

"I would say Charms, Transfiguration and Defense," the old wizard eventually answered.

"Agreed," said Keldorn, "although he shall stay in Riding as well. It is a skill that he shall need."

"WHAT?!" Hermione shouted as she jumped to her feet. "You can't be serious! Harry can't just abandon his education like that!"

"Harry is not abandoning anything, Miss Granger," Dumbledore replied, "he is merely taking his education in a rather unorthodox direction. Dropping a few classes will allow him the freedom to do so."

"But what about his N.E.W.T.s?!"

"That is a good question, Miss Granger," Dumbledore responded before turning to the old knight with a twinkle in his eye. "Sir Firecam, what are the N.E.W.T. scores required for becoming a paladin?"

The Headmaster's little joke seemed to only further anger the young witch.

"This is unbelievable!" she shouted.

"It's okay, Hermione," Harry interrupted her, "I can probably make up the classes down the road if I really need to."

"Well said, Harry," Dumbledore added, "and besides, perhaps we can include your new status as an independent study program, with N.E.W.T. scores to be determined by the instructor?"

That suggestion seemed to mollify Hermione enough that she once again took her seat. Keldorn then spoke up once again.
There's something else that will need to go…"

Harry was shaken out of his memories by Hermione returning and sitting down beside him. She slipped her hand into his and gave him a soft smile before he turned his attention to the Gryffindors seated around him.

"What's up, Harry?" asked Katie Bell.

"Yeah, Harry, why'd you need to see all of us? Have a new strategy for tomorrow's practice?" Demelza Robins asked.

"Err… no," said Harry.

"Then what is it?" asked Ginny.

"Umm…"

Everyone was looking at him expectantly and Harry found himself filled with dread.

"Look, the thing is, well…" Harry began but trailed off. He huffed and looked up to the ceiling as if the right thing to say would be found inscribed there. Finally he looked back to the assembled Gryffindor Quidditch team seated before him.

"I'm quitting Quidditch."

Harry's declaration was met with stony silence.

After a moment, Ron smiled.

"Good one, mate, you had me going there."

"I'm serious, Ron."

"Sure you are. Harry Potter, best Seeker in a century, quits Quidditch. Pull the other one, mate, it's got bells on."

Harry sighed and looked over at Katie.

"I think you'll need this," he said while handing her a small object. Katie looked down to see that it was the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain badge.

"You're not joking, are you Harry?" Ginny asked.

"No, I'm not," Harry replied.

The group lapsed into silence for a moment before Ron once again broke it.

"Are you mental?!" he shouted while rising to his feet as his face became bright red. "You can't quit Quidditch! You love Quidditch! We need you! The team needs you!"

Harry merely hung his head in shame as Ron unloaded on him.

"Stop it, Ron," Hermione came to Harry's defense. "Harry didn't want to do this, but he has to. It wasn't his decision."

"Oh really? Whose was it then?" Ron asked with a vicious look on his face. "Now that you're his
girlfriend you get to make all his decisions for him? Can't bear to let your Harry play the game he loves?"

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione shouted as her face brightened and she rose to stand face to face with Ron. "I would never make Harry quit Quidditch! I know how much it means to him. And I'm not his girlfriend!"

"Oh yeah right," said Ron. "You've always wanted Harry to quit playing. Go on, admit it, you hate the way he flies about after the snitch. You're always getting all antsy about it."

"I never…! Of course I don't like seeing Harry do all those crazy stunts on his broom! I just don't like seeing him nearly get killed! But I didn't ask him to quit Quidditch."

"Likely story. I always knew you were a bloody nag," Ron shot back at her.

Hermione merely stood there with her mouth open in stunned silence. No one else seemed to know what to say either.

"That's enough, Ron," Harry finally said. "This wasn't Hermione's idea. So stop being an ass to her."

That seemed to only make Ron angrier.

"Just because you asked her to one bloody party doesn't mean that you have to do everything she says!"

"I said enough!" Harry shouted. "Hermione didn't make me quit Quidditch. It was Dumbledore and Firecam. I'm going to start a new program with Sir Firecam and he said that I simply won't have the time to be playing games. He made me drop half my classes too."

Silence once again reigned in the group before Ron turned on his heel and left to storm up the stairs to the boy's dormitories.

"What are we going to do without you?" Ritchie Coote asked after Ron was gone.

Harry gave the younger boy a small smile as he replied, "I'm sure your new captain will figure it out."

"I don't know what to say, Harry," Katie responded.

"Just take good care of the team," Harry replied.

The girls on the team all hugged Harry before wandering off while Ritchie and Jimmy settled for handshakes. Ginny decided to hang around and she dropped back onto the couch with Harry and Hermione.

"I can't believe that empty-headed git you call a best mate," Hermione said with her arms crossed over her chest. "To think that I would try and control your life just because you asked me to a party. One date doesn't mean that I'm suddenly running your life."

"So you're not my girlfriend then?" Harry asked. "You seemed pretty adamant about that point."

Hermione exhaled as her lips twitched into a small smile.

"Well, you never actually asked me that," she replied.
"What would you say if I did?"

"Why don't we wait and see how the Christmas party goes?" said Hermione.

"Alright."

They sat in silence for a moment before Hermione turned to Ginny.

"I feel like cursing your brother into a million pieces."

"Don't worry," said Ginny, "he'll calm down and realize he's an idiot soon enough."

"Yes, well, he better stay out of my way in the near future if he doesn't want to find himself with fire ants crawling into uncomfortable places."

Harry found himself tuning the two girls out, however, as he once again thought about his new lot in life. He was still in shock over the abrupt changes, but he couldn't help but wonder at what Keldorn had in store for him. The only thing that he was certain of was that Slughorn would be greatly disappointed to learn that the Boy Who Lived was no longer in his potions class.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The next morning Harry made his way toward Keldorn's office after breakfast. While he was still upset about having to quit Quidditch, especially since Ron was refusing to talk to him, Harry was curious about what new activities would soon be added to his daily routine. Once he reached the out of the way room in the fourth floor corridor, he gently knocked on the door.

"Come in," the voice of Keldorn responded from the other side of the door.

Harry stepped into the room, quietly shutting the door behind him. His glance quickly took in the old knight's office. There was a mid-size, unadorned, wooden desk in the middle of the room facing the doorway with a simple wooden chair behind it and a pair of matching chairs in front. The far wall had a mostly empty bookcase that contained only a handful of books as well as a door that Harry assumed led to Keldorn's living quarters. Harry looked to his right to see a small desk and a simple chair that were pushed up against the same wall as the doorway leading to the corridors. There was a rather thick book on the desk as well as some parchment, a quill, and an ink pot. Other than that, the room was bare and empty.

Keldorn was seated behind his desk and beckoned Harry to come forward and to take a seat in one of the two unoccupied chairs.

"Welcome to your first full day as my squire, Harry," the knight said. "I hope you are prepared to work."

"I am," Harry responded.

"Good. You're here to be shaped and formed into a paladin, or at least to find out if you are capable of such formation. You have some disadvantages that most squires do not have to deal with, such as the fact that you are a bit older than normal to be starting, but that is not unheard of. The real disadvantage is the fact that this world does not know the Light, and thus, you do not know the Light. Yes, you have your magic, and while magic may be related to the Light as the Headmaster suggests, it is not the same thing. The Light is alive, Harry. It is personal. It is all that is good, true and beautiful. It is justice and right, as well as mercy. It is the creator and source of all good things.
But above all else, the Light is love. It is not an abstract thing that exists somewhere far away, removed from us, but it is here, now. It knows us better than we know ourselves. The Light loves us, and wants us to live forever in glory.

"In order for you to become a paladin, you must come to know the Light. The Light is the source of our strength as paladins. Yes, my arm could swing a sword just as well as any other man without the trust that I place in the Light, but I would not have the guidance that I need to ensure that I am swinging that sword at the right target, or whether I should be swinging it at all. The Light enables us to see and hear the truth, to know what motivates the actions of those around us. This is what you will work toward: coming to know the Light, just as well as if it were your best friend. First and foremost, this is your task.

"You will do so through the means of meditation, study and discipline."

Keldorn slid a small book across the desk to Harry.

"This is the Liturgia Horarum, a selection of passages from the Codex Luminis used for meditation. It mostly follows a month-long cycle before starting over again, with a few exceptions for particularly important days. You will meditate with it twice a day, in the mornings after you rise from sleep and in the evenings before you retire.

"As for your studies, you will focus on reading the Codex Luminis itself as well as St. Tomus' Summa Philosophica which you will find on your desk in the corner." Keldorn gestured to the small desk that Harry had noticed when he entered the room. "You will also spend time each day reflecting upon the Paladin's Oath, so that you come to not only know it by heart, but have actually come to understand and have integrated it into your life. Each night we will discuss what you have read that day and how you comprehend it. When you have no other task to perform, I expect you to be in here, studying.

"Finally, as for discipline, you will perform the various tasks that I assign you without question or complaint. You will soon be used to performing both tiring and menial tasks in my service.

"Do you have any questions?"

Harry simply shook his head.

"Good. Get to it, then."

OoOoO

Harry was quite tired by the time he made it back to the Gryffindor common room just before curfew that night. He had spent most of the morning reading first from the Codex Luminis and then from the Summa Philosophica. The Summa was actually rather difficult to work through; it was written in a question and answer style that Harry was not familiar with, and each paragraph was packed full of information. It seemed as if the author wanted to get as much content as possible into the bare minimum number of words needed for the task. Harry found himself constantly rereading each paragraph to make sure that he understood what was said and that he didn't miss anything. Reading the book turned out to be mentally exhausting.

After lunch, Keldorn brought Harry with him to the stables to assist with his third and fourth year riding class. He helped the students with their technique during the lesson and afterwards he was charged with cleaning up and inspecting the tack and harness for damage as well as repairing
whatever was found. He was instructed to do this by hand and without the aid of magic. He then had to muck out the stalls in the stables and provide fresh hay, again without magic. Harry had begun to think that if this was what training to be a paladin was like, it was going to be as if he was assigned to perpetual detention.

Then Harry was told to spend a couple of hours working on his swordsmanship followed by study, dinner and more study. He rounded out the evening by polishing Keldorn's boots and then dusting and sweeping the already pristine office before being quizzed on the reading he had done that day. He was dismissed for the night with orders to return in the morning an hour before dawn.

Harry staggered into the common room and was greeted by an anxious Hermione.

"Harry!" she practically shouted as she leapt up from her seat by the fire. "Where have you been? Other than the ten minutes you spent shoveling food into your mouth at lunch and dinner, I haven't seen you all day!"

Harry walked over to the young witch and sat down on the couch she had risen from before replying.

"I'm a squire now, remember? Apparently that means that I'm going to have to spend all my time working. I didn't have any classes today, which means I spent the whole day doing whatever Firecam told me to do."

"Really?" Hermione asked as she sat down beside him.

"Really. Did you know that being a squire means that I have to muck out all of the horse stalls twice everyday? And without magic? It's like being in permanent detention."

Hermione grimaced at that.

"I'm sure that won't last forever."

"Yeah right. Sir Firecam told me that he's letting me ease into things this week. Starting next week I have to do the hippogriff stalls too."

"I'm sure there's a good reason for it," said Hermione.

"Sure there is. Cleaning up horse crap is the secret to defeating Voldemort, didn't you know that?"

Hermione huffed in response.

"Don't be like that. You know that he wouldn't make you do those things if there wasn't a reason."

Harry leaned his head back against the couch and closed his eyes.

"Yeah, I know. I'm probably just tired. He's had me reading this philosophy book that's just killing me. I think it would be more fun to bash my head against the wall."

Hermione's eyes lit up at the mention of the book.

"Oh? What's it called?"

"It the *Summa Philosophica*, written by some saint from Sir Firecam's home world."

"Could I borrow it sometime?"
Harry cracked open one eye and cast a sideways glance at Hermione.

"Sorry," he said, "but reading that book is one of my main tasks. I have to read it for hours everyday and he's constantly questioning me about what I've read. It's pretty thick too, so I've no idea how long it's going to take. I don't think I can let you borrow it anytime soon."

Hermione looked somewhat dejected at hearing that, but soon recovered.

"Well, maybe I can make a copy. Most wizarding books have built in charms that prevent unauthorized copying, but something that Sir Firecam brought with him from a different universe probably wouldn't. Do you think he'd mind?"

"You're free to ask him about it."

They lapsed into silence for a while before Harry spoke up again.

"Did you talk to Ron at all today?"

"No," Hermione answered, "he wouldn't even look at me. Don't worry, Harry. He'll come around. Especially once he sees how hard you're working."

"He's a right git," Harry responded. "He had no right to say those things about you."

Hermione chose not to respond.

"How was your day, then?" Harry asked after another moment of silence.

"Well, to be honest, it was a bit lonely actually. What with you busy all day and Ron refusing to talk to me."

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault, Harry. You're only doing what you need to do."

"Yeah, but if I wasn't doing this paladin thing…"

"Which was my idea, remember? So don't go blaming yourself for me being lonely in class today without you. I'll survive. It's not like you won't be in any of my classes ever again. I guess Wednesdays will just have to be a little rough.

"Maybe Sir Firecam will let me come and study with you in his office?" Hermione added after a moment.

"Err… I don't know…"

"Why not?"

"Well, it's just that… I don't know. He's pretty big on me avoiding distractions. But I guess you're free to ask him that too if you want."

A few moments later Harry felt someone shaking his shoulder.

"Wha…?"

"Harry, I think it's time you went up to bed," Hermione said in an amused voice.
"What? Why?"

"You can barely keep your eyes open. You've been asleep for the past ten minutes. Sir Firecam must have worked you harder than I thought. We'll see each other tomorrow."

Harry wanted to deny it, but he was honestly too tired to put forth the effort.

"Fine. Goodnight, Hermione," he said as he pushed himself to his feet and shambled over to the staircase.

"Goodnight, Harry."
It is proper to justice, as compared with the other virtues, to direct man in his relations with others: because it denotes a kind of equality, as its very name implies; indeed we are wont to say that things are adjusted when they are made equal, for equality is in reference of one thing to some other. On the other hand the other virtues perfect man in those matters only which befit him in relation to himself. Accordingly that which is right in the works of the other virtues, and to which the intention of the virtue tends as to its proper object, depends on its relation to the agent only, whereas the right in a work of justice, besides its relation to the agent, is set up by its relation to others. Because a man's work is said to be just when it is related to some other by way of some kind of equality, for instance the payment of the wage due for a service rendered. And so a thing is said to be just, as having the rectitude of justice, when it is the term of an act of justice, without taking into account the way in which it is done by the agent: whereas in the other virtues nothing is declared to be right unless it is done in a certain way by the agent. For this reason justice has its own special proper object over and above the other virtues, and this object is called the just, which is the same as "right." Hence it is evident that right is the object of justice.

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. His head felt like it weighed a thousand pounds.

The thick book in front of him, the Summa Philosophica, had quickly become the bane of his existence. It wouldn't have been so bad if St. Tomus had simply written in words and phrases that people actually used. It seemed to Harry that the old saint threw around words like 'agent' and 'object' more than any man had a right to do.

Harry was not looking forward to mucking out the horse and hippogriff stalls once again in the freezing, late-December weather, but before he could get that over and done with, he needed to finish thirty-some more pages of this Merlin-forsaken book.

He was about to refocus his attention on his reading when there was a knock at the door. He quickly glanced at Keldorn, who seated at his own desk, before rising to answer the door. As he opened it, his eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Hello, Harry," Hermione said with a smile. "Is Sir Firecam available?"

"Certainly," Harry replied as he stepped to the side and held the door open for his friend to enter the knight's office.

"Miss Granger," the voice of the old man rang, "to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Harry made his way back to his desk and his reading. But while his eyes were focused on the book before him, his attention was on the brown-haired young woman who had just entered the room. To Harry, it seemed as though his interactions with his bookish best friend had dwindled to scant minutes per day since he began his time as Keldorn's squire. Most of their time together was limited to Harry's remaining classes, the ten minutes he was afforded to take his meals, and the brief time they had each evening when Harry returned to the common room after a hard day's work. Without fail, Hermione was always there to greet him when he finally made it back to Gryffindor Tower, even though most nights Harry was far too tired to be much company before simply heading off to
"I was hoping that you would allow me the chance to examine your armor once again. I think I've been able to replicate the extradimensional folding that allows the armor to disappear inside the gorget, but I wanted to make sure that I have the sequencing right. After all, an error in the folding process could destabilize the lattice of the subspace when it reemerges."

"Well, I don't see why not," Keldorn said as he stood and unbuckled his gorget from around his neck. He placed the piece of armor on a small wooden stand in the corner of the office before speaking the command word that made the rest of the suit appear. Hermione quickly brought her wand to bear and began inspecting the metal plates.

However, Harry couldn't help but wonder if her attention was really as riveted on him as his was on her. He knew that she had been rather lonely of late due to his absence and to the fact that Ron was still being a royal git about Harry's resignation from the Quidditch team. She had approached Keldorn with the thought that she might study in his office along with Harry, but the old knight had shot that idea down immediately. Apparently Harry was not in need of any further distractions.

After that, it seemed as though Hermione had found renewed interest in her N.E.W.T. project, which just so happened to require her to make frequent visits to Keldorn's office to inspect his armor. Harry had the sneaking suspicion that Hermione didn't really need to inspect it as often as she did, but he wasn't about to bring that up.

Harry tried to refocus on his reading.

*Now a thing can be adjusted to a man in two ways: first by its very nature, as when a man gives so much that he may receive equal value in return...*

But out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Hermione chew on her lower lip for a brief moment and all hope of concentration was lost.

*Maybe I'm just nervous about the Christmas party,* Harry thought to himself. After all, his first official date with Hermione was only two days away. Keldorn had reluctantly given his squire permission to attend the affair, and Harry had even found time to purchase a new set of dress robes for the occasion.

After about fifteen minutes of diligent study, Hermione proclaimed herself to be finished with the armor. She thanked Keldorn and made her way to the door.

"See you later, Harry," she said with a wink that Harry understood to betray her true intentions for visiting the office.

"Bye, Hermione," he replied.

Once the witch was gone, Keldorn walked over to Harry's desk and closed the book Harry was supposed to be reading.

"Let's see," the old knight began, "tell me, what is the difference between a natural right and a positive right?"

"Erm..."

"Yes, as I thought. You've spent the last quarter hour completely distracted from your given task, haven't you?"
Denial would do him no good. Paladins could literally hear the difference between truth and lies.

"Yes, sir."

"Hmmm. Well there's nothing for it today. You'll simply have to reread this section of the *Summa* tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," Harry said as he rose to his feet, preparing to head to the stables.

"And to hammer home the need for concentration," the knight said before Harry could take his cloak down from its peg, "I think one hundred push-ups are in order before you attend to your other duties."

Harry didn't bother arguing. He simply sighed and dropped to the floor. The extra exercises would guarantee that his arms would be burning by the time he finished the stables.

But still, fifteen extra minutes with Hermione was worth it.

OoOoO

Friday, the twentieth of December found Harry with an unusual abundance of energy. The day started off rather normally with his usual early-morning meditation and his regular tasks given by Keldorn. Professor McGonagall had the class beginning to work on human transfiguration, which was much more difficult and much more dangerous than anything they had done previously. After a long lecture, they proceeded to attempt to change the color of their eyebrows. Hermione, to no one's surprise, did rather well, managing to get her eyebrows to shift between several different hues from bright red to dark blue. Harry managed to turn one of his eyebrows yellow. Ron accidentally gave himself a handlebar mustache.

Later that afternoon, after hurriedly finishing his work in the stables, Harry ran back to Gryffindor Tower to prepare for Slughorn's Christmas party. At first, Harry had been afraid that his new mentor would not allow him to attend the party at all. After all, the old knight seemed rather adamant that Harry should avoid any semblance of distraction from his duties as a squire. However, in the end it took little convincing to obtain permission. It would simply be rude for Harry to rescind his acceptance of the invitation and to leave poor Hermione without a date at the last minute. Sir Keldorn Firecam was many things, but he was never rude.

And so Harry found himself almost bouncing with nervous energy as he finished donning his new dress robes. He was readjusting his white bowtie for the ninth time when Ron walked into the dorm room wearing his dirty Quidditch robes.

"Heading off to the Slug Club, then?" the red-haired wizard said.

Harry stilled his nervous movement as his eyebrows shot up in surprise at the fact that Ron had spoken to him. Harry turned to face him.

"Err… Yeah."

Ron sat down on his bed and removed his mud-ridden boots. He then stared at his hands in silence for a moment.

"Look, Harry…” Ron began but trailed off.
"Yes?" Harry responded after a moment.

"You know how I get sometimes," Ron began again, "and you know how important Quidditch is to me."

"Yeah," Harry said as he looked back to the mirror to continue adjusting his bowtie, giving Ron the space he needed to say whatever it was he was going to say.

"And you know that… well…" Ron trailed off again.

It wasn't much in the way of an apology for acting like a total git for several days followed by weeks of silence, but Harry understood what Ron was trying to do. Apologizing was never easy for anyone. Harry knew that Ron in particular had a difficult time with it. The time that Harry spent studying the *Summa* with Sir Firecam had given him a little bit of new insight into human nature. Harry already knew that Ron was terribly insecure because of his family—that he felt the need to try and live up to his older brothers, but now he also recognized the impact that insecurity had on Ron's pride. From Ron's point of view, no one ever gave him credit for doing something well or getting something right. It didn't matter whether or not that was the case in reality, that was simply the way Ron saw the world. Apologizing meant that Ron had to admit to himself that he was in the wrong. It meant that he had to add his own voice to the already overwhelming chorus shout at him that he'd never get anything right. That was why it took him so long to come to moments like this. That was why it took him so long to even get the words out. But he was trying.

And thus, Harry decided to cut him some slack.

"It's okay, Ron," Harry said without looking away from the mirror, "I get it."

The ability to forgive was important, after all. Did Ron deserve to be forgiven? Especially after such a poor attempt at apologizing? Probably not. But then again, did anyone ever really *deserve* forgiveness? If you deserved it, you probably didn't need it in the first place. Forgiveness could only truly be given to those who didn't deserve it. The Light was mercy and forgiveness itself. If Harry couldn't forgive one of his best friends, he had no business being Sir Firecam's squire.

"How was practice?" Harry asked, shifting the conversation away from heavy topics to something lighter.

"Dreadful," Ron replied with a relieved smile. "I think Katie is trying to bring Wood back from the dead."

"Oliver Wood isn't dead. He graduated."

"You know what I mean. I don't understand why she makes us practice like this the day before Christmas break. I know we've got our work cut out for us after shifting the positions around and holding tryouts again, but still. Flying in the cold and the muck doesn't exactly build morale."

Harry smiled.

"Sometimes quitting Quidditch doesn't seem so bad."

Ron responded by throwing a muddy boot at him.

Harry ducked out of the way, shouting, "Watch the robes, you git!"

"What?" Ron responded with a smirk. "Afraid Hermione won't kiss your ugly mug if you've got a
bit of mud on your shirt?"

Harry's reply took the form of a glare.

"Seriously," said Ron, "how's the snogging going?"

"There is no snogging."

"What?!" Ron laughed, "What's the point if there's no snogging?!"

"Shut it," Harry responded. With one last glance in the mirror, he turned and marched out of the dorm and down to the common room, leaving Ron to his laughter. He only had to wait for a few moments before Hermione appeared at the top of the steps to the girl's dormitory.

She was wearing a red, floor-length gown that left her shoulders bare, as well as long, white gloves that reached up beyond her elbows. There was a delicate string of what looked like pearls around her neck. Her wild hair had been tamed, and was done up very prettily. Harry thought that it must have taken her all afternoon.

The effect was worth it.

"Hi, Harry," Hermione said with a shy smile, "you look very handsome."

Harry coughed.

"Err… so do you. Pretty, I mean. You look really pretty."

"Thank you, kind sir," she said as she finished descending the stairs. The two teenagers stood looking at each other for a moment, seemingly at a loss for what to do next. Hermione finally broke the silence.

"Well, shall we?" she asked before taking Harry's hand and leading him to the portrait hole.

Once they were out in the hallway, Hermione shivered.

"Cold?" Harry asked.

"A bit," Hermione replied. "I suppose this gown isn't very practical." She then turned to Harry with a smile. "I guess I'll just have to rely on you to keep me warm."

Harry wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but he smiled right back at the girl standing next to him before putting his arm around her and walking off in the direction of the party.

They arrived at only a couple of minutes past six o'clock, but the party was obviously already well underway. The ceiling and walls had been draped with emerald, crimson and gold hangings, so that it looked as though they were all inside a vast tent. The room was crowded and stuffy and bathed in the red light cast by an ornate golden lamp dangling from the center of the ceiling in which real fairies were fluttering, each a brilliant speck of light. Loud singing accompanied by what sounded like mandolins issued from a distant corner; a haze of pipe smoke hung over several elderly warlocks deep in conversation, and a number of house-elves were negotiating their way squeakily through the forest of knees, obscured by the heavy silver platters of food they were bearing, so that they looked like little roving tables. Harry noted several students that he knew and several others that he had met at meetings of the Slug Club, as well as quite a few adults that he had never seen before. He guessed that they were past members of the club invited back for the holiday gathering.
"Harry, my boy!" Slughorn exclaimed when the older man spotted him. "How good to see you! Such a shame that you're no longer in my class. We really must have a chat with that Firecam, see if we can't work something out to get you back in the potions classroom. Your talent simply can't go to waste!"

Harry's reply was cut off as the professor turned his attention to Hermione.

"And if it isn't Hermione Granger on the arm of the Boy Who Lived! No real surprise there, I must say. A brilliant wizard needs a brilliant witch after all. You look marvelous, my dear. Come with me, you two, there are some people that I must introduce you to," and with a firm hand, Slughorn guided them off in the direction of several of the adult guests.

They were led to a stout, bespectacled wizard standing next to a tall, gaunt man with pale skin.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger" Slughorn began, "if I may introduce the distinguished author, Mr. Eldred Worple and his friend Sanguini."

"Harry Potter, I am simply delighted!" Worple began, "I was saying to Professor Slughorn only the other day, 'Where is the biography of Harry Potter for which we have all been waiting?'... But seriously, I would be delighted to write it myself — people are craving to know more about you, dear boy, craving! If you were prepared to grant me a few interviews, say in four- or five-hour sessions, why, we could have the book finished within months... My dear boy, the gold you could make, you have no idea —"

"I don't think Harry is interested in that at the moment, Mr. Worple," Hermione interrupted before he could say more. "However, I did find your recent work about living with vampires to be very interesting."

"Did you, now?" the short man replied to her. "Well then, you'll be pleased to meet Sanguini," Worple continued while gesturing to the tall man beside him, "he's one of the vampires that took me in for quite some time. Nearly made a meal out of me the first time we met!"

The pale vampire reached down and took Hermione's hand, bringing it up to his lips.

"Charmed," Sanguini said in a deep, foreign accent before he sharply inhaled with Hermione's wrist less than an inch from his nose. "May I say, Mizz Hermione, zat you look quite… delicious…"

"Right!" Harry exclaimed as he snatched Hermione's hand away from the vampire, "nice to meet you! Excuse us, I think I see someone over there." With that, Harry hurriedly pulled Hermione away from the creepy vampire.

Slughorn, however, was not so easily deterred. Harry and Hermione soon found themselves once again being guided through the room and introduced to more people. After about forty-five minutes, Harry was sure that he had made more introductions that evening than he had in his entire life.

"How much more of this do we need to take?" Harry whispered into Hermione's ear as they listened to an elderly witch drone on about some story in which Harry's great-grand uncle might have played a passing role.

Hermione turned to Harry with a smile and a wink before addressing the witch.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Pifflesnitch, but I just remembered that Harry here has promised me a number of dances. If we don't start now, I'm afraid I'll make a liar out of him."
"Ho ho!" Slughorn exclaimed, "can't have that, can we, Alberta? You two young people go have some fun. It is a party after all." He then dismissed them with a wave.

Hermione grabbed Harry's hand and led him to the area of the floor where a few other teenaged couples were awkwardly dancing together.

"You really want to dance?" Harry queried with a little bit of panic in his voice.

"Of course," she replied with a smirk. "You did promise after all."

"I did not!"

"Of course you did. It was implied when you asked me to the party. You can't simply ask a girl on a date to a formal party and not expect to dance with her."

"But I…" Harry began to protest.

"Relax, Harry," Hermione responded with a softer smile, "it's only me."

Harry swallowed hard before he took her right hand in his left, placed his other hand on her hip, and then slowly began to wobble with her about the dance floor. He knew that he wasn't a very good dancer; he never had much experience in the area. But Hermione seemed to be enjoying herself if the ear to ear grin on her face was any indication. They slowly danced together for a few songs before Harry broke the silence.

"So, I'm on speaking terms with Ron again."

Hermione looked into his eyes and smiled.

"See, I told you he'd come around. He always does. Did you make him beg?"

"What?"

"I would have made the big berk beg."

"Give the guy a break, Hermione."

"Why should I? He never seems to give me one."

"Ron's just… well… Ron," Harry said with a small amount of exasperation. "You know how he is. We can't hold that against him."

Hermione shook her head at Harry but with a smile.

"You have a good heart, Mr. Potter."

"Do I now?" Harry enquired with a grin.

"Of course you do. I've always liked that about you."

"Really?" Harry said before he decided to get a little playful. "What else do you like about me?"

Hermione, living up to her reputation as the brightest witch of the age, caught on quickly.

"Hmm… it's hard to say, there's not much to pick from, you being so scrawny after all." With that she moved her hand from his shoulder down to his ribs where she gave him a few playful pinches.
Her eyes widened a bit in surprise when what she expected to find as mere skin and bone actually turned out to be rather well-muscled.

Harry laughed.

"I didn't stay scrawny for long after Firecam really started working me."

"I'll say," Hermione replied. "What else are you hiding under those robes?"

"Wouldn't you like to find out?"

Hermione's cheeks turned bright pink, but she met him eye to eye nonetheless.

"Maybe."

That ensured that Harry's complexion matched hers rather quickly.

"But back to the topic at hand," Harry began after a few moments of heavy silence with the band playing in the background, "what exactly is it about me that you find to be so handsome?"

"Who says I find you handsome?" Hermione playfully rejoined.

"I do."

"Well, I probably shouldn't tell you now. Wouldn't want you getting a swelled head. Besides, as this is our first date, it's customary for the gentleman to lavish compliments upon the lady, not the other way around."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Didn't you read the rulebook?"

"There's a rulebook for first dates?"

"There's a book for everything! I read it twice, of course, so you can simply trust that I know what I'm talking about, as normal."

"Well then, Miss Granger, according to your rulebook, how am I doing so far?"

"I'd say you're managing to pass… barely"

At her teasing reply, Harry took advantage of the placement of his hand to quickly tickle Hermione's waist. She let out a sharp, high-pitched squeal.

"Stop that!" Hermione exclaimed as she stepped back from her assailant. Harry, however, did not let her out of his grasp.

"I don't think so."

"Harry James Potter, you stop that this instant!"

"Why should I? Does the rulebook say I have to?"

"I'll have you know that it does," she primly replied as she stepped back up to Harry, "paragraph sixteen, subsection four – no tickling without the expressed, written consent of Hermione Granger."
"Well, can't break the rules, now can I?"

"I should hope not! I'll not get mixed up with an unrepentant rule breaker!"

They both had a good laugh at that.

After a few more moments of dancing, Harry asked, "So what does your book say that I should do next?"

Hermione broke eye contact with Harry to glance down at his lips.

"Well," she began as she took a step closer to him, "as this is a date, and as we are dancing… the next logical step would be…"

"Yes?" Harry asked softly as he tilted his head down…

"Well, well, what have we here?" Someone rather loudly said from just beside them causing the two teenagers to jump apart. Harry turned and found himself face to face with one of the last people on earth that he wanted to see.

Rita Skeeter.

Harry and Hermione simply stared at the woman who had so callously interrupted their moment. It took Harry a moment to actually realize that the woman was really there. She had the same rhinestone-studded eyeglasses as the last time he saw her, the same elaborate blonde curls that looked like they were plastered on, and the same self-amused smirk that said she would take ineffable joy in tearing a puppy to pieces.

"Well hello there, Harry dear, it's been much too long."

"Rita Skeeter," Hermione said with disdain, "what are you doing here?"

"Why, I was invited, of course," the Daily Prophet's most notorious reporter replied. "Sluggy and I are old friends. Isn't that the usual way one arrives at a party?"

When there was no immediate response from the two teenagers, Rita when on talking.

"You know, Harry, our last little interview together proved to be quite the sensation. What do you say the two of us sit down for a little chat this evening?"

"Harry's not interested," Hermione quickly interjected.

Rita only spared the girl a glance before turning back to her main target.

"Do you always let your girlfriend speak for you, Harry?" she asked with some disdain.

Harry could feel his temper begin to rise and took interior steps to preserve his calm. Hermione, on the other hand, chose to let her anger color her words.

"I should have never let you out of that jar," the indignant young witch replied.

"Ah yes," Rita answered as she brought her attention to bear on Hermione, "I almost forgot how ruthless you could be. Tell me, Harry, how do you think the wizarding world will react when they hear about your girlfriend's darker tendencies?"

"Hermione Granger doesn't have a dark bone in her body," Harry responded, entering the
conversation for the first time. "And you can quote me on that."

"Really?" the older witch replied with a grin as an acid-green Quick Quotes Quill floated into view behind her shoulder, hastily scribbling something on a piece of floating parchment. "Tell me, what else do you know about Hermione's body?"

Harry flushed bright red at the implication while Hermione sputtered indignantly.

"Readers want to know, Harry," Skeeter continued. "How exactly did such a plain witch manage to steal your heart? What else did she manage to steal along the way? Do you think that a Muggle-born witch like her is really good enough for the Boy Who Lived? How much convincing did it take for you to fall for her... feminine wiles?"

He might have been bright red and uncertain of the best way to handle this situation, but Harry couldn't just let this woman make such lurid statements about Hermione.

"I'll have you know," Harry began to respond, "that Hermione Granger is the smartest, kindest, and most wonderful witch that I have ever met. She didn't need to convince me in the slightest to fall for her. I just needed to open my eyes for once. And if anything, I'm the one that's not good enough for her!" Harry finished rather emphatically.

Rita was smiling almost gleefully as her quill scrawled out lines and lines of text. Harry turned to see Hermione staring at him with wide eyes and her mouth hanging open.

"What?" Harry asked his seemingly surprised companion, "It's true. And I don't care who knows it!"

Hermione closed her mouth and broke out into a beaming smile. She was just about to say something in return when Rita once again interrupted.

"Harry, dear, what else do you have to give me for our readers?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the reporter for a moment before responding.

"Give them this," she said as she reached out with both hands a grabbed Harry by the sides of his face. She then roughly pulled his head to hers and gave him a long, almost fierce kiss right on the lips.

When she pulled away, Hermione said, "I think I've had enough of this insect, Harry. Let's go."
And with that, she grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him away from the dancefloor and the rather jubilant Rita Skeeter. She led the two of them to a secluded corner of the room where they could find a modicum of privacy.

Harry, somewhat in a state of shock, slowly reached up with the hand that wasn't entangled in Hermione's to touch his lips.

"Wow."

Hermione quickly released Harry's hand so that she could bury her face in both of hers. She let out a long groan.

"I can't believe that I did that as our first kiss," Hermione lamented from behind her hands.

"Wow," Harry repeated.
"Oh, honestly, Harry!" Hermione said as she dropped her hands and turned to him fully, even though her face was bright red. "It wasn't even that good of a kiss! I did it more to throw it in Rita's face than anything else after what she said about me. I can't believe I did that!"

"I thought it was great!" Harry replied with a smile.

"Boys…" Hermione said in exasperation. After a quiet moment, she shyly glanced up at his green eyes. "You know, because of that stunt I pulled, we're going to be all over the Prophet tomorrow."

"Front page most likely," Harry agreed with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You don't mind?"

"They're going to write about us no matter what we do, aren't they? At least this way maybe they'll get the story right for once."

"You're not mad at me?"

"Nah. I gave Skeeter quite a bit of ammunition myself before your grand finale."

Hermione shook her head slightly.

"You did say some rather nice things about me, didn't you?"

"I only spoke the truth."

"In any event," Hermione said as she brushed some imaginary lint off of Harry's chest, "I think you deserve a reward."

"Do I?"

"What would you like, Mr. Potter?"

Harry simply smiled as he leaned in, closed his eyes and kissed Hermione Granger for the second time. They softly lingered together for a long, blissful moment before they pulled apart.

"Better this time?" Harry asked?

"Much," Hermione replied with a smile. "After all, 'Repetito mater studiorum,' as they say."

"What?"

"It means, 'Repetition is the mother of study.'"

"Well," Harry said, "I suppose we'll need lots of repetition, then."

"Play your cards right..." Hermione replied. "You know how I love to study."

"So, does this mean you're my girlfriend now?"

"Well I should definitely hope so!" Hermione answered with mock indignation. "I'll have you know I don't go around kissing just anybody. I'm not that kind of girl!"

"Ha!" Harry laughed.

"Come on," Hermione said as she once again took Harry's hand and dragged him back into the party. "Let's get some punch."
Chapter End Notes

A few brief selections of text describing the Christmas party were taken from Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince.
Chapter 21

The next day Harry Potter had a spring in his step as he went about his duties. He had a bright smile on his face as he diligently focused on his reading, he tapped his feet and twirled his tools as he groomed Buckbeak, and he even hummed a jaunty tune as he shoveled manure out of the stables. Now, as he was covered in protective gear and sparring with Neville, he couldn't help but punctuate his movements with little shouts of victory.

Neville lunged forward with his wooden sword in an attack that Harry met with his own blade moving into contre sixte. He started his riposte, but Neville met it with his shield.

Neville Longbottom had taken to the sword like a fish to water. While Harry was still further along than his fellow Gryffindor, Neville was quickly catching up.

The sound of wood striking against wood, punctuated by the occasional laugh from Harry filled the air as the two young men continued their duel.

Most of the students, including the Weasleys, had departed on the train that morning for Christmas break, but a few had stayed behind. Neville jokingly said that he couldn't take two weeks off from sword work while Harry would still be training. He wouldn't let Harry gain such an advantage.

Neville shifted into quarte before thrusting at Harry's face. Harry responded by bringing his shield up to block the attack, but the move resulted in obscuring his field of vision. He realized his error almost a second too late, but managed to leap back in time to avoid Neville's swipe at his knees.

Hermione had stayed at the castle as well. Harry was overjoyed at this of course, but internally couldn't help but feel a little guilty about it. No matter what she told him, he knew that she had stayed just to be with him for the holidays. The problem was that squires apparently didn't get extended breaks from their training. He might not have any classes over the next two weeks, but that just meant his time was filled with more studying of the *Summa Philosophica*, exercise, menial labor, and training.

Idle hands were the play things of the Darkness according to Keldorn.

While Harry was slightly off-balance, Neville pressed his attack with a series of quick, lateral slashes that had Harry back-peddling and on the defensive.

Harry had argued with Hermione, trying to get her to spend the break with her parents, but she was having none of it. She insisted that her parents would be fine and that she would rather spend Christmas with her newly-minted boyfriend. He didn't understand how she could be so dismissive of spending time with her parents, but earlier that very morning, Hermione decisively won the argument and shut Harry up with a long, heated kiss.

Hermione fought dirty. Harry didn't mind.

While Neville was pressing his advantage, Harry switched gears and stood his ground. Caught unawares, Neville's next attack swung wide, and Harry used the opening to step in close and throw his weight into bashing his shield against his opponent's. Neville stumbled backwards and Harry lunged for the center of his opponent's chest.

"Ha ha!" Harry exclaimed as his attack struck home.
"Halt!" Keldorn cried. The two wizards straightened in response and turned to face their instructor. "Harry," the knight continued, "that was a smart move at the end, but be more careful of your footing. Do not leap - when your feet are off the ground you are helpless. Mr. Longbottom, do not over-commit your forward momentum. You were right to press your advantage, but you over-extended yourself."

Harry and Neville both nodded at the advice given to them before turning to face each other once more.

"Now, again," Keldorn said and the two wizards shifted into their ready position. "On guard. Begin!"

Harry feinted right and then disengaged Neville's parry, continuing the attack. But Neville wasn't so easily fooled and countered the move. The two combatants circled each other for a moment, neither wanting to initiate the next move. Harry decided to spice things up and began lightly bouncing back and forth on the balls of his feet while he lowered his guard, changing the tempo of the bout.

"Come on, Nev," Harry taunted, deciding to try and get in his opponent's head a little bit, "whatcha got?"

Neville responded with a quick forward attack, just as Harry was hoping. He dropped low, extending his sword in a coup d'arrêt, hoping Neville's forward momentum would carry him into the blade. Neville parried with a circular motion, ending with his sword in octave and locking the two blades in a bind. He then surprised Harry by bringing the edge of his shield down sharply against Harry's sword a few inches above the cross-guard.

The sword fell to the floor with a clatter.

Harry almost panicked. He was disarmed and caught in a crouch. He threw his body to the right, avoiding Neville's follow-through attack, and rolled back to his feet. However, the move took him several feet away from his weapon and left him with only his shield while he faced his opponent.

He cursed under his breath as Neville advanced. Blows began to rain down upon Harry's shield as he frantically tried to dodge. Neville kept himself positioned between Harry and his lost weapon, skillfully cutting off Harry's desperate attempts to regain his sword.

At a loss for what to do, Harry decided to gamble. With a shout, he threw his shield at his opponent and followed directly after, diving at Neville with hope of wrestling him to the ground.

Neville, however, stood his ground, and Harry's dive halted rather abruptly as his face smashed into Neville's shield.

Harry groaned, lying flat on his back, and looked up through watery eyes to see Neville standing above him with his sword at his throat.

"Halt," Keldorn sighed.

Harry slowly picked himself up and then removed his helmet. He touched his nose and looked at his fingers and finding them stained bright red. His hand went back to pinch his tender nose to try and stem the flow of blood.

"Mr. Longbottom," the old knight began, "well done. You took excellent advantage of your opponent's ill-conceived actions and did not allow him to regain his balance."
"Harry," Keldorn said with a slight bit of heat entering his voice, "how many times do I have to tell you to stop relying on that stop-hit? The coup d'arrêt may work well to surprise a novice, but using it against any opponent with even a modicum of experience will simply leave you exposed and defenseless. Do you understand me?"

Harry swallowed before responding, fingers still pinching his nose shut.

"Bes, sir."

Keldorn sighed.

"Is your nose broken?"

"I don' dink so."

"That's enough for today. Neville, you are welcome to train with my squire again tomorrow after breakfast. Harry, once you stop bleeding, I want one hundred sit-ups to help you remember to hold on to your weapon."

"Bes, sir."

"Sorry about your nose, Harry," Neville said somewhat shyly as he removed his equipment.

"Don' borry abou' id, Nev," Harry replied.

Later, as Harry counted out his sit-ups, he wondered if his face was turning black and blue. Maybe he could wring some sympathy out of Hermione if it did…

Harry smiled as he continued his exercises.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry Potter awoke bright and early on Christmas morning. He glanced at the foot of his bed to see several wrapped packages awaiting him there. He threw off his covers and put on his bathrobe before grabbing his presents and making his way down to the common room to wait for Hermione.

Harry smiled as he sat down on the sofa in front of the fire. Keldorn had given him his gift the night before – a day off from training and service. Harry lounged in front of the warm flames in contentment. He had almost forgotten what having free time was like.

Eventually, Hermione emerged from the girl's dormitory, wrapped in a fluffy, red and gold robe, her wild hair all over the place, and her arms laden with gifts.

Harry leapt to his feet with a grin.

"Happy Christmas, Hermione!"

"Happy Christmas, Harry!" she said before gently setting her presents down on the coffee table and then enveloping the young wizard in a tight hug.

"Now then," she said, pulling back from him, "let's get to the presents!"

"Don't I get a good morning kiss?" Harry asked.
"What makes you think you deserve one?"

"Well, I am your boyfriend, and it is Christmas after all."

"Fine," Hermione grumbled good-naturedly, "I suppose I will acquiesce to just one." With that she gave Harry a quick, light peck on the lips before settling down on the couch.

"That's it?!"

"Harry Potter! You should know better by now than to come between a Granger and her presents on Christmas morning!"

"Fine," Harry gave in, "but I expect more afterwards."

"We'll see about that, mister."

They spent the next half-hour opening the various packages that they had received from their friends. They both received new jumpers from Mrs. Weasley, as well as chocolates from Ron. Among other things, Harry received a large box of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes from Fred and George, and Hermione got a fancy new quill from Ginny. They saved their presents for each other for last.

Harry gave Hermione a thick tome entitled *Nuances in Numerology* as well as a necklace with a small blue gem suspended from a delicate silver chain. She seemed very pleased with her gifts, although Harry couldn't really tell if she was happier about the necklace or the book. Probably the book.

Hermione in turn gave Harry two gifts. The first was a framed picture of the two of them dancing and smiling happily at each other. It was obviously taken during Slughorn's Christmas party.

"Do you like it?" Hermione asked nervously.

"I love it," Harry replied. "That was one of the best nights of my life. Now, I'll always remember it with this."

Harry unwrapped the second gift to find a small leather pouch with a drawstring.

"It's a mokeskin pouch," Hermione explained as Harry inspected it. "It's enchanted with an Undetectable Extension Charm, so it has a larger than normal carrying capacity and also so that only the owner can retrieve whatever is placed inside. Mokeskin itself shrinks whenever a stranger begins looking for it, so it's impossible to steal it."

"Hermione, this is great! How much can fit inside?"

"Quite a bit, I believe."

"You're the best."

They spent the next couple of hours happily cuddling together in front of the fire.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Later that morning, Harry and Hermione decided to go for a walk around the grounds. So they bundled themselves into their warmest clothes, their new jumpers, and their winter cloaks before
heading out into the cold.

There was about a foot of snow covering the ground; most of it had fallen over the course of the past two days. Harry and Hermione simply smiled as they made their way through it hand in hand.

Eventually they decided to pay a visit to Buckbeak and Aristotle, their hippogriffs from their riding class. As they made their way over to the enclosure, they noticed that the creatures had left the warmth of their barn to wander in their snow-covered pen.

Before they got much closer, a loud voice startled the two teenagers.

"Merry Christmas, Harry! Hermione!"

They turned to see the large form of their friend Hagrid approaching them from the other side of the barn.

"Hagrid," they replied together, "Happy Christmas!"

"Wha're yeh two doin' out in the cold?"

"We just thought we'd pay a visit to Books and Buckbeak before the feast," Hermione responded.

"Well, good on yeh fer tha',' the half-giant said. "Those two've def'nitely taken a shinin' to yeh."

The three friends approached the fences together. Harry and Hermione entered the enclosure while Hagrid remained outside. They came upon Buckbeak first. When they bowed to the graceful creature, it immediately returned the gesture, but they were taken aback when the entire herd of hippogriffs bowed as well.

"Hagrid?" Hermione asked, turning to the gamekeeper, "Why are they all acting like that?"

"Heh," he replied, "don' yeh worry yehrsel', now, Hermione. Tain't really nuthin' yeh've done. Rather, it's our Beaky there. He's been pushin' his weight around a bit lately. Think he musta fixed himself as the alpha o' this here group. The rest o' them seem ter be followin' his direction enough."

"Is that right, Buckbeak?" Harry asked as he approached the animal in question and gave him an affectionate pat on the side of the neck. Buckbeak chirped and nodded in response before straightening up as if to put himself on display.

"Yes, yes," said Harry with an amused smile, "You're very magnificent. I'm happy that the rest of the herd has finally recognized it too." Buckbeak continued to preen under Harry's attention.

Hermione laughed lightly before she felt a nudge from behind.

"Books!" she exclaimed, turning to see her hippogriff behind her.

The creature snapped its beak and tossed its head, looking away from her.

"Oh, don't be like that. I was just looking for you. You know I love you best."

"You love him best, huh?" Harry asked her over his shoulder.

"Jealous?" she replied to Harry as Aristotle gave in to her ministrations.

Harry and Hermione spent a little while with Hagrid and their favorite hippogriffs before bidding
them farewell and heading back to the castle to get ready for the Christmas feast.

When they arrived in the great hall later on, they saw the place had been once again transformed for the occasion. Twelve tall Christmas trees lined the back wall, and decorations hung from every place imaginable. Live fairies flitted about the room, bringing their bright, multicolored light wherever they went. There was one long table decked out in festive decorations and Christmas crackers, as well as laden with food in the middle of the hall. Most of the staff that had remained in the castle for the holidays was already seated including Dumbledore, Firecam, McGonagall, Sprout, Flitwick, and Hagrid, as well as Neville and several of the other students that were around. Harry and Hermione greeted everyone at large before taking their seats across from Keldorn and McGonagall.

"Well," the Deputy Headmistress began, "if it isn't my two lions coming to join us at last. Merry Christmas, you two."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione replied for them both.

Dumbledore rose to his feet and tapped his spoon against his crystal goblet, gathering everyone's attention.

"It is wonderful to have you all here at this merry occasion," the old wizard said. "Let us enjoy this time together in celebration. Merry Christmas! Tuck in!"

The food was delicious as always and soon the sound of laughter filled the air, punctuated occasionally by one of the loud, wizarding Christmas crackers. Harry and Hermione pulled one together and from inside appeared a rather well-made black bowler hat. Hermione immediately placed it upon Harry's head.

"Beautiful!" she exclaimed, "I think it suits you wonderfully!"

"I don't think so, Hermione," Harry replied as he removed the offending article.

"Nonsense," McGonagall interjected, "I think she's right. You young wizards today don't pay nearly enough attention to your appearance as you should. It's only right for a young man such as yourself to wear a proper hat."

"As my squire," Keldorn said, turning to McGonagall, "I could, of course, require him to wear the hat. That is, if you so wish it, Madam."

Harry was gob-smacked at being teased by both his mentor and his usually stern head of house.

"You wouldn't," was all he could manage to say in response.

"It would help to cover up this mop," Hermione teased as she ruffled Harry's perpetually messy hair.

Eventually, after everyone's belly was full and the eggnog had been passed around twice, Keldorn rose from his seat.

"Harry," the paladin began, "once you are finished here, I must ask you to stop by my quarters. It will not take long."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied automatically.

The old knight glanced at Hermione before turning back to Harry. "Miss Granger may accompany
you, if you so wish." He then turned to the rest of the table. "I'm afraid that I must now bid you all
goodnight. Any more feasting would simply be too much for my constitution. Thank you for
including me in this wonderful celebration. Merry Christmas!" And with a short crisp bow directed
at McGonagall and another to Dumbledore, Keldorn strode out of the great hall.

"I wonder what he wants," Hermione mused aloud.

"No idea," Harry replied. "He told me that I had today off."

"I guess we'll find out together then."

A few moments later, Dumbledore grabbed their attention.

"Harry, tell me," the Headmaster said, "how are things progressing with Sir Keldorn?"

"Well so far, I think," Harry replied.

"That is good to hear. You have been able to keep up with your work from your remaining
classes?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the strain has not been too much for you? I know that our good paladin has been working you
rather hard."

"No, sir. I'm fine."

"Good. I trust that you will let me know if it becomes too much for you."

"Okay."

"Miss Granger," the Headmaster continued, turning to the young witch, "I also hope that you will
let me know if Harry begins overextending himself."

"Of course, sir," she replied.

"Excellent. Now, I'm afraid that I too must retire. I'm not as young as I used to be after all."

OoOoO

OoOoO

Later that evening, Harry and Hermione stood before the door to Keldorn's office. Harry knocked.

"Enter," came the gruff voice of the knight from the other side.

The two teens entered the office to find Sr. Keldorn Firecam coming around from behind his desk,
a small stream of smoke trailing from the pipe in his hand.

"Good. You're here," he said. "I have something for you, Harry."

"But you already gave me the day off as a Christmas present," Harry rejoined.

"Ah, this is not meant as a 'Christmas present,' per se, although you may think of it as such if you
wish. No, I arranged for this as soon as you entered my service. It has just now been completed."

With that, Keldorn gestured for Harry to look over at his own desk in the corner of the room.
Harry and Hermione walked over to the desk and found a large, wooden box sitting on top of it. With a glance at his mentor, Harry pried off the top of the box. Inside he found a long shirt made of tiny metal rings, a jacket made out of black, padded cloth, a long, blue, sleeveless tunic, and a wide leather belt. Harry looked up at the knight with a question in his eyes.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, "this is armor! Sir Firecam had your own armor made for you!"

"Indeed," said the knight. "Normally, a squire would arm himself in this simple manner as soon as he was accepted into a paladin's service. However, as such things are not readily available in this world, I had to have these custom made for you. Thus the delay."

"Try it on, Harry," Hermione said with excitement, "I want to see how you look!"

"Go on," the knight encouraged.

Harry shrugged out of his Gryffindor robe before picking up the metal shirt.

"No," said Keldorn as he moved over to assist. "First you must put on the gambeson." Keldorn reached into the box and lifted out the padded jacket. "It will keep the heavy armor from chaffing against your skin."

Harry took the gambeson from Keldorn and tried it on. Hermione came over and helped him do up the ties on the front.

"You will find that the sleeves of your gambeson contain a sheath for your wand," said the knight. "This is an innovation on my part, but the Deputy Headmistress assures me that carrying your wand in such a manner is rather common among the Aurors."

Harry inspected his sleeves and found the built-in wand sheaths that were mentioned.

"Next comes the hauberk," Keldorn said as he handed over the shirt of metal rings.

Harry lifted it over his head and settled it on his shoulders. It took him a few moments to struggle into the armor. The chainmail reached down to just above his knees but was divided below the waist in the front and the back to allow for a full range of motion. It had two full-length sleeves to cover his arms. It was really heavy. Harry could feel the weight of the armor bearing down on his shoulders.

"Next is your tabard," said Keldorn.

The lightweight, blue cloth slipped easily over Harry's head and covered most of the chainmail. Only the metal on Harry's arms was left exposed. Like the hauberk, it was divided below the waist. Harry noticed that it was the same shade of blue that Keldorn always wore.

"Your belt."

Harry fastened the wide, black leather belt around his waist. Keldorn shook his head and readjusted it to his liking. Surprisingly, once it was settled, merely having the belt around his waist seemed to take some of the weight of the chainmail off his shoulders.

"And finally," said Keldorn, "this." The knight's hands went to his own belt and removed a long dagger. I was in a black, leather sheath with scrollwork done in silver along the sides. He handed the dagger to Harry.

Harry unsheathed the blade and inspected it. It was very bright, as if it had been polished to
perfection. It was light in his hand, as if it weighed next to nothing. There was a small, red jewel worked into the pommel. But more than anything else, Harry's impression of the weapon came from what he thought to be a slight humming that emanated from within it.

"This dagger is a weapon of the Light. It was given to me when I was a squire by my master. Now it is yours. Take good care of it and it will serve you well."

Harry looked up at his mentor and nodded his head.

"I will."

Keldorn then helped him attach the sheath to his belt.

"Well," Harry said as he turned to Hermione, "what do you think?"

"I think you look rather dashing," she replied with a smile as she slowly walked around him, inspecting his new look. "My own knight in shining armor."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Keldorn said. "In any event, you will keep these items in good repair and remember to keep the hauberk free of rust. You will begin dressing in this manner every day starting tomorrow. I think you will soon find wearing this to be a rather heavy burden, especially in the first few weeks."

Harry's smile faltered slightly at that comment.

"Carrying the extra weight will prove difficult, especially during your exercises, but I trust you will manage. It will build your strength."

"Yes, sir."

"That is all for now," Keldorn said by way of dismissal. "You may return to your day off."

Harry and Hermione turned to the door, but before leaving, Harry turned back to his mentor.

"Thank you, sir."

"Wear it with honor, Harry. That is the only thanks I need."

With that they left and made their way to Gryffindor Tower.

As they were walking, Hermione took Harry's hand with a small giggle.

"What?" he asked.

"Well… it's just… you make quite a bit of noise now, walking through the hallways," Hermione said with a smile. "I'll always know when you're coming now. Kind of like putting a bell on Crookshanks."

"Funny," Harry replied. But as he walked, he paid a bit more attention to the noise he was making. Hermione was right. The chainmail did jostle and jingle quite a bit.

"Good thing we're not trying to sneak about the castle quite as much this year," he eventually said.

"Yes it is."

"I'm surprised actually," Harry continued with a grin, "that you haven't been hounding me to break
more rules this year."

"Harry Potter!" Hermione exclaimed with indignation, "I do not hound you to break rules!"

"Okay, Miss let's-brew-polyjuice-in-the-girl's-loo."

Hermione responded by slapping Harry on the shoulder.

"Ouch," she said afterwards while shaking her hand. "That hurts."

Harry just laughed.

Once in the common room, Hermione began inspecting Harry's new apparel much more closely.

"Are you still there under all those layers?" she asked, jokingly, as she prodded him here and there.

Harry laughed in response.

"I suppose I better think twice before I hit you on the shoulder again. I might break my hand."

"That you better," Harry said.

"That's okay. I know plenty of hexes."

"I'll show you a hex!" Harry replied before leaping at Hermione. The young witch shrieked as she ran from him. Harry caught her after a few playful moments and wrapped his arms around her in a tender embrace.

"You do feel nice and strong in this though," Hermione said. "I feel very safe in your metal-covered arms."

"I'm glad," Harry said before leaning in for a kiss.

"Merry Christmas, Harry."

"Merry Christmas, Hermione."
Classes resumed on Monday, January 6, 1997 at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry had spent the remainder of his Christmas break going about his normal routine with Keldorn – but now with the added burden of wearing thirty pounds of chainmail at all times. The weight was unevenly distributed too; the vast majority of it merely hanging off his shoulders. By the end of the first day, Harry's shoulders had developed a constant ache that had yet to go away. Keldorn laughed when Harry mentioned it and told him that it was to be expected.

Harry's favorite part of the day was returning to the common room at night to meet Hermione. Unlike his mentor, Harry's girlfriend took pity on him, and tried to help alleviate his pain. There, in Gryffindor Tower, she would help strip off Harry's tabard, hauberk, and gambeson, sit him down on the couch in front of her, and proceed to massage his aching shoulders.

The tender and loving attention that Hermione paid to his sore muscles was almost worth the price of carrying thirty pounds of steel on his back all day.

Harry and Hermione enjoyed their little late-night encounters. Even with his added burden, Harry wasn't nearly as tired when he made it back to the common room as he had been during his first few weeks as a squire. His endurance was definitely growing. They found a lot to talk about while Hermione's fingers worked their magic – they laughed at what they saw as the comedic fumblings of Ron and Lavender's romance, as well as at their own tentative steps into the realms of non-platonic affection. Sometimes Hermione would ramble about whatever book she was reading or about one of her assignments. Other times Harry would relate to her the things that he learned from Keldorn or from reading the *Summa.*

One evening Hermione spent their time together theorizing that Harry's chainmail might offer him a modicum of protection against curses and hexes. After all, cold iron was one of the more magic-resistant materials available, and the steel that Harry's mail was made from was largely comprised of iron. Harry thought that the idea had some merit, but wasn't really anxious to start jumping in front of spells to test the theory.

On other nights, Harry and Hermione merely passed the time in relative silence. Inevitably, once she was finished massaging Harry's shoulders, Hermione would wrap her arms around him, and pull him back against her chest so that the two of them could simply be together in a tangled but contented heap.

The return of the student body disrupted their routine somewhat. They still tried to go about it every evening, but they lacked the privacy that Christmas break had afforded them.

Harry in particular seemed to be getting a lot more attention from the female members of Gryffindor as well as the other houses. They hadn't failed to notice his new physique or the dashing figure that he cut in his new armor and tabard.

"You know, Harry," Romilda Vane began as she approached the young squire and his girlfriend one evening a few days after the term had recommenced, "my mother ran several magical pain clinics before she met my father. She's quite good at easing aches and pains."

Hermione paused her ministrations for a moment as both she and Harry stared at the brazen fourth-year.

"She taught me everything she knows, of course," Romilda continued with a rather disturbing leer.
for a fourteen year-old girl. "Would you like me to give you a hand? I'm certain that I could massage away whatever is bothering you. When I'm finished with you, I doubt you'd even remember what was wrong in the first place."

"Are you for real?" Hermione asked when Romilda was finished.

Romilda merely glared at the older witch.

"Thanks, um… Romilda, right?" Harry responded, "but Hermione's doing great."

"You sure?" she tried one last time.

"Positive."

"Well, if you change your mind, you only ever need to ask." With that she turned and sashayed back to her friends.

"Harry?" Hermione questioned once the younger witch was out of earshot.

"Yes?"

"Would you mind if I tattooed 'Property of Hermione J. Granger' across your forehead?"

"Ha!" Harry burst out laughing. "I'm your property now, am I?"

"Well no, not really," Hermione stated as she recommenced her massage with bright pink cheeks. "But it would help to keep all these other witches away from my boyfriend."

"Maybe she doesn't realize that we're dating and is only trying to be helpful?"

"Harry, the entire world knows that we're dating. It was on the front page of the Daily Prophet the day after Slughorn's Christmas party."

"Oh. Right."

"They even had a moving picture of me assaulting you with my lips right in front of Skeeter."

"Yeah, that was awesome," Harry said with a chuckle. "I need to get a copy of that for my scrapbook."

Hermione responded by lightly smacking him on the back of the head.

"Hey you two," Ginny greeted as she plopped down beside them on the couch. The youngest Weasley child was sporting a smugly satisfied grin once again. She had been wearing one ever since she returned from break.

"What are you so happy about?" asked Harry.

"Oh, I just love it when my plans come to fruition."

"What plan?"

"Operation Quidditch, of course," the red-head answered.

"What?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Ginny…" Hermione growled.
"Oh it's just a little something that Hermione, Luna, and I cooked up over the summer," Ginny replied, ignoring the older witch next to her. "You see, Harry, all good witches, present company included, are concerned about the wizards that are most dear to them. And everybody knows that a wizard without a good witch is just a disaster waiting to happen. So the three of us put our heads together to plan out how to get my thick-headed brother Ron together with Lavender."

"Oh," said Harry. "That kinda makes sense."

But Ginny wasn't finished.

"We also decided to make you open your eyes and notice that you and Hermione were perfect for each other."

"What?"

"Ginny..." Hermione continued to growl.

"I mean, when I saw your pictures in the *Daily Prophet*, snogging like there was no tomorrow, I must have danced around the Burrow all afternoon..."

"This is so embarrassing," Hermione moaned as she buried her face in her hands.

"You two really should have done that years ago. But like I said, wizards left to themselves... disasters."

Harry turned around to face the witch behind him.

"Hermione?"

"What, Harry?" she said from behind her hands. Harry reached out to lower them so that he could look at her. Hermione reluctantly met his eyes.

"Did you really get together with Ginny and Luna to make a plan for... well... us?"

"Yes, but, oh, I'm sorry Harry! I didn't really mean to manipulate you like that, that wasn't my intention at all, I was really just looking out for what was best for us, you know, and you know that I've liked you for a while which should be rather obvious by now and I was pretty sure that you liked me too but I didn't know how to get you to make the first move so I thought that Ginny might know something..."

Harry abruptly silenced his rambling girlfriend by placing his index finger against her lips.

"Brilliant!" he said.

"You're not mad?" asked a worried Hermione once Harry's finger was removed.

"Not at all. Like I said, you're brilliant," he then punctuated that statement by giving her a quick peck on the lips. "Now get back to work!" he said as he turned around again. "My shoulders aren't going to rub themselves!"

"You don't realize how good you've got it," Hermione replied with a smile.

She then turned to Ginny who was grinning smugly at them once again.

"You're going to be impossible to live with, now, aren't you?"
"I know!" Ginny squealed in excitement.

OoOoO

OoOoO

A few days later found Harry, Hermione, and Keldorn in the Room of Requirement. Hermione had explained to the paladin her theory that Harry's armor might afford him some limited protection against spells, but that the idea needed to be tested. Keldorn agreed that the notion had merit, and so, later that evening after Harry had finished his usual routine, they made their way to the seventh floor corridor.

Once inside the room, Harry took up a position about ten feet from Hermione while Keldorn stood off to the side to watch.

"Let's start off with something simple," said Hermione. "How about a Tickling Charm?"

"Okay," Harry replied.

"First, I'll cast it against an unprotected area, to establish a baseline of how you normally react."

"Alright."

Hermione readied her wand and aimed for Harry's feet.

"Rictusempra!" she shouted with a swish of her wand.

Harry quickly doubled over with laughter.

"Finite," Hermione cast, removing the effect.

"Alright," she continued once Harry had recovered, "now I'll cast it at your chest. Ready?"

"Ready."

"Rictusempra!" this time the bright flash of light struck the chainmail Harry was wearing, leaving him unaffected.

"Huh," said the wizard, "I guess you were right."

Hermione broke out into a wide smile.

"Oh, this is wonderful! Imagine the possibilities! This could revolutionize the way we approach Defense…"

"Calm down, Hermione," Harry interjected, "It was only a Tickling Charm."

"Right. Well, let's try something else. How about a Stunner?"

"Okay."

"Ready, Harry?"

"Fire away!"

Hermione once again took aim at Harry's chest and cast, "Stupefy!"
The bright red bolt of light struck Harry in the center of his chest and threw him backwards. He landed sprawled out on the floor.

"Harry!" Hermione cried as she rushed over to make sure he was okay.

Harry groaned, before rolling over and coughing. Hermione knelt down beside him and helped him sit up.

"Well," Harry said with a wince, "That hurt like hell. I feel like Hagrid dipped his fist in acid and then punched me in the chest."

"Oh, I'm sorry Harry… I didn't think it would…"

"It's okay, Hermione, I'll live," he responded while giving the anxious witch a pat on the shoulder. "I'm still awake though."

Harry stood back up to see that Keldorn had come closer to see if he was alright.

"Are you injured?" the old knight asked.

"Nothing that a little rest can't cure," Harry replied.

"Can you continue? I still think it is worthwhile to find the limits of this effect."

"Sure."

"Are you sure, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"I'm fine Hermione. Let's just keep it to spells with less power than that Stunner. I don't need another one of those."

"If you're sure…"

They continued to test different spells against the armor for another hour. They found that most simple, low-powered offensive jinxes and charms like the Tickling Charm and the Jelly-Legs Jinx could be stopped by the armor, while more moderately powered charms had their effects somewhat mitigated. For instance, Hermione's Full Body-Bind failed to make Harry's go completely rigid, but it did make his joints rather stiff and significantly slowed his movement. And while her Tarantallegra failed to produce the crazy, all-out dancing it normally caused, Harry did find himself slowly hoping from one foot to the other. They decided not to approach anything near the power level of the Stunning Spell, nor did they try anything that might cause significant injury, like the Piercing or Blasting Hexes, as those were simply too dangerous.

"Well, it seems this test was a success, I would say," Keldorn said as they left the Room of Requirement. "We now know that you have some moderate protection from simple spells, but in the end, I think it would behoove you to simply get out of the way."

"I agree," said Harry as he rubbed his bruised chest. "It's much better to simply wake up from a Stunner than to feel one of those hit you."

"I will disagree with you there, Harry," said the knight, "in battle it is better to be winded but aware than to be unconscious and helpless."

"Good point."

They abruptly halted their movement when someone rounded the corner in front of them.
"Malfoy," Harry almost spat the name when he recognized the platinum-haired Slytherin.

"Potter," the snake replied, "out for a late night snog with that girlfriend you pulled out of the gutter?"

Harry narrowed his eyes but then realized that Keldorn had gone eerily still upon seeing Draco.

"Mr. Malfoy," the old knight began in a tone that spoke of complete seriousness, "what are you doing out of your dormitory so late at night? Besides hurling unwarranted and juvenile insults at your fellow students, that is."

"None of your damn business, you trumped-up Muggle!" Draco responded with a sneer.

"But it is my business," Keldorn replied as he took a step forward. "I'm afraid that I'm going to have to ask you to empty your pockets."

Tension seemed to fill the hallway as the paladin stared down the wizard in front of him. It did not escape Harry's notice that Keldorn's hand was resting on the pommel of his sword. Harry surreptitiously eased his wand into his hand, and glanced over to see that Hermione was doing the same.

"I'll do no such thing! I don't need to take orders from filth like you, even if you are masquerading as a Hogwarts professor!"

Keldorn took another slow step forward while Draco took a tentative step backwards.

"I ask you again: empty your pockets," the old knight commanded.

Draco paused for a moment, his eyes flicking between the three individuals standing across from him.

Suddenly, he moved, bringing his wand to bear and aiming at the paladin.

But Harry and Hermione were faster.

"Stupefy!" cried Hermione.

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Harry.

Draco managed to dodge Hermione's stunner, but couldn't avoid Harry's spell. He could only watch in impotent rage as his wand went flying through the air and was deftly caught by Harry.

Keldorn advanced two steps and slowly drew his sword from its scabbard, the blade seemed to hum at a low, otherworldly pitch.

"Now then, Mr. Malfoy," said Keldorn with a note of deadly seriousness, "you have one last chance. Empty your pockets. Now."

Harry could see the rage building behind Draco's eyes, but without his wand, he knew he was helpless. Slowly, and with a snarl on his face, Malfoy began emptying his pockets, throwing the contents onto the floor in front of him.

"There, are you satisfied, you overgrown goblin?"

"Everything, Mr. Malfoy," Keldorn replied coolly, "I know what it is you are hiding."
Shaking with fury, Draco reached into his robe and slowly took out a bundle of cloth. He seemed to consider his actions for a moment before carefully placing it on the ground.

"Stand back against the wall," Keldorn commanded.

When Draco reluctantly complied with the order, Keldorn swept forward and without hesitation plunged his sword down into the bundle, piercing it through completely, his blade continuing into the stone floor.

"No!" Draco cried, but he was drowned out by a bright flash of light and the sound of something shattering within the fabric. When the light cleared, there was a faint trail of black smoke rising from where the sword was still lodged in the floor. The smell of sulfur permeated the air.

"Miss Granger," Keldorn said turning to the witch in question, "please go and find the Deputy Headmistress. Bring her here with all haste."

With a concerned glance at Harry, Hermione left to do as she was instructed.

While the paladin's attention was elsewhere, Draco made his move. He lunged forward with a quickness that Harry didn't know Draco possessed, and wrapped his hands around the hilt of Keldorn's sword.

"Look out!" Harry shouted in warning.

But as soon as Draco's skin came in contact with the sword, a loud bang reverberated through the hallway and the young Slytherin was thrown violently against the wall, landing in a crumpled heap at its base.

Keldorn remained standing in his place, a fierce look of deadly seriousness upon his face.

"Check him," the knight ordered.

Harry moved forward cautiously, and found that while he was unconscious, Malfoy was still breathing. Harry didn't notice any blood, but saw that his left arm was resting at an odd angle and his hands were badly burned.

"He's alive," Harry said after a moment, "but knocked-out."

Keldorn did not respond, but merely nodded.

"What is going on here?" asked the voice of a concerned Minerva McGonagall a few minutes later when she arrived at the scene with Hermione in tow.

"We should speak with the Headmaster," Keldorn replied as he finally removed his sword from the stone floor and the mysterious object that he had impaled. "This," he gestured to the still smoking bundle, "was a highly dangerous dark object that young Mr. Malfoy was carrying for malicious purposes. I have destroyed it, but I suggest caution in handling it still. Perhaps you might levitate it, Minerva?"

McGonagall stood with an expression of shocked surprise on her face.

"Mr. Malfoy, will likely need medical attention as well," Keldorn continued, "thus he will be unable to join us in the Headmaster's office. But I believe the threat is passed – for the moment," he said as he sheathed his sword. "I trust that my squire and Miss Granger can see to bringing Mr. Malfoy to the hospital wing while we take this abomination to Professor Dumbledore."
"Well…" McGonagall sighed as she levitated the dark object. "Let's go then. Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, please see to Mr. Malfoy." With that, she and Keldorn made their way off to see the Headmaster, while Harry and Hermione were left alone with the unconscious Draco.

Harry grinned. "Should we go get Ron and write some foul words on his face?" he asked his companion.

"This is serious, Harry!" Hermione admonished him.

"I know that, Hermione. I was only trying to lighten the mood."

Hermione looked down at the Draco's crumpled form.

"It would serve him right to wake up and find 'Inbred' tattooed on his forehead…” she mumbled under her breath before shaking her head and casting a charm that levitated the unconscious wizard.

"Come on, Harry," she said turning to her boyfriend, "the sooner we get this ponce to Madam Pomfrey, the sooner we're rid of him."

"True. And the sooner you can start on my massage."

Hermione shook her head again, but with a smile.

"Besides, you owe me extra tonight after you hit me with that wicked stunner."

"You said you were fine!"

"I will be – after your loving care, that is."

"Boys…"

OoOoO

The next day started off normally, but after lunch Keldorn, Harry, and Hermione were summoned to the Headmaster's office to discuss the incident that took place with Draco the prior evening. So, together they made their way past the gargoyle, up the spiral staircase, and into the eclectic office of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

"Please, take a seat," the Headmaster said from behind his large, ornate desk. With a flick of his wand, three comfortable armchairs appeared. They were all quickly seated.

"Would anyone care for a lemon drop?" Dumbledore graciously offered. The three guests all declined the offer, but Fawkes perked himself up and trilled from his perch in the corner.

"Yes, of course, my friend. I wouldn't leave you out," Dumbledore answered the bird. He then tossed one of the candies over to the corner and the phoenix deftly snatched it out of the air.

"Fawkes and I have been together for a long time. It seems my sweet tooth has rubbed off on him. In any event, I did not call you here to discuss my phoenix's predilections for confectionaries. I have already spoken at length with both Professor McGonagall and Sir Keldorn regarding the incident with Mr. Malfoy last evening. I was hoping that you might share your versions with me as well."

The next several minutes were devoted to first Harry and then Hermione recounting what they saw
and did the previous evening. After they were finished, Hermione took the opportunity to ask some questions.

"Professor Dumbledore, what's going to happen to Draco now?"

Dumbledore sighed, removed his glasses, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. In that moment, the Headmaster appeared to look very old and tired.

"I'm afraid that Mr. Malfoy has made some very poor choices over the past several months, and he can no longer be shielded from the consequences. Once he sufficiently recovers, the Aurors will arrive to escort him to Azkaban."

"Azkaban?!" Harry asked in disbelief. "Really? I mean, I know Malfoy's a git… but Azkaban?"

"After you delivered him to the hospital wing last night, Madam Pomfery discovered that Mr. Malfoy had taken Voldemort's Dark Mark."

Hermione's eyes widened at that revelation.

"Draco is an actual Death Eater?" she asked in disbelief.

"I'm afraid so."

"I didn't think he had it in him," Harry mused aloud.

"It seems as though he was given a mission to accomplish here in Hogwarts as well," Dumbledore continued as he reached into one of his desk's drawers and pulled out a familiar bundle of cloth. He placed it in the middle of his desk, causing the various silver instruments already there to scurry as far away from it as possible. He lifted the covering to reveal a broken and twisted piece of jewelry. It had obviously once been a necklace of dark metal and black stones, but the damage wrought upon it by Keldorn's sword had destroyed it beyond repair.

"This necklace," said Dumbledore, "is what Sir Keldorn sensed on Mr. Malfoy's person. It is a terrible thing of the darkest magic, meant to inflict immense suffering and to destroy the soul of the one who wears it. I do not know what Mr. Malfoy planned to do with it, but simply for him to bring it here…" Dumbledore trailed off as he closed his eyes.

"Do you think he could have been under the Imperious Curse?" asked Hermione.

"No," Keldorn answered. "He was acting of his own free will."

"As I said," Dumbledore continued as he opened his eyes once again, "Mr. Malfoy must now face the consequences of his choices."

"There's one thing I don't understand," Harry began as he turned to his mentor after a moment of heavy silence, "what exactly did you do to him that put him in the hospital wing? I didn't see you move a muscle."

"Ah," Keldorn responded, "well that's because I didn't do anything. It was Carsomyr that brought down the villain."

"Your sword did that by itself?"

"Yes. I told you before that Carsomyr is no mere sword, did I not?"

Keldorn looked around the office to find three sets of eyes intently focused upon him.
"Very well," he said rising to his feet and turning to the Headmaster. "With your permission?"

Dumbledore merely nodded.

Grasping the hilt of his sword, Keldorn slowly drew the blade. As it was unsheathed, all of the various silver instruments and odd knick-knacks in the Headmaster's office stilled their motion and silenced themselves, as if in reverence. In such close quarters, Harry could feel the hairs on his arms rise as the power within the blade made itself known.

"Carsomyr," Keldorn began, "is the greatest tool of the Light known to my Order. Its exact origins are lost, yet it is known to be ancient. It is a sentient blade, yet its mind is not like our own. It exists for one purpose only: to destroy the works of the Darkness. You have all seen me use it in battle to unravel the curses of our enemies.

"It was the power of this sword," he said, turning his gaze to the only witch in the room, "that broke the dark curse placed upon you last year, and saved your life."

The office was utterly quiet as they all, including Dumbledore, listened to the old paladin with rapt attention. Harry found that he was even holding his breath, and had to remind himself to breathe.

"Carsomyr will only allow itself to be wielded in a truly just cause, and only then by a consecrated servant of the Light – by a paladin who proves himself to be worthy. Anyone else who attempts to wield the blade will find themselves unable to do so. A slave of the Darkness that dares to touch this holy sword will find themselves suffering its wrath. Mr. Malfoy, after allowing himself to be branded for evil, after bringing a deadly artifact into this school, after filling his heart with hatred, could not hope to touch it and walk away unscathed."

"Fascinating," Dumbledore uttered quietly.

Keldorn smiled at the old wizard before crossing over to his side of the desk, and presenting the sword to him, hilt first.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, before reaching out with his right hand and grasping the hilt. Keldorn let go of the blade, and immediately the tip of the sword swung down to the floor where it impacted with a soft clank.

"Interesting," the Headmaster remarked, the twinkle returning to his eyes as he struggled to hold the weapon, "it feels like it must weigh a hundred pounds."

"Servant of the Light you may be, Headmaster, but you are not a paladin. As such, the weight of duty intrinsic to the sword is too heavy for you to bear. As you can see though, Carsomyr is willing to allow you to hold it, and likely even transport it."

"Harry," said Dumbledore, "Why don't you give it a try?"

Harry glanced at his mentor for permission before rising to his feet and reaching out to take the blade from Dumbledore. Like the Headmaster, Harry found that the sword was much too heavy to ever hope to use in battle. It did indeed feel like it weighed close to a hundred pounds.

As he held the sacred blade, Harry took a moment to look it over. The hilt was made from what looked like silver that was ornately interwoven with strands of gold. There was one large, red jewel set into the hilt where the handle met the cross-guard that, when Harry looked closely, seemed to shine with a faint inner light. The blade itself was made of some sort of steel that was so bright, it appeared to be almost white. There were little ripples on the blade that, upon closer inspection, turned out to be some sort of unknown writing that covered its entire surface.
As Harry stared at the sword in his hands, time seemed to slow down, and the world contracted until it was only he and Carsomyr that remained. He felt exposed – naked and vulnerable before some powerful, otherworldly presence. He no longer felt the unwieldy weight of the blade in his hands, but rather he felt an overwhelming weight of responsibility bearing down upon his shoulders, threatening to crush him. He felt undeserving, as if he was stained – dirty, like a dark spot of grease on an otherwise clear window with the sun shining through it.

He felt an alien intelligence in his mind – bright and terrible and burning like the dawn. Harry was helpless before it. He was completely vulnerable, stretched out and laid bare as the thunder of a gathering storm broke upon his soul and enveloped it. His senses were overwhelmed by a silent scream of fury.

UNWORTHY

Harry shivered and wrenched his eyes away from the sacred blade as he extended the hilt to Hermione so that she might inspect it. He had to get it away from him.

As she took it and began to minutely go over the sword's details, Harry wrapped his arms around himself and shivered. He closed his eyes and fought to control his breathing. His pulse was pounding in his ears. He felt slightly nauseous, like he might be sick, but he fought against the need to empty his stomach and focused on his breathing.

When he opened his eyes, he found his mentor's piercing gaze studying him intently. He glanced at Hermione and Dumbledore, who had Carsomyr laid out on the desk. They were bent over the blade, pointing at it, discussing it in low, excited whispers, wide smiles present on their faces.

Keldorn came to stand beside him.

"They do not understand."

"Sir?"

"It is no fault or failing of their own, but they do not see."

Harry shivered.

The silence between Harry and his mentor stretched out as they watched the elderly wizard and the young witch propose theories to each other over something that was utterly beyond their comprehension.

"Is it always like that?" he asked softly, his eyes downcast.

"Yes," the paladin replied in a tone that said he knew exactly what Harry meant. "It is always like that."
Chapter 23

Harry spent the next few days somewhat withdrawn from those around him. He still went to his classes and performed his duties, but it was all done quietly. He still spent his evenings with Hermione, but he only half-listened to her ramblings. He was distracted. No matter where he was, his mind kept going back to his encounter with Carsomyr.

Before that afternoon in the Headmaster's office, the idea of being a paladin was rather… remote. It was like thinking about life after Hogwarts. Harry knew that he would eventually need to leave the school that he loved, but that day seemed a long way off in the future. Likewise, the idea of actually being a paladin was rather remote. Learning from Keldorn was more like simply having alternative classes. Different, but not that different.

Carsomyr changed that.

That burning presence in his mind… it required, no it demanded so much from him. Keldorn had warned him that the life of a paladin was not easy. It seemed that the holy sword distilled that notion down to a fine, very sharp point.

Harry wasn't sure if he was capable of following through with the journey that he had embarked upon.

To be judged by that alien sentience and found unworthy…

Harry's experience with the sword made everything he was doing that much more real.

His introspection and melancholy lasted several days until he was shocked back to reality by an unlikely person.

Luna Lovegood.

"Hello Harry Potter. Hello Hermione." The blonde witch said in her usual dreamy voice as she approached the Gryffindor table during lunch. Harry was hurriedly shoveling food into his mouth as his mentor did not afford him the full lunch period that the other students enjoyed. So he chose to simply wave in greeting while he continued to eat.

"Hi Luna," said Hermione.

"Is Harry turning into a Were-Ron?"

"Wha?" Harry asked through a mouthful of potatoes while Hermione merely sighed.

"I was curious if Ron might have bitten you under the light of the full moon, and now you transform into a half-man, half-Ron during meal times. It would explain why you've developed his eating habits."

Harry looked across the table to where Ron was holding a chicken leg in each fist while his cheeks were stuffed close to bursting. Lavender was sitting next to him, happily spooning more mashed potatoes onto his plate.

"Ron has never bitten me," Harry finally responded.

"Oh that's too bad. He has such nice teeth."
Neither Harry nor Hermione knew what to say to that.

"Anywho," Luna continued, "I came over here because I've been feeling a bit funny lately."

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked as a look of concern took over her face. "Do you want me to go with you to Madam Pomfrey?"

"Oh no. I'm not sick, silly. It's a different funny. It's like, a funny funny."

"Okay…"

"It's like," Luna continued, "have you ever seen a beautiful little creature, like a butterfly or a moon frog… looked at its tiny little wings, or its fragile little eyes… and then wanted to crush it to bits and stomp on it until there was nothing left but a greasy smear?"

Harry and Hermione gaped at the young Ravenclaw, both their mouths hanging open.

"Err… no…" Harry said.

"Oh poo."

"Luna, are you… do you feel angry?" Hermione asked.

"That's it!" Luna said brightly, pointing to Hermione. "That's exactly it! I just couldn't think of the word. Thank you, Hermione. I feel very angry!" she finished with her usual dreamy smile.

"Umm… why are you so angry, Luna?" Harry cautiously questioned.

"Why it's your fault of course."

Harry sputtered.

"My fault! What did I do?!"

"Not just you, Harry. You and Hermione both."

"What?" Hermione asked, somewhat taken aback.

"I said I was angry with you, Hermione," Luna replied, her smile still in place as she reached out to give Hermione a pat on the head.

"Luna, I… what did we do?"

"You gave that exclusive interview to Rita Skeeter for the Daily Prophet."

"We didn't…" Harry began, "I mean… it wasn't exclusive…"

"Oh goody!" Luna exclaimed as she sat down at the table and brought out a quill and some parchment. "Then you won't mind if I ask you some questions for the Quibbler."

"But…"

"First question, Harry, are you or are you not having Draco Malfoy's lovechild now that he's been kidnapped by the Danes?"

"What?! Luna! No! I'm not having his lovechild!"
"Second question, did either of you have anything to do with the crowned prince of Finland's latest choice in eyewear?"

Hermione sighed in resignation.

"No."

"Third question, do you like my new sunflower seed earrings, or should I have stuck with the radishes?"

"They're nice," Harry said.

"Sixth question, do you have an irrational fear of elevators and slash or exercise equipment?"

"No."

"Nth question, Harry, boxers or briefs?"

"Luna!" Harry exclaimed.

"Boxers," Hermione responded.

Harry turned to his girlfriend with a look of surprise.

"What?" Hermione asked, "I have been in your dorm before, Harry. Your clothes are always strewn about."

"Wonderful!" said Luna. "This will do nicely. I'll just go and owl this to daddy."

Harry glanced at Luna's parchment to see that instead of a few sparse notes, Luna had drawn a crude, stick-figure sketch of Harry and Hermione holding hands as they rode on the back of a mechanical walrus.

"But before I go," she continued, "I'll need a picture."

Harry sighed but smiled for the rather large camera that Luna had been hiding somewhere and was now pointing at them.

After a few minutes, Harry was beginning to wonder what was wrong.

"Luna," Hermione asked, "are you going to take the picture or not?"

"I'm waiting for you to start snogging," the blonde replied.

"Luna!"

"What? The Prophet has a picture of you snogging. If we're going to compete, the Quibbler needs one too."

Hermione looked like she was getting rather worked up, but Harry just shrugged his shoulders before grabbing her face with both hands and planting his lips over hers.

The bright flash of Luna's camera went off as expected.

"Okay, now with some tongue," Luna instructed.

Hermione pulled herself away from Harry.
"I don't think so, Luna," she replied.

"How about one of you grabbing Harry's bum?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Not even a little squeeze?"

"No."

"Oh poo. Well, thanks for the interview," Luna said. "I knew I couldn't stay angry at you two."

With that, she turned and skipped out of the great hall.

Harry smiled before turning back to his lunch.

"I like Luna."

OoOoO

OoOoO

Several weeks passed and the bleak snows of January gave way to the bitter cold of February. Harry and Hermione gathered with Dumbledore one evening to review more memories about the young Tom Riddle. Harry hoped that Dumbledore or perhaps Hermione got more out of those 'lessons' than he did.

There was quite a bit of excitement amongst the sixth-years at the beginning of February due to the introduction of Apparition lessons. As expected, the skill proved rather difficult, and the enthusiasm of most of the students quickly waned as a result.

As Harry's time as Keldorn's squire went on, his dedication and willingness to do hard work proved themselves apparent. Accordingly, the amount of time that Harry was required to spend mucking out the stables decreased, while the time he spent in discussion with the old paladin increased. Keldorn was a demanding teacher. He was never satisfied until he was sure that his squire had internalized the wisdom found in his Order's Tradition. Over time, Harry got used to the antiquated language of the *Summa Philosophica*, and found himself more and more able to keep up with his mentor's questioning.

Likewise, his physical training evolved. Both Harry and Neville performed well in their sword work. With Hermione's help, Keldorn assembled several wooden dummies on wheels that moved about on their own and were able to cast stinging hexes strong enough for Harry to feel through his chainmail. Hermione found great amusement in watching her boyfriend square off against her creations either alone, or sometimes with Neville by his side. Keldorn was constantly trying to drill different tactics and ideas into their heads. Sometimes they were armed with their wooden swords and shields, at other times they went in with a sword in one hand and a wand in the other. Hermione's favorite, which brought the most laughter to her lips, was when Harry was sent in alone and unarmed.

Harry's Riding and Magical Mounts class also changed. Most of the students had shown themselves to be proficient with their hippogriffs, and so were moved on to the giant seahorses that Hagrid had somehow acquired. With the aid of a Bubble-Head Charm and several very strong Warming Charms, Harry's classmates found themselves speeding through the frigid waters of the Great Lake.
Harry, on the other hand, remained with Buckbeak. Under Keldorn's direction, he began to practice fighting from the back of his faithful hippogriff. He alternated between using his wooden sword and his wand. He trained on the ground and in the air. It was difficult – learning to keep his balance while swinging the heavy sword was challenging, but Harry's natural affinity for flight as well as his talent in the saddle helped him progress quickly.

And so it was that on one of the last evenings of February, Harry found himself putting the finishes touches on Sir Keldorn's boots.

"I've finished polishing your boots, sir," Harry said as he rose from his seat and carried the articles in question over to the knight.

The paladin had his eyes closed and seemed to be deep in thought. Harry placed the boots on the floor by the side of the knight's desk and stood at attention. When his mentor made no move to say anything after several long minutes, Harry broke the silence once again.

"Will there be anything else tonight, sir?"

Keldorn opened his eyes and looked intently at his squire. The old knight seemed… sad.

"There is one more thing before you are dismissed for the night."

"Yes, sir?"

"Have a seat, Harry," Keldorn said, gesturing to one of the chairs on the other side of his desk. "I have been meaning to discuss this with you for some time now. But I wanted to see how things progressed first. It is a rather… delicate topic."

Harry sat up a little straighter and licked his lips. Keldorn was rarely this hesitant when he spoke – it was making Harry nervous.

"I have been watching your interactions with Miss Granger."

Harry narrowed his eyes as he listened, feeling somewhat defensive all of a sudden.

"I do not doubt your intentions with the young woman, nor do I think that you would get up to anything dishonorable."

Oh, Harry thought. Please tell me he isn't going to give me 'The Talk.'

"But I have to question the wisdom of the relationship."

"What?" Harry blurted out in surprise. "What's wrong with me and Hermione?"

Keldorn sighed.

"There is nothing wrong with either you or your friend. You are both good people, and I am glad to know you. In any other circumstance, I would give you my blessings for a long and happy life together.

"But, we are not in other circumstances, we find ourselves here and now, in a place of our own choosing."

"I don't understand," Harry said in confusion.

"The life of a paladin, Harry," Keldorn continued in all seriousness, "is not one that readily lends
itself to romance or family."

Harry's heart was pounding in his chest.

"I'm sorry to have to say this to you, Harry, but it must be said nonetheless. I want you to seriously consider what life would be like for you and Hermione once you are truly a paladin. Neither the Codex Luminis nor the teachings of the Order expressly forbid paladins to marry, but remaining celibate has always been strongly encouraged.

"Celibacy allows for the single-minded devotion that is necessary to stem the tide of the Darkness. It removes the temptation to turn away from one's duty and indulge in the softer side of life that we are pledged to protect, but that can never truly be ours. It relieves us of the likelihood of divided loyalties to wife and children on the one hand, and the demands of our duty to the Light on the other."

Harry was slowly shaking his head as he listened to his mentor. His throat was dry and his eyes were stinging.

"The brightest knights in the Order always saw the wisdom of remaining romantically unattached. But there are always some who, perhaps foolishly, think that they can handle the demands of both service to the Light and the covenant of marriage."

"You don't know how I feel about her…" Harry painfully whispered.

"But I do, Harry," Keldorn said with a sad smile, "I do."

Harry looked up into his mentor's eyes.

"I did say that there are always those foolish paladins who think they can have both. I once had a wife. Maria. Hair red like the dawn, smile as bright as the Light itself. We had two daughters together, Leona and Vesper. What more could a man want?"

Keldorn's eyes became distant as he revealed this part of himself from a world that was now impossibly far away from him.

"She said she knew what she was getting into. She said that she could handle being the wife of a paladin. She was so strong, Harry, so very strong. I believed her. I thought we would be stronger together. I thought that we would serve the Light better together. And at first, it was true. While the Light was my strength and my shield, Maria was my rock. But over time, the demands became too much for her. I wasn't there for her when she needed me. It seemed that my duty always had me elsewhere.

"So she left me."

The room was utterly silent for a long moment before Keldorn once again took up the story.

"One day I returned home to find the house empty. Maria had packed up the girls and left. I don't even know how long they had been gone. There was a note explaining things. Apologizing. They were all unhappy. All three of them had made the choice to leave. I could have searched for them, of course. I doubtlessly would have found them too, with the resources of the Order at my disposal. But I finally saw the wisdom in letting things be. I knew they would be alright – Maria's family had ample means to assist her, and she was always a capable woman. My life was simply not fair to Maria or to my girls. It broke my heart, but I let them go."

Keldorn's gaze returned to the present and he turned and captured Harry's eyes with his own.
"I will not tell you what you must do in your relationship with Hermione. I will not interfere beyond this conversation unless it begins to impact your training. But you need to be aware of what you are getting into. Hermione has a right to know what she can truly expect if she stays with you.

"Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you and Hermione can endure where Maria and I failed. Truthfully, I only hope you that you can learn from an old man's foolish mistakes, and perhaps save yourself some heartache."

Keldorn broke their eye contact and turned in his chair to face the window.

"That will be all. Goodnight, Harry."

Harry rose from his seat and quietly left the room. He slowly made his way through the halls, meandering about the corridors on his way back to Gryffindor Tower and the young witch that was waiting for him in the common room. At the moment, he was in no hurry to return.

He felt unsteady. Like the rug had been pulled out from beneath his feet.

Was Keldorn right? Should he break things off with Hermione before it got to be too serious? Would that save them from heartache down the road?

The old knight made some good points. Harry could see the reasoning behind his words. There was wisdom in what he had said.

But his heart ached to stay with Hermione.

Harry sighed. His heart may have wanted Hermione, but he knew that a decision could not be made by his heart alone. He was certain that much was true.

Most people would probably tell him something like, 'Follow your heart.' But that was ridiculous.

Anyone who actually used their brain could see that adages like, 'Follow your heart,' were utter nonsense. Following your heartfelt desires was all well and good – when it was reasonable. Without reason, without the mind in control of the decision making process, following your heart was more likely to simply lead to heartbreak than happiness. Human beings were not meant to flitter from one heartfelt desire to the next without a thought for the consequences. Following your heart was all well and good for people in storybooks and movies, where the characters were assured of their happily-ever-after. But real people had responsibilities. They had others that depended on them. They had duties that couldn't simply be laid aside without real people getting hurt. There was nothing more selfish or self-centered than a person who went off to follow their heart without a thought for anything or anyone else around them.

After all, wasn't Voldemort just following his heart in his attempt to take over the world?

No, this was a decision that needed some careful thought and meditation. Harry knew what he wanted, but he wasn't sure if what he wanted was right.

Harry looked up and found himself standing in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady. He muttered the password and slowly made his way into the common room.

His eyes immediately went to Hermione. She was waiting for him as always on the couch by the fire. Ready to try and help relieve some of his stress – ease some of his burden.

She looked up at him and smiled. She gave a little wave, her eyes bright with something that Harry didn't want to think about at the moment.
He walked over to her, but did not sit down.

"Sorry, Hermione, but I think I'm going to just turn in tonight."

Hermione frowned and stood from her seat.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm okay."

"Harry, don't..."

"I'm okay, Hermione," Harry repeated, cutting her off. "It's just something Sir Firecam and I were discussing that has me thinking more than I should, I guess."

"You sound so sad though."

"Well, I guess I am a little."

"Why don't you sit with me so I can try and cheer you up?"

Harry gave her a small smile.

"Any other night, and I would let you try. Really, Hermione, I think I just need to turn in."

"Well, if you're sure," she said as she reached out and hugged him.

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said as he gave her a little kiss on the forehead. "I don't deserve you."

After savoring the embrace for a moment, Harry stepped back, said goodnight, and made his way to the stairs.

Halfway up, he glanced back over his shoulders to see Hermione standing where he had left her, her eyes following his every movement. She looked sad. Harry felt guilty.

The weight of responsibility had never felt heavier.
"Harry!" the voice of Lavender Brown exclaimed rather loudly, taking the wizard in question by surprise as he reached the bottom of the staircase. He had so much on his mind that lately he was finding it difficult to sleep. He had tossed and turned for the last couple of nights, and as a result was rather tired. He certainly did not expect to find Lavender waiting for him in the common room so early in the morning. Harry didn't think any of the other students even thought about waking up as early as he did.

"You're a hard man to find these days, Harry," Lavender said as both she and Parvati came over and stood before him, blocking his path to the rest of the room.

"Err… Excuse me, Lavender, Parvati, but I'm going to be late…" Harry said as he attempted to make his way past the two girls.

"You're not going anywhere just yet," Parvati said as she and Lavender stood their ground, "so cool it."

Harry took a moment to look at the two girls before him. They were obviously trying to look intimidating, glaring at him with stern frowns on their faces. It was rather ridiculous. Lavender, for one, was wearing way too much pink to intimidate so much as a kitten, and Parvati just looked like she had cleared out an entire makeup counter that morning. Harry didn't think he would be intimidated by these two if they started hurling Killing Curses at him.

"Okay…?"

"As you know," Lavender began, "today is my Ronny's seventeenth birthday. It's an important day in the life of a wizard. It's the day when the boy becomes a man…" Here Lavender sighed dreamily.

Parvati nudged her after a moment.

"Right, as I was saying. Gryffindor is going to be throwing a surprise party for him tonight after dinner here in the common room. Since he is your best friend, you will be present."

"Look, Lavender." Harry started, "I'd like to…"

"He's your best friend, Harry Potter, and you will be present for his party!" Lavender shouted. "I've put a lot of hard work into this and you're not going to ruin it because you're off doing Chosen One things! Today is about my Ronny, so you can just put all your business aside for one evening!"

Lavender finished with a firm nod of her head that Parvati mimicked a split second later.

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?" Harry asked.

"You haven't exactly been the easiest person to get a hold of lately, Harry," Parvati answered. "And we couldn't exactly tell you at meals or in the common room while Ron was around, now could we?"

Harry had no response to that.

"Now promise me," Lavender demanded, "that you'll be at the party tonight."
"Lavender, I can't..."

"Promise. Me."

"Fine. I'll be there."

"Good," Lavender said, nodding once again.

"Can I go now?"

The two girls stepped aside and let him pass. Harry quickly made his way to Keldorn's office to begin his daily routine. When he arrived, he quietly opened the door to find the knight already seated at his desk, reading from a book.

"Good morning, sir."

"You're late."

"Sorry, sir," Harry apologized. "It couldn't be helped. I was cornered by two of my classmates on my way out of Gryffindor Tower."

"What did they want?"

"Apparently, they want me at a party tonight. It's Ron's seventeenth birthday today, and Lavender is throwing him a surprise party. She refused to let me leave until I promised to be there."

Keldorn simply raised his eyebrows.

"May I go?" Harry asked after a moment.

"I suppose. You have been working diligently of late. And I wouldn't want to make a liar out of you."

"Thank you, sir."

"I expect you to finish the last twelve articles of question eight today."

"Yes, sir."

Without further conversation, Harry got to work.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Later that evening, after grabbing a quick dinner in the kitchens, Harry hurried back to the Gryffindor common room to ensure that he was on time for the surprise. He came through the portrait hole to find that the room had been transformed. There were balloons and streamers hanging from the ceiling. A Wizarding Wireless was playing a happy tune off in one corner. Chudley Cannons posters decorated the walls. There was a larger than life-size photograph of Ron decked out in his Quidditch gear, happily waving to everyone that crossed in front of it. One of the study tables was piled high with food, while another was laden with cold pumpkin juice and Butterbeer. There was even a gigantic, bright orange, five-tiered cake in the center of the room. It had seventeen large candles on it that were waiting to be lit.

It looked like almost every single member of Gryffindor was present for the party, including many
people that Harry was sure Ron had never even spoken to. He suspected that Lavender and Parvati did quite a bit of cajoling to ensure that everyone was present.

The only thing that was missing was the birthday-boy and his girlfriend.

Someone slid into place next to Harry and took his hand in theirs. Harry turned to see Hermione grinning up at him.

"Isn't this lovely, Harry?" she asked. "Lavender really outdid herself with this."

Harry took another look around the room before responding.

"You know, you're right. She really did put a lot into this for Ron."

Parvati chose that moment to walk up to Harry and looked him up and down.

"That's what you're wearing?" the Indian witch asked. "Hermione, I pity you. Oh well, too late to change now." She then strapped a paper party hat onto Harry's head, handed each of them a pair of noisemakers, and then rushed off to check on something else.

"Don't worry, Harry," Hermione said with a smile, "I think you look very handsome."

Harry merely smiled back.

At that moment, one of the first-year girls ran in through the portrait hole.

"They're coming!" she squealed.

"Places, places!" Parvati shouted. "Everyone quiet down and hide!"

Silence descended as they waited for Ron and Lavender to enter the room.

After a moment, they heard the portrait swinging open, followed by Ron's voice.

"What're you up to, Luv? The Twins didn't owl you and put you up to something, did they?"

"You'll see in a moment," the voice of Lavender Brown teased.

A second later, they emerged from the portrait hole together. Lavender had her hands over Ron's eyes.

As soon as she dropped her hands, everyone jumped out and shouted.

"SURPRISE!"

There followed a loud volley of 'happy birthdays,' well-wishes, and bangs and whistles from the various noisemakers.

Ron stood in the entranceway eyes wide, and his mouth was hanging open. Lavender was behind him grinning like a mad woman and bouncing up and down in excitement.

After taking in all the decorations and smiling faces, Ron turned to his girlfriend.

"You did all this?" he questioned.

She nodded excitedly.
"For me?"

She nodded again.

"Come 'ere, you!"

Ron then wrapped his arms around her, leaned back, lifted the delighted witch into the air, and spun around in circles with her.

He eventually put her down, but didn't loosen his hold upon her.

"You're the best, Lav," Ron said to his girlfriend, "I love you!" He then leaned in to plant a long kiss on her lips.

"Awww!" squealed most of the females present in the room, while the males cheered and hollered.

Harry felt Hermione hug his right arm to her chest and he looked over to see her happily watching Ron and Lavender.

After Ron finished his display, he turned to face the crowd.

"Let's party!" he shouted, much to the delight of everyone present.

The party was a lot of fun. Lavender really did know how to put an event together. As they mingled through the crowd, Harry realized that he had never seen his best friend happier than he was now.

Harry was aware that he hadn't been spending as much time as he used to with his best mate. But in that moment, it hit him how much Ron had changed in the last year. He had grown up. Like Lavender had said earlier that morning, he was now a man.

Weird.

"What are you thinking about, Mr. Potter?" Hermione asked from beside him.

"Ron and Lavender," Harry answered. "She's good for him, isn't she?"

"I think you're right."

"She gives him the devoted attention that he needs, and she certainly tries very hard to make sure that he has enough to eat," Harry continued, gesturing to the table that was piled high with food. "I really think that she's helped him overcome his insecurities. I mean, can you believe that Ronald Weasley just announced for all the world to hear that he's in love with Lavender Brown?"

"When did you become so insightful?" Hermione teased with a gentle poke in the ribs.

"I guess Ron isn't the only one that's grown up a bit."

Harry looked at Lavender as she continued to bounce with excitement as she followed Ron and held his hand. It wasn't very complicated. She was simply happy. Doing something nice and thoughtful for Ron brought her all the happiness in the world. She wasn't doing it for herself - that much was clear in the way she kept pushing Ron into the center of attention. Heck, she had made an eight-foot tall portrait of the guy for the party after all. If she had wanted to be the center of attention, she probably would have popped out of the cake or something. No, it was the selfless giving that made Lavender so happy. For all her squealing and flightiness, it was clear that Lavender had a good heart, and that she loved Ron dearly.
"They're so happy together," Hermione remarked.

Harry looked at her and smiled, but the witch seemed to realize that something was off about it.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

"Hey, mate!" Ron shouted, interrupting them. The man of the hour came over and wrapped Hermione in a hug. After a moment he smirked and then lifted her off the ground, spinning her in a circle.

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione shouted. "You put me down this instant!"

"Oh, I don't know," Ron laughed as he continued to spin her around, "it's my party and I'll do as I like!"

Lavender giggled from beside them.

"I'll hex you!"

"Fine," Ron complained as he set the witch back on her feet.

"Happy Birthday, mate," Harry said as he gave his friend a slap on the shoulder.

"Thanks."

"You couldn't imagine the trouble I went through to make sure that Harry was here," Lavender said.

Ron smiled.

"Firecam still got you busy shovelin' horse shite, then?"

"Shut it, you," Harry answered.

"Come on, Ronny, let's go get our picture taken with the cake before the firsties destroy it," Lavender said before dragging him away.

Hermione turned back to Harry, intent upon picking up their earlier conversation.

"Tell me what's bothering you," she gently said.

"It's just something Sir Firecam said a little while ago," Harry replied.

She looked at him expectantly and Harry realized that she wasn't going to be deterred.

"Not here."

She nodded in understanding before leading him to the portrait hole. Together they made their way into the halls and searched out an empty classroom. Once they were inside with the door locked and silenced, Hermione turned to him expectantly.

"Well?"

Harry sighed.

"It's… well… it's complicated."
"So explain it to me," Hermione said as she took a seat on the edge of an old desk, "I'm a smart girl, I'll figure it out."

"It's…" Harry started again, "He explained some things to me the other night. Got me thinking. And I don't really know what I should do."

"About what?"

"About this," Harry gestured between the two of them, "about us."

"What?" Hermione's eyes widened in surprise.

Harry looked down at the floor while he explained.

"Sir Firecam told me that paladins are better off without romantic relationships. He said that it's not a strict rule, but it's highly recommended. He said that he knows it's true from experience. He had a wife and children that left him because the demands of being a paladin were too much for them."

"Harry…?" Hermione said his name very quietly. He looked up to see that her eyes were full of tears just waiting to fall.

"He pretty much said that we would both be better off if we put a stop to this now, before we went too far. And I don't know what to do."

"Are you…?" Hermione sniffled, "are you breaking up with me?"

"I… no… I said I don't know what to do…"

"What do you mean, you don't know what to do?!" Hermione shouted, suddenly becoming rather angry.

"It's a lot to think about, Hermione…"

"What? You're not happy with me all of a sudden? I'm not good enough for you now?"

"That is not what I said!"

"I thought the way we felt about each other was understood!"

"It's not that simple…"

"Then explain it to me!" she shouted.

"I'm trying!"

Hermione huffed, but stopped yelling. Harry moved over to her and took one of her hands. She let him, but eyed him warily.

"I don't have this all figured out, Hermione. I don't have any decisions made. I know what I want. I know how I feel about you. And I think I know how you feel about me too. But it's not that simple."

"Why not?" Hermione cried as the tears freed themselves from her eyes and rolled down her checks. "Why can't this just be simple for once? Why does it always have to be so hard?"

Harry wrapped her in a hug that Hermione submitted to easily.
"Think, Hermione. All those things about being a paladin… all those reasons Firecam initially had for not making me his squire… those things that you argued with him about. They're still there. They aren't ever going to go away. And they won't exactly make it easy to have a relationship."

Hermione sniffled again and seemingly tried to burrow herself into his chest.

"I mean," Harry continued, "say all this happens. I become a paladin and somehow manage to defeat Voldemort. And we… well… we get married I suppose. Start a family. I won't be able to stop fighting then. As a paladin, I'll have to keep up the fight until the day I die. I'd probably be gone for long periods of time, while you… what? Wait for me? Is that fair to you?"

Hermione pulled back from him and started hitting his chest.

"Nothing about this bloody situation is bloody well fair!" she yelled.

"I know."

Silence stretched out in the room for a long moment.

"So what do we do now?" she asked as she leaned into his embrace once again.

"I don't know. I guess we think for a while. And then we decide if we're going to give this a serious shot or not."

"Thinking," she mumbled. "Great. I'm supposed to be good at thinking."

"Do you want to go back to the party?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione replied. "Let's just stay here for as long as we can."

"Okay."

OoOoO

OoOoO

A few evenings later, Harry was being tested in his mentor's office as usual.

"And is ignorance a mitigating factor for an illicit action?" Keldorn asked.

"Well, that depends," Harry answered.

"On?"

"Whether it is invincible ignorance or vincible ignorance."

"And what is the difference?" Keldorn continued his line of questioning.

"Err… invincible ignorance is when the person had no way of knowing that something was wrong and therefore is not morally culpable for their actions, while vincible ignorance is a willful ignorance, and thus they remain culpable."

"Give me an example."

"Okay, well… take the meditations that I do every evening with the Liturgia Horarum. As a squire or a paladin, it is morally incumbent upon me to do the proper meditations and prayers every
evening. But, for example, if you took me as your squire and forgot to tell me about it, I would have no way of knowing. Thus I would be invincibly ignorant and not responsible. But, if there was, say, a guide book for new squires that had all the requirements listed in it, and you gave it to me to read, but for whatever reason I refused to do so. Then, if I remained ignorant of my obligation, it would be only vincibly so, and thus I would be culpable for my action or lack thereof."

"Good. Your answer could use more polish, but it will do."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now then," the knight continued, "what constitutes grave matter?"

Harry's response was interrupted by a knock at the door. With a glance at his mentor, Harry went to answer it. He opened the door to find Hermione on the other side.

"Harry," she said by way of greeting.

"Hermione," he replied as he moved aside so that she could enter the office.

"Miss Granger," Keldorn greeted.

Hermione nodded her head to the old knight before turning to address the wizard in the room.

"Harry. I need a word with Sir Firecam. Alone, please."

Harry saw his mentor's eyebrows rise at her words.

"Harry, wait outside please," Keldorn instructed.

"Yes, sir."

With that, Harry exited the room, closing the door behind him. He walked several feet down the hall, so that he was well outside of earshot of the door before simply standing against the wall. It wouldn't be very polite to listen in on their conversation after all, and the distance would lessen his temptation to do so.

He glanced back at the door. Harry wondered what Hermione was saying to the paladin. It must have had something to do with him. If it was just about one of her projects, she wouldn't have asked him to leave. It was probably about Keldorn's advice about breaking off their relationship. Harry knew that Hermione wasn't in favor of doing that. He wondered if she found some way around the old knight's reasoning about celibacy. Maybe she had second thoughts about him becoming a paladin altogether, and was now arguing that Keldorn should dismiss him from his service.

Harry's mind was awhirl with thoughts, one after the other as he silently stood against the wall.

Sometime later, it had to have been at least thirty minutes, the door opened, and Hermione stepped into the hall. She glanced around until her eyes fell on him. When she saw him, she walked up to him and took him by the hand.

"You're to come with me," she said.

And without another word, she dragged him off down the hall.

They came to an empty classroom and quickly went inside. Hermione locked and silenced the
"door, before turning to Harry.

"Sit," she instructed.

"Okay," Harry said as he followed her directions and sat in an old chair.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking since Ron's party, Harry," Hermione began explaining, "and I needed to speak with Sir Firecam before coming to some conclusions."

"Alright."

"Harry," she began again, looking into his eyes, "you are not Sir Firecam."

"Right…"

"And I am not his wife. We are different people in different situations. Just because their relationship did not work out doesn't mean that ours is doomed as well."

"Okay. But the things that make a paladin's life almost impossible for relationships are still there."

"They are still there, yes," she said, "but they will not make our relationship impossible. It might be difficult. It might be very difficult at times, but if we work at it and through it together, I have every confidence that we'll survive."

"How can you be so sure?" Harry quietly asked.

"Because unlike Sir Firecam's wife, who I'm sure is a very nice woman, I will never be content to bloody well sit back and wait while you go off to war!" Hermione exclaimed rather emphatically. She took a deep breath to calm herself before continuing. "Harry, we've been through a lot together, you and I, and we got through it because we were together. Yes, we've had some bumps along the way, but we're stronger together.

"When the day comes for you to face Voldemort," she said with a slight tremble in her voice but in a tone that got stronger as she continued, "I'm going to be right there by your side, whether you want me there or not! It doesn't matter if I'm your friend or your girlfriend, I'll be right there with you and no one - not you, not Firecam, not Dumbledore, and not even bloody Merlin himself is going to stop me!

"And when you've put that bastard in the ground where he belongs and the next one comes along, well, I'll be standing next to you for that one too! If that means I earn myself an early grave, then so be it!

"You're all I've got, Harry. And now that I have you I'm not giving you up. Not without a fight."

"What do you mean, 'I'm all you've got?'" Harry asked. "You've got a lot of people that care about you."

"Oh really?" she asked, "Who?"

"Well… your parents for starters…"

"Harry, my parents couldn't care less about me."

Harry didn't know what to say to that.

"Why do you think it was so easy for me to spend the entire summer here with you? Why do you
think it wasn't a problem for me to stay here for Christmas? My parents don't care. They're too self-absorbed in their own little world to really notice anything I do. Nothing I've ever done has been good enough to get their attention. No matter how good I was or smart I was, they just... didn't care. They never wanted a child in the first place, and when I came along by accident, they had no idea of what to do with me. They would just buy me things and hand me off to nannies and tutors and boarding schools and figured that will take care of everything."

"I... I'm sorry, Hermione. I didn't know."

"It's not your fault Harry. I never talked about them for a reason, you know. I've come to terms with it. It is what it is. I'd choose you over them any day of the week.

"You really are the only person that I've got, Harry. I know that makes me sound desperate, and maybe I am, and maybe I'm ruining our relationship by putting too much pressure on you now, but... that's just it. You're all I've got."

Harry smiled.

"You're all I've got too."

"Oh, don't be silly, Harry. You've got the entire world in your corner. Minus the Death Eaters, of course. Plus you've got Dumbledore and Firecam teaching you all they know. Not to mention the Weasleys."

"Yeah, well, okay... But having teachers and Boy Who Lived fans isn't the same thing and you know it. And you've got the Weasleys too."

Hermione smiled.

"So, what do we do now, then?"

"I guess we make a decision."

"You know my decision, Harry. You're my decision."

"I suppose you won't let me change your mind about that?"

"Not a chance, Potter."

"So... I guess we give us a go then?"

"Yes. And we'll be serious about it. And we'll work through the tough patches. Together. And I'll be damned if I let anything tear us apart!"

Harry laughed.

"Come 'ere!"

After a tight hug and a brief kiss, they left the classroom together.

"So back to normal then?" Harry asked as they walked down the hall.

"I suppose."

"You know... I kinda like it when you get all worked up and start tossing around the foul language," Harry teased.
"Oh, quiet you," Hermione said with a blush.

" Seriously. It's... well... I like how passionate you get. It's kinda hot."

Hermione stopped walking and looked at him in surprise.

"What?" he asked.

"Harry Potter! Did you just call me 'hot'?"

"I guess I did."

"Oh don't be silly."

"What?"

"No one has ever said anything even remotely like that about me before."

"Well it's true. You're Hermione the hottie!"

"Oh stop!" Hermione smiled and pushed him playfully as she began walking once again.

"Never."

"You really, actually like it when I swear like that?"

"Well, I wouldn't want you to start doing it all day long or anything – that just wouldn't be you. But when you get all worked up... Yeah I do. And you are a hottie."

"You're sweet," Hermione said before giving him a peck on the cheek. "Delusional, but sweet."

"Hey, I am Harry bloody Potter after all! Boy Who Lived! Chosen One! My girlfriend is always the hottest of the hotties!"

"Prat."
Chapter 25

The days turned into weeks and soon the cold of Scotland in winter gave way to spring rains and then the warmth of summer. Harry continued his daily work as Keldorn's squire. Following his experiences with both Carsomyr and what the old knight told him about paladins and celibacy, Harry approached his training with a bit more trepidation. It wasn't that he had started having second thoughts about his current path, but rather that he began to really see the seriousness of the task he was pursuing – not to mention the extent of his own shortcomings. He could see that he was quickly growing in both skill and understanding of what it meant to be a paladin, but the more he understood, the more he began to question himself. As Harry began to accept and integrate the teachings of the Light into his own life more and more, his thoughts would always return to his encounter with Keldorn's otherworldly sword.

To be measured by that fierce yet sacred intelligence and judged unworthy was an experience that Harry would never forget. How could he ever hope to take up the mantle of a paladin if the most ancient and most sacred artifact of the Light found him to be unworthy?

Keldorn, however, never mentioned anything about Harry's unworthiness. Rather, he simply kept on the young man's back about his duties and his formation.

Harry and Hermione continued to meet with Dumbledore every few weeks to learn more about Tom Riddle's past. It was difficult for Harry to understand the usefulness of those meetings at times, but Hermione seemed to understand their merit, so he decided to follow her lead.

Their romantic relationship found a new equilibrium following the little speedbump they encountered in March. They knew they were committed to each other, but they hadn't really gone beyond that in their discussions. After all, Harry's time was rather limited by his duties. Together, Hermione and Harry found themselves to be content with the little bit of time and comfort they had with each other at the end of each day. They were focused on enjoying their time together and not of defining their relationship too precisely.

The spring term ended with little fanfare, and Harry soon found himself bidding farewell to his friends outside the main gates of the castle. He was once again remaining at Hogwarts over the summer in order to continue his training with Keldorn and therefore would not be returning to London on the Hogwarts Express.

"Take care, Harry," Neville said with a smile as he shook Harry's hand, "and don't think that your time alone with Sir Firecam this summer is going to give you a one-up on me. My Uncle Algie apparently found and hired a sword master from the continent to teach me over the summer. I expect to come back with a few new tricks."

"I look forward to it, Nev," Harry replied.

"Good bye, Harry Potter," Luna said as she stared at a spot about a foot to Harry's left. "Don't forget to floss."

"Err… right, Luna. Will do."

"Make sure that old knight lets you come visit us at the Burrow at some point this summer, mate," Ron said as he slapped Harry on the shoulder.

"I'll see what I can do," he replied.
“Just make sure it isn't during the second or third weeks of August,” Lavender interjected, "Ronny is coming with me and my family on vacation. Isn't that right, Ronny?"

Harry stifled a laugh when he saw Ron swallow hard and turn a bit green at the mention of meeting and spending such a long time with his girlfriend's family. But the red-headed wizard managed to force a smile as he nodded at his girlfriend.

"You're always welcome at the Burrow, Harry," Ginny said while she gave him a quick hug, "even if my git of a brother is off playing lotion boy for Lav."

His friends wandered over to one of the carriages, leaving Harry and Hermione alone for a moment.

"I'm going to miss you terribly," Hermione said as she wrapped her boyfriend in a crushing hug.

"I know," Harry replied as he squeezed her in return, "I'm gonna miss you too. But you'll be back soon, right? Just a few days at home with your parents before you come back to research your N.E.W.T. project some more."

Hermione dug her face into Harry's shoulder to hide a sudden blush.

"Remember all those comments about appropriate behavior that Professor McGonagall kept making last summer? I wonder if she'll be even worse now that we're dating…”

Harry laughed.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," he said with a smile, "she'll probably assume that Sir Firecam will be keeping me too busy for us to get into any trouble."

"Maybe you're right."

"I always am!"

"Hardly," Hermione replied with a roll of her eyes. "Honestly, I don't know how you ever managed to survive before you met me."

"Well, I can tell you that my life pre-Hermione wasn't nearly as much fun. I didn't get into nearly as much trouble…”

Hermione reached up to give Harry a long and tender kiss.

"I'll see you in a few days," she said as she slipped away to join the others in the carriage.

"I'll be waiting," he replied as he watched her slowly walk away.

Harry stood and watched the carriage roll away out of sight before turning and making his way to the stables.

"Alright, Buckbeak," Harry said to himself as he walked, "let's see what's in store for us today."

OoOoO

A few weeks later found Harry dodging through the air on the back of his faithful hippogriff. Three days after the departure of the Hogwarts Express, Hermione returned to the school with plans to
stay for the rest of the summer. Her official reason for doing so was to continue researching her N.E.W.T. project, but Harry hoped that she was really there to spend time with him. Surprisingly, the young witch was not content to spend all of her time in the library and had even somehow convinced Keldorn to allow her to assist with Harry's training, something that really surprised the young wizard as the paladin usually wasn't very keen on permitting any 'distractions.' Harry wasn't sure exactly how she managed to bully the old knight into letting her spend so much time with him, but he was glad she did.

Harry used his knees and heels to direct his mount as they weaved this way and that through the air while they steadily dived toward the ground. Bright flashes of spellfire hurtled by him, missing by mere inches in some cases, but they might as well have been miles away for all their chance of actually connecting with the flying wizard or his steed. Harry's skill at flying as well as Buckbeak's preternatural dexterity combined to make them an unbelievably agile fighting unit in the sky.

On the ground below, Hermione, professors McGonagall and Flitwick, as well as Remus Lupin stood in a ring around a group of five wooden dummies while they kept up a constant barrage of spells, all aimed at Harry and Buckbeak.

The spells themselves weren't very dangerous; merely quickly cast and easy to aim charms that would splatter the target with bright orange paint. But Harry had not been hit since the second day after Keldorn introduced this exercise, when it was just him dodging in the air and Hermione providing the ground fire.

Harry gripped his wooden sword and shield a little tighter as he urged Buckbeak into a barrel roll and came out low to the ground, merely a few feet from the center of the defensive circle. Three quick swings of his sword knocked down three of the dummies before he sped off close to the ground, dodging angry spells along the away.

Harry cast a glance over his shoulder and smirked at his opponents' vain attempts to land a spell on him.

"Gaah!" Harry shouted as a sudden and forceful impact across his chest knocked him from his saddle. The world spun before his eyes before he painfully hit the ground which had been rushing by in a green blur moments before. He bounced twice before tumbling and skidding to a stop. He wheezed and sputtered, trying to regain the wind that was knocked from his chest.

Once his breathing was under control, Harry groaned in pain. His right shoulder throbbed in a dull ache, but that was nothing next to the acute agony in his left knee that had borne the brunt of his impact with the ground.

"Harry!" he heard Hermione shout in distress from across the grounds.

The prostrate wizard lifted his head and cracked open his eyes to see his mentor Sir Keldorn Firecam in full armor, astride a large brown hippogriff, and brandishing a wooden sword a few feet from where he lay crumpled on the ground.

Harry closed his eyes and let his head thump back to the grass beneath him.

"Well?" prompted the knight as Harry continued to lie in the grass.

Harry could hear hurried footsteps approaching. He merely groaned in response to his mentor's question.

"No one is invincible, Harry," Keldorn continued after a moment. "You may show some promise in
these exercises, but do not allow yourself to become overconfident. Breaking your concentration to
gloat for even a moment during battle can quickly lead to your downfall."

"I wasn't gloating," Harry mumbled.

"Really?" Keldorn inquired. "Then why was I so easily able to unhorse you? Did you even see my
approach?"

"No," the squire grumbled.

"I thought not. Gloating."

"Harry!" Hermione shouted as she finally ran up and knelt down by Harry's side. "Oh Merlin! Are
you alright?"

Harry shook off her probing hands before replying.

"I think so… Knee rather hurts, though…"

Hermione cast a quick glare at the paladin before reaching for Harry's leg.

Keldorn laughed.

"Do not glare so heatedly at me, Miss Granger. This lesson might just save the life of your
paramour one day, and I doubt he will soon forget it."

"Hmpf!" was the young witch's only reply as she started probing Harry's knee with vigor.

"Easy… Ow! Easy! Hermione," Harry responded to Hermione's somewhat less than gentle care.

By that time McGonagall, Flitwick, and Lupin had made their way over to the fallen wizard.

"Well?" the Deputy Headmistress asked, "are you injured?"

"Just – Ow! Quit it, Hermione! Just my knee," Harry answered.

"Better be off to the hospital wing, then," Flitwick interjected.

Hermione quickly cast a diagnostic spell before speaking again.

"I think it's just a bad sprain, professor. I've been reading up on healing spells, do you think I could
try something?"

McGonagall cast her own spell before replying.

"I agree, Miss Granger. You may proceed – with Mr. Potter's permission, of course."

Hermione turned her steely gaze to the wounded wizard.

"Err… go ahead, Hermione."

Hermione traced her wand above Harry's leg in a precise circle followed by a triangle before
finishing with a twist and a flick and shouting, "Episkey Modicus!"

Harry felt a quick snap in his knee before the pain vanished.

"Well done, Miss Granger!" Flitwick cried. "If term were in session, I'd grant ten points to
"Gryffindor!"

"Thank you, professor," Hermione answered with a blush while her eyes continued to study Harry.

"Where did you learn that?" Lupin calmly inquired.

Hermione dragged her eyes to the older wizard before responding, "Oh, I've been looking over some of the healing texts in the library during my spare time. I figure that this one," here she pointed at Harry, "isn't going to stop damaging himself anytime soon, so I might as well be able to put him back together somewhat."

"An excellent idea, Miss Granger!" Flitwick exclaimed. "I'd say that St. Mungo's would be glad to have you after Hogwarts!"

Hermione beamed at the praise she was receiving.

"Your exam scores are certainly high enough," McGonagall added. "If you do as well on your N.E.W.T.s as I imagine you will, you would have no trouble at all finding a healer to take you on as an apprentice."

"Oh that sounds wonderful! Don't you think so, Harry?" Hermione asked with bright eyes.

Harry smiled.

"Sounds good to me. I know I wouldn't mind having a girlfriend that can piece me back together." "Ha!" Keldorn laughed. "No doubt about that. You would certainly live longer in any case." Hermione's smile vanished at those words, while the knight gave no notice, and instead kept speaking. "But that's enough lounging about. Back on your feet!"

Harry gave out one last groan as he lurched to his feet. He felt a nudge from behind and turned to see Buckbeak with his head bowed.

"Don't worry, boy," Harry said to the creature as he gave him a pat on the neck, "that fall wasn't your fault, but mine."

The animal chirped in response.

"Back in the saddle, Harry," Keldorn ordered. "We'll count this one as a failure. You were to eliminate all five dummies while under enemy fire without taking a hit, if you will recall. I want to see you succeed ten times in a row before we move on."

"Umm… Sir?" Harry questioned as the others moved back to their positions.

"Yes?"

"Will you be opposing me as well?"

Keldorn merely grinned in response while Harry felt his mouth go dry.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Later that evening found Harry stiffly limping through the portrait hole and into the Gryffindor common room.
"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed as she shot up from her place on the couch.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry managed to respond but with a wince of pain.

"Ohhh… what is Sir Firecam doing to you?"

"Well, you know… can't become a paladin without taking a thump or two about the head and members. Or fifty."

"Oh my… Come over here, Harry, and let me help you out of that chainmail…"

Harry spent the next several minutes wincing and hissing as Hermione gently helped him out of his armor and padding.

"Oh Merlin!" she exclaimed when he was finally stripped down to bare skin from the waist up. "You're all black and blue! Look at these bruises!"

"It's not that bad…" Harry grumbled before looking down at himself. "Okay, it's pretty bad…"

"Stay right here," the witch instructed, "I've got some Bruise Be Gone upstairs."

Harry gently lowered himself onto the couch while his girlfriend ran up the stairs to the girl's dormitories. She returned a moment later with a large jar of thick, yellow paste, and instructed Harry to lean forward so that she could apply it to his discolored back, chest and arms.

"I can't believe that old man would do this to you…" she grumbled as she gently administered the healing remedy.

"It's your fault, you know," Harry said with a small smile.

"What?!" Hermione nearly shouted, "how is this my fault?! Sir Firecam is the one who kept beating you about the head and members, as you put it, not me."

Harry hissed as she pressed against a particularly tender spot before replying.

"Well yeah, but he only did that after he found out that you've been studying healing. No doubt he thinks that now that I have my own personal healer, he can push me that much harder."

"Oh," was Hermione's only response.

"Yeah," Harry responded before glancing at the large tub of Bruise Be Gone paste in Hermione's left hand. "I think we're gonna need a bigger batch of that stuff…"

"Oh, this is terrible! I'm sorry, Harry! I didn't know Sir Keldorn would react that way to my learning a few simple spells…"

"Relax, Hermione, I was joking."

"But what if it's true?"

"It's not. Breathe. I was just pulling your chain a bit. Sir Firecam has been meaning to ratchet up my training for a while. I was going to get this eventually whether or not you suddenly took an interest in healing."

"Couldn't he heal you, though? Isn't that one of his abilities as a paladin? Like he healed me last year?"
Harry thought for a moment before responding.

"Err… I guess so. But a paladin's healing isn't really used for minor things like bumps and bruises. It's more restricted, and is usually only used in severe cases. Not for treating bruises from sparring. Besides, I think the bruising is part of the lesson – helps you remember what happened better."

Hermione continued working in silence for a while.

"Maybe I should speak with Madame Pomfrey. With the students gone for the summer, perhaps she would be willing to teach me a thing or two. Goodness knows you're going to need it."

"Ha!" Harry laughed and then winced. "Might be a good idea."

"There, all done," Hermione said before finding a towel to wipe her hands. "You need to let that set for an hour before washing it off."

"Can't I just go to sleep like this and shower in the morning?"

"Not if you don't want to wake up in the middle of the night with your skin on fire. This stuff does miracles, but if you let it dry out while it's still on your skin, it will literally burst into flame."

"Where in the world did you get this stuff?" Harry asked incredulously.

"I got it from Fred and George, actually."

"What?!" Harry cried, "Hermione! I'm going to sprout feathers, or turn purple for the next week or something!"

"Relax, Harry. I just got the recipe from them. I examined their instructions and made the paste myself. It's perfectly safe. As long as you don't let it dry and burst into flames…"

"You're sure?"

"Of course."

Harry nervously eyed the thick yellow goop that covered most of his upper body before turning back to Hermione.

"So, are you really thinking about becoming a healer?"

"Well, yes, actually, I think I am."

"That's great, Hermione! You'd do a terrific job at it."

Hermione blushed a little bit at his praise.

"Well, with you around, I'll certainly get lots of practice."

"I think you should talk to Pomfrey," Harry said after a few moments of comfortable silence, "at the very least, she can likely get you started in the right direction. It's too bad that you already started your N.E.W.T. project though; you could've probably used your research time next year to give yourself a head start."

When Hermione didn't immediately respond, Harry turned to see an impish smile on her face.

"What?"
"Well…" she began, "Don't tell Professor McGonagall, but I've kind of already been done with my N.E.W.T. project for the past several months."

"What?!" Harry laughed.

"Shhh!" Hermione admonished as she nervously glanced at the portrait hole.

"Oh, quit worrying. She's got plenty of better things to do than to eavesdrop on us."

"Yes, but I gave that as my reason for staying at the castle this summer. If she finds out that my research as well as the project itself is already finished, she might be rather cross with me…"

"Hermione Granger - lying to the deputy headmistress…" The witch in question blushed and looked down. "If she finds out, you're dead. Or worse, expelled! You're such a bad influence on me!" Harry continued, laughing the whole time.

"Oh, quiet you!" Hermione responded with a shove to his shoulder, but came away with a grimace and a hand covered in yellow goop.

They both managed to find that funny after a moment.

"So if you're not here for research, why did you stay at the castle this summer?"

Hermione grinned devilishly at Harry before responding, "Why do you think?" She then leaned in to plant a soft kiss on his lips.

A few minutes and several kisses later, Harry brought the topic of conversation back to Hermione's N.E.W.T. project.

"Well," he said, "let's see it, then."

Hermione pierced him with a steely look while she thought for a moment.

"Swear that you'll not breathe one word of this to anyone. I know we were joking earlier, but I really don't want Professor McGonagall to find out that I'm already finished. I don't know how she'd react."

"My lips are sealed."

"Okay," Hermione said as she rose from the couch, "wait here a moment while I go get it ready."

Hermione once more hurried up the stairs to her dormitory.

It was roughly five minutes later that she came back down the steps, barefoot, and clutching a fluffy bathrobe about her.

"Err…" Harry stated in confusion, "your project is a bathrobe?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "No, my project is not a bathrobe. It's this." Here she gestured to the string of pearls that encircled her neck.

"Okay… So, what's with the bathrobe, then?" Harry questioned.

"Well, I wasn't about to prance down here in nothing but my underwear!"

"What?! Why does your project mean you have to be in just your underwear?"
Hermione smiled. "Because of this! *Rambunctious Rowena Ravenclaw!*"

Harry noticed that suddenly Hermione's feet were no longer bare, but were instead enveloped in a delicate pair of heeled shoes. He only saw this for a split second though, as folds of red fabric seemingly fell from beneath the bottom of Hermione's robe to cover her feet. With a triumphant smirk, Hermione whipped off the robe to reveal that she was now wearing the crimson gown and white gloves that she had previously worn to Slughorn's Christmas party.

"Ta da!" she exclaimed before twirling in a circle to show off her dress.

Harry smiled and clapped his hands.

"Bravo, Hermione!"

"Thank you, Harry. You see, I was able to arithmetically break down the charm on Sir Firecam's gorget and subsequently develop a series of runes and a spoken charm that replicated the effect. As you can see I decided to use the pearls as the anchor for the runes, as that was most practical. It got a little tricky trying to account for the thermal pressure in the folding process, but I fixed that by overlaying the fourth node with a reverse sequence of Drouple's Runes…” Hermione finally focused back on Harry to see his eyebrows arched up under his fringe.

"Right, sorry about all the technical babble…” Hermione said apologetically. "But anyways, here we are! Just put on a necklace, say the password, and instant dress robes!"

"That's brilliant, Hermione!"

"Thanks!"

"Will it work with anything else?" Harry asked.

"In theory, yes, this can be applied to almost anything. Anything that can be worn. Halloween costumes, hiking gear, protective equipment for the potions laboratory, even your armor. You name it, I can enchant it. Now that the proper rune sequence and charm work has been fleshed out it shouldn't even be that difficult."

"Only you could manage to copy previously unknown magic from an unknown universe in less than a year. And for a school project no less!"

"Oh, stop!"

"You really are brilliant. But what's with 'Rambunctious Rowena Ravenclaw?'"

"Well, I needed an easily remembered password, but also something that I won't say accidentally. You wouldn't want your dress robes to appear or disappear in the wrong situation just because you said the wrong word."

Harry thought about that for a moment and then smiled.

"So what's the password to put everything away again?"

Hermione opened her mouth to reply before she snapped it shut, flushed bright red, and narrowed her eyes at Harry.

"Harry Potter!" she shouted, "did you just try to trick me into standing here in nothing but my underwear?!"
"Well…"

"I don't believe you!"

"Oh, come on. It's not like we've never teased each other before…"

Hermione snatched up her robe and marched back over to the stairs. She was halfway up before she stopped and turned back with an impish smile.

"If you want to get me out of my robes, you're just going to have to do it the old fashioned way!" She then quickly disappeared from sight.
Chapter 26

The summer passed rather uneventfully for Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. Hermione split her attention between the library, learning from Madame Pomfrey, and spending time with Harry. Harry still wasn't sure how his girlfriend had managed to convince his mentor to allow her a more active role in his training as a squire, but he was grateful nonetheless. Harry spent most of his time as he had in the months previous: training with Keldorn, learning philosophy and theology, as well as mucking out stables. But with Hermione now added to the regimen, he also spent a much more considerable amount of time dodging spells.

One of the only events of note during the summer took place a few days after Harry's seventeenth birthday when, accompanied by Keldorn, Tonks, and Hagrid, he traveled to the Ministry to take the test for his Apparition license. Hermione had already received hers months beforehand and decided to stay behind to work with Madame Pomfrey. The test itself was hardly remarkable, and with little more than a few quick pops from point A to point B, Harry found himself to be a legal adult with the magical ability to travel almost anywhere he desired in an instant. The ability to exercise this newfound freedom was quickly brought into line by Keldorn, who was swift to remind him that he was still a squire and that these new milestones, while nice, would do little to change Harry's current routine.

Hermione, at least, was pleased with Harry's new status, and celebrated with him in private.

Life at the castle was simple but enjoyable. Besides the two teenagers, Hagrid, McGonagall, Flitwick, Keldorn, and Dumbledore were the only regularly visible individuals around. Although Trelawney was supposedly present in the castle as well; not that Harry ever saw her. Dumbledore had taken to long, unaccounted-for absences from the others. No one would see him at all for days, even weeks at a time, and then he would suddenly reappear at dinner as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

One evening, a few days after Harry had passed his Apparition test, the Headmaster requested Harry and Hermione's presence in his office for another of their lessons. And so it was that the two teens found themselves seated in conjured armchairs, watching Dumbledore as he prepared vials of memories for the Pensieve that was lying amidst the various scurrying, silver things on his desk.

"Tonight," the aged Headmaster began, "I'd like to share with you something I discovered rather recently, as it were. This is a memory from the year 1959, a rather unremarkable year in the grand scheme of things, but this event in question might give us some new insight about our enemy."

As he was speaking, Dumbledore emptied the silvery contents of one of his many vials into the swirling depths of the Pensieve. He glanced to his left and saw the figures of Hermione and Dumbledore appear, before looking ahead to see two wizards, one a squat, balding man, the other slightly taller and sporting a long,
curling mustache - both were wearing rather non-descript robes.

"That would be Mr. Dingle and his partner," Dumbledore commented. "Let's follow them, shall we?"

Together they followed the two Aurors down the alley to the side door of an old building. The two men knocked and then mumbled something that was likely a password before they were allowed entrance.

Harry and his companions found themselves descending a set of narrow stairs into a dark and cramped basement room where a rather loud gathering was taking place. The room was filled with wizards and a few witches from what was obviously the lower tiers of society. They were dirty and haggard-looking as they hurled invectives at each other over some argument that had obviously began before Harry's arrival.

"Friends! Friends!" someone shouted from the other end of the room. Harry turned to the speaker who seemed to be able to somewhat command the attention of the rest of the assembly. The others in the room quieted a little, but not completely.

"Friends!" the speaker continued in a loud yet pleasant voice, "you are right to be angry. You are right to be anxious over the danger presented to our noble way of life by these Muggles."

By this time recognition dawned upon Harry. The speaker was a little older than when Harry had last seen him in a memory. There were a few more lines upon his face, and the slightest bit of gray at his temples, but those were doubtlessly the same handsome features of Tom Marvolo Riddle. Harry glanced to his left, met Hermione's eyes, and saw that she had made the realization as well.

"Gone are the days when a wand could easily protect us from the danger posed to our way of life by the Muggles. I wish it was true that we had only to fear the witch-hunts of the past when burning at the stake could easily be overcome by a mere Flame-Freezing Charm. But no longer! Ever since the establishment of the Statute of Secrecy, the power of the Muggles has grown, only to be eclipsed by their growth in numbers!"

A number of boos and jeers broke out at this point. Harry wasn't sure if they were booing the idea of Muggles having any sort of power, or if they were booing Riddle for saying it.

Riddle continued, "You have all seen the destruction that the Muggles were able to bring about during the last war. Grindelwald did not destroy the continent on his own. It was the weapons of Muggles that brought about most of the carnage. You are all old enough to remember those days of terror. But now the Muggles have surpassed themselves even there. They have made weapons of such destruction that they could snuff out all life on earth within hours. They have harnessed the power of the atom, and built bombs with such power and in such numbers that our world's destruction is assured!"

Here the yelling and jeering ramped up once again.

"Liar!" someone shouted from the crowd. "Muggles ain't got nuffin' like at!"

"He's a'scared of them Muggles an' their little bullets!" shrieked the high-pitched voice of some witch. "Don' he know a shield charm can stop 'em bullets?"

"Friends!" Riddle shouted, trying to regain control of the room, "Our death, the death of all wizard-kind, can be decided upon at any moment, and at the whim of a filthy Muggle!

"The time has come, friends, to tear the Muggles down! We must destroy them and their weapons
before they can destroy us! We must cast aside the misguided Statue of Secrecy, and make our natural superiority known and felt! We will turn back the past thousand years of history and regain the glory that once was ours before this so-called peace with the Muggle scum! They cannot be trusted with their freedom! They deserve death or slavery! Nothing more! And it is time that we put them where they belong before they destroy us all!"

At that point a deafening bang rang out through the room. Harry turned to see Mr. Dingle and his partner step forward.

"Aurors!" they shouted, "everyone on the ground! You're all under arrest for conspiracy against the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy!"

Far from calming the already rowdy crowd, the actions of the two Aurors caused sheer pandemonium to break loose. Wands were drawn. Curses and hexes flew. Witches and wizards ran every which way. By the time things settled down again, only a small handful of people were detained, the vast majority of the crowd was gone, including Tom Riddle.

"I think that's enough for now," Dumbledore said, and before he knew it, Harry was once again seated in the Headmaster's office.

"What was that?" Harry asked once he had had a moment to process what he had witnessed.

"That," Dumbledore replied, "was one of Tom's failures."

"He was trying to incite revolution," Hermione said, "he was trying to stir up the mob to attack the Muggle government, wasn't he?"

"But why?" Harry asked, "I thought Voldemort wanted to go after Muggle-borns, not the Muggle government."

"You're confusing what you know of Voldemort's current rhetoric with what you have just seen, Harry."

"The crowd didn't seem to be too accepting of what he had to say, did they?" Hermione said.

"Indeed, Miss Granger. Tom was little able to control those around him quite so masterfully at this point," Dumbledore replied.

"So, Voldemort didn't start off hating Muggle-borns, but instead wanted to try coming to power by stirring people up against the Muggles in general?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore answered, "but I do not think that a mere grab for power was Tom's true goal at this point. The means, maybe, but not the end."

"Nuclear weapons," Hermione said.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Think, Harry," Hermione continued, turning to face him, "Riddle mentioned 'the power of the atom' and the Muggles' ability to destroy the world. This meeting took place in 1959, right at the height of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race. Riddle found out about nuclear weapons and their potential to bring about the end of the world and it terrified him! What good would his quest for magical power do him if the Muggles burned the world around him?"

"Indeed, Miss Granger," Dumbledore interjected, "those were my conclusions as well."
"Riddle didn't become Voldemort to destroy the world," Hermione continued, "he did it to stop the threat of nuclear war!"

Harry cast a doubtful look at his girlfriend.

"Not that I approve of his choices or methods, of course," Hermione hastily added, "he's still proved himself to be an evil megalomaniac, but it makes a kind of sense. At that time no one knew what was going to happen tomorrow, or if there would even be a tomorrow. The arms race had most of the Muggle world paralyzed with fear. And because of all its secrecy, the wizarding world didn't even know about it! Riddle found out and tried to do something to stop it!"

"And he failed," Dumbledore said. "No one would listen to him. For too many in our society, Muggles were and are beneath notice. Perhaps an interesting curiosity at best, but hardly to be considered dangerous. It is not very surprising that Tom was unable to garner sufficient support for his cause by prophesying the dangers of the modern Muggle."

"So after his failure," Harry began thinking out loud, "Voldemort needed to find something that would work. A cause that wizards would actually follow."

"Blood supremacy," Hermione answered the unasked question.

"Indeed," Dumbledore replied, "I have long been curious about Tom's championing of the cause for pure-bloods. He showed no real passion for it as a student as I recall. And, as we three know, Tom is a half-blood himself. But he found in the blood supremacy movement the means to garner the support of numerous wizards and witches, some with rather deep pockets. I had never truly understood his actual goal until now. He's always desired immortality and power, but those would be better pursued through other channels, not by trying to conquer the world."

"So, Voldemort is trying to save the world by destroying all the Muggles?" Harry asked.

"Not all of them, I dare say," Dumbledore answered. "Not even he could think that he could kill almost all six billion human beings on the planet. And he likely sees himself as the uncontested ruler of whatever he manages to raise up from the ashes. But I believe that you've basically summed things up for us, Harry."

"But the world isn't in nearly as precarious a position today as it was forty years ago," Hermione said. "The threat of nuclear annihilation isn't quite as imminent since the fall of the Soviet Union."

"But does Tom know that?" Dumbledore asked. "Or has he become blinded to the changes in the Muggle world because of his involvement in our own? Does he realize that the threat isn't quite so grave today? Or has he travelled so far down this path that he has lost sight of his original goal himself and merely continues? Does he even care? I do not know."

"So what do we do now?" Hermione asked.

"We continue to learn, Miss Granger. We continue to fight. And as Harry or his mentor would doubtlessly tell us, we continue to stand as a Light against the Darkness."

OoOoO

OoOoO

"Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, these are for you," Professor McGonagall said one afternoon as the two teenagers were finishing lunch in the Great Hall. The Deputy Headmistress handed them both an envelope before smiling and departing for her office.
"I guess it's our letters for seventh year," Harry said as he tore open his envelope. He quickly read over his supply list for the coming year, which was rather short considering that he was only enrolled in Charms, Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Riding and Magical Mounts. After a moment, Harry realized that the normally talkative Hermione had yet to say a word. He glanced at her to see her breathing rather heavily. Her eyes were fixed on a small golden badge that she had clutched in her hands.

"Hermione?"

"I'm Head Girl," she said softly.

"That's great!" Harry replied.

"I'm Head Girl!" Hermione shouted as she jumped to her feet. "Oh my! Can you believe it, Harry? I'm actually Head Girl!"

Harry smiled as he too rose to his feet.

"Of course I can believe it," he said, "you were born to be Head Girl."

"I can't believe this!" Hermione squealed as she started bouncing up and down. "I've wanted to be Head Girl since I first read Hogwarts, A History."

"I know," Harry laughed.

Hermione finally tore her eyes away from the badge to look at Harry. After a moment she leapt at him throwing her arms around his neck.

"Congratulations, Hermione!" Harry exclaimed as he wrapped his arms around her waist, lifted her off her feet, and twirled her in a circle.

Hermione squealed in delight before she was set back on the ground.

"Oh my! This changes everything!" the witch exclaimed once she released Harry.

"It does?"

"Of course! I'm going to have to revise all of my calendars and schedules for the coming year. I'm going to have to block out more time for patrols and for planning prefect meetings. I'll need to account for regular meetings with Professor McGonagall, as well. I should probably start drafting an acceptance letter for her right away – I wouldn't want her agonizing over whether or not I'd accept…"

Harry laughed. "I don't think you have to worry too much about that."

"I'll need to start drafting patrol schedules for the other prefects as well," Hermione continued speaking without really acknowledging what Harry said. "I wonder how much this is going to affect my time in the Infirmary with Madame Pomfrey… Maybe I can get Professor McGonagall to lend me another Time Tuner… But of course I'll need to wait to confer with the new Head Boy, as well. I wonder who he is…"

Here Hermione's eyes flew up to meet Harry's.

"Don't look at me," he responded to her unasked question with a smile. "No badge in my envelope."

Hermione's smile diminished somewhat.
"Hermione," Harry continued, "Sir Firecam made me give up being Quidditch Captain and half my classes last year to be his squire. Even if McGonagall was daft enough to want me for Head Boy, do you really think he'd let her?"

"Oh, I suppose you're right," she replied. "It would have been nice though. Patrolling and working on all those schedules together. Oh well, if you'll excuse me, Harry, I must get started."

"But term doesn't start for another month!"

"No time like the present!" she responded as she gathered her belongings and then made her way to the door. "Have fun cleaning the stables this afternoon! I'm off to the library!"

Harry just continued smiling and shook his head as the new Head Girl nearly broke into a run.

August thirty-first found Harry, Hermione, and Keldorn at the Burrow. As the summer of 1997 wound down, Pigwidgeon was sent repeatedly to Hogwarts with invitations to come stay at the Weasley homestead. Even old Errol was sent on the journey once or twice. Initially, Keldorn was steadfastly against an extended visit to stay with the Weasleys as it would take too much time away from Harry's duties, but eventually Harry and Hermione together were able to convince him that one day with their friends wouldn't be too much time lost, especially since they would be required to travel to England to simply take the train back to Scotland for the beginning of the school year.

Thus Harry, Hermione, and Keldorn stepped out of the floo and into the comforting chaos of the Weasleys' home on the last day of summer vacation.

"Harry!" Molly cried when she spied the young man emerging from the fireplace. Soon he was gathered to her bosom in a crushing hug. "It's been much too long, dear. What have you been up to at that school all summer? Not normal for a young wizard like yourself to be working all the time. Youth should be spent having some fun with friends and family! At least they're feeding you, I can tell. Finally filled out, you did. I'm not too sure about these robes of yours, though. What's this with the metal sleeves?"

"It's good to see you too, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said once he could get a word in.

"And Hermione, dear!" Molly said as she pulled her next target in for a hug. "How've you been? And Head Girl too, I hear! Such an accomplishment, that. We're all so proud of you! Have you been looking after our Harry, now? That's a good girl. A good wizard always needs a good witch if he's to come to anything, I've always said. Just you look at my Ron – always worried about him, I have, as you know. But this year – it's like he finally went and grew up, all at once! And it's all thanks to that Lavender, I tell you. A good girl she is too. She's spent the last week here with us; very eager to learn, asking about how to make all of Ron's favorite dishes. Warms a mother's heart. Harry's always been quite partial to treacle tart, you know," She finished with a wink.

"I know, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said.

"And you must be Sir Keldorn!" Molly exclaimed as she released Hermione.

"Indeed I am," the knight answered with a short bow. "And you must be Mrs. Weasley. Thank you for welcoming me and my squire into your home."

"Oh, think nothing of it. This is Harry's home too, of course. We're always glad to have him with
us. Ginny's told us all about you. She's really taken to your riding course at Hogwarts, you will be teaching it again this year, yes?"

"Of course."

"Oh good. I've been meaning to ask someone, I've always been curious about horses, how do they manage to make their shoes? But where's my head? The kids are outside, Harry, Hermione, go on out and join them while Keldorn and I have a bit of a talk. Don't mind us. Lunch will be ready in an hour."

With nary a thought for the fate of his mentor, Harry slipped out the kitchen door hand in hand with Hermione. They were spotted as soon as they entered the garden.

"Oi! Georgie!" one of the Weasley twins cried, "its little Harry-kins and Hermione!"

"And they're holding handsies, Freddy!" the other twin answered.

"Isn't that precious!"

"It's like they're all grown up."

"Maybe they're just trying to beat out Ronny and Lav-Lav for the title of mostest sickeningest sweetestest couple at the Burrow!"

"I don't know, Freddy, they've got their work cut out for them."

"I know, Georgie-boy, I doubt that they'll be able to break the Ronny-Lav time record for keeping each other's tongues in the other's throats."

"Eww..." Hermione said.

"Now Hermione, there's nothing to be squeamish about, right Freddy?"

"That's right, Georgie, it's perfectly natural for boys and girls your age to want to try and taste each other's tonsils."

"It's good to see you too, guys," Harry said.

"Hey, Harry," Ginny said as she strolled up to the group.

"What's new, Ginny?" he responded.

"Oh not much. I can't wait to get back to Hogwarts. Mum's been driving me spare this summer."

"Oh?" Hermione inquired.

"Yeah," the red-head answered, "Ron goes and gets himself a girlfriend and suddenly he's 'sooo mature.' Now all I hear is, 'Ginny, when are you going to find someone nice like Ron did?' or 'you should take after your brother Ron,' or some such. All he does is get a girlfriend and suddenly he's Mr. Perfect."

Fred and George smiled.

"Cheer up, Gin-Gin," one of them said, "we'll find you a boyfriend!"

"Let's go make up some fliers, Georgie, with a big picture of Ginny here. Caption: 'Will you date
this witch? We'll owl them to every guy in Hogwarts!"

"Beautiful idea, you roguishly-handsome devil, brother-o-mine. We could also include them on the
back cover of our next mail-order catalogue for the shop!"

Ginny glared at her twin brothers and whipped out her wand.

"Gotta go!" Fred shouted as he was already running toward the house.

"Lovely seeing you again, Hermione," George said as he scrambled past his brother.

"Those two still act like they're twelve," Ginny said as she put her wand away.

"Hermione!" came a deafening shriek from across the yard.

Harry suppressed his reaction to draw his wand at the sudden noise. Hermione, meanwhile, jumped
an inch off the ground while turning to see Lavender Brown running her way.

"Oh Hermione, it's so great to see you!" the blonde witch continued as she enveloped Hermione in
a tight hug.

Hermione looked at Harry with wide, uncomprehending eyes from over Lavender's shoulder.

"Oh isn't this just wonderful!" Lavender continued. "Ronny and I have had such a wonderful
summer together. We've been planning out what we're going to do together once we've finished
Hogwarts."

By this time Harry noticed that Ron had appeared as well. He figured that he didn't see the other
wizard at first because of Lavender's overly enthusiastic greeting.

"Hey, mate," Ron said.

Harry gave a little wave in response.

Lavender continued her as of yet one-sided conversation with Hermione.

"But I hear you've been all alone with Harry up at Hogwarts this summer," she turned to give a
saucy wink to the black-haired wizard. "Come on, you've got to tell me all about it! Girl talk!"

Lavender quickly linked arms with Hermione and began dragging her off. Hermione shot Harry a
desperate look that screamed, 'Help me!'

Harry just waved goodbye.

"I better go help bear some of the brunt for Hermione," Ginny said as she quickly followed after
the other two witches, leaving Ron and Harry alone.

"So…"

"Yeah…"

"So…" Harry began again, "planning your future with Lavender?"

"Yeah, mate," Ron answered with a smile, "she's great. Figure we better get things planned out for
next summer. We'll need to find somewhere to live an' all."

"You're going to move in together?!" Harry asked with not a little bit of shock. "Isn't it a bit soon to
Ron looked at him quizzically.

"How else are we supposed to live once we're married?"

"You're getting married?!"

"Well, it's not all official yet, but that's the plan."

"Wha…?"

"Lav wants me to propose at Christmas. I figure that'll work. Gives plenty of time for a summer wedding. Mum's pretty excited about that part."

"You mother is okay with this?!"

"Sure, mate. She an' Mrs. Brown have been arguing a bit over where the ceremony is gonna be held. But I'll let the witches worry over that. As long as the food is good, I'm happy," Ron said with a smile.

"But you're only seventeen!"

"So?"

"Don't you think that's a little young to be getting married?"

"What are you talking about, mate? Everyone I know got married right after Hogwarts. Well, almost."

Harry thought for a moment about the married couples he knew. He realized that his own parents must have married rather young. The only other couple he really knew well were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and he never asked when they got together.

"Really?"

"Yep," Ron replied. "As mum says, 'once a witch hits twenty without a wizard she starts getting desperate. And a wizard over twenty one without a wife is just asking for Azkaban.'"

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Sure it does," Ron defended.

"But none of your brothers are married!"

"And now you know why mum is always so worried about them."

Harry just stared at his grinning best friend in silence for a long moment.

"When did you manage to get all grown up without me noticing?" Harry finally asked.

"It's all thanks to Lav, Harry. The love of a good woman is a powerful thing."

Harry thought for a moment about Hermione.

"Yeah, I guess it is."
"Besides," Ron added as they turned to start looking for the girls, "she can really cook! I'm gonna be bigger'n Hagrid within a year. It's gonna be great!"

OoOoO

Lunch was served not too long after that, and everyone was ushered to a long picnic table out in the garden. As usual, Molly strove to outdo herself and provided enough food to feed half of greater London – not that anyone complained.

To Harry's surprise, Lavender seated herself right next to Molly, and the two of them launched into some topic of conversation that they had obviously been over once or twice before. Both witches had ear-to-ear grins the entire time and had to remind themselves to pause and eat every once in a while or else run the risk of having Ron surreptitiously finish their plates for them.

The twins continued to tease Ginny about getting her a proper boyfriend, while she, in turn, promised swift and terrible retribution. Keldorn was simply enjoying the delicious home-cooked food, but Harry could tell that he had his attention on the conversations around him, should he have to respond to some comment. Arthur presided over all with a silent but contented smile on his face.

"Ron and Lav are talking about getting married," Harry leaned over to whisper to Hermione.

"I know!" Hermione loudly whispered back.

"How did we miss that?"

"Well, I knew they were serious, but I didn't think that serious."

"Mr. and Mrs. Weasley seem happy about it," Harry continued.

"Must be something about being raised in a wizarding home. Culturally, I suppose they just expect to get married early."  

Harry took a moment to really look at Hermione while he thought. If magical society was used to couples getting married right out of Hogwarts, would that mean that people would be expecting them to make it official soon? Harry swallowed hard at that thought. It wasn't really a bad idea, per se, but was he ready to be thinking about marriage? He had so much else on his plate at the moment: being a squire, Hogwarts, not to mention Voldemort. He was happy and comfortable with how things were with Hermione. And he thought she was happy too. But would the rest of the wizarding world expect the Boy-Who-Lived to announce his betrothal on the cover of the Daily Prophet sometime soon?

Those thoughts were derailed, however, by a searing bolt of pain that hammered into Harry's skull. He cried out briefly as his hands flew to his forehead, clutching at his scar. He fell off the bench and began convulsing on the ground as the blinding agony kept growing in intensity. Harry could taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth, and was dimly aware that the others were moving about in commotion around him, but he couldn't bring himself to focus on anything other than the pain.

The white-hot torture reached its peak, and Harry arched his back off of the ground and let out a long, gut-wrenching scream.

Someone else nearby answered with a scream of their own. It started off softly but was soon ear-piercingly loud, in a high-pitched, metallic tone.
And then everything went black.
Harry's return to consciousness was gradual and sluggish. The first thing he registered was a feeling of nausea and the resulting desire to curl into a ball. But his body wouldn't respond. He managed to roll his head and emit a feeble groan, but that just caused him to become aware of a splitting pain in his head. Harry screwed his eyes shut as tightly as possible and tried to will the pain away.

He wasn't very successful.

Eventually, he cracked open his eyes just a sliver to see a bright light. His vision was even blurrier than normal and it took a minute for his eyes to focus to the best of their ability. Finally, Harry was able to recognize the familiar environment of the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts. He was lying in his usual bed and the room was quiet. The light coming through the many windows told him that it was probably sometime in the late morning or early afternoon.

He let his head roll to the side, which caused a flash of pain to stab through his skull, but there to his right he saw a chair occupied by a blurry figure with an abundance of brown hair.

Hermione! Harry tried to say, but his dry and irritated throat made it come out sounding more like, "Erm…"

The figure stirred and sat up.

"Harry!" she exclaimed as she reached for and clasped his hand. He tried to give her a squeeze in return but only managed to twitch his fingers a bit.

Hermione leaned over him and kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Wait just a moment, I'm going to fetch Madam Pomfrey."

The young witch left, but returned only a moment later with the matron.

Harry knew that the healer was saying something to him, but he found it hard to concentrate – his mind was lethargic.

Suddenly a glass vial was pressed to his lips, and Harry obediently drank. The thick, foul-tasting liquid burned his throat as it went down, but its effects helped immensely. The fog cleared a bit from his mind and his headache receded to the background. Hermione placed his glasses on his face, and Harry smiled in thanks.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter."

"What happened?" he managed to croak. His voice was still raspy and it hurt to speak.

"You somehow suffered a severe shock to your body's systems as well as near fatal magical exhaustion," the stern matron explained. "You're rather lucky that Miss Granger and Sir Firecam were nearby when it happened."

Harry turned to his girlfriend with a question in his eyes. Hermione just gave a worried smile in return.

"It was a very near thing for a while there," Pomfrey continued. "Might I ask just what you were
doing to bring yourself so close to death's door?"

Harry thought back with no small amount of confusion.

"We were eating dinner..." he croaked, "at the Weasleys', right? That's the last thing I remember."

"Hmpf," the matron responded. "Well, I must inform the Headmaster that you're awake." With that, she left Harry and Hermione alone once again.

Harry turned to his girlfriend once again.

"Hermione?"

"I was kind of hoping that you could tell me what happened, Harry," she responded. "We were just sitting there at dinner, and then you were on the ground screaming." She sniffed a little and Harry saw a tear roll down her cheek. "And then that... shadow, or whatever it was came out of you. It was horrible. I've never been so frightened in my life," she finished softly.

Harry tried once again to squeeze her hand in comfort. His limbs responded a bit more this time, but still not completely.

"How long?" Harry asked.

"You've been here for four days. You missed the sorting and the opening feast."

After that, the two teenagers sat in silence together for a while.

Soon, footsteps could be heard coming their way, and the curtain around Harry's bed was parted to reveal Madam Pomfrey followed by Dumbledore and Keldorn.

"Good afternoon, Harry, Miss Granger," the Headmaster said in greeting, "it's good to see you awake once more."

Dumbledore had his usual smile fixed in place, but behind him, Keldorn's expression seemed much graver.

"What happened?" Harry forced the question past his battered throat.

"We shall get to that soon enough once you have recovered your strength," Dumbledore answered as he pulled out his wand. "You are in no condition at the moment for such conversations."

Harry wanted to object, but his mentor interrupted.

"I concur with the Headmaster in this," Keldorn spoke with a tone that would suffer no argument from his squire. "We shall wait until your condition improves."

"Don't worry, Harry," Dumbledore continued, "Madam Pomfrey assures me that you shall be up and about in no time. For now, though, might I have your permission to cast a few diagnostic charms?"

Harry wasn't happy, but he didn't argue. He simply nodded his head.

Dumbledore began waving his wand and chanting in a low tone. Whatever he was doing took several minutes. When he finished, he smiled once again at the questioning look in Harry's eyes.

"Worry not, Harry, we'll talk soon enough. For now just rest and regain your strength." With that,
he took his leave.

"Miss Granger," Pomfrey began, "a dose of Dreamless Sleep, if you would?"

Hermione quickly left Harry's bedside to rummage through the potions cabinet.

Keldorn stepped forward and gently laid his hand on Harry's forehead. Through that light pressure, Harry realized that he was wearing a bandage wrapped around his head.

"You will recover," the old knight said before smiling. "Do not think that I will coddle you though. I expect you to be back at your regular duties soon enough."

Harry smiled at his mentor's expectations.

"May the Light protect and guide you, Harry."

Hermione returned with a small glass vial.

"Alright, Harry, open up," she said.

Harry obeyed without argument and swallowed the potion.

His eyelids quickly drooped, and he was just aware enough to hear Hermione bid him goodnight before sleep claimed him.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry recovered relatively quickly all things considered. Following some rest and lots of food in the Hospital Wing, his pains vanished and his strength returned. Hermione was with him quite often – her new status as Madame Pomfrey's semi-official assistant saw her overseeing much of Harry's recovery. Neither really complained about that arrangement, even if Harry did think that his girlfriend was just a tad overly insistent about the amount of rest he needed.

And so, two days after he had awoken in the infirmary, Harry was released with a clean bill of health, but with orders from Madame Pomfrey to take it easy for the next few days. He was certain that Keldorn would take that to mean that he should muck out just the horse stalls instead of doing the hippogriff stables as well.

True to his word, Dumbledore seemed anxious to discuss what had happened with Harry, so as he walked out of the Hospital Wing, Hermione switched rolls from Infirmary Assistant to Head Girl and escorted him to the Headmaster's office.

If they were delayed along the way by finding a moment to steal a few illicit, I'm-glad-you're-better kisses, well, no one was the wiser.

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore began as soon as the two teens entered his office, "I'm glad to see you up and about once again. Your youthful resilience is something I envy."

Dumbledore waved his wand and conjured two armchairs before speaking again.

"Please have a seat."

Harry decided to take the initiative, "You wanted to talk about what happened at the Weasley's, Professor?"
"I do indeed," Dumbledore responded.

"It was Voldemort, wasn't it?" Harry questioned.

"Undoubtedly," the Headmaster answered. "Have you remembered anything else from the incident?"

"No. The last thing I remember is eating dinner and talking with the others – nothing out of the ordinary."

"Then perhaps this might prove enlightening to you. Miss Granger has graciously provided me with her memory of the incident, which I have viewed repeatedly. Would you like to see it for yourself?" Dumbledore then gestured to his Pensieve that stood off to the side near the cabinet of broken silver instruments.

Harry raised his eyebrows as he looked at his girlfriend before nodding at the Headmaster. He made his way over to the stone basin before plunging into the swirling cloud of memories.

He found himself again in the Weasleys' garden, watching as another version of himself writhed in agony on the ground. The others stared in horror at the unexpected display. Harry saw Keldorn draw his sword before starting to make his way to the other side of the table. But before he had moved more than a few steps, the other Harry arched his back and screamed.

As the throat-rending cry continued, something like black smoke began to rise from the bleeding, lightning bolt-shaped scar on his forehead. As the shadow continued to grow, a new sound emerged. It started off low, like a quiet scraping of rusty metal on metal, but it quickly built to a high-pitched, deafening wail. The others cringed back from the sound, even as they tried to move forward to help their fallen friend.

Then, as quickly as it began, it was over. The black smoke disappeared as if it was never there, and memory-Harry slumped down to the ground, unconscious.

Harry felt himself yanked back into the real world, and after a moment made his way back to his seat.

Hermione looked a little shaken as Harry retook his place next to her. No doubt she had replayed the scene in her mind as he experienced it in the Pensieve.

"What was that, Professor?" the witch asked. "What was that black smoke, and why did it attack Harry?"

"I do not believe it was attacking Harry, as you say, Miss Granger," Dumbledore answered. "Rather, I believe it was finally leaving him."

"What?" Harry asked quizzically, "I've never seen anything like that before in my life."

"No doubt, Harry, but please, let me continue," the Headmaster replied. "As to what it was, I have come to believe that it was a piece of Tom's very soul."

The two listeners sat in stunned silence as they took in that revelation. When neither of them moved to speak, Dumbledore continued.

"You might be surprised to learn that at the very moment Harry here was experiencing his ordeal at the Weasley residence, the very same thing took place in this office. You see, over the summer, I had begun to suspect the means through which Tom has managed to survive his many brushes with
death, starting with his first encounter with Harry on Halloween of 1981."

Dumbledore slid open one of the drawers of his desk and took out a battered book as he continued.

"This diary, which you recovered from the Chamber of Secrets back in your second year, was my first clue. But things did not fall into place for me until I spoke with Professor Slughorn, and convinced him to reveal some of his conversations with the young Tom Riddle while he was still a student at this institution. You see, I believe that Tom made this diary one of several Horcruxes."

Again, no one else broke the silence as they waited for the Headmaster to continue his explanation.

"There have been many attempts by wizards throughout history to obtain immortality. Some more thought-out than others, but none of them completely successful. The creation of a Horcrux is the closest thing to insurance against death as I have been able to discover. It is also the vilest. They are things of utter evil, belonging completely to the darkest of the Dark Arts. You see, a Horcrux is created through a deliberate act of murder through dark magic, which damages the murder's soul. A piece of that soul is then transferred to an object, the Horcrux, which then acts as an anchor – as long as the anchor exists, the soul cannot depart this world for the next."

"Light defend us," Harry murmured as the Headmaster continued.

"The diary, which you so bravely destroyed when you were but a mere a child, Harry, was one of Tom's Horcruxes. I had just found another the day before the present term started."

Here Dumbledore took out a gold ring set with a large, black stone, and laid it on the table.

"This ring was one as well. I had just brought it back to my office, and was contemplating how best to dispose of it, when a black cloud of smoke rose from it and made a piercing wail before disappearing. As I have accounted for it, this took place at the exact same time that you had your experience at the Burrow."

Hermione loudly sucked in an anxious breath.

"Are you saying that Harry was one of these Horcruxes?" she worriedly asked before looking at the wizard in question. Harry nervously swallowed before looking to Dumbledore for answers.

"Sadly, I had begun to expect as much. It would account for many things – Harry's ability as a Parselmouth for one, and his mental connection to Tom for another."

"But how could I have possibly been made into a Horcrux?" Harry asked with some distress.

"I can't say for sure, Harry," Dumbledore answered, "It likely happened the night that you received your scar. Perhaps it had to do with the spells Tom cast, or the way the Killing Curse rebounded on him. I cannot say with certainty exactly how it happened. Although it is clear that it did. But worry not, Harry, for while I had begun to fear for what this might eventually mean for you, I no longer believe that you need be frightened of this possibility.

"You see," he continued, "the black smoke and the piercing wail was the destruction of the Horcrux."

"How?" Harry asked incredulously.

"That," Dumbledore replied, "is the question, Harry. I did not do anything to destroy the Horcrux that was contained within this ring. Yet, I am now absolutely certain that the taint is gone. Just as I am certain that the soul fragment that had lain dormant within your scar is now gone. Have you not
noticed that in the few days since your incident, your famous scar has faded quite remarkably?"

"He's right!" Hermione exclaimed. "Oh, why didn't I see that before? Your scar used to be more noticeable – it's been a bit red and inflamed in the past couple of years, especially, but now, it's like it's almost gone!"

Hermione dug around in her bag for a moment before pulling out a small, compact mirror, and handed it to Harry. He examined his scar in the mirror for a moment before realizing that the Headmaster was right. His scar was much less noticeable that it had been only a week before.

"So, what does this mean, then?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore smiled.

"It means, Harry, that somehow, all of Tom's Horcruxes have likely been destroyed."

"You mean he's gone?" Hermione asked, hope filling her voice.

"I cannot be completely sure about that, you understand, Miss Granger," Dumbledore answered with a smile, "but the destruction of his Horcruxes means that Tom is very likely dead. I must confess that I find myself more hopeful of a peaceful old age than I have been in a long time."

"But what about the prophesy?" Harry asked. "Didn't it say that I had to be the one to defeat him? How can he be dead if I didn't even do anything?"

"Yes, things are not quite so neatly wrapped up as they might first appear, are they? Perhaps I was wrong about the prophecy after all. Or maybe there has been something else in play with it this entire time without our knowing. Perhaps he never intended or knew about you being a Horcrux, and that somehow brought about his end. Contrary to the opinion of many, I am unfortunately not omniscient."

"Harry!" Hermione joyfully exclaimed as she clasped his hand, "Oh this is wonderful! If he's really gone, you won't have to fight that monster after all! We won't have to worry about him anymore!"

"I don't know," Harry replied somewhat hesitantly, "I just feel like that's not all there is to this. How could Voldemort just suddenly be gone like that? Isn't it a bit… I don't know… anticlimactic?"

"Who cares? If it means that we get to be together in peace, I say good riddance!"

"That does bring up another thought that you may now want to consider," Dumbledore said, recapturing Harry's attention. "Will you continue on as Sir Keldorn's squire if Tom is indeed truly gone? After all, if the desperate need that drove you to this position has departed, I do not see that you need to continue as you are. I would be happy to allow you back into your regular course load. And while the positions of Head Boy and Gryffindor Quidditch Captain have already been given to others, perhaps we could work out something for you that recognizes the reward that you deserve after all this time."

"Oh Harry! This is wonderful!"

"I don't know," Harry replied, "I still don't feel right about all of this. What if this is all just a trick to make us let our guard down?"

"Harry," Hermione replied with more than a little exasperation, "why would Voldemort try to trick us by destroying his own Horcruxes? He would never eliminate his own means of immortality just
to pull one over on us. That would do away with his greatest advantage!"

Harry looked down and rubbed his forehead.

"It just doesn't feel right."

"Well, there's no need to make any decisions right now," Dumbledore said. "It appears that we might have purchased some breathing room at the very least. Take your time and think things over."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied.

Harry and Hermione took the dismissal for what it was and quickly left the Headmaster's office.

Once they were alone in the halls, Hermione latched onto Harry's arm and pulled him into an empty classroom. A few quick spells locked and silenced the door.

"What's with you?" the young witch asked, "Aren't you happy that Voldemort is gone?"

"I just don't think it's that simple."

"I know that this might feel like something of a let-down," Hermione said gently as her eyes softened in understanding, "you've been working so hard to be ready to face him. Now it must seem that all that work was for nothing."

"Hermione…"

"But who cares! Your hard work still counts for something! It's made you who you are today. It's made you strong and brave and capable. Just because you don't have to fight that monster doesn't mean that you've wasted your time."

"Hermione, it's not that."

"Then why aren't you happy about this?!"

"It just doesn't feel right to me. I just don't think he's gone – it doesn't make any sense that he would just die without any of us even doing anything. There's nothing else to say he's dead, other than his Horcruxes being destroyed."

"But Dumbledore—"

"Dumbledore doesn't know everything," Harry interrupted. "He said so himself. I just… I can't explain it, but I just feel like there's more to this than what we're seeing."

Hermione huffed, but smiled.

"Well I for one hope you're wrong, Mr. Potter," she replied before reaching up to give him a quick kiss. "It would be nice to have a year at school without worrying about dark plots and evil wizards out to get us."

"Wishful thinking will not chase away the Darkness, Hermione."

"You're starting to sound a lot like Sir Firecam."

"Well, he is my mentor and I do spend all day everyday with him learning to be like him."
"So are you going to continue?"

"What?"

"Training to be a paladin?"

"Hermione, I already told you, I don't think this is over."

"Okay, well, then hypothetically, say Voldemort really is gone. Say the Headmaster discovers proof next week that he blew himself up in a potions accident or whatever. Would you go back to being a normal Hogwarts student?"

"I… I don't know," Harry replied.

"Well think about it," Hermione smiled before kissing him again. "It would be nice for us to be normal for once. Nothing to worry about but homework, Head Girl duties, and finding time for a quick snog with my boyfriend."

They left the old classroom shortly after that and split up to go their separate ways, Hermione to class and Harry to find his mentor.

Harry was deep in thought as he wound his way through the corridors. Should he consider quitting as Keldorn's squire? If Voldemort really was gone, did he need to continue along his current path? What Hermione had said about being normal for once was very tempting. He could just relax with her in their free time, instead of working himself to exhaustion with the old paladin.

But Harry had learned so much in the past several months, almost a year, that he had spent as a squire. His swordsmanship had taught him discipline and self-control, not to mention putting him in better physical shape than he had ever dreamed. His studies with the old knight saw him learning faster than ever before, and he had begun to see and understand the world from a new and illuminating perspective. Life just made more sense to Harry when he saw it through the lens that Keldorn had provided. Heck, Harry could even see the benefit he received from cleaning up horse manure and polishing boots – it made him more willing to simply do what needed to be done without complaining. Someone had to do it after all. Hard work was a good thing.

And then there was the Light. Harry didn't think that he had really come to know it in the way that Keldorn always talked about. He didn't feel like he was really building a relationship with it. But there was something there. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he did notice it from time to time. It wasn't always apparent, nor was it always in the forefront of Harry's mind, but after all the learning and praying and hard work, Harry had come to realize that there was something to what the old knight was saying.

Yet the temptation to go back to the way things were was pretty strong. Harry could just turn in his armor and finally get some enjoyment out of life. It would be easy. He wouldn't even be breaking his word. The oath that he made in becoming a squire enabled gave him the freedom to choose to leave Keldorn's service whenever he so desired. He was under no obligation to remain. Keldorn would understand. The Light allowed him the freedom to choose his own path as he so wished.

"Light guide me…” Harry quietly prayed as he continued his ruminations on the way to Keldorn's office.
Harry quietly slipped into Keldorn's office.

"There you are," the old knight said as soon as the door was closed. He was seated behind his desk going over a few pieces of parchment. "I thought you would be up and about today. How do you feel?"

"Fine, sir."

"Any instructions from the Matron that I should be aware of?"

"Only that she told me to take it easy for a few days, sir."

"Ah. Well, perhaps I'll be a bit gentler when laying into your hide during sword work," Keldorn chuckled. "I'd better put off the Longbottom boy for a few days as well. He's returned from his vacation rather eager to test his new skills against you."

Harry smiled, "I wouldn't mind seeing what he's learned."

"Yes, but we wouldn't want to upset good Madam Pomfrey," Keldorn said. "Always keep your healers happy, Harry. Remember that."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, the Summa is waiting for you," Keldorn said as he gestured to Harry's own desk in the corner. "Get to it."

"Yes, sir," Harry said once again before making his way to his desk.

He spent the next hour trying to focus on the writings of Saint Tomus, but found little success in the endeavor. His previous conversations with Dumbledore and Hermione were dogging his thoughts. Finally, he gave up and decided to speak with his mentor about it.

"Sir?" Harry asked the knight who was still reading at his desk.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Err… it's just… Did Professor Dumbledore speak to you about what he believes happened with me?"

Keldorn placed his parchment down on the desk before fixing Harry in his sights.

"Nothing specific. Have you spoken to him?"

"Yes, sir. We just…err, that is, Hermione and I just came from there. From speaking with the Headmaster."

"And what have you learned?"

"Well," Harry began, "have you ever heard the word 'Horcrux' before?"

Harry spent the next thirty minutes or so going over what the Headmaster had told him about immortality, Horcruxes, their destruction, the black mist and what it meant, as well as
Dumbledore's theory and Hermione's hope that this meant that Voldemort was gone for good.

"But it doesn't feel right to me," Harry said. "I can't really explain it, but I just have this sense that he isn't really gone. It's like I would be able to tell if it was really true."

Keldorn leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling for a long moment while he thought.

"There are more ways than one of achieving the cursed 'immortality' that evil sorcerers often crave." Keldorn began after a while. "Though they do not truly gain life without end. They always end up sacrificing what is best about living in order to merely keep existing for a little while longer. They trade the joy of life, though finite, for damnation that promises to last forever. It never does, though. They always meet their end. No Darkness can stand forever before the Light.

"These Horcruxes, however, are not something that I have encountered before. Although I have seen similar sorceries in my home-world. Soul-jars and phylacteries. Necromancers and life-draining spells. Undead monstrosities. Evils darker than most, meant to prolong life unnaturally. They are all horrid, and pursuing them is never worth the cost. I suppose that the Horcruxes you mention sound most similar to a lich's phylactery – the soul of a powerful mage willingly trapped within an amulet, transforming the mage into an undead being of great magical power. No longer alive, but not truly dead either. But a phylactery must always be worn by the lich and there could never be more than one of them."

A chill went down Harry's spine as the old knight spoke about those particular dark magics.

"Have you ever fought a lich?" Harry asked.

Keldorn paused before replying.

"Yes," he finally said while his eyes gazed off into the distance, "it was long ago in the labyrinths beneath Athkatla. We destroyed the lich, but I barely escaped with my life. Many of my fellow paladins did not. In truth it was Sir Ryan Trawl who won the day. He gave his life in order to destroy the beast's phylactery - ending its cursed existence. May the Light shine on him evermore."

The old man brought himself back to the present as he turned to look at Harry.

"In any event, if Voldemort's Horcruxes have been destroyed, then good riddance to them."

Harry went back to the Summa, but another thought struck him.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"I was just thinking… as a paladin, you can detect evil, right? How is it that you never sensed the Horcrux in my scar?"

"Ah. Good question," Keldorn answered. "Well, I can't say for certain, but… well, here's a thought. Paladins, properly speaking, do not detect evil per se, rather we are able to detect evil intent."

"What's the difference?"

"How do I explain this… it's not about sensing whether a person or object is evil, but rather detecting if that person is intending to commit some sort of evil action. If I were to come upon a murderer who was at that moment merely thinking about what he was to have for lunch, I might not sense anything out of the ordinary. But at the same time, I might come across a usually good-
natured person, who at that moment might be fantasizing about a dark course of action – like taking revenge on someone, a common enough occurrence – and I would immediately know it. And then there are some creatures and artifacts that are so malicious that they always radiate enough evil for any paladin to sense at any time. That is how I knew that Mr. Malfoy was carrying that cursed necklace last year. The evil intent of that thing nearly screamed its presence for me. But this ability isn't the simplest thing in the world to get a grasp of, or to determine what precisely the sense is warning about.

"As for your scar, well, perhaps the soul fragment was dormant or in some sort of hibernation – not intending any evil. Or maybe since it was merely a fragment of Voldemort's soul, it lacked the ability to truly intend anything at all. Or maybe your own goodwill overcame the evil of the Horcrux. I can't know for sure, Harry."

"Oh."

Harry once again turned back to his reading, but still found concentration difficult. Keldorn interrupted him after a few minutes.

"What has you so anxious, Harry? I can tell that your mind is everywhere but at your work."

"Well… what do you think," the young wizard asked as he turned back to his mentor, "about what Hermione was saying? With the Horcruxes destroyed, do you think Voldemort is really gone?"

"It is hard to say without knowing more. We haven't heard or seen much of him since we were attacked in Diagon Alley over a year ago, have we? He's been very quiet for such a terrible 'Dark Lord.' Perhaps he is gone."

"You really think so?" he asked with a tinge of incredulity.

Keldorn fixed him with a stare.

"What do you think?"

"Well… like I said, him being gone so easily just doesn't feel right to me. I think there's more to this."

Keldorn smiled.

"For my part, I will trust your intuition."

"Really?"

"Yes. You've grown much during the last several months, my squire. You may not realize it, but you've made steady progress. You live in the Light, even if you do not know it. And the Light lives in you. If you are certain that this foe of ours remains dangerous, then I believe you."

Harry didn't know what to say to that. That Sir Keldorn Firecam, a knight and paladin with such vast experience, would simply take Harry at his word on such an important topic was rather humbling.

"In any event, it doesn't really matter," Keldorn continued.

"Sir?"

"Whether or not this particular slave of the Darkness is defeated, there will be others. Our task is to
be ready to stand with the Light against any and all Darkness. Not just Voldemort."

Harry tried to turn back to his book. But his mind was still awhirl with thoughts. After a minute he turned back to his mentor once again.

"But that's just it," he began again without preamble, "Dumbledore and Hermione both seem to think that I should go back to being a normal student now that Voldemort seems to be gone."

"Oh?" Keldorn replied as he arched his eyebrows, "and what do you think about that?"

"Err… I don't know. I'm… conflicted."

"I see."

"It's tempting. Very tempting. To just… have a normal life. To not worry about fighting and the next evil scheme. I could just, go about living life – graduate, get a job, spend time with Hermione and Ron."

"I warned you, Harry."

"What?"

"All those months ago when you came to me, asking to be trained as a paladin. I told you that you could not commit to this as merely a means to combat one man, no matter how evil he might be."

"I know," Harry responded. "It's just… I don't know."

"To be a paladin is a sacred calling, a vocation. If this vocation is truly yours, the Light will lead you there, if you allow it, whether or not you have an immediate foe arranged against you. I will not force you to remain my squire. You are free to leave my service at any time. You know that. However, I will also not keep you on unless you are committed to the task before you."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Harry. I expected something like this eventually. With this new situation, you have found a new perspective from which to discern your vocation. At long last you begin to see – becoming a paladin is not a means to defeat Voldemort. Being a paladin is to be the Light before the Darkness."

Harry nodded in understanding.

"Perhaps," Keldorn continued, "Providence has put you here as a test. This is your moment to choose, Harry, what your path will be. I want you to presume that Voldemort is gone for good."

"But…"

"Listen to me."

"Sorry, sir."

"As I was saying, I want you to presume that Voldemort is gone for good. With that in mind, it is time for you to choose what path you will follow. You have reached the fork in the road. To choose the life of a paladin is to forever forsake the normalcy that you desire. That is not our lot in life. Perhaps a life of family and comfort does await you down the other road. I do not know. But if you truly are called to serve the Light as a paladin, no 'normal' life will ever truly satisfy you. The Light creates each and every one of us for a purpose, Harry. Discerning that purpose is the most
important task we ever undertake.

"Close your books," he continued, "the Summa will keep for a while without you bent over it. I want you to go and pray. Find a place of peace and speak to the Light. Ask for guidance. Discern what your path is to be. Return to me once you have decided."

"Now?"

"Now, Harry. There's no time like the present. Go. And may the Light go with you."

Harry left Keldorn's office and began walking without any real sense of direction. At first, he thought about going out onto the grounds and perhaps finding a spot by the lake where he could pray and think. But after almost making it through the great doors of the Entrance Hall, he stopped and turned around. The grounds would only be distracting. The early September weather was still too nice and there would doubtlessly be other students milling around near the lake. Harry wanted to be alone. He knew that he needed solitude for this. Whatever 'this' was.

He slowly climbed the staircases and eventually found himself in the seventh floor corridor near the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.

Harry smiled.

He didn't exactly know what he needed right now, but perhaps he didn't need to know it in order to get it. Maybe the castle could show him.

So, he paced back and forth across the entrance to the Room of Requirement while thinking, I need the right place to pray and discern my future…

With a sound of grinding stone, the doorway appeared.

Harry pushed on the door, which opened into a pitch black interior. He took a deep breath before he stepped in and shut the door behind him. The boom from closing the heavy portal echoed throughout the room, giving Harry the impression that the space he was in was truly vast, like a vast, gothic cathedral. But he couldn't exactly see how big it was. The room was utterly dark. Nothing whatsoever pierced the darkness that surrounded him.

And then a light flickered to life.

A single bright point. Somewhere far off in the distance ahead of him. Harry walked toward it.

Soon, he saw the light to be a single, calm flame burning atop a tall candle. As far as Harry could tell, the candle was the only object in the room beside himself. It was maybe three or four inches in diameter, and made from a soft, golden wax. The candle was set in a large, brass stand that was perhaps four feet high. The candle was tall. Taller than Harry – the top perhaps seven or eight feet above the floor. The flame burned steadily atop the golden pillar. There was no wind to disturb it. It merely kept burning brightly.

Harry approached and examined the candle. At first he thought that its surface was smooth and flawless all the way around, but then he noticed something carved into its side. There, in neatly cut letters, were the words: LUX INVICTA.
Harry knelt down and prayed.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Several hours later, Harry had given up on kneeling. The stone floor was hard and painful beneath his knees, so eventually he had slumped down and sat. He leaned back, supporting his upper body with his hands on the ground behind him.

He stared at the candle. He took in the calmly burning flame at the top. It's light bright in the darkness.

*LUX INVICTA*, read the words on its side. 'Light invincible,' or perhaps, 'light unconquerable.'

It was fitting, Harry thought. No matter how dense the darkness was around it, that little flame would just keep on burning, shedding its light for all to see. The darkness, though vast, had no power to overcome its light. That little flame truly was *lux invicta* - light invincible.

"Light, guide me," Harry spoke aloud into the darkness and into the light of the solitary candle. "Where am I supposed to go? What am I supposed to do? It's so tempting to turn away from what I'm about with Firecam. It would be so nice to just be normal for once. To go about the year with my biggest worry being about N.E.W.T.s. I could play Quidditch again. Maybe even get picked up by one of the professional teams. That would make for a good life. Just me and the sky and the Snitch. Nothing else to worry about.

"I could spend more time with Hermione. I wouldn't have to be content with glimpses of her in the hallways, or quick conversations at meals or while waiting for class to start. We could just be lazy together down by the lake – or I guess, it's more likely that I could be lazy with her in the library while she read up on something or other…" Harry chuckled.

"I wouldn't need to worry about what Firecam said about paladins and celibacy anymore. Does Hermione really know what she's getting into if she sticks with me and I stick with becoming a paladin? Will she stay if I'm not around all the time? Or will she realize that she can do better, that she deserves better than that? Better than me?"

Unbidden, the memory of the cold but burning and piercing *presence of Carsomyr* crashing into his own mind came back to him as he talked to the candle.

*UNWORTHY*

Harry shivered.

"I'm not worthy of being a paladin, am I? I don't get it."

But then Harry's thoughts turned. He started thinking about his past, about the life that had brought him to this point. Rescuing Daphne from the spiders in the Forbidden Forest. The desperate fight at the Department of Mysteries. Holding his ground before the Hungarian Horntail as it breathed out its fury. Standing before the horde of Dementors and throwing them back with the light of his Patronus. Drawing the Sword of Gryffindor and turning to face the Basilisk. Leaping through a curtain of flame and into the unknown, his only thought of protecting the Stone.

Jumping onto the back of a towering troll so that a lonely girl that he hardly knew and barely liked might have a chance to escape.
Harry never consciously chose to do any of those things. He didn't go looking for trouble. He was always just kind of there. He found himself in whatever situation, and he simply did what needed to be done. It was just who he was. Acting in those moments as he did just felt right, even looking back on them with the advantage of hindsight. If he had to do it again, and someone asked him to choose between jumping on that troll and going back to the safety of the common room, Harry would think they were crazy. There was no choice. He belonged on the back of that troll. It was what he was made for.

"So that's it, huh?" Harry asked the candle with a wry smile on his face. "No big light shows or voices from the sky? Just me on the back of the troll…"

"Well," he said with conviction, "I guess I better try to find the door and get out of here."

As he leaned forward to stand up, his hand brushed against something laying on the ground. Harry reached for it, and found a short candle, perhaps a foot or so long. The wax was of the same golden color as the tall candle. On its side, Harry could see the same words engraved there – LUX INVICTA. The wick sticking out of one end was white – new, never used – but ready to take on its purpose.

Harry stood and approached the great wax pillar. He reached up and lit his small candle from the calm flame above. The flame divided, but its light did not dim - it became brighter as Harry now held his own flame. Two bright points shining in the dark. With that light to guide him, he made his way through the darkness, and back out into the rest of the school.

He had to speak with Keldorn. And he likely had several articles in the Summa to read before he could even think about starting on the stables…

OoOoO

OoOoO

Later that evening, Harry was smiling as he entered the Gryffindor common room. He spied Hermione on one of the couches and made his way over to her.

"You look happy," she said by way of greeting.

"I am," Harry replied as he plopped down next to her.

"Might I ask why you're in such a good mood?" Hermione continued her line of questioning as she cuddled up against him. "I thought you might still be all sulky after our conversation earlier today."

"No, I'm no longer 'sulky'" he responded as he stretched his arm around her. "I'm good."

"Did you realize I'm right and that Voldemort is out of the picture?"

"No, I'm afraid I still disagree with you there."

"Then what has you so happy? I expected you to either still be in a slump, or at best all worn out from Sir Firecam working you too hard."

Harry laughed. "What? Don't you like it when I'm happy?"

"No!" Hermione was quick to defend herself. "That's not what I'm saying at all. Honestly! I just wasn't expecting it today. You have me confused, and I need to know why!"
"Ah, that sounds like the Hermione I know," he said before giving her a quick kiss on the forehead. "I guess I just figured some things out today. You know... who I am, what I'm supposed to do with my life."

"And?"

"I'm a Light standing against the Darkness."

"So you're sticking with becoming a paladin then?" she asked with a slight frown. "Even though Voldemort is gone?"

"Voldemort is not gone, Hermione. I don't know what happened, or what's going on, but I'm sure that he's not gone just yet. And yes, I'm going to continue as Sir Firecam's squire and, Light permitting, one day I'll be a paladin."

"You still want that?" she asked.

Harry frowned in thought.

"It's not... it's not about that," he began. "It's not about what I want. I don't want to be a paladin. But this is something more. It's hard to explain. It's a calling. It's something that goes beyond what I want. I could turn it down, I could say 'no,' but that would be like turning away from who I am, from who I was made to be. Does that make any sense?"

"Yeah, Harry," she said with a smile, "it does."

Harry smiled back at her.

"Oh well." Hermione sighed before snuggling into Harry a bit more. "I didn't really think that you'd give it up anyways. It was worth a shot though. Would have been nice to be normal for once."

"But we weren't made for 'normal,' Hermione. We were made for more than that."
"Who keeps stealing my damned sandwiches?!"

Mervyn Brimble glared with his best icy stare of death at the rest of the department as he held up his empty lunch sack.

Everyone else just kept on ignoring him as usual.

No one ever listened to him.

"Well?!"] Mervyn shouted.

"Hey Eunice!" someone shouted from the other side of the large room, "Merv's shoutin' about someone stealin' his sammich again. Must be lunch time. Wanna head out for a bite?"

"Good idea, mate."

Mervyn twitched.

He then focused his glare on the nearest person he could find. Thankfully, it was an intern.

"You!" Mervyn shouted while pointing at the nervous young witch. "You stole my sandwich, didn't you?"

"I… I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Brimble," she replied.

"Don't play coy with me, whatever your name is. You want to be an Auror? You better fess up!"

"I brought my own lunch," the witch tried to defend herself. She even had the gall to wave her lunch pail back and forth in demonstration. "Chicken salad. With marshmallows."

"Who in the world puts marshmallows in chicken salad?!" Mervyn stepped forward and leaned into her personal space. "What are you? Some kinda spy?"

"Quit it, Merv," Gawain Robards said as he came around the corner. "She didn't steal your sandwich. And you should know by now that if you want to keep your food for yourself, you need to put your name on it."

Mervyn grumbled and shot the young intern one last dirty look before stalking off to his desk.

"Lousy Auror Department… full of thieves… the lot of 'em!"

All he wanted was to have one day, one stinking day, where he was able to enjoy the sandwich he made that morning in peace. How was it that every single day, someone, without fail, stole his sandwich? It was like the break room was cursed or something.

Mervyn's head snapped up at that thought.

"Actually," he mused aloud, "that makes a lot of sense."

Everything started last month when Pinfield was fired. No one knew exactly what happened, but the rumors about him and Crutchley's wife still hadn't gone away. There must be something to that. Why, that bastard probably put a curse on the break room as he was leaving! And now Mervyn's
sandwiches were disappearing, all because Pinfield couldn't keep quiet about his extracurriculars. That bloody bastard! And Mervyn had actually liked Pinfield too!

Mervyn rummaged through the mess on his desk, looking for a clean piece of parchment. He knocked over a six foot tall pile of incident reports before he found one.

Eh… Mervyn thought to himself, no one reads 'em anyways.

Pausing to think for a moment, he began composting a memo to the head of the department.

An anonymous source has recently given me cause to believe that former Auror Winifred Pinfield has begun practicing the Dark Arts. Evidence suggests experimentation with Muggle artifacts in order to try and drain and bottle their inherent elektrickity and weaponize it. Preliminary investigations report that when launched from a catapult large enough, a jar of concentrated elektrickity can cause the same amount of damage as a standard Blasting Hex. My source suggests that Pinfield plans to sell his experiments back to the Muggles, who, as you know, could never be trusted with such destructive power. Furthermore, it is my belief that this endeavor constitutes a direct threat to the International Statue of Wizarding Secrecy. I therefore request authorization to place Pinfield under arrest and submit him for questioning under Veritaserum.

Mervyn signed his memo with a flourish, threw down his quill, and with a wave of his wand, the parchment folded itself into a paper airplane and flew off to the other end of the department.

"That'll teach bloody Pinfield to steal my bloody sandwiches…"

Mervyn turned back to his desk to find something else to do when he saw something rather odd.

His quill was floating.

"That's strange…"

He aimed his wand at the floating implement and quickly incanted, "Finite!"

Nothing happened.

The quill just kept on floating there without a care in the world.

Mervyn tried again to the same effect.

"Hey Dermot," he called to the Auror at the next desk over.

"No, Merv," the other wizard responded, "I didn't take your sandwich."

"No, not that," said Mervyn, "look at this will you? My quill is floating."

"So?"

"What do you mean, 'so'?"

"Just cast the Counter Spell already."

"I already did! It didn't work!"

Dermot came over to get a better look at the quill in question. After glancing at it he took out his wand and shouted, "Finite!"
Nothing happened.

"Huh."

Mervyn turned his head to the right when he heard a shout of surprise.

"What the…"

"My chair! It just floated out from under me!"

"Alright, who's pranking the office this time?"

Within the next few moments, various objects from around the department began floating around the room. The Counter Spell didn't seem to work on any of them. Soon, everything not bolted down was airborne.

"Somebody better call maintenance."

Then the ground shook.

One quick jolt that silenced all the commotion in the department.

"Was that an earthquake?" someone asked.

Mervyn noticed that all of the hairs on his arm were now standing on end.

The ground shook again, violently, and this time the quake lasted longer, it was almost a minute before things settled down again.

Then the lights began to flicker on and off.

"What in the world is going on?"

Robards chose that moment to burst out of his office.

"Everybody move!" he shouted. "Breach in the Department of Mysteries! All wands at the ready! This is not a drill!"

Mervyn scrambled. His wand was in his hand as soon as he started moving.

"Unknown assailants in the Dee Oh Em," Robards continued, "we are to engage on sight. This is the real deal, boys and girls!"

Mervyn ran for the door and down the hallway, following the Aurors in front of him. The ground continued to shake and the lighting flicked on and off. It took several minutes to navigate the twisting corridors of the Ministry and find the quickest path to the Department of Mysteries. Even then, the Aurors were bogged down at the elevators that were the only way to gain access to the ninth level.

"It's cold," someone said as they stepped off the elevator.

"Do you think Dementors got loose down here somehow?"

Mervyn shivered.

"Keep moving."
Finally, they entered the Department of Mysteries and the Aurors ran head-long into whatever was waiting for them. Mervyn thought that he could hear something around the next corner, he slowed down, trying to position himself in case he needed to get off a quick spell.

Most of the other Aurors ran ahead of him. Mervyn tried to get them to stop, to slow down and think, but they didn't heed his frantic gestures.

No one ever listened to him.

And then the ground lurched and threw him to the side. A wave of force lifted him off his feet and tumbled him like a ragdoll, throwing him several yards back the way he came. His head struck hard against a stone wall, and Mervyn fell to the floor in a daze.

He groaned and managed to sit up and blink back the stars before his eyes.

That's when he first heard the screams.

Screams of terror. Screams of pain.

Screams of the dying.

Mervyn checked that he still had his wand before easing himself to his feet. Whatever was around that corner would not be pleasant.

Then he heard the laughter.

"This is not good," Mervyn said to himself. He looked to his left and saw Dermot crouched there – the only other Auror that hadn't run around the bend without a thought. They nodded to each other before cautiously making their way forward.

The screams ceased, but the laughter continued as a figure floated around the corner.

"Oh Merlin!" Dermot moaned, "it's the Dark Lord!"

At first, Mervyn thought Dermot was right – the thing before him certainly looked like He Who Must Not Be Named. But a second glance had Mervyn questioning that conclusion. It looked like a wizard – it was certainly shaped like a man and it was wearing tattered black robes and a large gold medallion. But that's where its likeness to human beings stopped. It floated two feet off the ground without the use of a broom. The thing was more of a skeleton than a man, with dry, leathery flesh hanging off its bones in places. Its eye sockets were empty, and yet filled with a vile red light. Its lips had been ripped away, to reveal a set of stained and rotting teeth. The horrid face was set in a grimace of pain, but yet was the source of the maniacal laughter.

Mervyn felt the cold grip of fear clench his heart.

Whether or not it was You Know Who, Mervyn knew they were in trouble.

The thing waved its wandless, boney hand and hurled a jet-black spell at Dermot.

"Protego Maxima!" the Auror shouted, conjuring a sturdy shield in front of him. But the black bolt of magic shattered the shield, and the one following behind sent Dermot to the ground, screaming as flesh dissolved from his bones.

Mervyn, throwing caution to the wind, leveled his wand and shouted the most fearsome words he knew, consequences be damned.
"Avada Kedavra!"

The sickly green spell flew to its target and impacted it in the center of its chest.

The thing never stopped moving forward.

But its laughter ceased.

"Interesting choice for an Auror," it spoke in a voice that sent shivers down Mervyn's spine. "I confess a certain fondness for that spell myself. But you must remember: you cannot kill that which is already dead!"

Suddenly, Mervyn found himself yanked through the air before coming to a stop directly before the thing. Skeletal hands grabbed both sides of his head, and dug their claws into his skin. Blood trickled down his face. Mervyn struggled, but could not fight against the overwhelming strength that gripped him.

The leathery, emaciated face stooped down to his own. Mervyn could see patches where the dried skin had flaked away, revealing the bone beneath. The stench of death and decay invaded his nostrils. The blood-red pinpoints that served the thing for eyes pierced Mervyn's mind.

"Your life is mine," it rasped before throwing back its head.

Mervyn screamed.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry dodged left and swung his sword high with his right hand. As expected, Neville parried the blow, but was almost taken down by the Stunner that Harry fired off from the wand in his left hand.

Neville jumped back out of the way of the charm and returned fire.

"Incarcerous!"

Harry was easily able to avoid the spell while pressing his attack.

Neville had returned to Hogwarts with his swordsmanship showing great improvement. Whatever tutor he studied with over the summer certainly managed to teach the young wizard a thing or two.

Or fifty.

On the last day of October, after two months of sparring, Neville still had plenty of surprises during their duels.

His opponent parried Harry's next attack and then lunged. Harry smiled, Neville was way out of range – he ignored the attack and brought his wand around for a more complicated spell, taking advantage of the time that Neville's silly move afforded him.

Harry's smile quickly faded, however, as Neville's lunge ended with a twirl of his wand and a shouted, "Extendo!" The sword grew longer and closed the distance between them before it stopped with a soft tap against Harry's chest.

"Touch!" Keldorn shouted, bringing the duel to a halt.

"Nice surprise, Nev," Harry said.

"Clever use of Transfiguration," Hermione said from off to the side where she was observing.

"Thanks."

"I agree," Keldorn said. "However, I wouldn't use it as anything but a last resort if I were you. If you had missed your attack, what would you have done then?"

"You're right. I would have been stuck with an extended, unbalanced sword, with no time to shrink it," Neville responded as he waved the nearly seven foot long weapon. "I would've had to drop it, and then rely on my wand alone."

"I thought as much," the Knight replied. "A sneaky attack that leaves you disarmed might be fun during a friendly duel, but in a real fight, such things are best left forgotten."

"Of course, sir," Neville responded with a smile, "but I had to take the chance to get one in on Harry here."

"Hmmm..." was Keldorn's only reply.
"Try that one again, Nev," Harry said as he moved into his *en garde* position, "see what happens now."

Neville laughed.

"No thanks, that was a one-use trick."

"Arghh!" Keldorn suddenly cried, falling to one knee as his hands flew to his temples.

"Sir?" Harry asked in concern as he stepped toward his mentor. But the knight waved him off and, after a moment, got back to his feet. "Hermione," Harry started again, "can you tell if—"

"Harry," the girl in question interrupted, "look at that."

Harry glanced at his girlfriend and saw her pointing to the south. He turned to look in that direction and saw something rather startling. It seemed as though there was a fierce lightning storm in the distance, stretching from one end of the horizon to the other, violently ripping through the countryside.

And it was headed their way.

"We need to get back to the castle," Harry commented.

They turned to head back inside, but the storm was moving even faster than they thought, and it was suddenly upon them.

The wind battered them and pushed them across the soft grass of the grounds, even as they tried to dig in their heels. Lightning flashed to the ground all about them in great, celestial columns of white fire. Harry could feel his voice shouting something into the noise, but he couldn't even hear himself above the deafening roll of thunder.

And then, as suddenly as the storm had come, it was gone.

He turned to see it fading to the north before it was completely out of sight.

The aftermath of the sudden storm felt strange. Like the air was charged with something extra, something that wasn't there before.

But the only real noticeable difference was the fact that every hair on Harry's body felt like it was standing on end.

"We must speak to the Headmaster," Keldorn remarked in a commanding tone. "Now."

Hermione looked frightened as she nodded her head.

"We've still plenty of time before dinner. He should be in his office…" Hermione's voice trailed off as she glanced at her watch. "That's odd. My watch stopped."

"I thought watches never worked at Hogwarts," Harry commented as he quickly stripped off his sparring equipment.

"Electronic watches don't," Hermione answered, "but mine's a mechanical wind-up." She brandished her wand at her wrist watch. "*Reparo!*"

Nothing happened.
"Come on," Harry said as he grabbed hold of Hermione's elbow.

"I'll just… put this stuff away, then," Neville said to no one in particular as he looked around at the gear that had been strewn about by the storm. But Keldorn was already striding toward the castle with Harry and Hermione close behind.

"Any idea what that was?" Harry asked.

It was Keldorn that answered.

"Whatever it was, it was not good."

As they approached the Headmaster's office, the gargoyle sprung to the side and out of the paladin's way without waiting for a password. Keldorn quickly ascended the stairs and burst into Dumbledore's office without preamble. Harry and Hermione were right on his heels.

"Headmaster," Keldorn began, "you must have felt that."

Dumbledore was standing near one of his book cases – he seemed to be referencing some old tome.

"Indeed, I was just wondering what might have caused such a sudden meteorological event, and I thought I might consult Waverly's Weather Wonders about the matter," Dumbledore answered with a smile while waving the book in his hands. "But I take it you might offer a different insight?"

"Whatever that was, it carried with it the most foul and malicious intent that I have ever felt."

The room fell silent for a moment at Keldorn's proclamation. Harry felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

"It was abhorrent," the paladin continued, "the pain of sensing such a thing brought me to my knees. It is almost as if the storm was alive, seeking out the deaths of untold millions. I fear for what this might mean, Headmaster."

Harry turned to look at Hermione and saw that she had gone quite pale. She reached out her hand and entwined her fingers with Harry's. A small gesture of support in the face of what Keldorn was saying.

The Headmaster furrowed his eyebrows in thought as he considered the problem.

"My watch stopped working too," Hermione mentioned.

Dumbledore fixed her with his intense, blue eyes.

"It's a wind-up. Clockwork. It was fine earlier today. I tried a Repairing Charm but… nothing. That storm did something."

"Perhaps I best contact the Ministry, then," Dumbledore said as he replaced his book on the shelf. He walked over to his fireplace, took some floo powder, and threw it into the flames, saying, "Auror Department."

But instead of turning a vibrant green, the flames remained their natural orange and red.

"What… what does that mean?" Hermione questioned in a small, frightened voice.

Dumbledore turned and smiled at the witch.
"It means, Miss Granger, that the Floo Network is not working at the moment. But I'm sure it will be back up soon." After a brief moment of thought he continued, "Perhaps it would be best if I popped over to the Ministry myself to check on things. Merely as a precaution, of course."

"Headmaster," Keldorn said, "might I suggest that my squire and I accompany you?"

"I'm sure everything is fine. There's no need…"

"I insist."

"Well, I guess it is better to be safe than sorry," Dumbledore conceded.

Keldorn reached a hand into one of his magical belt pouches and pulled out a sword sheathed in a black scabbard. He handed it to Harry.

"Arm yourself with this," the knight instructed. "I have a feeling that you may need it."

Harry quickly adjusted his belt so that the sword hung at his left hip. He then drew the blade and inspected it. It was good, sharp steel. Probably just over three feet long from pommel to tip. The guard was a black steel crossbar, and the grip was wrapped in dark leather. A good, no-nonsense weapon, Harry thought. He quickly finished his inspection before returning the blade to its sheath.

"Harry?"

He turned to look at his girlfriend. There was obvious fear in her eyes, but she seemed to steel herself as she was speaking, drawing upon her courage to say her next words.

"I'm coming with you."

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but Dumbledore beat him to it.

"I think not, Miss Granger. Rather, I have need of you here. You must find Professor McGonagall and tell her where we've gone. And tell her to put the castle on alert. Students to their houses, etcetera. It also might behoove us to gather the Order of the Phoenix here as well. Please ask her to do so for me."

Hermione sent a rather fierce glare at the Headmaster. He was unfazed.

"Now, Miss Granger."

Harry could tell that the witch was angry, but instead of arguing, she turned and threw her arms around him.

"Be safe, Harry," she said before giving him a quick kiss, "come back to me safe."

And then she was through the door and running down the stairs.

After she left, Harry turned his attention back to the Headmaster. Dumbledore now looked rather grim.

"I do not know what we will be stumbling into," the old wizard said. "It could very well be just a simple problem with the Floo Network, and everything else is fine…"

"It is not," said Keldorn. "I assure you."

"Well… wand at the ready, Harry."
"To arms," Keldorn spoke softly, causing his armor to appear.

"Fawkes!" Dumbledore shouted. The phoenix burst into the room in a spectacular display of crimson flame. "If you would take us to the Ministry, please? Grab ahold of one of his tail feathers, gentlemen."

Harry swallowed back his fear before he reached out to the mythical bird. A burst of searing fire left the Headmaster's office empty.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry did not need a paladin's ability to sense evil to know that something was wrong as soon as he appeared in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic.

It was quiet. Eerily quiet. The magical lighting was flicking on and off and the air felt heavy, saturated with something thick and unnatural. Cracks spider-webbed across the walls, floor, and ceiling – cracks that definitely had not been there the last time Harry was in the building. Large chunks of masonry had either fallen or were blasted out of the walls – but the rubble did not lay strewn about the floor, it instead hovered in the air, gently bobbing this way and that, like leaves in a pond. Every so often a silver flash of what looked like static electricity would crackle across one of the surfaces.

"Draw your sword, Harry," Keldorn ordered as he drew Carsomyr from its sheath. The sacred blade shed a faint light upon their surroundings as its wielder grimly surveyed the area. Harry drew his own sword with his right hand while holding his wand ready in his left.

"Homenum Revelio," the Headmaster spoke into the silence. He then walked over to the guard's station, Harry and Keldorn following cautiously behind.

Behind the desk, lying on the ground, was a wizard. He was dressed in the robes of the regular watchman, but the man looked to be ancient – many times older than Dumbledore. He was thin, gaunt-looking – his skin creased and wrinkled, and sagging from his bones. Liver spots showed on his hands and face, and only a few, gray wisps of hair remained on his head. His eyes were dull and vacant, and did not seem to register their presence.

Dumbledore moved his wand through intricate motions while mumbling under his breath. He ultimately stopped with a sigh, before summoning some of the nearby floating rubble. A quick swish saw chips of stone Transfigured into a handful of orange patches. He once again waved his wand over them before incanting, "Portus Multiplicus!" Taking one of the patches, he placed it on the ancient wizard and tapped it with his wand. The man disappeared in a fall of color.

"Take a few of these," Dumbledore said, handing some of the patches to Harry. "They are Portkeys targeted for the Hogwarts Infirmary. If you come across anyone injured, like that boy I just sent, please send them to Madame Pomfrey."

"Boy?" Harry asked. "He looked like he was three hundred years old."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly.

"I'm afraid not. I saw his name tag and could hardly believe it. He actually finished Hogwarts at the end of your second year, Harry. What happened to him to age him so... dramatically... I do not know."
"His life was drained," the old knight said with utter seriousness. "I have seen this foul sorcery before. Only a great Darkness can drain someone's life force like that."

Harry swallowed nervously.

"This place does not feel right," Keldorn said as his eyes kept moving around the room.

"No it does not," Dumbledore agreed. "Let's keep moving."

"Shouldn't we call for help?" Harry asked.

"Whom should we call?" Dumbledore replied. "This is the Ministry, Harry. Any available Aurors would be here. No, we must take our chances alone."

The three companions slowly worked their way through the ruined Ministry of Magic, each room they came upon much like the atrium. They found a few more witches and wizards, who, like the guard, appeared to be hundreds of years old and barely clinging to life. Harry sent them off to the hospital wing.

As they were searching one of the larger courtrooms, they heard a soft shuffling sound that drew them to a halt. It sounded like the rustling of fabric and sticks being dragged across stone.

Then they heard the moans.

"What is that?"

"We shall find out soon enough," Keldorn answered, "it's coming this way. Be on your guard."

Eventually several figures appeared in the doorway, they paused their shaky, halting motion to seemingly take in the three figures that they had literally stumbled upon. They looked like witches and wizards, but their eyes were empty and lifeless. Several of them had gaping wounds on their necks, torsos, or heads. Some were missing limbs. None seemed to even notice their injuries. And the stink! They smelled like a month's worth of rancid, rotting meat. Harry had to fight back the urge to empty his stomach. One of them then let out a deafening shriek and together, they moved forward.

"Inferi," Dumbledore said calmly. "Use fire, Harry."

The Headmaster began chanting a spell, but Keldorn merely closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the closest dozen or so Inferi burst into crimson, sweet-smelling flame, while the next several ranks turned and began fleeing from them. They didn't get very far, however, as the Inferi behind kept advancing.

"Incendio!" Harry shouted, pointing his wand at the nearest monstrosity, setting it alight.

Dumbledore finished his chant and the tip of his wand exploded in a great, swirling whip of fire. He wasted no time slashing it through the Inferi with devastating effect.

Keldorn stood calmly, his shield before him, and his bright sword at the ready. The horde of undead kept coming, and whenever one managed to slip past Dumbledore's impressive magic or Harry's quickly cast spells, Keldorn dispatched it with his shining blade.

They fought for several minutes, bodies of destroyed Inferi piling up in the room, and the smell of burnt flesh heavy in the air.
"Meat!" came a cruel shout from the door behind them.

Harry turned to see several new creatures enter the room. At first they looked like the other Inferi, with their discolored flesh and stench of decay. But they were crouched low, and moving quickly. Long, lolling tongues wagged from mouths filled with sharp teeth. Their eyes were alight with fiendish intelligence.

"Meeeeeaat!" they screeched again, before leaping at the three defenders.

Keldorn once again closed his eyes, and the first several attackers from the new group were instantly reduced to ashes in crimson fire.

Dumbledore tried to counter both groups at once with his Flame Whip, but more and more of the monstrosities began slipping through. Keldorn was constantly at work, cleaving Carsomyr through rotten flesh. The horrid creatures seemed to try and shy away from the paladin and his sacred blade, but something drove them on nonetheless, and they overcame their hesitancy. Harry continued his casting, mixing his Incendios with a few Blasting Hexes for good measure, but all too soon, the enemy had closed in around him, and he was glad to have sharp steel in his hands as he laid about himself with his sword.

"Harry!" Dumbledore shouted above the din of the melee and the rush of the still-coming, undead horde. "Use one of the Portkeys! Flee this place!"

"But…"

"Now!" Keldorn shouted. "We'll be right behind you!"

Harry dodged under a swinging fist and rammed his sword through the guts of one of the ghouls, before fumbling for a patch, slapping it on his wrist, and tapping it with his wand.

Nothing happened.

"It's not working!" Harry shouted before decapitating another ghoul with a quick stroke.

"Someone has warded us in!" Dumbledore cried.

"We need to make a run for it!" Keldorn yelled. "We cannot hold this position much longer!"

"Cover me for a moment!" Dumbledore shouted.

Harry and Keldorn moved to stand beside the old wizard, their blades a constant blur of motion.

Dumbledore dismissed his Flame Whip and began gathering energy to himself, his wand making small, precise motions, and his voice singing in some long forgotten tongue.

Without Dumbledore's fire holding back the tide, the defenders were soon swarmed with undead – teeth snapping and claws raking at their armor.

"Light defend us!" Keldorn cried as he continued to hew and slash at the creatures all around him. Carsomyr shone brilliantly, it's light now like the sun. Each slash of the dazzling blade left a swath of fire in its wake that burned through the undead around it.

"Gah!" Harry cried out as he felt teeth sink into his calf. He looked down to see that one of the Inferi had crawled past his guard. He brought his sword down swiftly and smashed through the creature's skull.
Dumbledore suddenly stopped chanting. His wand, the tip trailing liquid fire, traced a rune that hung suspended in the air. But not just any rune. Rather, one full of jagged edges and malevolence.

"Az-reth!" the voice of the Headmaster boomed, the word filled with ancient, fell power.

The air cracked, and the stench of sulfur filled the room. Dark, writhing Flame burst into being. Harry could tell that the Flame hungered to turn on them, to devour them, to consume the entire building – even the entire world.

Dumbledore's face was twisted in sheer concentration as he vied to dominate the will of the malicious Flame.

The Headmaster triumphed.

The dark Flame exploded outward, instantly consuming all that it touched. Dumbledore's mastery of the living Fyre caused it to arch around Harry, Keldorn, and himself, even as it feasted upon the horde of the undead surrounding them. Once the room was clear, Dumbledore hurled the Flame through the entrance they had come through earlier.

"Run!" he shouted. "Follow the Fiendfyre! It will clear a path before us!"

Neither Harry nor Keldorn needed telling twice.

The three companions raced through the halls of the Ministry behind the dark Flame. The Fiendfyre did its work, clearing the way of enemies before them, and leaving the walls and ceiling smoldering in its wake.

Within minutes they burst back into the atrium, but there they stopped.

The Fiendfyre rushed headlong into a looming wall of dark water. The water surged and roared with the sound of a thousand crashing waves. Great arms formed out of its depths to pound at the Flame before it. Dumbledore grunted with effort as he fought to maintain control of the Fiendfyre as it fought against the Water Demon.

Soon the air was filled with steam as the two Elementals obliterated each other. The sound of Dumbledore's heavy breathing filled the room as he fought his exhaustion.

"Fiendfyre," a raspy, malevolent voice spoke through the mist. "I didn't think you had it in you, Dumbledore."

With the Flame gone, Harry felt the cold. An unnatural chill that reached into his very bones. The steam in the air quickly condensed and fell as a thin layer of frost on the ground.

At the other side of the atrium stood another horde of undead, Inferi and ghouls alike, but they were held back by the figure that stood in front of them. Bald, with pale leathery skin that was creased and even absent in places. It looked more like a skeleton than a man. It wore tattered, black robes and a large gold medallion around its neck. Its eye sockets were dark, gaping holes, but yet held pinpoints of bright red malignant light.

Voldemort looked like a corpse. He had become some sort of hideous undead.

"Tom," Dumbledore spoke calmly, "what have you done?"

"I have won, Dumbledore!" the thing that used to be Voldemort spat across the space between them. "I have triumphed!"
"Not while I still stand, Tom," Dumbledore replied.

Voldemort simply laughed.

"You've already lost and don't even know it! Your pathetic Ministry is dead! Fallen to my power within moments of my return to this world. Your beloved _Muggles_ are next! No longer will they threaten _my_ domain with their hideous _inventions._"

"I will not allow you—" Dumbledore began.

"You're too late!" Voldemort interrupted. "It's already done! The die was cast before you even stumbled upon my victory! As I tore my way back into this world I unleashed a _storm of magic_ well beyond your feeble comprehension!"

"The storm," Harry mumbled to himself.

Keldorn looked rather grave.

"I've unleashed so much magical power that it has _saturated_ the entire globe! Can't you feel it?!! The air you breathe is heavy with it. The stones beneath your feet sing with power. The very pillars of the earth are radiant with the magic _I_ have unleashed!"

The bottom fell out of Harry's stomach once again. It was true. Everything Voldemort was saying was true. Harry had felt the _change_ in the air, the change in the _world_ once the storm had passed.

"Even now," Voldemort laughed as he continued, "the Muggles above us _die_ by the _thousands_ as their pitiful _machines_ fail them. Their inventions will no longer work in my world of magic! I have cast the Muggles and their creations back a thousand years! All their might and power built upon guns and bombs and feeble electricity – none of it will aid them now! They will cry for their contraptions to save them, and then they will _die_!

"The only _might_ in this world is now _magic_, and _magic IS MINE_!"

Harry trembled as Voldemort's words set in. The world was over. Voldemort had already won. The maniac had really _destroyed the world._

Dumbledore seemed at a loss for anything to say.

Voldemort laughed at the Headmaster's silence.

"Nothing to say, old man?" the Dark Lord taunted, "no more speeches, or lectures? No more _condescension_ for me? You have _lost_, Dumbledore! You have lost everything! You are nothing before me!"

"Your Darkness will not last forever, fiend," Keldorn replied. "No Darkness can stand forever before the Light."

"The knight speaks!" Voldemort laughed. "Tell, me, _Muggle_, can you do tricks, too?"

"I have faced evil such as yours before," Keldorn said calmly, "and here I still stand."

Voldemort's hideous face twisted in what once would have been a malicious grin.

"You have never faced anything like me!" the Dark Lord answered. "I have met death itself, and come through victorious!"
"I know a Lich when I see one, fiend," Keldorn replied, his words causing Voldemort to go rigid, "I have fought others who have embraced the same promise of cursed immortality, and as I said, here I yet stand."

Harry felt the tone in the room change with the paladin's words. Did Voldemort suddenly become… afraid?

"Seize them!" the Lich cried and his horde of undead surged forward. "But do not kill them! Their souls belong to me!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Dumbledore unleash a torrent of power against Voldemort, power that was met with equal force by the Lich.

But Harry's attention was needed elsewhere as Inferi and ghouls leapt at him, clawing and biting for his flesh. Harry screamed as he laid into them with both sword and spell. Blasting and burning them with his wand, while he hewed and cleaved them with his blade.

Keldorn closed his eyes again, and a score of the fiends burst into flame while scores more desperately tried to flee from him, only to be turned back by the iron will of their dark master. Keldorn hefted his shield and soon the fury of Carsomyr was carving a burning swath through the room.

"Why fight, Dumbledore?" Voldemort cried above the chaos. "Why not just lay down and die? I will make your death quick."

Harry chanced a look at the Headmaster, who was fighting with everything he had. Dumbledore didn't respond to Voldemort's taunts, but Harry could see the glistening of tears on the old man's face.

Harry tried to fight his way over to Voldemort, but there were too many undead around him to get close.

Dumbledore twirled his wand, and the stones at Voldemort's feet transformed and rose up as giant, grasping tentacles. The Dark Lord screamed, and the stone constructs were blasted apart, and Dumbledore was thrown backwards.

The Headmaster managed to keep his feet, and soon was once again unleashing a barrage of bright, multicolored lights against his foe. The Lich stalked forward, shielding some of the Headmaster's spells, but ignoring others – simply allowing them to strike him with little noticeable effect.

Voldemort threw his hands forward, and a great ball of dark flame shot at the Headmaster. Dumbledore dove out of the way, and landed awkwardly on his side.

Harry thrust through the skull of one Inferius, while he blasted apart the knee of another, dropping it to the ground.

Keldorn whirled about the room, a blur of light and fire and shining metal, none of the undead able to stand before him.

Their enemies were thinning, numbers cut down by their combined prowess. Soon it would just be the three companions and Voldemort.

But the icy grip of fear seized Harry's heart as he heard an incomprehensible sound.

Dumbledore's cry of pain.
Harry turned to see a black spell rip through the old man's thigh, causing him to crumble to the ground.

"No!" Harry shouted as he ran toward the Lich, heedless of the few remaining claws grasping for him along the way.

Voldemort turned to meet his charge.

"Reducto! Confringo! Stupefy!" Harry cried as he ran. The young wizard threw every spell he could think of at the monster before him.

Voldemort countered them all.

But soon, Harry had closed the distance, and he swung his blade with all his might. The sword struck the fiend in the side.

And shattered into a thousand glittering pieces.

Voldemort pulled back his arm and delivered a backhanded blow that sent Harry flying across the room. He landed in a heap, and had no time to recover as the Dark Lord snarled out a cruel spell.

"Cruciio!"

Harry screamed in agony for a small eternity before the spell was lifted. He tried to move, but his limbs wouldn't obey.

Voldemort summed Harry's fallen wand, and with a sneer, snapped the length of holly in two before throwing the pieces back into Harry's face. He then turned back to the Headmaster who was trying to rise, but seemed to be unable to move his legs. With another sneer, the Lich pointed a boney finger and once more unleashed the Cruciatus Curse.

Dumbledore screamed.

"Light save us!" Keldorn's voice rang out. The young wizard managed to turn his head enough to see his mentor dispatch the last of Voldemort's undead minions before charging the Dark Lord.

The Lich unleashed a barrage of spells, all of which rebounded harmlessly off of Keldorn's gleaming shield.

Soon the knight was within striking distance, and Carsomyr cut a burning swath through the air once more. However, the Dark Lord proved himself to be agile in his undeath, and skillfully evaded Keldorn's attacks.

When an opening presented itself, Voldemort leapt back out of the paladin's reach for just an instant, but bought himself enough time to sweep his arms in a wide gesture. Great, heavy stones were ripped from the floor and the walls, and hurled themselves toward the knight. Keldorn dodged the first few, but there were too many and one managed to strike his leg with a sickening crunch, throwing him off balance.

Soon several more pounded into the knight, and he fell - broken and bleeding - to the floor.

Carsomyr slipped from his grasp to clatter on the pavement.

Harry struggled, a little bit of movement was returning to his limbs. He couldn't stand, but he managed to pull himself forward, as he drew the dagger at his side.
Voldemort reached up with both his hands, and then swept them down, bringing the ceiling above Keldorn crashing to the floor, pinning the fallen knight to the ground.

The Lich surveyed the carnage around him and laughed. He saw Harry trying to crawl toward him, and another quick dose of the Cruciatus Curse halted his movement.

"Now, Harry," the undead wizard taunted, "be a good boy and watch as I kill your masters."

Voldemort stalked over to Dumbledore at stared at him for a long moment.

"I used to think you so powerful," the Lich spoke softly. "Look at you now. Know, before you die, that soon I will gather my followers and march upon your school. Hogwarts will be mine."

He pointed one boney finger at the Headmaster and snarled the curse.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Green light flashed.

Albus Dumbledore laid still.

"No…" Harry groaned feebly while tears pooled in his eyes. He struggled with all his might, but his body, ravaged by the Cruciatus Curse, refused to obey.

"Patience, Harry. Your turn will come."

Voldemort stalked over to Keldorn. He loomed above the knight who was struggling, pinned as he was beneath heaps of rubble. He knelt down and grasped the paladin at the temples with his sharp, boney fingers, before throwing back his head.

Keldorn cried out in pain.

Before Harry's eyes, he saw his mentor begin to age rapidly as Voldemort somehow sucked the life out of him. The paladin's hair grayed and felt out. His skin wrinkled and sagged. His face became drawn and hollow as the strength and vigor was stolen from his body.

At last Voldemort released him.

Keldorn groaned feebly.

Harry raged in his impotence.

"I think, knight," the Lich sneered, "that you shall die upon your own sword. A fitting end for one such as you."

The Dark Lord stepped aside and stood over Carsomyr. He bent down and grasped the hilt.

And a deafening boom shook the chamber as a bright flash hurled Voldemort away from the sacred blade to crash against the far wall.

Voldemort cried in pain and anguish as his dry bones snapped, and the little flesh he had remaining burned away from his hands.

He glared in hatred and pain at Harry from where he was crumpled in a smoking, broken heap on the ground before he disappeared in a fall of color and a deafening crack.
And Harry was alone in the darkness of the broken and ruined Ministry.

Chapter End Notes

I borrowed the Fiendfyre rune and incantation from joe6991's magnificent work Harry Potter and the Wastelands of Time. Go read it. You won't be disappointed.
Harry groaned in pain and fought back tears as he tried to move, as he tried to do anything at all.

After several long minutes, Harry’s range of motion returned. Even the smallest movement was sheer agony, but he rose to his feet and shambled over to Keldorn.

The paladin looked old. Ancient.

But he was still breathing.

His legs were buried under the rubble of the collapsed ceiling. Without his wand, Harry was helpless to free him. He looked over to the Headmaster… and was assaulted with a wave of despair. Harry sobbed as he slowly stumbled over to the fallen wizard.

"Professor…" Harry cried softly, "Professor, please… I need your help…"

But Dumbledore remained still.

Harry bent down and shook his shoulder, as if to rouse him from sleep.

But no amount of shaking would bring back Albus Dumbledore.

The temptation to simply lay down and cry was overwhelming. It would be so easy to simply give up. Dumbledore was dead. Keldorn was likely dying. Why not just lie down and wait for death?

But Harry shook off his despairing thoughts and stifled his tears. There would be time for mourning later.

He sheathed his dagger and bent to grasp the Headmaster under the arms. He tried to lift him, but he didn't have the strength. The repeated Cruciatus Curses had left Harry weak.

He glanced over at the broken pieces of his wand and fought the urge to cry again.

Without a wand, he wasn't much of a wizard.

But then he looked down. There, only a few inches from the Headmaster's lifeless hand was a wand.

Dumbledore's wand.

Harry bent and picked it up. It was long, probably a foot and a half in length, and had what looked to be clusters of berries carved into it. It felt old. And powerful.

Harry tested it with a flick, and a shower of red sparks resulted. He grimaced however, as the mere use of such a small amount of magic was physically painful to the injured and exhausted wizard. If he tried too much, he knew that he would likely pass out.

He looked back at Keldorn. The old knight was half buried in rubble.

Harry steeled himself against the inevitable pain and began to slowly clear the fallen debris with the Headmaster's wand. It was slow, tiring work in his current state, but he managed.

"Locomotor," Harry whispered, the wand pointed at the Headmaster. He then moved
Dumbledore's body over to lay next to the injured knight. 

By that point, Harry was at a loss for what to do. He didn't know any healing spells, and he was far too weak to attempt Apparition. The Floo was out. There was no one to help. Everyone in the Ministry was dead. **Dumbledore was dead.** The despair began to creep back in.

Harry ruthlessly stamped it out.

His eyes went to **Carsomyr**, laying discarded on the floor. The Dark Lord, in his arrogance and ignorance tried to pick up the sacred blade – Harry managed a small smile thinking about how much that must have hurt the bastard. He reached out a hand to pick up the sword, but stopped himself.

He recalled his last encounter with it and the memory made him hesitate. He couldn't bear to face that fierce intelligence again, to be judged unworthy once more. Not now. Not with the whole world crumbling around him.

Harry remembered the Mokeskin pouch at his side. He opened it, and with a whispered "**Wingardium Leviosa,**" levitated the blade into the pouch.

**What now?** Harry thought furiously. And then an idea struck him. *The patches!*

Harry pulled out one of the Portkey patches and carefully adhered it to Keldorn. But the tap of his wand failed to activate it. They were still being blocked.

Again, he was at a loss for what to do. He had to get back to Hogwarts, but he had no way to get there. Who knew what chaos was erupting above in the streets of London?

Harry's eyes went to the broken pieces of his own wand. He summoned them before he dropped down to sit on the ground.

The broken bits of holly felt very fragile in his hands. Was he even a wizard anymore if he didn't have a wand?

His eyes lingered on the red length of Phoenix feather that trailed between the two pieces of wood.

And then hope, desperate hope, like a small flame in the darkness, burst into light in Harry's chest.

"**Fawkes!**" Harry cried. "Fawkes! Please! You have to hear me! You have to help me!"

His words echoed in the emptiness of the Ministry Atrium.

And then fire roared into life as the Phoenix flared into being.

The mystic bird cried out in anguish as it laid eyes on Dumbledore, but then sang in lament and compassion as it recognized Harry and Keldorn. Harry felt both hope and sadness flood into him at the same time. The firebird sang a poignant, heartrending melody, and Harry found that he understood.

A great Light had left the world with the death of Dumbledore. But hope was not yet lost. Light still shone in the Darkness.

The song ceased, and the Phoenix fluttered over to hover above Keldorn's face. A single teardrop fell and landed within the paladin's open lips.

Harry saw no immediate change – the dramatic aging effect was not reversed. But he knew that the
tears of a Phoenix would provide more help than he possibly could.

The firebird clutched Keldorn's thumb in one talon, and wobbled over to grab onto Dumbledore as well. It then turned to look over its shoulder at Harry and gave out a soft trill.

He reached out and grasped one of the Phoenix's tail feathers.

A bright burst of flame latter, and the Ministry of Magic was an empty ruin.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Bright, crimson fire burst into the air and the piercing cry of Phoenix song filled the Hogwarts Hospital Wing.

"Help..." Harry moaned softly, his strength failing him with each passing moment. He was finding it hard to focus on the world around him.

Somewhere close by he heard a glass shatter on the ground before several voices filled the air.

"Harry!"

"Miss Granger where is that...?"

"Albus?"

"Oh Merlin!"

"What is this?!"

"ALBUS!"

"Bring those potions quickly!"

"Harry! Stay with me!"

There were sobs. Someone was crying.

More than one person.

There were hands. Someone was coaxing him to lie back.

But the room was fuzzy – out of focus.

There was another great piercing cry that sang of sorrow and loss.

And then it all went black.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry woke knowing exactly where he was and why he was there.

He was alone in one of the Infirmary's beds, with the privacy curtains pulled around him. He tried curling his fingers and toes – finding them to be in working order – before sitting up. His strength
had seemingly returned. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. He felt better. Tired, but better. Harry wondered how long he had been out. It couldn't have been too long, when he looked down, he saw that he was still wearing his own clothes, although his armor had been removed and was laying haphazardly across a nearby chair.

Harry took a few steps and left the enclosed space around his bed. There were several other screened-off beds in the Infirmary.

Harry stared at them all. Wondering which held his mentor, and which held the body of Dumbledore.

"Harry!" the voice of Hermione rang out.

He turned just as the witch in question ran over and threw her arms around him.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up, but Madame Pomfrey needed my help, and she said you would be fine soon, so I thought you'd want me to help the others, but I was so worried! When I saw you…" Hermione squeezed him even tighter. "Is it really true? About Professor Dumbledore? I was here when you all appeared, but I was so worried about you, and everything happened so fast, and Professor McGonagall told me not to say anything to anyone…"

Harry squeezed his girlfriend and bit back a sob when he spoke.

"It's true. Dumbledore's… gone. It was Voldemort."

"Oh Harry, what are we going to do?!"

Harry didn't know how to respond. So he just took comfort from his girlfriend's embrace and tried to do the same for her.

After a few moments, Hermione stepped back and wiped her eyes.

"I've got to get these potions to Madame Pomfrey. She's probably wondering where I am…"

"Go, Hermione," Harry responded. "I'll be okay."

"Don't disappear," Hermione admonished before turning away. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be here."

Harry walked over to one of the enclosed beds and peeked through the curtain. He saw an elderly figure there – one of the wizards that they had discovered in the Ministry and portkeyed to the Infirmary.

He looked in on two other beds to see similar scenes, only in these the witch and wizard were no longer breathing. Their aged bodies had given out on them.

The fourth bed held someone Harry recognized.

Albus Dumbledore.

He looked like he was asleep. The sheet was pulled up to his armpits, and his hands were resting on his chest, fingers laced together. Someone had returned his wand to him. It was held securely in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Harry spoke quietly to the Headmaster. "I'm sorry you never got to live in
peace. I'm sorry I couldn't help you at the end."

Harry walked over and gently laid a hand on Dumbledore's forehead. He was cold.

"Light, give him rest from his labors," he prayed.

Harry found his mentor shortly thereafter. He had been stripped of his armor, and was lying unconscious in another hospital bed. The paladin looked ancient. Wrinkled, sagging skin hung from his bones. Only a few wisps of gray hair still clung to his scalp. His breathing was shallow and labored. Whatever Voldemort did to him had stolen decades away from his life.

At a loss for what else to do, Harry quietly took a seat in a nearby chair and waited. He wasn't sure what he was waiting for, but he waited nonetheless.

Hours passed.

People came and went. McGonagall eventually came by along with Alastor Moody to get the story of what happened from Harry. He told them everything. His voice was wooden, emotionless through it all. He started by telling them how they found the Ministry seemingly deserted. He told them about the damage to the building, the strange, floating debris, and the little, random flashes of magic. He told them about the horde of undead that had attacked. He spoke of Voldemort and his transformation, that Keldorn had called him a 'Lich.' He recounted what Voldemort said about flooding the world with magic and destroying all of the Muggles' technology. He told them of their last, desperate fight against the monster that now seemed a hundred times more powerful than he had ever been before.

And he told them how Albus Dumbledore died.

McGonagall cried through it all.

Moody had questions. Harry did his best to answer them. At some point Hermione resurfaced and planted herself at Harry's side. She clung to him and refused to let go.

No one had any idea of what to do.

The world was falling apart, reports began to come in of mass chaos in the Muggle world especially. Whatever it was that Voldemort had unleashed across the globe had stopped almost all Muggle technology from working. It seemed as though the world was now saturated with magic and regular technology simply refused to function. It wasn't just electricity that had failed, but almost every technological advancement from the past thousand years seemed to have been undone in an instant. Gunpowder no longer burned. Internal combustion engines lay silent. Even some clockwork mechanisms just stopped ticking. A moment after the storm of magic spread across the earth airplanes fell from the sky. Modern communication ceased. Ships could no longer navigate or steer. Food couldn't be transported to the markets. Governments and militaries were unable to perform even the most basic of tasks. Order was broken. Panic was spreading. Riots had already started to flare up.

With the abrupt destruction of their technology, the Muggles had already begun to die by the hundreds and thousands. Soon, they would start to die by the millions.

Voldemort had won.

Voldemort had said that he was going to come to Hogwarts next.

And no one had any idea of what to do.
Eventually McGonagall and Moody left.

OoOoO

OoOoO

It was several hours later when the old knight turned his head and cracked open his now dull eyes. Hermione was curled up asleep next to Harry, but the squire himself was alert while maintaining his bedside vigil.

"Harry…" the old man wheezed.

Harry leaned forward and grasped his mentor's hand.

"I'm here."

"What… happened?" Keldorn asked between labored breaths.

"We lost," Harry answered. "Dumbledore's gone. The Ministry and the Aurors were gutted. The world is literally ending. Voldemort won."

"No…"

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry said quietly as he hung his head, "we tried, but we lost."

"No," the old knight said with more strength, "it… is not… lost… All… is not… lost…” Keldorn fixed his eyes on Harry with what intensity he could manage, "Not… yet…"

For some reason, that made Harry angry.

"What can we possibly do?!" Harry asked with incredulity while rising to his feet. His quick motion roused Hermione from her slumber.

"Harry?" she questioned sleepily.

"You saw how strong he is!" Harry continued shouting at his now feeble mentor. "You saw what he did! Heard what he told us! How do we fight that?!"

"The Light… still… shines… Harry…" Keldorn struggled to say, "and the Darkness… will not… overcome…"

Harry closed his eyes and let his brief anger drain away as he listened to his mentor. Even now, when everything was crashing down around them, the paladin still had faith that the Light would prevail.

"You… Harry… you… must be… the Light… now…"

The eyes of the old paladin were fixed on him – staring with intensity, trying to communicate something of utmost importance. Begging Harry to see, to realize, and to choose.

And Harry knew.

 Somehow he knew that this was the moment. Everything that had happened had brought him to this one moment here and now. The Darkness was everywhere, it had spread like cancer to every corner of the world. It was threatening to snuff out all that would oppose it. Keldorn's Light was still shining, but it had dimmed. Soon it would go out. And without the Light to hold it back, the
Darkness would consume everything.

But not if the Light refused to go out.

Keldorn's fire had burned low, its Light was dim. But a flame, no matter how small, could still be passed from one candle to another so that the Light would continue to shine in the Darkness.

Harry knew what this moment was. He didn't need to think, he had already made his choice. He approached Keldorn's bedside and fell to his knees.

"I'm ready," the young man spoke to his mentor, "it's time."

"Harry?" Hermione asked in confusion, "what's going on?"

Keldorn reached out with a shaking, feeble hand, and grasped Harry's.

"Swear," the old man commanded.

Harry knew the words. He had read them almost every day during his study and training. The Oath that was now asked of him. The Vow that was to be professed, one paladin to another.

Harry swallowed hard before he spoke.

"I, Harry James Potter, son of James and Lily Potter, do hereby vow, with the Light as my witness, to stand when fear would have me hide, to speak the truth when lies would seduce me, to defend the innocent when evil threatens, and to remain a Light against the Darkness until my last breath leaves me."

Keldorn's hand squeezed Harry's before it slipped out, and came to rest upon the squire's head. He pressed down, hard.

"Receive the Light, paladin," the old man spoke in a solemn tone, all hint of weakness now gone from his voice, "that it may fill you and shine forth from you."

Then his strength seemed to fail, and his hand fell limply from Harry's head. And yet a weak smile formed on his haggard face.

"See to it," the old paladin said to the young, "that the Light… does not… go out."

OoOoO

OoOoO

Harry gazed up at the stars, shining brightly above him in the vast night sky.

Sir Keldorn Firecam had died a few hours earlier.

He did not linger overlong. After speaking a few last words to Harry and Hermione, his remaining strength failed him. In the faint hours just after midnight, he closed his eyes and was gone.

He had stood against the Darkness longer than most paladins ever would. He had spent himself in service to the Light and to the good people he found wherever he went. Finally, the fight had claimed his life, as he always knew it would. All paladins eventually fell in the fight against the Darkness. Sir Keldorn Firecam was no exception.

First Dumbledore, now Firecam.
Two great Lights had gone out of the world.

Harry heard the door behind him open followed by soft footsteps joining him at the top of the Astronomy Tower.

"Harry?" asked the soft voice of Hermione Granger.

Harry did not respond, but he did put his arm around her shoulders when she came to stand next to him. There just didn't seem to be much to say at the moment.

Quietly, they looked at the stars together.

After a long while, Harry broke the silence.

"He liked coming up here at night."

"Who?" Hermione asked.

"Sir Firecam," he answered. "This is where I first met him. Err… I guess, for the second time, actually… After the Department of Mysteries, he was up here, gazing at the stars. He told me later that the stars gave him hope. Bright points of light, shining in the darkness."

He turned and looked down into the face of his girlfriend. She was regarding him with open curiosity. Her eyes were red and puffy though, like she had been crying.

There had been a lot of crying that day.

"I guess I could use some of that, now."

"Oh, Harry…" She hugged him tightly.

They lapsed into silence for a little while.

Eventually, Hermione spoke again.

"What you and Sir Firecam were talking about," she began, "before… before he… you know…"

Harry just gave her a sad smile, silently telling her to continue.

"Was that, are you…?"

"A paladin now?" Harry finished the question for her. "I guess so."

"Does it feel any different?"

Harry thought for a moment before responding.

"No, not really."

The silence returned. There really just didn't seem to be anything to say. What do you talk about when the world as you knew it had come to an end?

Plans would have to be made, of course. They would need to figure out what was going to happen next. Voldemort said that he was going to come to Hogwarts. Defenses needed to be prepared. What would the collapse of Muggle society mean for the magical world? Harry knew that the two supposedly separate worlds were much more intertwined that most people realized. Would basic
resources start to become scarce? Would they soon start running out of food? If they managed to hold off Voldemort's pending attack, what could they do to help those that would soon find themselves in dire need? Set up refugee centers? There was so much to think about and to do…

And Dumbledore and Firecam were gone.

The thought made Harry feel rather empty.

How in the world were they supposed to accomplish any of it without Dumbledore there to guide them? It would be so easy to give in to despair, to just lie down and wait for the end to come…

Harry sighed and turned his mind away from those thoughts. He would never give in to that temptation. He would not give up. Come tomorrow, he would help as he could, but right now he needed something else. He just needed the quiet and the stars. Those fierce points of Light in the dark night sky. He needed the hope that Firecam believed they could provide.

And Hermione. He needed her too. The soft assurance of her comfort and companionship. The knowledge that she would be by his side no matter what might come next.

Tomorrow could wait for just a little while longer.

Harry turned his eyes back to the heavens, to the stars, and with Hermione by his side, he prayed for hope in what was to come.
Refugees began to arrive at Hogwarts early the next morning.

They came from all walks of life. Initially, most were the parents of current students who wanted to assure themselves of the safety of their children. Some took their children and left – trusting their lives to the wards and protections of their homes. Most wound up staying at Hogwarts, knowing that the castle had the best defenses in all of Britain. Soon others started to arrive as well. Recent alumni returned to their Alma Mater in search of something safe and familiar. The few Aurors that still remained trickled into the castle in groups of two or three in the hope of finding some sort of organization. The fall of the Ministry of Magic and the chaos in the Muggle world had left the citizens of magical Britain desperate to find some sort of security, and Hogwarts was seemingly the answer for many. They came with the belief that the sturdy walls that had sheltered generations of students over so many centuries would be able to withstand the upheaval that Voldemort had wrought upon the world.

Meanwhile, everyone at Hogwarts was worried about the people that they knew and loved outside the castle. The Floo Network was still unresponsive, so they couldn't easily reach anyone to see if they were okay. Every single bird in the Owler had been dispatched at some point over the previous twelve hours to try and find out if family members and friends were safe and sound. Harry had sent Hedwig off with hastily scribbled letters to the Weasleys and to Hermione's parents. Everyone was anxious as they waited for replies. Tension and worry was at an all-time high within the castle.

Minerva McGonagall, as Acting Headmistress, had canceled all classes until further notice. Normally, the death of the Headmaster under such circumstances would result in sending the students home while order was restored in the castle. However, sending the children away wasn't a viable option. Many might no longer have homes or families to go to. Instead, the children were put to work around the castle shoring up the defenses, stockpiling resources, and preparing for Voldemort's inevitable attack. They weren't told what they were doing of course, rather, it appeared to them that they were merely being kept busy in an attempt to keep their minds off what was going on in the world outside of Hogwarts.

Many of the older students, the prefects especially, were conscripted into helping to organize the refugees that began flooding into the castle. It soon became apparent that there were not enough apartments to house everyone in the school, but the clever use of wizarding tents set up in unused classrooms made for good use of the space available. Hogwarts itself seemed to be trying to pitch-in as well – every time it looked like space had run out, another empty room in a newly discovered corridor was found.

Harry parted company with Hermione after spending the morning helping her restock and expand the Hospital Wing. He couldn't do much without a wand, but he was able to brew a few healing potions. No one had any doubt that they would be needed.

But as the hour neared midday, Harry realized that he was in a rather vulnerable position – he was completely unarmed and defenseless. His wand was in pieces, snapped by Voldemort in the Ministry of Magic. Nor did he have a sword, as the one given to him by Keldorn had shattered when it struck the undead Dark Lord. He still had his dagger, but he couldn't expect to last long in the inevitable battle with only that. Short of stealing Dumbledore's wand from where the Headmaster's body was lying in wait for burial, which seemed like sacrilege, Harry had no idea of how to get his hands on another one. However, he did have a thought or two that might help in a
And so Harry excused himself from the Hospital Wing with a promise to return quickly and hurried through the halls to the gargoyle that stood guard at the entrance to the Headmaster's Office.

Apparently no password was required of him, for as soon as Harry stopped before the statue, the grating sound of stone grinding on stone revealed the hidden staircase. He made it into the office without issue.

Dumbledore's refuge within the castle looked exactly like Harry had last seen it. Indeed, nothing had changed since he, Keldorn, and the Headmaster had departed in haste for the Ministry in a burst of Phoenix fire. Everything was the same. Apparently McGonagall had either not yet found the time to move into the office or she was reluctant to displace the memory of Albus Dumbledore so soon. The fiddly, silver things still twirled and puttered about on the desk, and the cabinet against the wall was still filled with the broken remains of Harry's temper tantrum from a time that now seemed so long ago.

But the chair behind the desk sat empty, as did the ornate, golden perch usually occupied by Fawkes.

Standing in that room was difficult for Harry. Dumbledore's presence was so tangible there, and yet it was lacking too. For the great wizard would never again return. There was something sad about being in that office without the Headmaster, but Harry felt no temptation to fall into tears. In fact, he had yet to shed a single tear for either Dumbledore or Keldorn since he woke up in the Hospital Wing. He wasn't really sure why that was the case.

Harry shook himself out of his musings. He had work to do after all.

He looked down to the Mokeskin pouch strapped to his belt and reached for it.

He hesitated.

All too well could he remember the last time that he held the sacred and powerful object that was now hidden away in the pouch. Was he really ready to go through that once more?

Again, Harry shook off his musings, he had a problem to solve, and this would probably be the best solution for everyone. Hesitation was a luxury that he could no longer afford. Without further ado, he reached in and grasped the hilt of Carsomyr.

He didn't try to draw the sword out of the pouch, indeed, he doubted that he would even be capable of doing so. Instead, he simply allowed the strange sensation of time slowing down to invade his awareness once more. His world contracted. He couldn't see the sword, hidden away as it was within the Mokeskin pouch, but the sacred artifact that he held in his hand demanded Harry's complete attention. He was naked, cold, and exposed before the might of the otherworldly intelligence that lived within the sword. The sensation of crushing responsibility bore down upon his shoulders and Harry physically stumbled under the weight.

The bright, burning presence of Carsomyr assaulted Harry's mind and brought all of his faults, failings, and shortcomings to the forefront and laid them bare as a damning accusation. A thunderous storm of judgment rolled forth from the blade and through Harry, and he was defenseless, helpless before the silent scream of righteous fury that ravaged him.

UNWORTHY
The word, no, the absolute certainty reverberated through Harry's soul.

He quickly dropped the hilt and withdrew his empty hand from the pouch. With his senses returning to normal, Harry realized that he was breathing quite heavily and that sweat was dripping from his forehead. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and sighed in disappointment.

I thought it might be different this time, Harry thought to himself, now that I'm a consecrated paladin. Oh well. I guess we'll go for Plan B.

Harry's eyes went to the wall behind the Headmaster's desk. There, just off to the left, between two portraits of former Headmasters, was a glass case holding the Sword of Gryffindor. Harry approached slowly. He noted that there was a keyhole in the wooden frame of the case, but when he reached out to try the door, it opened without resistance.

The sword looked larger than Harry remembered from his second year. Back then, it was small enough that it could easily be wielded by a twelve year-old. It had been short, thin, and light. It was still decorated in the same way that Harry remembered, fashioned from pure, magic-tempered silver, the hilt inlaid with large, crimson rubies, the name Godric Gryffindor engraved in gold script just below the crossguard. But now the sword seemed to have grown. It was much larger and heavier. The blade was broad and almost three feet long. The bejeweled crossbar extended further, and the handle was clearly capable of being used with either one or two hands.

This was no longer a sword that could be swung by a child. This was a weapon worthy of the fiercest and noblest of warriors. Apparently the Sword of Gryffindor knew that Harry had need of it, and had altered itself accordingly.

Harry reached into the case and reverently re-claimed the sword that he had once drawn out of the Sorting Hat in his hour of need and used to slay a basilisk.

He held it at the ready and then went through a few quick parries and attacks with the blade. The sword seemed to have taken on a form that was almost perfectly suited to what Harry was used to and the training that he had undergone. It felt light in his hands and yet strong. Few things, Harry was sure, would be able to withstand the might of the goblin-steel that Godric had left for some member of his House to find when they needed it most.

His objective completed, Harry took one last, wistful look around the office before making his way back to the Hospital Wing.

Needless to say, striding into the Infirmary with the Sword of Gryffindor in his hands caused a bit of a stir.

"Mr. Potter!" Madam Pomfrey exclaimed, "just what do you think you're going to do with that in here?!!"

Harry smiled at the Matron.

"Don't worry," he replied, "I promise not to hurt anything. But a paladin needs a sword after all."

Pomfrey shook her head in dismay, but quickly went back to the multitude of tasks that were waiting for her.

Harry approached Hermione, who met him with raised eyebrows.

"Just what do you have there, Harry?"
"A paladin needs a sword, Hermione," Harry replied.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Is that the Sword of Godric Gryffindor?"

"Yes."

"Did you just take it from the Headmaster's Office?"

"Yes."

"Harry Potter!" Hermione exclaimed in exasperation.

"What?"

"You can't just take a priceless artifact from the Headmaster's office!"

"Why not?"

"Because! What if you lose it? Or break it? That sword needs to be protected and preserved!"

Harry chuckled a bit at his girlfriend's reaction.

That only made the witch angrier.

"Harry! This isn't a joke!"

"I know it isn't, Hermione," he said with a smile. "I know how serious this truly is. Which is why I need the Sword of Gryffindor. It won't do anyone any good in what's to come if it's gathering dust up in that office."

The bushy-haired witch narrowed her eyes, but she was listening.

"I know this probably goes against your academic ruleset, but I think having this sword ready to use against Voldemort is the right thing to do. Gryffindor left it to us to be used after all. I don't think he intended it to just sit in a display case all the time."

Hermione sighed and looked at her feet.

"You're right, of course," she said after a moment. "I'm sorry for reacting the way I did. I guess I just… with everything that's happened, with everything going on, I guess I just slipped back into my old habits." She looked up at her boyfriend and smiled. "Harry does something reckless, Hermione lectures him for it."

"Ha!" he laughed. "Well, it's good to know that the old Hermione is still in there somewhere."

"Oh she is. And she still has plenty of lectures for you, Mister, even if you're a big, bad paladin now."

"Well anyways, I actually need your help with this."

"Oh?" Hermione asked.

"Err… yeah. Could you, maybe, transfigure me a scabbard? That would make carrying this thing a lot easier."
Hermione looked puzzled.

"Why do you need me to do that?"

"Oh," Harry replied, "I guess I kinda forgot to tell you. My wand, err, kinda got broken at the Ministry…"

Hermione actually took a step backwards upon hearing that.

"What?!" she practically screamed. "Oh… I'm so sorry, but… oh! This is terrible! How are you going to face him without a wand?!" Hermione began frantically pacing back and forth while talking to herself. "Maybe we can sneak out to Ollivander's… no, that won't work, his shop is closed. Who else makes wands? Does the school have a backup supply for use in the case of mishaps? But then why didn't Ron get one in second year… Oh, this is just awful!"

"Hermione!"

"Harry! We need to figure this out!"

"We will. But for now, I've got this," he waved the sword a little bit, "so I'm not completely helpless."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief.

"You can't be serious!"

"What?"

"Harry James Potter! You can't seriously be suggesting that you face Voldemort with only a sword at your side! I don't care if it's the Sword of Gryffindor or bloody Excalibur itself!"

"Hermione," Harry tried to calm her, "slow down. I didn't say I was going off to face him with just a sword. But right now, it's the best I've got. And I need your help with it. Okay?"

Hermione's lower lip trembled for a moment before she launched herself at Harry and pulled him into a crushing hug.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she sniffled into his shoulder, "I don't know what's wrong with me. My emotions are all over the place."

"Well, I think you can cut yourself some slack," Harry replied while bringing his left hand up to rub comforting circles on her back. "A lot's happened in the past couple of days. I think everyone's entitled to have a moment or two where they're out of sorts."

Hermione gave him one last squeeze before she pulled back and, with a sniffle, drew her wand.

"Okay," she said, "let's transfigure you a scabbard." She walked over to a cupboard and took out a folded hospital gown. "It would probably be better if we found an actual scabbard for you. Or maybe if we had one made. Transfigurations don't last forever."

"Well, I have the one that Sir Firecam gave me before we left for… you know, but the blade on this sword is longer. I don't think it would fit."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond but then snapped it shut. She thought for a moment before speaking again.
"Actually," she stated with a twinkle appearing in her eye, the same look that she got when she figured out a solution to a difficult problem, "that might just work."

"How?"

"Well, when I was working on my NEWT project last year, I learned quite a bit about spatial extension charms. Like the one on the Mokeskin pouch that I gave you. As long as the scabbard doesn't have any other enchantments on it, I could probably inscribe a few runes on it tonight. It wouldn't have to be anything too fancy, just enough to hold a sword that's a bit bigger than what the scabbard was made for."

"Really? You can do that?"

"Of course!" Hermione said with a smile. "What, did you think I was just a pretty face?"

"Ha!" Harry smiled back. "Never. I'm well aware that you're both beautiful and brilliant."

Hermione beamed at him.

"Flatterer. Well anyways, I won't be able to get to that until tonight. I'll need my runes kit and probably half an hour or so to work. So let's transfigure this for you to use in the meantime."

With a swish of her wand and a moment of concentration, the hospital gown shrank, darkened, and folded in on itself until it was a simple black scabbard.

"I'm afraid that it's not really something worthy of the Sword of Gryffindor, but it should work for now."

"It's brilliant, Hermione," Harry replied as he was already sliding the sword into the sheath and buckling it onto his belt.

"Remind me to enchant the other scabbard tonight. Now let's get back to work. We're going to need more potions."

OoOoO

OoOoO

The day ended up being both long and hard. Everyone was working to prepare the castle for whatever might come, but the emotional stress that they were all feeling ate up a lot of energy.

Dinner was a welcome relief. It took Harry a few moments to realize that he no longer had to down as much food as possible in only a few minutes. He was no longer a squire. Keldorn was no longer there to hurry him along to his next task.

That thought made him rather sad.

Hermione took note of Harry's melancholy and was about to say something when the doors to the Great Hall swung open. In walked Lupin and Tonks. Their eyes quickly searched the Gryffindor table and landed on Harry. They hurried over.

"Harry!" Tonks exclaimed while scooping him up into a hug. "Am I glad to see you!"

Harry smiled and tentatively returned the hug.

"I'm glad to see you too, Tonks," he replied. "You and Professor Lupin still in one piece?"
Tonks released him while Lupin responded.

"Please, Harry, I think we're at the point where you can call me Remus."

Tonks moved on to hugging Hermione and then started in on Ron and Ginny while Harry and Lupin sat down at the table.

"Yes, we're still in one piece. Barely. I'm glad to see you're okay too."

"What do you mean, 'barely'?" Hermione asked.

"Well," Lupin began to explain, "There've been a lot of weird things going on since the Storm."

"'Weird' doesn't do it justice," Tonks interjected while taking a seat next to Lupin. "My choice in hairstyles is 'weird.' The stuff we've seen has been bloody bonkers!"

"Oh, Hello Mr. Lupin, Miss Tonks." Harry turned to see Luna standing behind him. She wedged herself into a seat next to Neville. "I'm glad that you escaped the Snorkack stampede."

"How so?" Hermione asked Lupin while ignoring the younger Ravenclaw's comment.

"Well, ever since You Know Who unleashed that… storm, or whatever it was… you know how the air has felt, well, heavier? Thicker?"

"Yeah," Harry said while nodding his head.

"The world's got too much magic now," Tonks took up the explanation, "and it's gotta go somewhere. So it's been soakin' into whatever's around. Causin' strange shite all over the place."

"Yesterday we were attacked by a bookcase in a Muggle shopping center," Lupin said.

"We were there, tryin' to straighten out the situation, lookin' for survivors," Tonks said, "when all of a sudden, the books come alive and start flyin' about the place, dive bombin' us! And I'm not talkin' 'bout Hagrid's Monster Book of Monsters, these were Muggle books! I got a black eye from a bloody copy of Pride and Prejudice!"

"And today," Lupin continued, "a whole row of trees lining a Muggle street came to life and attacked like a bunch of Whomping Willows."

"Bloody Hell!" Ron shouted from where he was listening in on the conversation.

Hermione was so concerned that she didn't even bother to reprimand him for his language.

"You can say that again, mate," Tonks replied.

"Well that's just silly," said Luna. They all looked at her curiously. "I've never heard such a ridiculous tale in all my life. Really. Flying Muggle books! Hmpft!"

Everyone at the table just stared at Luna Lovegood with open mouths.

"What?" the blonde girl finally asked. "Do I have something on my face?"

"The world really is ending," Ron mumbled to Lavender, "Loony Lovegood has become a skeptic…"

"This isn't good," Hermione stated, bringing everyone's attention away from Luna and back to the
matter at hand.

"No it really isn't," said Lupin, "not only has You-Know-Who disabled all Muggle technology, but all the wild magic is having unforeseen consequences. Who knows what's going to happen next?"

Harry closed his eyes and hung his head. There were so many people out there in the midst of all that. So many that had no idea of what was going on. So many that had no way to defend themselves. What was an ordinary man or woman supposed to do when the tree that had been in their backyard for decades suddenly decided to try and kill them?

Harry needed to do something.

"What can we do to help?" he asked.

Lupin sighed.

"I don't think we can," he replied.

"But there must be something!" Hermione nearly shouted.

"Wot'cher gonna do, Hermione? Short of puttin' all that magic back in the bottle it sprang outta, there isn't much any of us can do," Tonks responded.

"But so many people are going to die!" Hermione exclaimed again.

Lupin just looked at her sadly for a moment.

"I know," he finally said.

Harry closed his eyes again and clenched his fists. Lupin was right. There wasn't really much that they could do.

"We can only do what we can," Harry finally said. "Hogwarts is going to be the best shot for a lot of people. If they can get here, maybe we can give them some help. But we can't save everyone."

"That's if bloody You-Know-Who doesn't come here next and burn the bloody place down…" Ron grumbled bitterly.

Sitting next to him, Lavender gasped.

"Don't say that!" she cried.

"What?" Ron shot back. "Not saying it isn't gonna make it not happen."

"But you don't need to be so callous about it, Ron," Hermione argued.

Ron just shook his head.

Further conversation was cut off by the arrival of hundreds of post owls swooping down into the Great Hall. The level of anxiety in the room ramped up rather noticeably as everyone hoped to receive assurance that their loved ones were safe - wherever they might be.

Hedwig landed on the table in front of Harry. She stuck out a leg with two envelopes attached to it. He relieved his pet of her burden and pushed the remainder of his dinner to her before looking at the letters.
The first was addressed to him. He opened it to see a short note from Mr. Weasley.

Harry!

Thank goodness you're all okay! Please look after Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. We're all okay here for now. Thankfully, Percy and I weren't at the Ministry when it was attacked. But everything is in disarray here. Molly is having a tough time of it. I think we might try to gather the boys together and make it up to Hogwarts in the next day or so. Give our love to Ron and Ginny.

Arthur

Harry handed the note to Ron and then looked at the other envelope. It was addressed to 'Mr. and Mrs. Granger.' Harry's eyes met Hermione's. He could see the worry start to build up within her. He opened the note to find what he already knew would be inside: the letter that he had written and sent off that morning.

"Harry?" Hermione asked in a rather small, timid voice, "what does this mean?"

"I…" Harry started but hesitated. He swallowed before trying again. "I guess it means that Hedwig couldn't find them."

The bird in question turned away at the mention of her failure.

Hermione sobbed and buried her face in Harry's shoulder. He put his arm around her and pulled the crying girl to his chest.

"We'll find them, Hermione."

"They're dead!" she bit out between sobs.

"We don't know that," Harry responded with authority. "Maybe there was just something in the way. Something that kept Hedwig from reaching them."

Hermione just sobbed harder.

"Harry…” Lupin started to say.

"We're going to go look for them." Harry stated.

"Is that smart, Harry?" Tonks asked. "You heard what we've run into out there."

"It doesn't matter. I might not be able to help everyone, but I can help Hermione's parents. I can try at the very least."

Hermione pulled away, wiped her eyes, and brought her breathing under control.

"Harry, Tonks is right," she started, "we shouldn't bother—"

"No." Harry cut her off forcefully. "I'm not going to just sit here!" He lifted her face and stared into her eyes, "Hermione, these are your parents we're talking about. We can't just leave them out there. I have to try something."

"Okay, Harry." she said with a nod. "How do we do this?"

"Wait a minute!" Tonks shouted. "You can't just run off on your own!"
"Then come with us," Harry replied. "We could use your help. Yours and Remus's both."

"Harry this is crazy, you don't know what it's like out there now," Lupin argued.

"That doesn't matter," Harry answered, "it's the right thing to do."

Tonks and Lupin looked at each other before they both let out a resigned sigh.

"You'll just go off on your own if we don't go with you, won't you?" Lupin finally asked.

Harry just smiled.

"Well, okay then. Let's figure this out."
Harry, Hermione, Tonks, and Lupin appeared in a dark, deserted Muggle park a few hours later that evening. Except for his head, Harry was almost entirely encased in metal plates.

It was Hermione's idea.

She was nervous about Harry going into a potentially dangerous situation without a wand and mentioned that Harry might try wearing Keldorn's armor.

"No." Harry vehemently shot down the suggestion.

"Why in the world not?!" Hermione fired back.

"It just wouldn't be right."

"How can you possibly say that? Wearing it might save your life!"

"Hermione," Harry patiently began, "think about what you're asking me to do. Firecam is… he's only been gone for a day, and you just want me to take all his things?"

"Harry, I know you're still grieving, I know this is hard, but with the way things are right now you've got to be practical too."

"No."

"Just think, Sir Firecam wasn't the first paladin to ever wear that armor. He told us the story about the enchanted gorget himself. He said it was ancient, remember? And while the rest isn't quite as old as the Gorget of Saint Jorg, it's all been passed down from paladin to paladin. In fact, I would think that Sir Firecam would expect you to make use of his arms and armor. He'd want you to have every possible advantage in the fight against the Darkness!"

Harry hesitated before replying. His girlfriend made some very good points.

Sometimes it was tough dating the brightest witch of their generation.

"But it probably won't even fit me…" He knew he was grasping at straws by that point.

Hermione smiled.

"Well, let's just try it on and see. I bet that since it's so highly magical, it will resize itself to fit whomever is wearing it."

"I… just… No. I won't do it!"

Hermione pulled out her wand.

"Oh really, Harry? Okay, then how about I try something from your bag of tricks? If you're not willing to go to every reasonable length to protect yourself in dangerous situations, how about I cast an Incarcerous Spell on you and leave you tied up on the floor while Tonks, Lupin, and I go look for my parents?"
Harry wound up wearing the armor.

It turned out that Hermione was right. When Harry donned the gorget and spoke the command words, the armor that unfolded upon him fit perfectly, as if it had been made specifically for him. Even more remarkably, Harry found that wearing over sixty pounds of steel didn't hinder his movement at all. He recalled Keldorn talking about enchantments on it that allowed for 'freedom of movement,' but this was something else. Wearing it felt more like Harry had simply slipped on an extra jumper over his normal clothes, but the experience went beyond even that. He paradoxically felt *more* agile in the armor. Like he was somehow *lighter* on his feet and could easily start doing cartwheels and backflips.

The only part of the suit that he decided to forego was the helmet. Just like Keldorn, Harry found it to restrict his vision, hearing, and breathing far too much. Wearing the helmet would be like going into battle blindfolded.

Hermione had worn a smug smile of satisfaction as the four of them made their way to find McGonagall.

They had all agreed that it would be necessary to tell the Acting Headmistress about their plan, not only because it was the responsible thing to do, but also because they needed portkeys that could travel through Hogwarts' wards. Initially, McGonagall thought they were all mad and refused their request. But Lupin's reasoned argument, together with Harry's threat to go by Hippogriff if need be, convinced her to acquiesce.

The Muggle park they arrived in was eerily quiet. It wasn't that late in the evening – normally there would be at least a few people still milling about. But the park was utterly deserted. The street lights were dark and not a sound could be heard.

Strapped to his left arm, Harry held his mentor's reflective shield at the ready and he slowly drew the Sword of Gryffindor out of its scabbard with his right.

"Which way, Hermione?" Tonks asked.

"*Lumos,*" the teenaged witch whispered, bringing a bright point of light into the darkness. She took a moment to get her bearings. "Right. We go three blocks this way," she pointed down a street, "and then turn left. My house is down a bit on the right. If my parents are still here, they'll probably be holed-up in the basement. There's an old air-raid shelter down there from the war where dad keeps his camping equipment."

"Okay," Tonks said taking charge. "Remus and I'll go first. Hermione, you're in the middle. Harry you bring up the rear."

"Keep your eyes and ears open for anything odd," Lupin added. "We don't know what might be lurking around here at this point."

Slowly, the group made their way out of the park and down the street.

"This is so strange," Hermione whispered. "I've never seen it so quiet like this."

"Do you smell that?" Lupin asked the group.

"Yeah," Tonks responded, "smells like smoke."

They walked the three blocks Hermione had indicated without incident and came to the intersection where they were supposed to turn left.
Hermione gasped.

"Oh no! What happened?!"

Hermione's street looked like it had been hit by an earthquake and a tornado at the same time. Cars were overturned and smashed to pieces. Great chunks of stone and concrete had been torn out of the roadway and sidewalks. The scattered remains of trees and other plants were strewn all over the ground. To their left, the charred remains of several houses still smoldered in ruin.

The intersection itself was now nothing more than a large crater. It looked like the asphalt, concrete, and stone had been torn away. It didn't look like an explosion, as there weren't any chunks of rocky debris nearby, but rather, it looked like something massive had ripped the material right out of the street.

"Hermione! Focus!" Lupin admonished the girl behind him. "The last thing we need is someone panicking."

Hermione swallowed before nodding.

"Which house is yours?" Tonks asked.

"That one," Hermione replied while pointing to a still mostly intact house five doors down on the right.

"Okay, everyone," Tonks instructed, "keep sharp."

Slowly they made their way forward again.

The sound of tumbling rocks brought their movement to a halt.

"Did you hear that?" Harry asked.

"Shh!" Tonks replied.

They waited in silence for over a minute before they moved forward again. They had almost made it to the walkway leading to the Granger's front door when they heard the sound again.

This time it was louder.

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck suddenly stood on end while a strange prickling sensation ran up and down his spine.

"Something's not right," Harry said to the group. "Something's out there."

"It's coming from over there," Lupin said, pointing at the house across the street from Hermione's. "Whatever it is, it's behind that house."

"Hermione," Tonks began, "you and Remus go quick and check the house. Harry an' I'll stay out here."

Remus had just nodded in acceptance when the ground shook with two heavy thuds.

"That's not good," said Remus.

It was hard to see in the darkness, but something large and dark rose up behind the house across the street. Its movements were accompanied by the sound of falling rocks and grinding stone.
"What is that?" Hermione asked.

The thing had to be at least thirty feet tall. It turned, and two points of red light came into view. Harry felt a malevolent will focus on him.

"Hermione!" he shouted while keeping his eyes on the thing across the street and bringing his sword and shield to the ready. "In the house! Now!"

The thing took a pounding step toward them which reverberated through the ground like a mini earthquake.

"Oh bugger!" Hermione swore before she and Lupin turned and ran toward the front door.

"Confringo!" A hurried curse from Lupin's wand blasted the door out of the frame allowing them to race into the building without slowing.

The giant took two more sluggish steps in their direction. Then, with a thundering crash, it burst through the house across the street. Wood, brick, and plaster went flying in all directions. It tore through the building like it was paper.

"Shite!" Tonks exclaimed, "mother bugging shite!"

It kept coming.

Now that it was closer, it was easier to see what it was. It kind of resembled a human being, in that it stood upright on two legs and had two arms and a head. But there the similarities ended. It looked like it was hastily put together out of asphalt, concrete, and stone. The legs were short and stocky, and they held up the thing's massive torso. The arms were long and thick and they hung down from blocky shoulders to drag along the ground, leaving foot-deep furrows in the earth behind it. Atop it all sat a squat, misshapen head, from which two malicious, red eyes glared at them.

As it got ever nearer, Harry could make out what looked like white strips of paint that marked the giant in random places.

*It's made out of the missing pavement from the crater at the intersection!* Harry realized. *There was so much magic that the street came to life and ripped itself out of the ground!*

The ground shook as the stone and asphalt beast took another lumbering, thunderous step toward them. The head seemed to split open horizontally and a bright red mouth appeared. It bellowed out a roar of challenge that sounded like boulders smashing and breaking upon each other.

Harry glanced over at Tonks. Her eyes were wide with fear and her wand was shaking.

"Steady, Tonks," Harry said before looking back to the giant. "We just need to give Hermione and Remus enough time to search the house."

The thing took another slow step toward them.

"When it gets to the middle of the street," Harry continued, "you light it up with everything you've got."

Harry glanced at the Auror beside him again and saw her take a deep breath before nodding to him. Two more earth-shaking steps brought it into the street.
Tonks unleashed her magic.

"Bombarda Maxima!"

The bright spell shot out and struck the asphalt beast in the shoulder. It stumbled back a half step before slowly righting itself.

Then it roared.

And charged.

The periodic rumbles of the thing’s slow steps became a constant tremor as it raised its massive arms and ran forward.

"Oh shite!" Tonks swore again before throwing more curses and hexes at the thing. But most of the bright bursts of spell-fire merely bounced off of the creature's stony hide.

Harry hefted his sword above his head and screamed before running forward to meet the colossal monstrosity.

"Harry!" Tonks screamed somewhere behind him. "Oh shite! Harry, get back here!"

But Harry was focused on the foe before him. The thing saw him and pulled back its huge, concrete arm. It punched down and Harry barely dodged out of the way as a fist the size of a truck plowed into the ground. The windows in the surrounding houses shattered with the force of the blow.

Harry planted his feet and turned. He slashed out with the Sword of Gryffindor, the enchanted goblin-steel easily carving a hunk of rock off the giant's arm. Where the sword cut, it left the stone blackened and smoking.

The beast pulled back and roared.

Tonks continued to pour on spells, but nothing seemed to be effective.

"Aguamenti!"

The water just bounced off it.

"Incarcerous!"

The ropes wrapped around it, but snapped a second later when the giant moved.

"Reducto! Displodo! Tarantallegra!"

Nothing, nothing, nothing!

Harry lunged forward and thrust his sword into the giant's leg, the magic blade sinking deep into the asphalt and concrete which sizzled and darkened.

The giant roared again before swinging an arm down at its opponent. Harry just managed to bring up his shield before the weight of a thousand tons smashed into his side.

Harry felt an odd sensation of weightlessness as his feet left the ground.

The sky and the ground spun around before his eyes.
And then he slammed into the dirt.

*That hurt.*

"Harry!" Hermione's voice rang out in the night.

Harry groaned and shook his head. Somehow he was still alive.

*Well, that's something,* he thought to himself.

He focused and willed the world to stop spinning.

His vision was blurry, but Harry looked to the door of the Granger's house and saw Hermione and Lupin throwing spells at the giant. The beast had stopped moving forward. With three spell-casters focusing on it, the hulking figure was forced to raise its arms to shield its face.

Harry rose to his feet and hefted his sword again.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Hermione incanted.

The Granger's car, which had been sitting uselessly in the driveway, rose into the air to hover over the giant. With a fierce slash of her wand, Hermione threw the car down, crashing into the beast's head.

Cracks splintered across the giant's concrete skull and it swayed as if it were dazed.

Harry charged.

He ran behind the beast as it stumbled about. Without slowing his sprint, he slashed out with a backhanded swing, and the Sword of Gryffindor sliced neatly through the giant's stone leg.

The monster staggered again. The damaged leg cracked and then crumbled. And with a deafening crash, the giant collapsed to the ground.

Harry turned and ran back to the house.

"Hermione!" he screamed. "Portkeys! Now!"

The earth shook as tons of stone slammed into the ground once again. Harry skidded to a stop in front of Hermione and turned to see that the asphalt giant was rising to stand once more — supporting itself with an arm in place of its ruined leg.

But then a hand pressed something into Harry's.

A hook yanked him from behind his navel.

And Hermione's devastated neighborhood was gone.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The world spun wildly until it suddenly stopped and the Hogwarts Hospital Wing appeared.

Harry felt rather nauseous, but he fought back the urge to vomit.

"Harry!" Hermione shouted as her hands latched onto him. "What were you thinking?!!"
Harry sheathed his sword and blinked several times. Now that he was in a well-lit area, spots began to dance before his eyes.

Hermione stepped in front of him and reached out to his forehead.

"What?" he asked but then winced, his head was pounding and his entire left side was rather sore.

Hermione began waving her wand over his head while she went on speaking.

"Running at that giant like that!" It seemed like she was talking more to herself than to Harry. "Of all the stupid, idiotic things to do!"

"Hey!"

"Should've been killed when it hit you like that. Bloody Gryffindors."

"I was buying you time!" Harry tried to defend himself.

"Quiet, you! I'm busy!"

Hermione continued muttering to herself while casting spells on him, Harry glanced over to see that Tonks and Lupin had also made it back to the castle. They looked unharmed.

A sharp stinging sensation made him wince again, which in turn brought back his nausea.

"What was that?" Harry asked.

"I just healed the gash on the side of your head," Hermione informed him. "You also have a rather nice concussion, and I'm detecting extensive bruising on your left side."

"Oh."

Hermione glared at him.

"Take off your armor and sit on your bed," Hermione scolded him. "I need to get Madam Pomfrey so she can deal with your concussion."

Harry looked to Lupin and Tonks as Hermione stomped away.

"What'd I do?"

"Cut her some slack, Harry." Lupin advised. "We didn't find her parents and then she saw you get smacked across the garden like a ragdoll. Just let her calm down a bit."

Harry nodded – which turned out to be a poor decision because it made him feel like vomiting. He spoke the command word and his armor disappeared into his gorget. He limped over to the bed that he frequently occupied, his body hurting more than he first realized. He quickly unbuckled his sword belt and sat down.

A few minutes later Hermione returned with the Matron in tow.

"Well, what have you done this time, Mr. Potter?" Pomfrey asked, her wand already in motion.

"Just a little run-in with some sort of asphalt giant."

Pomfrey tisked at him but otherwise continued her diagnostics.
"You were right, Miss Granger. Concussion. Nothing too bad, but not something to be ignored either. Fetch three drams of Concussion Concoction and a dose of Pain Relief Potion. You might as well bring the Bruise Be Gone too."

Hermione returned in short order carrying a tray with the supplies mentioned. Pomfrey grabbed a goblet of dark, steaming liquid and presented it to Harry.

"Bottoms up, Mr. Potter."

Harry took the goblet. Whatever was in it smelled awful. He threw it back in one swallow, trying not to taste it while it was in his mouth. It took a couple of minutes, but his lingering nausea faded away and the spots in his vision disappeared. His pounding headache remained though.

Pomfrey offered him another goblet.

"This one should help with the headache and other pains."

Harry did as directed.

Pomfrey nodded in satisfaction.

"Miss Granger can help you with the Bruise Be Gone," Pomfrey instructed. "Be sure to shower in an hour's time to wash off the salve. And no magic until after breakfast tomorrow. I don't want any complications from that concussion."

"Yes, ma'am."

Pomfrey nodded once again before turning to leave. A swish of her wand made privacy screens appear around Harry's bed.

Harry looked at Hermione.

She was glaring at him again.

"Strip," she commanded.

"Err…"

"Strip," she said again, "you do want the Bruise Be Gone, don't you?"

Seeing no use in arguing, Harry removed his gorget, gambeson, and undershirt. His arm and the entire left side of his body was one dark bruise.

"Trousers too," Hermione calmly stated.

"Err…"

"Oh honestly!" Hermione huffed, "there won't be any of that!"

Harry hesitantly followed her orders. Once he was stripped down to his boxers and socks, Hermione began applying the bruise salve.

Harry thought that she could have been a bit gentler if she wanted.

"Quit squirming," she admonished.
"Sorry."

Hermione worked in silence for a few minutes.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry said again.

"What for?" the witch asked without pausing her work.

"We didn't find your parents."

"Hush."

"What?" Harry asked in confusion.

"I'm not thinking about that right now."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll have plenty of time to curl up in your arms and have a good cry in a bit," Hermione explained, "but right now I've got to put you back together. I'll worry about the rest later."

Hermione worked in silence while she applied the rest of the salve.

When she was finished, she sealed the jar of yellow paste, cleaned off her hands, and then seated herself next to Harry, pulling his right arm around her shoulders.

"I think you should start wearing the helmet with the armor," Hermione pronounced.

Harry sighed.

"Don't give me that," the witch continued, "that concussion could have been much worse. The helmet might have saved you from that."

"I don't think the tradeoff is worth it," Harry replied. "I can barely see or hear with that thing on. And it's even hard to breathe. I think I'm better off without it."

"Well, I'll just have to figure something out then," Hermione declared. "If you're going to insist on carelessly throwing yourself into situations like that, you'll need something to protect your thick skull."

Harry wisely chose not to bring up the fact that becoming a paladin and sticking his 'thick skull' into danger was all Hermione's idea in the first place.

"Let me look over the helmet later tonight after I've enchanted your scabbard. Maybe a modified Transparency Charm on the inside… and an Air Freshening Charm…"

"Whatever you say, Hermione."

She didn't respond so Harry changed the topic.

"Good job dropping that car on the giant's head by the way, it looked like it was the only spell that really did anything."

Hermione actually blushed a little bit before responding.

"Well, when I came out of the house and saw you fighting that huge thing, my mind went back to
the troll in first year, and, well, Wingardium Leviosa seemed like the obvious choice."

Harry chuckled and leaned down to plant a quick kiss on her forehead.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Please don't get tossed around by any more giant monsters."

"I'll do my best, but no promises."

The two teenagers lapsed into silence after that. Harry tried to quietly provide what consolation he could while his girlfriend leaned against him. Eventually Hermione sniffled and wiped her eyes.

"The house was such a mess, Harry," she quietly said. "It looked like a whirlwind went through it. They weren't in the basement. Professor Lupin cast Homenum Revelio, but nothing came back."

"We'll find them, Hermione," Harry said softly.

Hermione closed her eyes and buried her face in Harry's shoulder for a long moment before pulling back again.

"No, we won't."

"Hermione, don't give up hope—" Harry started, but the witch cut him off.

"No, Harry, I won't give up hope, but we can't go out looking for them again."

"Hermione…"

"No. It's too dangerous. Besides, I honestly have no idea where to look next. The whole neighborhood was abandoned. Who knows where they might be by now if they're… if they're even still alive."

Harry sighed. She was right of course. Going to the Granger's house had been the right thing to do, but without any other leads, searching blindly wasn't likely to do much good. And it was dangerous. It was a good thing that Harry and Tonks merely needed to distract the asphalt giant for a few moments and didn't actually have to defeat it. They had no idea what other dangers and monstrosities were now lurking in their magic-saturated world.

"We'll keep sending owls," Harry finally decided while pulling his girlfriend closer. "Everyday. If the government managed to evacuate them and get them to a shelter or something… maybe Hedwig just couldn't get through to them there. Eventually an owl will get to them."

They lapsed into silence for a long while.

"I've still got you, Harry," Hermione finally said.

Harry smiled.

"That you do," he replied.

"I think I'll be okay as long as I still have you."
Fun fact: I thought about having Hermione's neighborhood be strewn with dead bodies, the Grangers among them. That seemed too dark. Then I wrote a version where they were found in the basement and rescued. But that seemed unrealistic. Why would they stick around when everyone else had seemingly fled? Besides, bringing them into the story at this point wouldn't really add anything essential to the mix. So I decided to leave it ambiguous. Whether or not the Grangers are dead or alive can be up to you and your imagination. At least for now…

So what do you think?
Chapter 34

The Great Hall was packed to bursting whenever it was time to eat.

With so many people fleeing to Hogwarts for safety over the past few days, it was becoming more and more difficult to manage the simple necessities of daily life like meals. However, no matter how many people crammed around the tables, there always seemed to be just enough room. The magic of Hogwarts was stretching itself to provide what was needed.

Even with so many people, the noise in the hall was just above a low murmur. The events of the previous days had not left many in a joyful mood. Everyone was working hard to solve the ever-increasing list of problems, and by the time dinner rolled around, they were all rather tired.

Harry sliced a piece of sausage, brought it to his mouth, and chewed. The house-elves in the kitchens had somehow managed to keep up with the influx of hungry mouths. Part of him thought that they might even be happier than they had ever been with so much to do and so many people to care for. He didn't dare voice that opinion out loud of course – some things you just didn't say when Hermione Granger was your girlfriend.

The Weasleys, minus Charlie, who was still outside the country, had all made their way to the castle. The big family took up a sizable portion of the Gryffindor table. Harry and Hermione were having their dinner amongst them, seated next to the twins. Lavender was perched in the middle of the red-haired family, sandwiched between Ron and Molly. The blonde girl ate lethargically, with one of Ron's arms wrapped around her waist. Her family had neither come to Hogwarts nor had they responded to any of her owls. No one knew where they were.

Lavender was not alone in her worry. Many at the castle were anxious about missing loved ones. The turmoil that Voldemort had brought upon the world made for a somber tone in the Great Hall of Hogwarts.

Harry speared some green beans and glanced up to the Head Table. McGonagall and the rest of the staff were doing their best to organize everything that was going on at the school, and they were doing an admirable job of it too. They even managed to put on a constant air of confidence about the situation. Their leadership had gone a long way in keeping the ever-increasing population of Hogwarts from falling into desperation and despair.

Like the house tables, the Head Table had been expanded to make more room. Lupin was once again seated with the faculty along with Tonks and her parents. Harry recognized many faces from the Order of the Phoenix. There were also about twenty or so Aurors, including Moody and Shacklebolt, seated up there as well. Snape was conspicuous in his absence.

Dumbledore's throne sat empty.

What little dinner conversation there was abruptly cut off as a bright ball of light rushed into the room. A feeling of safety and security fleetingly warmed those touched by the light before it halted in front of McGonagall at the Head Table and coalesced into the form of a silver doe. A harried voice spoke forth from the *Patronus*, three words that echoed throughout the Hall.

"He is coming."

The glowing doe faded away.

Sound returned to the Great Hall. First it was whispers, but quickly it turned into shouting and
screaming as more and more of those present realized just who 'he' was.

Voldemort was coming to Hogwarts.

A hand clamped down on and squeezed Harry's. He glanced over and meet the worried eyes of Hermione.

Pandemonium broke loose. Students were crying and running about in a frenzy. Parents frantically pulled their children close. People began haphazardly moving toward the doors.

A loud cannon blast brought all sound and motion to a halt once more.

"Students are to *calmly* return to their dormitories!" the magically amplified voice of the Acting Headmistress rang out through the room.

No one moved.

"Now!" McGonagall commanded.

"What bloody good is that going to do?!" someone shouted from the crowd. "We need to run!"

Chaos broke out again. McGonagall tried to shout over the commotion, but no one was paying her any attention. Soon panic would take hold and overwhelm the crowd.

*This can't happen!* Harry thought. *We need some semblance of order or we're all going to be slaughtered.*

He looked over to the Head Table. The professors were trying in vain to recapture everyone's attention. They were ignored. In the minds of common witches and wizards, what were a bunch of school teachers supposed to do against Voldemort?

Without further thought, Harry leapt up onto the table in front of him.

"Listen!" Harry cried out desperately. "Everyone, listen!"

Slowly, the commotion and shouting diminished, but the sound of quiet sobbing could still be heard. All eyes turned to him in expectation. He was still Harry Potter after all.

He didn't really know what to say, but he had to try something. Someone had to do something.

"We can't run from this—" Harry started, only to be immediately cut off.

"You've lost it, Potter!" someone cried out from the direction of the Slytherin Table. "We have to run!"

"There's nowhere to run to!" Harry shouted back, silencing his anonymous challenger. "And you know it!" Harry's eyes searched through the crowd. "You've all heard what's happened out there. Some of you have *seen* it for yourselves. There is *nowhere* left to go! We can't run anymore, there's nowhere left to hide! There's no one left to fight our battles for us. It's time for us to **stand** and **fight** together!"

"You're effin' *crazy!*" someone shouted as murmurs started up again. "Dumbledore fought and he's *dead*! You-Know-Who *killed* him! What chance do we have?! What makes you think you *can* do better?"

Harry snapped his mouth shut. But instead of allowing panic to overtake them again, the crowd
stood and waited. All eyes fixed on Harry.

They were looking for something from him, he realized, even if they didn't really know it themselves. They wanted an answer. They needed an answer. They needed hope. With the Darkness closing in, surrounding them now more than ever, they needed a Light to keep it at bay.

And they were looking to Harry Potter to provide it.

He looked down to Hermione. Her eyes glistened and tear tracks stained her cheeks. She was trembling. She was afraid.

In that moment, Harry realized that he was afraid too. Fear was threatening to overwhelm and crush him. He'd been there at the Ministry. He'd seen what had happened. He was there when Voldemort broke Dumbledore and killed him. He saw Keldorn fall before the might of that horrible undead wizard. He could still run. It would be so much easier to just sit back down and let mayhem break loose again. He could then sneak out. Grab Hermione, find his cloak of invisibility, and make a break for it.

No.

Harry resolutely crushed those thoughts. Fear would not win. He would stand when fear demanded that he run.

His eyes settled on Hermione again and his mind went back to the words that she had once spoken about him. An afternoon not so long ago, but now seemingly from another lifetime, when Hermione desperately tried to convince Keldorn to take Harry as his squire, to train him to be a paladin. She'd spoken with passion and fervor, listing Harry's feats and exploits, expounding on his qualities and virtues, and arguing that Harry was already everything that a paladin should be – a slayer of monsters and defender of all that was right and good.

A hero.

At the time, Hermione's zealous assertions had left Harry feeling quite embarrassed. He hadn't seen any of the qualities she talked about in himself. He thought she'd been dead wrong about him.

But sometimes it takes a different perspective to shed light on the truth. Harry might not have ever felt like a hero, but to Hermione he was. He'd jumped on the back of a troll for her and saved her life. In that moment, he became not only her friend, but also her hero. For the people of Magical Britain, who had been living in constant fear of the Dark Lord, Halloween of 1981 made Harry their Boy-Who-Lived, their hero.

Harry looked out at the people silently watching him. They wanted to know how he could possibly succeed where the greatest of wizards had failed. These people needed hope. They needed a Light.

And Harry would give them one.

"You're right," he shouted to the crowd, confidence filling his voice, "I'm not Dumbledore. I can't do what he could. But I am Harry Potter! The Boy-Who-Lived! The Chosen One! I've fought Voldemort six times, and I'm still standing! You all know me! You've all read about me and heard stories about me. Well, I'm here to tell you that Voldemort will not win! Not if you stand with me! Not if we stand against him! It only takes one Light to beat back the Darkness! He has nothing! He fights for nothing! He is empty and evil and lifeless. I would pity him any other day, but today I will stand against him! I will fight him! I will throw him down and shatter his Darkness into
nothing! For all his evil and darkest arts, we can beat him!

"It's time to call Hogwarts to arms!" Harry's bright, shining armor unfolded upon him as he shouted the command words. In a quick, fluid motion, he drew forth the Sword of Gryffindor and thrust the flashing, silver blade to the sky above him. "It's time to stand together as the Light against the Darkness!"

With a thunderous roar, fire exploded above Harry's head. The crimson light of dancing flames illumined the Great Hall and reflected in the eyes of all those present. Harry lifted his gaze to see Fawkes hovering above him, wreathed in flame. A piercing cry rang out, and Phoenix Song kindled the fire of hope in the hearts of all those who listened.

There was no shouting or cheering, but there was resolution. Hogwarts was resolved to go to war; to stand against whatever Darkness might come.

OoOoO

OoOoO

Commotion broke out in the Great Hall once again, but this time there was a sense of purpose.

The prefects collected the students and the many young children present and led them to the relative safety of the dormitories.

Harry and Hermione followed McGonagall as she and several teachers and Aurors marched out of the castle. They passed through the Entrance Hall and stopped just outside the main doors. McGonagall paused before she whipped out her wand with a flourish and then thrust it down to the stones beneath her feet.

"Hogwarts Defensor!" she bellowed.

A deep, powerful rumble shook the earth. The ground heaved and rolled beneath them. Harry reached out a hand to steady himself against the wall as the tremor continued. Suddenly, the ground burst open, sending fountains of dirt rocketing up into the air as massive stones emerged from the earth.

Harry lifted his shield above his head, wary of falling debris, but the quick wands of Professors Sprout and Vector had already protected those present with a charm.

When the ground finally stopped shaking, Harry looked to see that a massive curtain wall now surrounded the castle. It stood about fifty yards beyond the doors of the Entrance Hall. It was huge, perhaps twenty feet thick and more than fifty feet high. Towers were spaced like guardians along the wall, and there was a massive, fortified gatehouse across from the main doors of the castle. Harry stepped forward and squinted to get a better look. He couldn't make out any mortar or individual bricks or stones. It looked like the entire wall was one enormous piece of solid granite.

"That should do," McGonagall said with a satisfied nod.

Harry looked to Hermione. Her mouth was hanging open as she stared in disbelief.

"But I thought…" the young witch began, "I thought the castle's defensive wall was torn down in the eighteenth century to provide, what Hogwarts, A History called, 'a more pleasing aesthetic atmosphere…'"

"Heavens no!" McGonagall replied. "I don't know where that idea came from. As if the castle
would ever let that happen."

"Now we just need to man the defenses!" Flitwick squeaked before flourishing his own wand. "Piertotum Locomotor!"

The ground shook once again as the statues and gargoyles that adorned the castle leapt off the walls and crashed to the earth. A great clamor could be heard within the castle itself, and soon the cluster of witches and wizards had to scramble out of the way as a column of suits of armor marched out of the doors. The walls and towers were quickly manned with rows upon rows of bright, shining armor interspersed with fantastically-carved stone men, women, and beasts.

"I've always wanted to cast that spell!" Flitwick laughed with a broad smile.

"How is this possible?" Harry asked aloud.

"The Founders lived in very violent times, Mr. Potter," McGonagall answered. "They didn't choose a castle for their school at random, you know. They knew what they were about."

Harry looked to the newly revealed defenses again. They looked solid. Strong. Maybe there was cause for hope yet.

"Hagrid!" McGonagall called out.

"Righ' here, Professor!" the large man replied as he lumbered over.

"I want you and Septima to go out and gather in everyone and everything still out on the grounds and bring them back behind these walls."

"O' course, Professor!" Hagrid replied while Vector simply nodded. "Be needin' ter get all me little beasties in here, anyways."

"Perhaps Mr. Potter and Miss Granger might help," McGonagall added after a moment.

"We might as well lend a hand, too," Lupin spoke up while gesturing to himself and Tonks.

"Good," McGonagall nodded, "but for Merlin's sake, be quick about it. We don't know how long we have until You-Know-Who shows up."

"Let's go, Harry, Hermione!" Hagrid called out as he started jogging toward the gates.

Harry and Hermione quickly followed the half giant out onto the grounds. As they left, McGonagall was barking orders left and right, putting everyone to work. Soon, the walls would be defended not only by statues and animated suits of armor, but by every witch and wizard with a wand that could stand and fight.

As they passed through the gatehouse, Harry marveled at the structure. It was a long tunnel carved through the solid granite of the fortification. It had two sets of thick, iron-banded doors – one on the outside facing the grounds, and one on the inside facing the Entrance Hall. In the center of the tunnel, a steel portcullis was currently raised into a slot in the ceiling. Soon, that would be brought down, its sheer weight providing an almost impassible barrier. Murder holes dotted the ceiling and the walls, which would allow the defenders to curse anyone within the tunnel from relative safety. Trying to pass through the gates while they were defended was tantamount to certain death.

The sun was beginning to set as Harry, Hermione, Hagrid, Vector, Lupin, and Tonks emerged from the newly fortified castle. Hagrid quickly ran off in the direction of his hut, no doubt anxious to
bring all of his 'harmless' creatures into the safety of the walls.

With a shouted, "Expecto Patronum!" a silver wolf raced into the Forbidden Forest. Harry raised an eyebrow at the wizard next to him.

"Need to warn the centaurs," Lupin explained.

Another silver wolf leapt off toward the lake a moment later.

"Merpeople," Tonks said without prompting.

"Good thinking," Vector complimented before she sent her own Patronus racing away. "That should raise the alarm in Hogsmeade.

Working under the Arithmancy professor's direction, Hermione and Tonks quickly dismantled the horse stables and began floating them through the gatehouse where they reassembled in Hogwarts' new castle bailey. Vector bewitched the horses and had them calmly trot after the floating portions of the stables.

"Huh," Harry murmured, impressed with the magical control the witches displayed.

Lupin was running toward the greenhouses, likely to start something similar. Harry made to go after him, but then stopped in realization.

He still didn't have a wand.

He wouldn't be much to help magically shrinking and transporting things like the others were doing.

But he wasn't useless either.

Harry ran to the hippogriff stables. He entered and his eyes quickly searched out Buckbeak. Without prompting, the grey hippogriff bowed in deference to Harry, and the rest of the herd followed suit. He grabbed his familiar saddle, tack, and other gear and threw them onto Buckbeak. It only took a few moments for him to get everything buckled into place before Harry leapt into the saddle. He eased out of Buckbeak's stall before trotting up and down the center aisle of the stables, unlatching each stall as he passed by.

Harry rode out, the entire herd of hippogriffs following just as Hermione and Tonks turned to begin magically dismantling the structure.

"Mr. Potter," Vector began, "what are you doing?"

"Well, err… sorry, Professor," Harry answered, "but you wouldn't be able to bewitch the hippogriffs to simply march into the castle like you did with the horses. Besides, they might not take kindly to you trying. So I thought I'd lead them in the old fashioned way."

Hermione flashed him a brilliant smile.

"Good thinking, Harry!"

"But how did you get them to follow you?" Vector asked, puzzlement evident on her face.

It was obvious to Harry that the Arithmancy professor did not spend much time with magical creatures.
"Well, Buckbeak here," Harry gave his mount an affectionate pat on the neck, "has made himself the leader of the herd. The rest should follow his example. At least I think they should."

It didn't take long for the witches to dismantle the stables and reassemble them inside the walls. Harry urged Buckbeak into the air, and a quick burst of flight later had the animals safely back in their stalls inside the castle.

With the other hippogriffs accounted for, Harry directed Buckbeak into the air once more. He swooped down to meet Hermione and Vector as they were heading to the Quidditch Pitch.

"Get the brooms from the locker rooms," Harry suggested. Hermione nodded. "They might be useful. Buckbeak and I'll take a quick flight around the grounds and see if there's anyone out here. I'll get them to head back to the castle."

"Good idea, Mr. Potter," Vector replied.

Harry took to the skies once more. He searched the grounds for anyone or anything that might need his attention. He spotted a couple of figures lying on the grass on the far side of the lake. Buckbeak raced through the sky and then dove down toward them.

Apparently it's quite frightening for a fully armored man mounted on a hippogriff to swoop down out of nowhere and land right next to you while you're in the middle of an intense snog. The girl let out a startled, ear-piercing shriek as Buckbeak reared up next to her.

"Merlin's bloody beard!" her male companion shouted.

Harry looked them over. The yellow trimming on their robes marked them for Hufflepuffs, fifth years, Harry thought.

"P-Potter?" the boy asked while trying to bring his breathing under control, "What…?"

"Get back to the castle!" Harry commanded.

"You're not a prefect! We're not doing anything wrong!" the girl argued.

"It's just a bit of snogging!" the boy added.

"Voldemort is coming!" Harry shouted.

The girl shrieked again, and this time her boyfriend joined her.

"Get back to the castle!" Harry commanded once more before he and Buckbeak launched back into the air. The two Hufflepuffs scrambled and ran back to the school.

The sun finished sinking behind the horizon and darkness soon began to roll in. Harry wheeled Buckbeak about in several circuits over the grounds. He only came across one other isolated group of people, a family that had been trying to find some peace out near the boathouse. Harry quickly sent them to safety. Beneath him on the ground, Hagrid did his best to wrangle his creatures into several hastily conjured pens in the new bailey, while Vector, Hermione, Lupin, and Tonks levitated everything they could into the fortress. All the while a stream of witches and wizards hurriedly made their way up the path from the nearby wizarding town and into the castle.

Harry swung around once again for another circuit when he felt every hair on his body stand on end. Chills ran down his spine as if someone dumped a torrent of ice water down his shirt. Suddenly he just knew what it meant – somewhere nearby, a vast, malicious will had set its
intentions upon Hogwarts.

Voldemort was here.

Harry cast his eyes toward Hogsmeade, he could feel that the evil intent came from that direction. There were still people on the path from the town. With the Dark Lord now present, they would soon be overrun, caught out in the open.

Harry urged Buckbeak into a dive, pulling up at the last second to land before Vector and Hermione.

"He's here!" Harry shouted. "Get back to the castle!" He then turned to launch into the air again.

"Harry! Where do you think you're going?!" Hermione yelled at him.

"I've got to buy some time for the people on the path from Hogsmeade," he shot back.

"You can't!"

"I have to!"

Hermione hesitated for a split second before responding.

"Fine!" she marched over to the hippogriff, "then I'm coming too!"

"Hermione…"

"Not another word!" Hermione ordered as she vaulted up into place behind Harry. A quickly muttered Sticking Charm held her securely in place behind Harry's armored back.

"But you hate flying," he argued.

"Just don't get us killed and I'll be fine." she snapped back.

"Miss Granger! Mr. Potter! What do you think you're doing?!" Vector finally seemed to rouse herself out of her shock at Hermione's actions.

"Sorry, Professor," Hermione said with a blush. "Get the others back to the castle."

Harry couldn't wait any longer and spurred the hippogriff into the sky.

Hermione screamed.

"Hermione," Harry began again, "I can still let you off at the castle—"

"Oh, honestly!" she exclaimed, "I was just a little startled at how fast you took off! I'll be fine. I think…"

Harry wheeled around and climbed higher as they turned toward Hogsmeade.

"Your helmet, Harry," Hermione admonished as she clutched to his back.

Harry sighed in response.

"Don't give me that!" his girlfriend snapped, "I've enchanted it just fine for you! The last thing we need right now is for you to get another concussion!"
"Okay! Okay!" Harry acquiesced before muttering, "To arms..." and a visored helm appeared on his head. Hermione had spent several hours inscribing runes on the interior of the helmet. She managed to make both a Transparency Charm and an Air Freshening Charm work within it without interfering with the original enchantments. With her additions, neither Harry's vision nor his breathing were constrained by wearing the helmet. It still muffled his hearing, but not even Hermione Granger could solve every problem in just a few days' spare time.

As they soared toward the village, Harry noted that the last stragglers on the path were about halfway to Hogwarts.

"We don't need to save the town," he told the witch behind him, "we just need to buy some time for those who made it out to get to the castle."

"Okay," Hermione replied. "So what should we do?"

"Let's take a look first."

A moment later the Village of Hogsmeade came into view.

Or rather, what used to be Hogsmeade came into view. A dark, rolling mass of bodies rampaged through the town. Spell fire flickered here and there, setting buildings ablaze. Soon the sky would be filled with thick, black smoke. A stray gust of wind brought with it the stench of rancid meat.

Harry gagged.

"What is that?" Hermione asked in disgust.

"Undead."

"Oh," was her only verbal reply but her hands gripped him even tighter.

Harry cast his eyes over the town; he didn't see Voldemort anywhere, but he had no doubt that the Lich was somewhere nearby. A cluster of about six cloaked and masked Death Eaters caught his eye – they were throwing spell after spell at the iron gate in the low wall that surrounded the grounds of Hogwarts.

"See that group of Death Eaters trying to open the gate?" Harry asked the girl behind him.

"I see them," she acknowledged.

"If we stop them, that should buy us the time we need."

Hermione nodded and said, "Good idea."

"They haven't seen us yet, so we can surprise them. I'm going to dive-bomb them. When we pull away, start casting to cover our retreat."

"Wait!" Hermione shouted while she began digging through the small bag she kept at her side, "I have something that might help!"

"What?"

"Aha!" she cried as she pulled out a small green and brown cube. "Portable Swamp!"

"Where did you get that?"
"Remember that trip we made to the twins' shop? How they loaded us up with a bunch of things?"

Harry nodded in understanding.

"I never knew you carried pranking supplies everywhere you went," Harry said with laughter in his voice.

"You never know when something might be useful!"

Harry reached down to his side and unsheathed the Sword of Gryffindor.

"Okay, here we go!"

Harry could feel Hermione tense up behind him, likely biting back a scream of terror, as he used his knees to urge Buckbeak into a dive. In a matter of seconds they plummeted hundreds of feet toward the ground. The hippogriff changed direction at the last moment and cut straight through the center of the Death Eaters.

Cries of startled surprise were quickly cut off as Harry slashed around him with his magical sword. Buckbeak let out a shrill cry as he bore down upon one of the Death Eaters and raked his talons across their face. Hermione threw the cube and it impacted with a flash. The engagement lasted only a moment, and then the hippogriff was carrying them back into the sky.

They had not passed unnoticed however.

Several nearby Death Eaters brought their wands to bear on their attackers and the night sky was soon filled with curses and hexes.

Under Harry's control, the hippogriff dodged and weaved to and fro through the bright splashes of murderous color.

"Hermione!" he shouted, "start casting!"

"I'm trying!" she cried, pointing her wand behind her, "Confringo! Stupefy!" But her aim was way off. Harry's erratic flying was simply too much.

"Hold it steady! I can't aim!" she yelled.

"Do you want us to get hit?!" he shouted back.

"Oooh… fine! Then screw this! Protego!" Hermione's Shield Charm sprang into place behind them as they continued their retreat.

Soon they were out of range of the Death Eaters on the ground.

"You okay?" Harry asked now that they were somewhat safe.

"Fine," Hermione replied, breathing heavily.

Harry swung them around again to get a look at the damage they had caused. Hermione's spell casting might have been way off the mark, but her aim with the little cube was dead-on. A large swamp now covered the area in front of the gate. He could see two Death Eaters floundering in the mud, trying to pull themselves out. What had once been solid ground was now an impassible mess.

"That should hold them long enough," Harry said before he wheeled them around again and took off toward the castle. They quickly caught up with the last of the stragglers fleeing the village.
Harry circled overhead, just to be sure that there were no surprises.

As he flew, Harry's mind went back to their brief engagement. The fight had been so quick. It was over in an instant, probably lasting only a second or two. Buckbeak dove through them. Hermione threw the Portable Swamp. Harry slashed the Sword of Gryffindor once to the left and once to the right. Barely enough time to blink.

But as they had wheeled around again to get another look, Harry had seen what his actions had wrought. He didn't see just the Death Eaters struggling to get out of the quagmire.

Several black-robed bodies were sinking in the murk, the water around them stained with red.

He glanced at the Sword of Gryffindor held securely in his gauntleted fist. The blade was crimson. He hadn't even felt it in the heat of the moment. The sword passed through them seemingly without resistance.

Harry closed his eyes and uttered a silent prayer. He had known that he would need to kill eventually. You don't prepare to become a paladin, you don't train yourself with the sword without knowing that the moment to use it would come sooner or later. Paladins were warriors. Warriors killed when it was necessary. Besides, they were Death Eaters – murderers following Voldemort, out to kill school children.

Harry felt guilty nonetheless.

He had taken a life. More than one most likely. Not by accident, but by choice. Before the night was over he would likely take more.

Harry wrenched his mind away from those dark thoughts. He would mourn for his fallen enemies later.

Soon enough the last of the villagers made it inside the walls. Harry flew over the gatehouse and directed Buckbeak down to land in the bailey before the doors of the Entrance Hall. A loud crash heralded the closing of the gates and the massive portcullis slammed into place.

The space between the curtain wall and the castle was humming with activity – people rushing back and forth in every direction.

Hermione hastily canceled her Sticking Charm and slid off the hippogriff. She stumbled on wobbly legs over to the doors of the castle before reaching out to steady herself.

"Hermione?" Harry asked in worry. Her face looked a little green.

Suddenly she hunched over and vomited.

"Hermione!" Harry cried as he jumped out of the saddle. He ran over to her and laid his sword on the ground before reaching for his helmet. He fumbled with the latches for a moment before he came to his senses. "Return to the Gorget!" he shouted, causing the helmet along with the rest of his armor and shield to fold itself away.

"What is it?" Harry frantically asked. "What's wrong? Did you get hit?"

"I'm… fine…" Hermione gasped between dry heaves.

Harry quickly looked her over, his eyes searching for blood or any trace of a wound. Not finding anything out of place, he tried laying a comforting hand on her back.
"What's wrong?"

Hermione stopped heaving, and with a deep breath, stood up straight.

"I think it's just the adrenaline wearing off," she finally said.

Harry just quirked an eyebrow at her. That was apparently the wrong thing to do.

"Not everyone enjoys flying around like a bloody madman!" she shouted in self-defense. "Some of us value our lives!"

"Hey! You insisted on coming!"

"And it's a bloody good thing I did too! We're lucky I had that swamp!"

Harry bit back a retort.

"You're right," he said, "and now is not the time for us to be fighting with each other."

Hermione calmed herself and managed to look abashed.

"Sorry," she muttered. "You're right of course."

Harry smiled at that.

"Can I get that in writing?"

She smiled back.

"Hush, you."

"Are you really okay?"

"I'm fine, Harry." Hermione waved her wand in a quick Breath Freshening Charm before giving him a peck on the lips. "Let's go find the others."

Harry reached down for the Sword of Gryffindor. He noticed Hermione's eyes widen when she saw that it was stained with blood. Harry quickly wiped off the blade and sheathed the sword without comment.

"Let's go," he finally said. "We're not out of this yet."
Chapter 35

Harry hurried through the crowd with Hermione at his side. It seemed like everyone had one last thing to do before they took up their positions on the walls. Wherever he went, Harry was met with quick waves and resolute nods. He might not be in command of the defense of Hogwarts, a fact for which he was immensely grateful, but everyone acknowledged leadership.

The students were supposed to be in their dormitories, but Harry could see several moving amidst the statues and suits of armor along the ramparts. It looked like most of the older students were not content to leave the defense of the school to the teachers and the handful of Aurors that were present. Robes with red trim were everywhere, but so were blue and yellow. Even a smattering of green could be seen standing on the walls. The prefects must have given up trying to keep the students away. True to their house's nature, there were even a few of the younger Gryffindors taking up positions.

Hermione pointed and Harry glanced up to see McGonagall standing with Mad-Eye Moody at the top of the tower above the Entrance Hall. From there they could overlook the gatehouse, the walls, and much of the grounds beyond. It was the perfect position from which to direct the defense. He entered the castle and climbed the narrow, twisting stairs before he emerged on the roof. The Acting Headmistress was gesturing sharply as she gave directions to an Auror.

"Potter!" Moody barked a moment later, "What'd you see while you were whirling about on your hippogriff up there?"

Harry quickly described the scene in Hogsmeade – that the town was overrun with Death Eaters and a horde of undead. He mentioned how they had managed to buy some time with the Portable Swap at the gates, but that it wouldn't last long. Moody nodded at what he was hearing.

"I want you up on top of the gatehouse," the old Auror said once Harry was finished. "You're gonna be in the thick of it no matter what, so we might as well put you there to begin with. And that Patronus of yours might do some good."

"Err…" Harry hesitantly started to respond.

"Spit it out boy!" Moody shouted. "We don't have all bloody night!"

"I don't have a wand."

Moody's electric blue eye twirled to take in the young man before settling on the sword at his hip.

"Ha!" the old Auror laughed, "no wand and you're still up here looking for a fight! Likely to get yourself killed. Good on you, lad! Get down there anyways, you'll be able to get some practice with that sword of yours!"

Harry merely nodded in response and turned to leave. He stopped when he heard Hermione's voice.

"I can cast a corporal Patronus," she mentioned aloud.

"Really now, eh Missy?"

In any other situation, Hermione probably would have taken offense to being called 'Missy,' but in that moment, waiting for Voldemort's forces to arrive, the young witch let it slide.
"Of course."
"Good," Moody snapped, "Then go with Potter. Might need you to relay messages along the walls."

Harry's stomach sank. He didn't like that idea. It was one thing to accept in the heat of the moment that his girlfriend would be coming along with him into danger, but it was something else entirely to have her stationed with him where the fighting was likely to be fiercest.

"Err…" Harry began, about to argue that Hermione should stay where she was, where it would be safer. Or maybe even move to wherever would be furthest away from the fighting, like the top of the Astronomy Tower or maybe the Chamber of Secrets.

But the glare that Hermione speared him with was rather effective in shutting him up.

"What is it, Potter?!" Moody barked.

"Never mind," Harry mumbled.

"Off with you, then!"

The two students turned together to make their way to the gatehouse. Harry really didn't like the idea of Hermione being on the front line. His stomach churned with anxiety at the thought of her being in what was likely to be the most dangerous place in the coming battle. He took a deep breath. He knew his thoughts were emotional, that his desire to keep her as safe as possible was due to how he felt about her. But he also knew that he couldn't afford to have his feelings in control at the moment. He needed to be able to think clearly in what was to come.

Harry glanced at the girl next to him. She was a sight to behold. Her hair was wild about her, but her eyes were set with fierce determination. To Harry, Hermione was never more beautiful than when she had that sense of resolution about her. Her complete dedication and unwavering bravery were incredibly attractive.

He knew that their peers sometimes wondered why the smartest witch in generations wasn't in Ravenclaw, but he never did. Anyone that saw her in a moment like this would realize that she was a Gryffindor down to her very bones. He'd never be able to convince her to go somewhere safer. But he had to do something to protect her.

"Hermione—" Harry began.

"I'm not leaving you, Harry," she responded immediately as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. "So don't bother."

"Err… it's not that."

Her face softened just a tad.

"Okay, then what is it?"

"I was wondering if you'd do me a quick favor."

"I'm listening."

"Could you run up to Gryffindor Tower and grab my cloak?" he asked.

Hermione's brows furrowed in thought.
"Why would you need that?" she asked. "After your speech, the last thing you should do is disappear. The people need to see that you're here, fighting with them, or they might turn and run."

"I know, that's why I'm asking you to go get it, so I can stay out here."

"But why?"

"Just trust me."

"Fine."

She hurried off into the castle.

Harry turned toward the gatehouse. Before entering the side door that would lead him to the roof, he was stopped by a hippogriff.

"Buckbeak," Harry said with a smile as he gave the noble creature a pat on the neck. "Thanks for your help earlier."

The hippogriff chirped in response and Harry knew that his meaning was received. And then a sudden thought struck him.

"Maybe you could keep yourself ready," he said as he continued to stroke the hippogriff's neck. "I might need you again. You willing to help me fight some more?"

Buckbeak chirped again in what came across as impatient affirmation. Of course I am, the creature seemed to say.

"Right then," Harry replied. "I'll be on the roof. But keep your eyes and ears open in case I call."

Buckbeak nodded before trotting off toward the stables that were housing the rest of the hippogriffs.

It wasn't long before Harry found himself standing at the edge of the battlements atop the gatehouse. The space was filled with silently watching statues and suits of armor. Harry was glad to have the magical sentinels at his side – there would be no break in their vigilance. They would have no fear and would not tire when the battle came. But Harry wasn't the only wizard present. Two Aurors were positioned in the corners, and a handful of Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors were standing around, trying to calm their nerves.

Harry glanced to the side, looking at the curtain wall that stretched out, surrounding the castle. It was well-defended. Statues and suits of armor making up the bulk of the force with witches and wizards sprinkled here and there to provide magical firepower. At the top of the nearest tower, perhaps a hundred feet to the left of the gatehouse, Harry could see Ron and Lavender holding each other as they kept watch over the grounds. All of the Weasleys would fight, he knew. Everyone would fight. There was nothing else for it.

Ron glanced over and noticed Harry watching him. He raised his hand and waved. Harry returned the gesture.

Light, keep them safe, he silently prayed.

The sound of the trapdoor opening caught his attention, and Harry turned to see Hermione emerging. She came to stand next to him and handed him a bundle of fluid, silky cloth.
"Well, here it is," the young witch said.

Harry smiled as he took the cloak from her. He let the silvery material fall open before he tossed it around her shoulders and clasped it at her neck.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing?"

"Keeping you safe," the young paladin replied as he watched everything but Hermione's head disappear from view.

Hermione flushed, no doubt working up some anger.

"I'm not some china doll that needs protecting!" she snapped. "I thought we talked about this already!"

"I know," Harry calmly replied. "I'm not tying you up and hiding you from the fight. I learned my lesson in Diagon Alley. But I have to do something to try and keep you safe. It's no different than you demanding that I wear Keldorn's armor. I'm not stopping you from doing your part, but you're going to be as safe as possible while you do it."

"Harry..." Hermione's voice softened.

"It's not much," Harry continued while fiddling with the cloak, "I'd wrap you up in steel if I could, but it's better than nothing. And it might give you some advantage. I don't want to lose you, Hermione, I love you too much for that."

Harry looked up to see Hermione's eyes shining with tears.

"You love me?" she softly asked.

Harry smiled shyly.

"I didn't really mean to let that slip out just now. But, yeah, I do. With all my heart. I know this probably isn't the best time to tell you. I should have done it sooner. But I do love you, Hermione Granger."

"I love you too, Harry," she breathed out before pulling him in for a hard kiss.

"So don't go getting hurt," Harry said once they pulled apart. "And keep the cloak on!"

"Okay," Hermione agreed. "But don't you do anything reckless!" she shot back.


"Why did I have to fall in love with a bloody Gryffindor?" Hermione asked aloud.

"A paladin too," Harry added.

Hermione pulled him in for another kiss. They kept their arms around one another as they shared one final moment of peace before the storm came.

OoOoO

OoOoO

A few hours later, Harry could sense that most of the witches and wizards waiting along the
battlements had begun to get rather nervous. There wasn't much conversation, only hushed whispers that didn't last long. The defenders stared out into the night, watching and waiting. Great Sunlight Charms had been cast by the professors to illumine the grounds around the castle, but it wasn't by sight that they knew Voldemort's army had finally arrived.

It was the smell that announced their presence.

Wafting up from the grounds, the stench of rotting meat surged over the walls.

"Gah!" gasped one of the Hufflepuffs atop the gatehouse with Harry, "what the bloody hell is that stink?!"

"Undead," Harry calmly answered.

"What?" the Hufflepuff responded.

"To arms!" Harry shouted, his armor springing out to encase him in enchanted steel. "They're here!"

Shouts rang out up and down the ramparts, calling everyone to be ready.

Harry looked at the panicked Hufflepuffs. "Inferi and ghouls most likely," he explained, "but maybe more. Use fire."

The students straightened as Harry spoke to them. They took in his direction and nodded when he was finished.

Soon a dark mass of shambling bodies stepped into the light. There were _thousands_. Harry felt his heart sink as he realized just how many there were, how _vast_ the enemy host truly was. Voldemort had had plenty of time over the past several days to add to his army, he realized. The world was in utter chaos and each death, each corpse provided an opportunity for another undead horror to be added to the ranks. The Dark Lord had an almost limitless supply of soldiers.

The host stopped perhaps two hundred yards away and stood as a silent, terrifying horde.

Harry couldn't see him, but he could feel the malevolent will out there in the darkness, and he knew that Voldemort was there.

The horde shifted and Death Eaters appeared in the front rank. There were perhaps three dozen or so of them; fewer than Harry had anticipated. They raised their wands, and a volley of bright spellfire rushed toward the castle.

"Incoming!" Harry yelled as he set his shield in front of him.

The curses and hexes struck hard and fast, but they had little effect. Most impacted the solid curtain wall and either bounced away harmlessly or were absorbed by the magic of the castle, adding their energy to the defense. The animated sentinels on the battlements proved impervious to the assault as well.

After several minutes, the ineffectual volleys ceased.

Cheering broke out amongst the defenders.

"It's just a test…" Hermione invisibly mumbled to herself at Harry's side. "He knows the castle's magic is too strong for him to overcome like that."
Then the shambling horde moved again. The Death Eaters disappeared into the mass of bodies, while the undead shuffled forward. They were soon close enough to be seen in detail. Some of the defenders quailed at the sight of rotting flesh and empty eye sockets. Festering wounds marred their bodies, exposing the bones beneath. Their empty groaning filled the air with horrible noise.

Harry could feel the fear begin to take hold of those around him. He whipped out his sword and held it firmly above his head.

"Steady!" he commanded. "Steady!"

Fire burst into life above the gatehouse. Flames danced as Phoenix Song filled the air, a cry of hope and bravery called out into the night. Harry felt his spirits lift, his heart strengthened by the song of the Firebird. Fawkes couldn't fight the battle for them, but he would lend courage to the defenders in their darkest hour.

The horde hesitated as the righteous song buffeted against them, but they lurched forward once again as the malevolent, iron will of their master drove them onward.

_Light, save us from this Darkness_, Harry silently prayed.

His prayer was answered.

As they marched toward the gatehouse, bright, crimson flame erupted from the fiends closest to Harry. Several of the monsters were utterly consumed in fire, while those nearby turned and fled screaming back into the darkness, unable to stand before the simple prayer of the paladin.

The wizards and witches along the walls brought their wands to bear and unleashed their magic.

_"Incendio!"_ Hermione's disembodied voice shouted from Harry's side, sending a jet of orange flame into the advancing ranks.

Fire rained down upon the enemy. Flame Whips and Fireballs. Infernos of all hues, red, blue, green, and more fell upon the undead, burning holes in their ranks and consuming their cursed flesh. Any other army would have fled in sheer terror when faced with such fiery death.

But the undead horde kept coming.

Soon they reached the base of the walls. The mindless Inferi began to beat their fists against the unyielding granite, even as fire poured down upon them. Burnt corpses began to pile up against the fortifications.

Harry felt the magic in the air shift a moment before the first ladders and ramps appeared. Moving like lightning, ghouls raced up the structures before they could be cast down. They screamed in unholy wrath as they threw themselves at the defenders. The statues and suits of armor went to work, shattering bones with stone fists and cleaving through rancid flesh with sharp steel.

More ladders and ramps were quickly conjured. They were dispelled or blasted apart by the defenders, only to be almost instantly replaced.

"Meeeaat!"

Harry turned to see that several ghouls had made it to the top of the gatehouse. Long, purple tongues lolled out of their too-large mouths. Wicked, yellow eyes gazed at the defenders in unnatural hunger. They lunged, ignoring the animated constructs in favor of reaching for living flesh.
"Get behind the statues!" Harry shouted before he stepped forward and brought the Sword of Gryffindor to bear, carving through two of the fiends in one stroke. He pulled his arm back before thrusting forward again, spearing another ghoul through the eye socket. Something latched onto his shield and pulled with inhuman strength. Harry swung his blade down, slicing through bones and severing limbs.

Beside him, axes and swords as well as stone claws and fists turned the battlements atop the gatehouse into a meat grinder.

Harry heard a scream from the ramparts below to his left. He glanced over to see a wizard thrown off the wall to disappear in the churning mass of undead below. He was likely ripped to shreds before he hit the ground.

Something slammed into the side of Harry's helmet.

He stumbled.

Dirty, broken fingernails clawed into the joints in his armor. He pivoted, and brought his blade crashing down upon the ghoul's skull. He turned again, preparing for the next strike, but it never came.

Breathing hard, Harry glanced around the parapets at the top of the gatehouse. Everyone was still standing as far as he could see. A couple of the statues were missing large chunks of stone, but most were fine.

"Hermione?" he asked aloud, knowing he'd be unable to see her.

"I'm fine, Harry."

Ghastly moaning drew Harry's attention back to the walls. The slower, but far more numerous Inferi had managed to scale the ladders. The statues and suits of armor stepped forward and were already hacking at the mass of undead. Harry leveled his sword and stepped into the fray.

OoOoO

OoOoO

The fighting continued unabated into the night for what seemed like hours. The magical sentinels were tireless in their work and the undead knew nothing but the malicious will that drove them forward. The horde was seemingly limitless. For every Inferius that was destroyed, two more replaced it.

But Harry and the other witches and wizards were merely human, and the battle was exhausting.

"We need to get rid of those ladders!" Harry panted as he pulled back from the front to catch his breath.

"We're trying!" Hermione invisibly responded. "But for every ladder we dispel, the Death Eaters just conjure another!"

Harry looked out past the Inferi clawing their way over the parapets and across the grounds. There, standing at the edge of the conjured Sunlight Charms, was a line of Death Eaters.

"Well, I guess we need to get rid of some Death Eaters, then," Harry said.
"They're out of range," Hermione argued.

"Leave that to me. Tell Moody to get some Aurors up on brooms. We'll hit them from the sky."

"Okay," she replied.

"Buckbeak!" Harry screamed into the bailey below as loudly as he could, "Buckbeak!"

A few moments later, the large hippogriff thudded down onto the roof next to him. Harry leapt into the saddle. By the time Hermione's otter Patronus was racing toward the top of the Entrance Hall, Harry was already airborne.

"Harry Potter!" the young witch screamed. "Get back here!"

"Keep dispelling those ladders!" he answered as he urged this mount higher, leaving his angry girlfriend behind him.

She'll be safer there for now, he quietly told himself.

Buckbeak suddenly turned and dove to the side.

"Whoa!" Harry shouted, trying to bring the hippogriff back around. But the creature would not be deterred and ignored his rider as it dove down into the bailey. Buckbeak flew in low over the stables and let out a long, high-pitched screech.

The call was answered by several others just like it, and soon the air was filled with the herd of hippogriffs.

"Reinforcements, huh?" Harry asked as his mount once more gave in to his direction. "Good thinking, Buckbeak." The creature chirped in response.

He led the herd higher and circled above the castle. He looked down at the battle below. There didn't seem to be any more of the fast-moving ghouls; they'd likely all been at the forefront of the horde and were by that point all cut down. Now the slower Inferi were steadily climbing the ladders and ramps to meet the steel and stone of the animated defenders. The statues and suits of armor were holding them off remarkably well, but they were slowly falling, one by one, to the attacking horde. The sheer number of undead would eventually overwhelm the walls if something wasn't done about the ladders. The witches and wizards were steadily vanishing them or blasting them apart, but they would succumb to exhaustion sooner or later. And focusing on the ladders drew their attention away from casting fire at the hordes of undead and thinning out their numbers. Few spells were being thrown into the throng below the walls, and the fall from a crumbling ladder often wasn't enough to destroy the Inferi. If the battle continued as it was, Hogwarts would be overrun.

A moment later, five Aurors on brooms rose up beside Harry.

"We need to take out some of those Death Eaters!" Harry shouted over the wind, "We'll be overrun otherwise!"

"How?!" a young witch shouted back at him.

"Follow me! Come in wands blazing after I hit them!"

Harry wheeled around and climbed higher. The hippogriffs followed, but he had to slow a little bit so that the brooms could keep pace. Soon he was directly above the line of Death Eaters. Applying
pressure with his knees, he urged Buckbeak into a dive and the rest of the herd followed. They plunged, plummeting hundreds of feet in mere seconds. The hippogriffs let out deafening screams a split second before they slammed into the Death Eaters, their razor-sharp talons tearing through flesh and bone. Spells started flashing in all directions. Jets of green and purple light flying everywhere. The screams of both men and beasts filled the air.

Harry slashed with the Sword of Gryffindor, the silver blade cutting through a skull-like mask before he brought up his shield to deflect a dark curse. He urged Buckbeak to keep moving; to stop going forward would be death. His sword flashed again, taking a witch's wand-hand off at wrist. Harry watched as she clutched the smoking stump to her chest and fell screaming to the ground. A moment later her thrashing stopped and she was still.

He didn't have time to dwell on it, but there was apparently more to the bloodstained Sword of Gryffindor than he had first thought.

Harry reflected another curse with his shield before turning his mount toward the caster. The Death Eater stood his ground as Harry bore down upon him, throwing spells at the charging paladin. He conjured a magical shield at the last possible moment, but Harry's blade easily carved through both the barrier and the wizard's neck.

Spells began to rain down from above. The broom riders had finally caught up. Harry used the distraction to direct Buckbeak into the air once more. He climbed and then veered around for another attack. A few of the other hippogriffs followed, but without riders to guide them, most had by now given themselves over to their natural ferocity. Several were lying in heaps on the ground.

He brought Buckbeak down low and raced forward, mere inches above the earth. By now the Death Eaters were thrown into utter disarray, and Harry's attack cut right through them. He laid about with his sword cleaving left and right through both Shield Charms and flesh.

The Death Eaters broke and started running, fleeing in all directions. Harry looked back toward the castle. Without the Death Eaters to maintain the conjurations, almost all of the ladders and ramps had been destroyed. Magical fire was once more reaping destruction through the undead horde. The Inferi were still thrashing at the walls, but were having little effect. He brought Buckbeak to a halt and cast his gaze around for the Aurors.

"We should pursue the Death Easters so they can't regroup!" Harry shouted as two of them flew by.

But the air suddenly turned deathly cold - freezing, like the icy grip of a hundred Dementors.

The Aurors were about to respond when they were both consumed by a huge burst of white-hot fire.

Buckbeak reared back and screamed, almost throwing Harry from the saddle.

The ground rocked as a great weight slammed down upon it. A deafening roar scattered the remaining hippogriffs. Harry knew that sound. He'd heard a roar like that before. He brought his mount back under control and looked to his left.

"Damn."

A dragon.

Black-scaled and lizard-like in appearance, bronze horns and spikes protruding from its body. A Hungarian Horntail. But this one was easily twice the size of the beast that Harry had faced in his
fourth year. The dragon's cruel yellow eyes were tinged with red as it stared at him with hatred.

But that wasn't the worst part.

Seated on the back of the dragon was the very visage of death. Bald with pale, leathery skin, looking more like a skeleton than a man. Patches of flesh missing from his face, exposing the skull beneath. Wearing tattered, black robes and a large, gold amulet hanging at his chest.

The Lich. The Dark Lord Voldemort.

Callous laughter rang out from the undead sorcerer as his glowing red eyes burned with malevolence. The cold embrace of death poured off the fiend in waves, spreading icy crystals of frost along the ground.

"The knight lives!" Voldemort laughed as his dragon pawed at the earth, tearing great furrows through the dirt with its claws. "You surprise me, old man. I thought it would be Potter who took the bait and rushed out here to meet his death. No matter. Draining your life was delicious! I can't wait to do so again!"

Harry spurred Buckbeak into the air moments before the dragon's white-hot flame immolated the ground where they had be standing. Voldemort laughed and launched into the sky, firing spells from the back of the dragon.

*He thinks I'm Firecam,* Harry realized as he desperately tried to climb higher. But he was constantly forced to twist and turn, dodging the lethal curses that Voldemort was flinging like confetti.

"Why do you run?" the Lich laughed as he gave chase. "Embrace me! I am your death!"

Harry dove to the left, just avoiding the scorching heat of the Horntail's breath.

Spells stabbed at the dragon. Harry turned to see one of the Aurors still airborne and throwing curses at the monster. Harry glanced back to the castle. To his eyes, the horde seemed to have almost stopped. They were milling about, wandering aimlessly, even as they were continually bombarded with magical fire.

*It's Voldemort!* Harry realized. *He's distracted. He can't focus his will on controlling the Inferi. If I can keep him busy a little while longer, maybe they can finish off the undead...*

Harry swung Buckbeak around and flew straight at the dragon. Voldemort was busy throwing dark purple fire at the Auror. Harry screamed and tried to close the distance to attack.

But the dragon was still very much aware of him, and Harry had to peel off to avoid being crushed by the monster's spiked tail.

A jet of green light enveloped the Auror, and he fell lifelessly from the sky.

"There goes your friend, knight!" Voldemort sneered.

Harry spurred his hippogriff to go higher while Voldemort veered around on the dragon. The Horntail was huge and its powerful wings were quickly able to close the distance. But Buckbeak was more agile, using this advantage to barely stay ahead of the beast. They weaved back and forth through the night sky, always climbing higher, always away from the battle below.

Harry could tell that Voldemort was becoming increasingly frustrated. The Lich screamed obscenities louder and louder as he threw spells and dark curses. They were at a stalemate in the
sky, neither one able to hit the other.

"Enough!" Voldemort finally shouted. "If you won't face me, I'll just have to burn your friends!"

The dragon rolled over and dove toward the earth, heading straight towards the castle.

"Shite!" Harry swore as he spun Buckbeak around and plummeted in pursuit.

But the dragon was faster, bearing down upon the castle in moments. Harry could do nothing but watch in horror as the beast's fiery breath engulfed a long section of the wall. Witches and wizards screamed as they burned alive.

Voldemort laughed at their deaths.

Spells lanced up through the air, but were unable to penetrate the dragon's thick hide.

Harry's righteous anger filled him as he closed the distance.

The dragon turned. Buckbeak screamed as he charged. Harry drew back his sword, ready to attack. Voldemort locked his malignant, red eyes with Harry's and a triumphant grin stretched across his skull-like face.

A jet of green light flew out of the Lich's hand, racing at Harry.

He was too close. There was no time to dodge or turn. Harry brought up his shield and prayed.

The Killing Curse struck the mirrored surface and rebounded at its caster. Harry breathed a sigh of relief and Voldemort snarled in rage. The Lich wrenched the dragon's head to the side, trying to twist the beast out of the path of the curse. Harry flew in close, and slashed the Sword of Gryffindor across the Horntail's neck, leaving a bloody gash that sizzled and burned, discoloring the flesh around it.

The dragon roared in anger and pain. It lashed out with its tail, smashing into both Harry and Buckbeak. The hippogriff screamed as the bones of its right wing popped and snapped like twigs. Harry was thrown from the saddle.

He was helpless as he fell. But he watched as the dragon's wings weakly beat the air one final time, before it convulsed and dropped, taking its rider with it.

The ground rushed up to meet him. Harry closed his eyes and uttered a last, fervent prayer.

*Light, protect them.*

Voices shouted around him. He felt something take hold of him, and his fall slowed.

And then he plowed into the ground.

Everything hurt.

But that was a good thing. Pain meant that he was still alive.

Harry groaned as he opened his eyes. The world was spinning and spots danced through his vision. The coppery taste of blood filled his mouth. There, just a few feet from where he was sprawled on the ground, he saw his sword. He dragged himself toward it. His left leg wasn't working as it should, but he managed. His hand closed around the hilt, and he used the sword to lever himself up to his feet.
Sound began to return to the world as his vision stopped spinning. He realized that he was standing within the castle bailey near the gatehouse, and that there were people around him.

"Harry!" a familiar voice cried out from somewhere in the distance, but his fuzzy mind didn't recognize it.

*Voldemort was falling toward the ground outside,* he remembered – that much was clear in his mind. He started to limp toward the gates. He needed to get there in time. Hands reached for him, but he brushed them off as he staggered forward.

*There! The gatehouse.*

Something roared on the other side of the walls. Red light backlit the fortification. The doors of the gatehouse cracked and blackened before they were engulfed in flame and were reduced to ashes. The burning heat of a thousand suns washed against Harry's face as he watched the heavy, magic-tempered steel of the portcullis melt like butter. A great serpent of dark, living flame burned through the tunnel, and reared up in front of Harry.

*Fiendfyre.*

But the cursed fire winked out and the unbearable heat was replaced with dreadful cold.

The Lich strode through the gates with a sneer on his horrid face. A few curses and hexes lanced out at the Dark Lord. They struck home, but seemed to do little more than irritate him. He threw out his skeletal arms and *power* flowed forth. Screams of agony and death were ripped from those who had dared to strike at him.

The Lich's red eyes flashed, and palpable terror *pulsed* through the area. Witches and wizards screamed and ran, fear overwhelming their senses.

Harry quashed the terror that tried to overtake him with iron resolve and stood alone before the Undead Dark Lord.

"You killed my dragon, knight." Voldemort growled at Harry.

Harry tried to charge forward, but his injured leg hampered him and he stumbled. The Lich laughed and cast a Reductor Curse that caught Harry square in the chest. He was thrown off his feet, the wind knocked from his lungs. The armor was all that stood between him and a crushed torso.

Voldemort laughed as he circled his victim.

Harry gasped for breath and stumbled to his feet again.

"How would you like to die?" the Dark Lord taunted. "I know! How about *slowly* and *screaming*?"

Harry's eyes focused on his enemy as he fought to fill his lungs with air. He saw the large, golden amulet hanging around the Voldemort's neck. Something about it jogged a memory in Harry's mind. He knew that Voldemort had somehow managed to become a Lich, Keldorn had said as much at the Ministry during that ill-fated fight. But what was it about Liches and their amulets?

He frantically searched his memory as Voldemort taunted and sneered. His mind went back to a conversation with his mentor, not that long ago, but in a time before the end of the world. They were talking about Horcruxes.
A phylactery! Harry suddenly remembered. That's what Firecam called it. A soul jar, something like a Horcrux. If I destroy that, maybe there's a chance…

He lunged forward, slashing with his sword, hoping to catch the swinging amulet. But Voldemort stepped back out of range. The Lich laughed.

"Fighting to the bitter end. You don't know when to quit!" He slashed his hand diagonally, and a swath of purple flame arced toward Harry.

He managed to get his shield up in time, and the curse was thrown back at its caster.

Voldemort dodged and growled before evading again as Harry counterattacked and thrust his blade at him.

"Curses and Hexes don't work very well against you, do they?" Voldemort asked aloud. "I keep forgetting. How about the indirect approach?" A wave of the Lich's hand ripped several large stones out of the ground.

And with a vicious smile, they were banished at Harry.

He tried to dodge. He spun out of the way of the first massive rock. But his injured leg hampered his movements. He raised his shield just in time for a stone to crash into it. The shield couldn't protect him from so much raw momentum, and Harry felt the bones snap in his arm. He screamed in pain as another boulder crushed his leg and pinned him to the ground. He lost his grip on his weapon, and the Sword of Gryffindor went spinning through the air.

Harry almost blacked out from the pain, but fought to maintain awareness. He tried to lift his shield arm, but the broken bones screamed in agony. His left leg was pinned beneath the boulder, leaving Harry helpless and exposed on the ground.

Voldemort stalked forward, malicious laughter in his dead throat.

Harry drew his dagger, but the Dark Lord casually disarmed him with a silent spell.

"Now then," the Lich began, "Let's get back to draining your life away."

The sound of buckling metal filled Harry's ears as his helmet was ripped off. Voldemort gaped in a moment of shocked realization.

"Potter?!" the Lich exclaimed. "Harry Potter?! Ha! The old knight is dead then, isn't he? I commend you on your ruse, but you've failed. You've lost, Potter." Voldemort bent down and grasped Harry's chin in cold, vice-like fingers. "Like everyone else, you've finally fallen before me. I am the greatest wizard who has ever lived! I have wiped the Muggle filth from the earth! I will live forever and rule this world!"

"And now, you will die!"

Voldemort brought his other hand to Harry's temples. The bony fingers were so cold that they burned his skin. Harry felt icy tendrils of Darkness start to worm their way into his mind, syphoning his life away.

But then a voice called out.

"Reducto!"
Harry knew that voice.

_Hermione_!

Voldemort batted the spell away without effort, but his eyes darted about, searching for an invisible attacker.

But as the Dark Lord's attention was briefly distracted, the icy tendrils receded, and Harry used that moment to slip his right hand into his Mokeskin pouch and close it around the hilt of an ancient weapon.

Time slowed and the world contracted. Everything but Harry and the sword faded away. Harry was already wounded and weak, but now he felt naked and exposed. Not just pinned and at the mercy of a pitiless Dark Lord, but utterly helpless against a power that could blast him into nothingness. The boulder on his leg felt light as a feather compared to the crushing weight of responsibility that pressed down upon him. All of his many faults and failings were brought forward and paraded before his mind's eye. His anger. His recklessness. His lust. His pride. They accused him, and he was unable to defend himself.

The alien intelligence once more invaded his mind. It thundered through his being. Harry was helpless before its silent scream of fury that threatened to burn away his soul. He was judged and found wanting.

**UNWORTHY**

The word, the absolute certainty echoed within him, enveloping his soul in shame.

But Harry did not let go. He tightened his grip on the hilt and let his soul be battered by the storm.

**UNWORTHY**

It crashed upon him again, threatening to pull him under.

_I know_, Harry finally directed his thoughts to that ferocious, alien intelligence. _I know I'm unworthy. I know I don't deserve to be a paladin. I know I'm not a hero, not really. I know that they all deserve better than me. But I'm all that's left. Keldorn's gone. Dumbledore's gone. There's no one else. I'm not a real hero, but I'm all that stands between Voldemort and Hogwarts. I can't let the Light be snuffed out. The Darkness cannot win. Consume me if you will, but help me. I know I'm weak and foolish and sinful. I have nothing to offer, no argument to make, or justification to give._

_I can only beg._

_Please._

_Help me._

_Have mercy._

_Please._

An eternity passed while Harry desperately clung to the sword while the storm that ravaged his soul.

And then there was
Power surged through him.

Time returned and the world reappeared.

Harry drew his hand out of the pouch and brought forth Carsomyr, brilliant and shining, fierce and terrible like the dawn. Light poured off the scared blade, brighter than the heart of the sun.

Voldemort's eyes widened in fear. He hurriedly released Harry and tried to back away, raising his arms in desperate defense.

But he was too late.

New, ineffable strength was coursing through Harry's veins, a Light that burned, but yet did not consume. He thrust the blade forward, and its might tore through all resistance. Carsomyr ripped through Voldemort's arms and pierced the golden amulet, it passed effortlessly through bones and rotten flesh, until the tip emerged from the Lich's back.

The demonic, red glow in Voldemort's hollow eyes faded to nothing and he slumped upon the sword.

Tom Marvolo Riddle, Dark Lord and undead Lich, was no more.

"Harry!"

Hermione's frightened shout rang in Harry's ears. Suddenly she was there, cradling his head in gentle hands. The boulder pinning his leg was lifted, and floated away.

The pain was immense, but Harry had the Light, everything else was secondary.

"Help me… up…" he bit out in shallow breaths. It hurt to even breathe.

"Harry! You're in no condition to—"

But he cut her off.

"Hermione… not over… the Inferi… still outside…"

The witch's watery eyes widened in understanding. Voldemort was dead, well and truly dead, but the battle wasn't finished quite yet. She waved her wand. Spells and incantations flew from her lips. Harry felt his crushed leg and fractured arm stiffen, something squeezed his torso, and an invisible force gently caressed his head.

"Okay, Harry, I'm going to levitate you to the Hospital Wing…"

"No," Harry barked. "Help… me… up…"

Hermione looked ready to argue, but Harry speared her with a look of resolute determination. He knew how to stand his ground when it really mattered.

"Fine!" she gave in at last, "be stubborn! But if you bloody well die on me now, I'll bring you back just to kill you myself!" But her gentle hands belied her angry words. Hermione draped Harry's right arm over her shoulders and carefully lifted him to his feet. She turned them toward the Entrance Hall, but again Harry stopped her.
"No…" he muttered, "outside…"

Hermione only hesitated for an instant before helping Harry limp through the gatehouse and out onto the grounds.

The earth was scorched and black. Great mounds of burnt corpses were piled against the walls. Dark, acrid smoke wafted through the air. There were still many Inferi stumbling about, but without the will of their master to drive them, they lacked direction. When Harry and Hermione emerged from the gate, their pale lifeless eyes fixed upon them, and they started to shuffle forward.

"Harry?" Hermione nervously asked.

Harry smiled at her and raised the sword above his head.

"Light defend us," he prayed aloud.

_Carsomyr_ burst into brilliance once again. Light bright enough to chase away any Darkness pierced the night all around them. The Inferi that were closest to them exploded in crimson fire, while the rest of the horde turned and with unholy screams fled from the Light.

Harry stayed there, supported by Hermione, with the shining blade held aloft until the last of the Inferi disappeared into the distance. Only then did he let his arm fall.

Death was everywhere. Harry had no idea how many people, how many of his friends had died in the defense of Hogwarts. The sadness in the air was palpable. But mourning would have to wait, because in that moment, even surrounded by death and sorrow and destruction as they were, the only thing that Harry could feel was a quiet but insistent joy. He was alive. Hermione was alive. The Light was alive. That was cause enough for joy. Everything else could wait just a little while longer.

"Is it over?" Hermione spoke into the silence.

"For now…" Harry softly replied, his breathing still labored. "It will… never… truly… be over… The Darkness… will be… back… But the Light… will be here… waiting…"

"Yes, we will," she answered before rounding on him. "Now then, you're coming with me to the Hospital Wing."

Harry looked at his girlfriend. His love. His Hermione. There would be no arguing with her now. Not that he intended to.

"Yes… dear…"

"Don't you 'yes dear' me!" Hermione admonished as they turned and slowly limped toward the castle. "I'm furious with you! Leaving me behind as you flew off on Buckbeak! What did I tell you about us sticking together?! You nearly got yourself killed!"

Harry smiled as Hermione continued her rant. She was laying into him bigtime.

"And furthermore—"

Harry cut her off.

"I… love you… Hermione…"
The young witch snapped her mouth shut and visibly fought against the smile that wanted to break out on her face.

"That's cheating!" she finally exclaimed as she lost the battle and grinned. "You shouldn't be able to make me forgive you like that so easily! I'm supposed to be angry with you! Honestly!"

"Sorry."

Hermione huffed before kissing him on the cheek.

"As long as you acknowledge that you're a cheater."

"Okay."

Hermione swished her wand and started to levitate her boyfriend without asking him.

"Come on, Harry," she said, the smile still splitting her face, "let's get you to Madam Pomfrey."

Harry sighed in relief as his weight was suddenly lifted off his battered body.

"Yes… ma'am…"

"And Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you too."
Harry wrapped his thick cloak more tightly about himself as the late November wind tried to pry it away. The weather had definitely taken a definitive turn towards winter, but the sky was bright and clear. Sunlight reflected off of the two monuments in front of him.

One was rather large and ornate. Built of pristine, white marble, the wide, rectangular base rose two feet off the ground. Columns with ionic capitals lined the perimeter like silent sentries keeping watch. They supported a dome of clear crystal that refracted the sunlight and made it dance across the polished surfaces. An intricately carved pediment depicting the mighty deeds of one of the world's greatest wizards stood watch over the steps of the entryway. The entire structure was built around a stone sarcophagus that held a gilded inscription.

ALBUS PERCIVAL WULFRIC BRIAN DUMBLEDORE
AUGUST 14, 1881 – OCTOBER 31, 1997
HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS
GRAND SORCERER
SUPREME MUGWUMP
CHIEF WARLOCK OF THE WIZENGAMOT
MENTOR AND FRIEND

Another grave, some little distance away, was much simpler. A common burial plot, the earth still freshly overturned. It had an upright, granite headstone.

SIR KELDORN FIRECAM
DIED NOVEMBER 1, 1997
PALADIN
KNIGHT OF THE MOST NOBLE ORDER OF THE RADIANT HEART
REQUIEM ÆTERNAM DONA EI
ET LUX PERPETUA LUCEAT EI

They weren't the only graves that now occupied the grounds.

Dumbledore's mausoleum stood at the center of what was now the Hogwarts Cemetery. It was an addition to the school born of necessity. The outside world was too dangerous, too full of unknowns to risk a venture for the many necessary burials. The remains of the fallen would rest in the very earth that had been hallowed by the shedding of their blood.

There were many simple headstones like Keldorn's in the new burial ground. Far too many in Harry's mind. Several of them were carved with names that were near and dear to the young
Even Buckbeak had a simple marker in the graveyard.

The Weasleys had taken the loss of their patriarch and one of their sons rather hard. The fact that they had died like the Gryffindors they were, fighting bravely, was ultimately of little consolation to the grieving family. The knowledge helped, certainly, yet it couldn't replace a brother and a loving husband and father. But Harry knew that they would pull through in time. Charlie finally turned up a few days after the battle was over. The fact that the rest of her children were safe and sound and within her reach did much to ease Mrs. Weasley's grieving heart. Harry had no doubt that in the coming months, when the pain of loss was no longer quite so fresh, Molly would be getting rather anxious for Ron and Lavender to tie the knot and start raising a family. He was also sure that soon afterwards, hints would start dropping from the Weasley Matriarch about him and Hermione as well. He wouldn't hold it against her, not that he'd be inclined to anyways. She had nothing but good intentions. After all, something joyful would go a long way in healing the wounds of their society.

A large section of the cemetery was denoted only by a single stone. It was decided that the bodies of the undead, the unwilling victims of Voldemort's dark magic, would be buried with respect in a single, mass grave.

The foul remains of the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters were gathered and burned in a clearing in the Forbidden Forrest. Magical fire was poured into the blaze until even the finest of ashes were utterly consumed.

The last remnant of Voldemort's evil was purified by white-hot flame.

Harry sighed as he stood in front of the graves of his two mentors. Dumbledore and Firecam. Wizard and paladin. He had learned so much from both men. They might now be gone from the present world, but Harry would see to it that their legacies lived on.

*Light, help me live up to their example. Help me be whatever you need me to be. And grant them rest and peace,* Harry silently prayed before his eyes swept over the entire cemetery. *Light grant them all rest and peace.*

A pair of lithe arms snaked around Harry's waist and a chin came to rest on his shoulder.

"You okay, Harry?"

The young man who was both wizard and paladin answered with a sad smile.

"Yeah, I'm okay, Hermione."

He wrapped his arm around the witch, pulling her to his side, and enfolded her within the warmth of his cloak.

"They'd both be very proud of you," she said after a moment of silence. "In fact, I'm sure that they are, wherever they might be."

They stood watch over the graves for a little while, sharing their warmth and giving each other what comfort they could.

"Come on," Harry finally said, "we better get back to the castle. There's lots to do yet."
They turned together, still wrapped in their embrace, and slowly made their way back to the school.

In the days and weeks since the battle, Harry had been feeling more and more responsibility pressing down on his shoulders. And it wasn't just from the fact that Carsomyr was now constantly strapped to his hip. For the many witches and wizards of what was left of wizarding Britain, Harry's legend just kept growing. He was now universally acknowledged as Dumbledore's protégé, and after his example both before and after the Battle of Hogwarts, everyone looked to him to fill the old wizard's shoes. No one expected him to become the next Headmaster of Hogwarts, at least not yet, but they did expect him to be their leader, their example, and their guide in the difficult times that were sure to come.

He even had a new nickname.

After they had witnessed his defense of the castle, flying on the back of a hippogriff in full armor, wielding a sword, a lot of people started to get ideas. Some started referring to him as 'Sir Harry,' others called him 'the Knight of Hogwarts,' still more preferred 'Protector of Hogwarts.' Eventually, a compromise was somehow reached, and now he was almost universally known as 'Sir Harry Potter, Knight Protector of Hogwarts.'

Harry tried to get everyone to stop giving him more monikers of course. He argued that he had never been knighted and that he was no more a protector of Hogwarts than anyone else that did their part against Voldemort. But no one listened to him. The people might have been looking to him as their leader and champion, but that didn't mean that he had any say in what they called him.

Hermione hadn't said what she thought of his new title. He knew that she was aware of his opinion on the matter, but that didn't stop the smile from spreading on her face whenever the topic came up.

At least it's not hyphenated, Harry eventually admitted defeat. And at least they didn't go with Luna's idea. He smiled as he recalled that particular encounter with the quirky girl. She always managed to bring a light of joy and humor with her wherever she went, no matter how dark the world might seem.

"Hello, Harry Potter," the blonde witch said as she approached him and Hermione a few days after the battle.

"Hi, Luna," he replied with a tired smile. Harry was relieved that the eccentric Ravenclaw had made it through the fighting unscathed. Like so many others, she had done her part on the battlements.

"Would you prefer that I use your new title, Mr. Knight/Wizard/Paladin of the Chosen Defenders of the Damsels of Hogwarts?" she asked.

Harry groaned at hearing yet another name.

"Where did you get that one?" Hermione asked with a grin.

"That one' what?" Luna replied, seemingly confused. "If you're talking about my new necklace, I welded it together from spare parts I found at an aircraft hangar..."

"No," Hermione answered, "I mean that absurdly long title you gave Harry."

"Oh, I suppose it is a bit long. Perhaps we could just go with 'M.K.W.P.o.t.C.D.o.t.D.o.H.' How could we pronounce that? Maybe, 'Mic-Kow-Pot-See-Dot-Doh?'"
"Anyways," Luna continued. "I got it from the Quibbler, of course. We published a special edition this morning, what with everything that's been happening. I brought you a copy."

"Luna," Harry started, "We literally just lived through the end of the world. How in Merlin's name did you and your father find the time to print and distribute a new edition of the Quibbler?"

"Oh, you know, the usual," she answered with a waggle of her eyebrows.

The Ravenclaw then handed them a thicker-than-usual copy of the peculiar periodical. The front page of the tabloid proclaimed "Fungus-Man Lives!" in big bold letters. Luna directed them to a page somewhere in the middle of the issue for the article about Harry's new nickname. Hermione had to unroll a small slip of parchment in order to read the entire headline.

**KNIGHT/WIZARD/PALADIN-WHO-STILL-CHOSES-TO-BE-ALIVE-DESPITE-HIS-QUESTIONABLE-WARDROBE-ACCESSORIES RESCUES DAMSELS IN DISTRESS FROM UNDEAD DRAGONS OF THE ROTFANG CONSPIRACY?**

By Luna Lovegood

Three nights ago the eldritch horrors of the Rotfang Conspiracy unleashed their dastardly plans upon the quiet locale of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Students and teachers alike were quite taken aback when a sizable flock of revivified dragon assassins arrived at their doorstep. If not for the intervention of seventh-year student Harry Potter, they might have succeeded in their plan to impose mandatory poor dental hygiene upon the female population of the school.

*Mr. Potter, who sources say is now referred to as 'Mr. Knight/Wizard/Paladin of the Chosen Defenders of the Damsels of Hogwarts,' single-handedly defeated the undead legions by organizing an impromptu wizarding checkers tournament. Famed wizard and notorious missing-person Stubby Boardman took first prize in the tournament, but it was the byzantine bureaucracy imposed at the last minute by Potter that is credited with defeating of the necro-draconic horde. Sources were unable to determine why Mr. Knight/Wizard/Paladin of the Chosen Defenders of the Damsels of Hogwarts was wearing nothing but platinum underwear throughout the evening.*

For speculation about Potter's sartorial choices, see page 87-92.

For more details of the tournament, see the spherical page.

To unlock the secrets of other eldritch horrors, stare into your nearest abyss.

Harry wasn't sure how many people had actually read Luna's article, but thankfully no one else seemed inclined to use her suggested title.

He also wasn't sure what had happened to the copy of the *Quibbler* that Luna gave them, but he had a sneaking suspicion that his girlfriend was planning to have it framed.

He could only hope that the House Elves would never catch wind of any of this. If they did, it would probably take twenty minutes just to say 'hello' to one of them.

"How's the research with Flitwick going?" Harry asked the girl at his side as they passed through the gatehouse.
McGonagall had decided that the curtain wall around the school would remain where it was. There was so much that was still unknown about the world outside of Hogwarts, that everyone agreed that extra defenses were a good thing. The Acting Headmistress had managed to mostly repair the damage that was done to gatehouse by Voldemort's Fiendfyre, and volunteers took turns patrolling the ramparts, keeping watch for anything out of the ordinary.

"It's okay," Hermione answered. "Still rather slow going. It's not going to be easy to disable such old and powerful Muggle-Repelling Charms. We still need to find some way to redirect all the magic when we start syphoning it off. If we don't, the charm will just come back in a few days."

Since refugees kept arriving at the castle looking for shelter, it was decided that Hogwarts would officially become a refuge for anyone in need in the post-apocalyptic world that Voldemort had created. And everyone was aware that Muggles were going to be suffering the most in the new magic-saturated environment. Muggles and magicals alike would all be welcome to build new lives at Hogwarts.

Harry was organizing search and rescue teams that would soon scour the countryside for anyone in need so that they could be invited to come the school. But they couldn't start their efforts until the Muggle-Repelling Charms were gone. It would be hard to provide food and shelter to people that were constantly trying to wander off as they suddenly realized that they'd forgotten to turn off their ovens.

"I'm sure you'll figure something out soon," Harry said. "No problem is too hard for the smartest and hottest witch in the world!"

"Oh, stop," Hermione blushed at Harry's blatant flattery.

"Never. Not until you admit the truth."

"You're delusional."

"I've told you before, the girlfriend of the Boy-Who-Lived is always that hottest of the hotties."

"But you're not the Boy-Who-Lived anymore," Hermione argued, "now you're the Knight Protector of Hogwarts."

"You're right!" Harry exclaimed. "And his girlfriend is always the Beauty of beauties!"

"You're terrible."

"You love me."

"I do," Hermione said as lifted up on her toes to give him a kiss.

"Come on," he said once they broke apart, "let's go find something to eat."

"Yes sir, Sir Harry Potter, sir!"

Harry shuddered.

"Don't do that! It makes you sound like Dobby."

"What's wrong with Dobby?"

"Nothing. I'd just rather you didn't start talking like him."
"Hmm…" Hermione tilted her head to the side and tapped her chin in thought. "I might be willing to agree to your demands, but it's going to cost you."

"Oh? How much?"

The young witch gazed at him through hooded eyes.

"I'm sure I'll think of something mutually agreeable," she said seductively.

"Merlin, I love you, Hermione."

"I'll never get tired of hearing that."

They continued into the castle together. Outside of Hogwarts the world was still falling apart. Inside the castle there were plenty of problems and many wounds in desperate need of healing. But Harry and Hermione had each other. They had good friends and companions. And they had the Light. They'd do their part in building something new.

And they'd be ready to stand against whatever Darkness might come next.

Chapter End Notes

It's over! Then End! Hooray!

What did you think?

I originally posted this over on fan fiction dot net, but as I was going through the text for a last edit, I decided to cross post is here as an archive as well. If you're interested in some further thoughts about this work, check out my profile on fanficition.net, same username and title, where you'll find a link to a forum that I used to discuss some of the more commented upon aspects of the story - magic interfering with technology being the big one.

She wasn't originally supposed to be there, but Luna just insisted on being included in the epilogue. It was gonna be all serious 'n stuff, but she begged to write another article for the Quibbler. She really does shine like a light in the darkness, doesn't she?

The story's over, but there's still a lot left open and unresolved, isn't there? I actually have a few sequel ideas bouncing around in my skull; maybe I'll start writing one at some point. They're mainly just individual scenes, or character ideas at the moment though. What I really need is a plot. Do you have any ideas? Would you be interested in reading a sequel? Let me know in a review.

If I do ever manage to start writing a sequel, I'll try to remember to post an update here so anyone following the story gets a notice. But you might want to throw on an author alert as well just in case.

If you're curious about what I've had to say during the writing of this story, or if you want to see some comments about a few of the things that have happened, check out my forums. I created them specifically for the purpose of archiving story notes. There's a link in my profile on fanfiction.net.
If you made it all the way to the end, please do me a favor and leave a review. Fanfic authors get nothing in return for their efforts except for the (dubious) joy of writing as well as the feedback of their readers. So, leave a review, please. Let me know what you think!

Finally, I want to say thanks to all the readers. Thanks to everyone who favorited or followed the story. And most of all, thanks to all the reviewers!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!