The Cupboard Under The Stairs

by Stargon

Summary

A mysterious green inked letter banished Harry from his cupboard. But does taking the boy out of the cupboard also mean that you've taken the cupboard out of the boy? A first year fic. Book 1 of The Cupboard Series
Chapter 1

Disclaimer – Everything you recognise belongs to JKR. All the rest is simply me playing in her sandbox.

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The Cupboard Under the Stairs

Chapter 1

“Hermione, dear, slow down, the train doesn’t leave for another half hour,” Emma Granger laughed at her eleven year old daughter.

Surprisingly, Hermione actually pulled her trolley to a stop to wait, but instead of looking back to plead with her to hurry up as Emma expected, she seemed to be staring at something across the busy floor of King’s Cross Station.

As Emma rapidly closed the distance with her daughter, she peered around to try to determine what had caught her daughter’s attention. She knew that it couldn’t be the entrance to the hidden platform that that strange, stern teacher had shown them three weeks earlier as they were still some distance from that part of the station.

It may have been a Sunday, but King’s Cross was never an empty place so Emma was forced to watch dozens of people criss-crossing in front of her. Not one of them looked out of place or different in any way. There was no one there that they knew and nothing to indicate that there were any … magical … people like her daughter around.

The catch in her throat and her eyes widening like saucers caused her the revise her previous thought.

There, sitting elegantly atop a trunk laden trolley, was a cage containing the most beautiful snowy owl that Emma had ever seen. And owls, she now knew, were used to carry letters between magical folk. As the crowd parted, she was finally able to spy the owner of that amazing owl and her eyes widened even more before quickly narrowing.

A bespectled dark haired boy, no older than her own Hermione, leant on the handle of the trolley, his hands holding on so tight that even from a distance she could see the knuckles were white. His head pivoted backwards and forwards as though he was searching for something. The expression on his face was something between lost and scared with just the hint of determination.

But it was the boys’ clothes that had caused Emma’s maternal instincts to cry out in alarm.

The cuffs of his badly dyed grey pants were turned up so many times that his feet were pushed farther away from each other than what she thought would be comfortable. His shirt, a dull faded orange, was also blatantly many sizes too large for him and just like his pants, the sleeves were rolled up and the neckline flapped open and closed at his barest movement. Even his shoes looked like they’d fall apart at the drop of a hat.

Emma took a single step towards him before changing her mind.

“Hermione, dear, how about I wait here with your trolley and you go see if that boy’s looking for your train? It doesn’t look as though he knows how to get on to the platform.”
Hermione looked up at her mother, her bottom lip firmly in the grasp of her teeth. With a single nod, she slowly walked across the hallway.

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With his uncle’s parting laugh still ringing in his ears, Harry Potter stared around at King’s Cross Station.

His ticket plainly said ‘Platform Nine and Three Quarters’. But where that was was anyone’s guess. Hagrid had stressed that keeping a hold of his ticket was very important and he assumed that that meant that it’d help him get on to the station. Somehow.

But right at this minute, Harry was feeling as though he could burst into tears. He didn’t know what to do. The Dursley’s had simply left him. There was no Hagrid or anyone else who even looked remotely as though they were magical. The whole place was filled with muggles.

He looked up at the clock again. Ten-thirty. He had exactly thirty minutes to work out how to find the mysterious platform before the train left without him. And there was no way that he even wanted to contemplate that disaster.

A sudden movement out of the corner of his eye, spun him around.

“Hello, is that your owl?” a girl with bushy brown hair asked.

He nodded uneasily. People, especially people his own age didn’t talk to him. Dudley usually made sure of that.

“I’m Hermione. Hermione Granger,” she smiled shyly at him.

“Harry Potter,” he replied.

Hermione’s brown eyes widened. “Really? Harry Potter? The Harry Potter? I know all about you, of course. You’re in Modern Magical History and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century.”

Harry stared at her. He was in books? Cautiously he looked around King’s Cross before leaning in towards her slightly.

“Are you going to Hogwarts too?” he asked.

Hermione beamed at him. “Yes. Isn’t it wonderful? I’ve read all about it, of course. No one else in my family has ever been magical before.”

Harry wondered how many books there were that he really should find and read. This strange new world boggled him and this girl seemed to know all about it already and she’d obviously had the same sort of muggle life as him.

Suddenly, a much more pressing question popped into his mind.

“Do you know how to get on to Platform Nine and Three Quarters?”

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When no resounding crash indicating that he’d just ploughed headlong into the wall occurred, Harry dared to open his eyes. The sight before him was enough to freeze him in place and take his breath away.
Dozens of people, both adults and children milled around on the platform before him. Some were still wearing normal clothes while many, especially the adults, were dressed in various shades of robes, just like he’d seen in Diagon Alley.

But the sight that really captured his attention was the train. The scarlet steam engine was huge and looked more than powerful enough to pull the dozens of carriages lined up behind it. Suddenly, a great gush of steam billowed out from the underside of the engine engulfing the platform. Waves of white clouds rushed out hiding the platform itself and making it seem that everyone was floating in a cloud.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Hermione squealed at him as he slowly pushed his cart up beside hers.

“Young ones, kindly move further onto the platform so that others can enter in safety,” an older voice instructed.

As Harry complied, he looked across at the speaker and found himself staring once again. A severe looking older lady was peering down her long straight nose at the pair of them, but all Harry could focus on was her hat. There was a vulture perched on it! As he continued to stare, he realised that in fact, the bird wasn’t alive, it was simply stuffed.

Dragging his eyes down, Harry noticed that the old lady’s eyes were fixated upon his scar. Before he could even attempt to flatten his hair to hide it, she spoke to him, this time in a slightly less stern voice.

“Ah, yes, Harry Potter. I was expecting to see you here. Augusta Longbottom,” she stated, thrusting out a hand.

Tentatively, Harry reached out and shook the proffered hand. “Nice to meet you, ma’am,” then, remembering his manners, he looked at the girl beside him. “This is Hermione Granger.”

She gave the girl a polite nod before switching her attention once more back to him.

Noticing her disapproving gaze sweep over his clothes, Harry attempted to sidle backwards behind his trolley, but Madam Longbottom was having none of that.

“Step forward, Mister Potter and unroll your pants and sleeves,” she commanded.

Harry risked a quick sideways glance at Hermione, but all she could offer was a slight shrug. It was too ingrained in Harry to refuse a direct order, so he carefully bent down to first unroll his pant legs before allowing the sleeves of the old shirt to roll down and dangle well past the ends of his fingers.

When next he looked back up, it was only to find that he was now on the end of a wand. It drew a complicated little pattern in the air before Harry felt his clothes shimmering on his body. His sleeves shot up to rest comfortably on his wrists while the shirt resized itself fit perfectly on his body. His pants, too, were undergoing the same treatment.

Harry stared at his clothes in amazement and held his arms out in front of him. And that’s when he noticed that not only were they the exact right size for him, something that Dudley’s old clothes had never ever been for him, but the old faded colours had also changed. Instead of badly dyed grey pants, they were now matte black and his faded orange shirt was red.

“Yes, much better,” Madam Longbottom murmured, “much more in accordance with your proper station.”

“Th…thank you,” Harry stuttered, “that was brilliant!”
Turning to Hermione beside him, he could see the excitement in her chocolate eyes mirroring his own.

“You are quite welcome, young man,” Madam Longbottom replied in the kindest voice that he’d yet heard her use. “My grandson, Neville, is also starting at Hogwarts this term. Perhaps you might like to join him in the compartment that he is currently sitting in on the train.”

“Yes, ma’am, thank you,” Harry replied.

Between the three of them, their trunks were quickly loaded on to the train close to the indicated compartment.

“Thank you for the new clothes,” Harry quickly blurted just before Madam Longbottom stepped back to take her leave of them.

Together, he and Hermione dragged their trunks down the corridor before opening the door to the indicated compartment. Inside was a small, round-faced boy who looked just as scared and unsure as Harry himself felt.

“Um, hi, are you Neville? Your grandmother said that we should share the compartment with you,” Hermione took charge. “I’m Hermione Granger and this is Harry Potter.”

Neville’s eyes grew round before flicking upwards to settle on Harry’s scar.

“Sure,” he squeaked, “come on in.”

The next few minutes was spent with a fair bit of huffing and puffing as they placed first Hermione’s brand new trunk and then Harry’s old, battered trunk in the overhead racks.

Harry plonked himself down across from Neville, with Hedwig’s cage between him and Hermione.

As they waited for the train to leave, Harry found his attention divided between the conversation between the two others sitting with him and the amazing scene’s happening right outside his window.

Dozens of owls hooted to each other. Students, some already in their black Hogwarts robes raced up and down the platform calling to friends and parents alike. Trolleys were bundled past by the dozen and clouds of steam irregularly billowed over it all.

With only moments to go before eleven o’clock, a gaggle of red-heads, led by a frazzled-looking dumpy woman, who Harry could only assume was their mother, rushed onto the platform. He hoped that they’d have enough time to load the four trolleys before the train left.

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Molly Weasley was too flustered to even notice that she’d said good bye to two of her sons three times and nearly even put Ginny on the train with her brothers. She’d been given one simple task: make sure that Harry Potter got onto Platform Nine and Three Quarters, preferably while ensuring that he and Ron had the best possible chance of forming a fast friendship. And she’d failed miserably.

She’d dawdled as long as she could on the muggle side of King’s Cross. She’d even dropped large hints of magical words and phrases in as loud a voice as she dared in case he was simply somewhere where she couldn’t spot the poor boy.
But Harry had failed to materialize. In the end she’d had to give up or risk having her own four miss the Hogwarts Express. She couldn’t for the life of her work out what had happened to Harry. And she dreaded what Dumbledore would say when he found out that the boy’d missed the train.

In her worry, her hand automatically raised itself to wave her sons off as the train started moving, only to have it instantly freeze as her jaw dropped. A small black-haired boy with a lightning bolt scar on his forehead was smiling out a compartment window at her.

At the complete wrong end of the train from her own brood.
Chapter 2

The wonder of magic that dazzled Harry was as plain to read from the smile on his face as the scar upon his forehead.

The little boat rocked along gently under its own power as he, Hermione and Neville floated across the lake towards the grandest castle that he’d ever imagined. Dozens of towers soared into the sky while down lower, lights shone brightly out of hundreds of windows. Across to the right, a flock of small lights twinkled about as the faeries, according to Hermione, played their way from one end of the great lawn to the other.

“Watch yer heads, now,” Hagrid’s great voice boomed across at the flotilla of boats approached a cave in the rocks below the castle.

Instinctively, Harry ducked, although he didn’t need to. The ceiling of the cavern passed by far over his head. In fact, as far as Harry could tell, the only one who did in fact need to duck was Hagrid himself.

Sticking close to his giant friend’s tailcoats, Harry, flanked by Hermione and Neville were led up through tunnels of rock and dozens of stairs to suddenly appear in a small room.

“The first years, Professor McGonagall, ma’am,” Hagrid boomed.

As Hagrid stepped off towards a door on the far side of the room, Harry found himself facing a slender, black-clad witch. Her steel grey hair was pulled tight into a bun, emphasising a stern visage that screamed that this was someone not to get on the wrong side of. Her sharp blue eyes roamed over the students in front of her and every so often, her lips would narrow in displeasure. Harry gulped as the sight of his unruly hair caused one such reaction.

“As I’m sure you heard Hagrid say, my name is Professor McGonagall. Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Very soon now, you will follow me through that door where you will be sorted into your House. Each House will be like your family while you’re here. You’ll sleep in your House dormitories, eat at your House table, earn points for your House and any rule-breaking will result in loss of points for your House.

There are four Houses. They are Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Each one has its own noble qualities and I’d encourage you all to strive to be a credit to the House into which you are sorted. I will return in a few minutes, as soon as the rest of the school is seated and lead you in for your sorting.”

With one last look and a barely concealed sigh, Professor McGonagall raked her eyes across the few who had caused her mouth to thin earlier before stepping from the room.

“What do you think we’re going to have to do in the sorting, Harry?” Hermione asked anxiously the second the door closed.

Before he could even think about forming a reply, a gangly red-headed boy rushed forward, almost knocking Neville over in his haste.

“Harry? Harry Potter? Are you really him?” the boy asked, his eyes fixated on Harry’s forehead.

Not quite knowing what to think, Harry glanced quickly at Neville and Hermione before giving a
“Ron, Ron Weasley,” the boy said, thrusting a hand out at him. “Nice to meet you, Harry.”

Harry carefully took the proffered hand. “Um, yeah, hi, nice to meet you, too, Ron.”

Just as Ron opened him mouth to respond, both he and Neville found themselves knocked to the ground. The slim blonde haired boy the he’d met in Madam Malkin’s had appeared in front of Harry. Two large boys that could give Dudley a run for his money in terms of bulk, flanked him.

“Malfoy, Draco Malfoy. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Potter,” the boy sneered, hand outstretched.

Harry stared. The curl of the lip, the clear disdain that this boy showed towards both Neville and Ron, not to mention the once over of Hermione that stated that merely being in the company that she was made her so far beneath him, that she wasn’t even worth being acknowledged, set Harry’s teeth on edge.

“You’ll find, Potter, that some families are better than others, here, even at Hogwarts. I can help you with that. I’d be happy to introduce you to all of the right sort of people,” Draco Malfoy continued.

“Thanks, but, no thanks,” Harry replied, gritting his teeth so tightly that his jaw instantly started to hurt.

The blonde boy’s face instantly transformed into a mixture of horror, disbelief and outright anger. He’d clearly never heard the word ‘no’ before.

Thankfully, the return of Professor McGonagall ended the rest of that conversation.

“The rest of the school is ready for you now, first years,” Professor McGonagall stated. “Form a line and follow me, please.”

Harry quickly sidestepped into line behind Hermione as both Neville and Ron scrambled to their feet and in line behind him. Warily eying the three boys that had just accosted him, Harry watched them push their way to the head of the line.

“I don’t like bullies,” Harry muttered.

The look of sympathy and understanding that Hermione shot him let him know that she, at least, had heard him.

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Hermione’s legs felt like jelly as she beheld the sight in front of her.

A hat! All we have to do is put on a hat.

Seconds later, her relief was overcome with thoughts of how a hat could know which House best suited them. Indeed, her thoughts were running so thick and fast that Hannah Abbot being sorted into Hufflepuff or Terry Boot into Ravenclaw barely even registered.

“Hermione Granger!”

With a start at hearing her name, she walked forward with as much confidence as she could portray.

-oOoOo-
Harry watched spellbound as the witches and wizards beside him were called one by one by place the Sorting Hat on their head.

There didn’t seem to be any common timeframe that it took the hat to decide either. Some, like Draco Malfoy, had the hat deciding almost before it’d even touched his head where he belonged (Slytherin). Others, like Justin Finch-Fletchly or Seamus Finnegan (Hufflepuff and Gryffindor, respectively), took a little longer.

And then there was Neville and Hermione. Both of them wore the hat for a couple of minutes each before the brim split and called out in its loud voice “Gryffindor!”

But there was one definite advantage to Professor McGonagall calling them forward in alphabetical order: for once he wasn’t going to be left until last to be picked. That was one experience that he was hoping wouldn’t repeat itself here at Hogwarts. And with no Dudley around, he had high hopes of leaving the life of the bullied far behind him.

“Harry Potter!”

On unsteady legs, Harry slowly walked forward.

At the sound of his name, all four House tables erupted in whispered conversations. Dozens and dozens of voices echoed his name back at him. Glancing quickly at the four tables, Harry could see every head craned in his direction. The smaller students weren’t the only ones standing up to get a better look at him.

As the brim of the hat settled down past his eyes, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hmm, interesting, interesting,” a voice spoke just inside his ear. “A quick mind with a thirst to prove himself. Yes, yes, you could be great, you know. It’s all here inside your head. There’s courage and more than a little recklessness. Now, where to put you? Slytherin perhaps would help you on your way.”

“No, please, not Slytherin,” Harry thought desperately, repulsed at the idea of being in the same House as someone like Malfoy who he suspected could be a worse bully than his cousin. “Please, I’d like to be with Hermione and Neville.”

“Aren’t you sure?” the had asked.

“Yes, please,” Harry begged.

“In that case, better be GRYFFINDOR!” this last was shouted for all the hall to hear.

With a smile that he felt was about to split his face, Harry pulled off the hat and jumped off the stool.

The explosion of sound that erupted from Gryffindor table staggered him back a step, but he resolutely pushed forward to join his new Housemates. Cheers and applause followed him all the way across the hall, even as jeers could be heard directed at the ‘losing’ tables.

“We got Potter! We got Potter!” was sung continuously by two red-heads who could only be twins as they danced between the tables.

As quickly as he could, Harry made his way half-way along the table to squash in between Hermione and Neville.
A single stern look from Professor McGonagall was all that it took to settle the table down again so that the sorting could continue.

Soon, Ron, the red-headed boy that they’d met just before they’d entered the Great Hall joined the other Gryffindor first years.

Before long, the sorting had concluded and the hat and stool were whisked away, only to be replaced by the oldest and strangest man that Harry had ever seen. This man had the longest hair and beard that Harry’d ever seen. The long silver locks dropped down past the man’s belted waist.

“Welcome! Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts,” the Headmaster called happily. “Before we begin the feast, I’d like to say a few words. And they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!”

With that, he spun around to return to his seat. Harry carefully closed his mouth as he stared and stared.

*The old man’s mad! Absolutely barmy,* he thought. Then, *what have I gotten myself into?*

But those thoughts were driven out of his mind the instant that the Headmaster was seated. Platters piled high with food had appeared all along the table. Harry stared. He’d *never* seen that much food before in his entire life. Whole roast chickens, potatoes (roasted, mashed and chips), beef, ham, vegetables of all colours and varieties and gravy boats filled the table in front of him.

With a shaking hand, he slowly reached out and began to fill his plate. To be allowed to eat as much as he wanted and whatever he wanted was too much to comprehend. There was one thing that Harry knew for sure: if the Dursleys ever found out that he was getting this much food while he was at school, then they’d make doubly sure to feed him even less once he returned to Privet Drive.

Conversations bounded about around him and Harry was content to just listen. There was laughter and smiles, jokes and japes aplenty everywhere he looked up and down the table. It was almost overwhelming.

Within five minutes, he was sure that he’d met and shaken the hand of nearly everyone at Gryffindor table. Some had been so keen to meet him (and to stare at his forehead) that they’d literally been falling over everyone else at the table just to get close to him.

During one of the few lulls in people wanting his attention, Harry surveyed the head table. There the professors were arrayed for all to see. And once he’d looked them all over, Harry realised that the elderly Headmaster wasn’t the only bizarre one there. One man was so tiny he was sure that if the professor stood up that he wouldn’t be able to see over the tabletop. Another, this one a woman, looked as though Harry’s Aunt Petunia’s doily cupboard had thrown up all over her.

And then he saw him. Sitting beside the professor that Hagrid had introduced him to in the Leaky Cauldron, was a man with long, oily looking hair and skin so white that Harry wondered if he was a vampire. But what made this particular professor stand out was the look on his face as he stared at Harry.

Every day of his life, as far back as he could remember, Harry had been stared at with as much hatred as his uncle could muster. But this man, this teacher, had *nothing* on the looks that Uncle Vernon so often gave him. No, the look that the black haired professor was directing towards Harry was pure, unadulterated hate with a side order of loathing and revulsion. If looks could kill, then he knew that he should have keeled over at first glance.

With a shiver of dread, Harry tore his gaze away and back along the head table, only to have his
head burst into pain, centred right where his scar was.
Chapter 3

“It’s ‘Get out of the way, Scarhead!’”

The taunt snapped Hermione’s head up from where she was rummaging in her book bag for her timetable. There was only one person that she’d met so far at Hogwarts who could drawl like that. Draco Malfoy. And sure enough, she quickly spotted the blonde headed boy striding straight at the group of Gryffindors.

Ahead of her, Harry appeared to momentarily freeze in place before quickly stepping to the side. Unfortunately he wasn’t quite fast enough to avoid the shoulder that Gregory Goyle, one of Malfoy’s ever present stooges, planted in his chest, sending him staggering into the rough stone wall.

“Perhaps next time you’ll learn to stay out of the way of your betters,” Malfoy sneered at the black haired boy adjusting his glasses back onto his nose.

“Freak!” Vincent Goyle shot as a parting remark as the three Slytherins continued down the corridor.

Harry, though, Hermione could see, had frozen in place. Everything about him screamed out for others to leave him alone. His head was down, staring at the floor and somehow he’d made himself seem even smaller than he was already was.

“Are you alright?” Hermione asked, bustling up to him. “He didn’t hurt you did he?”

Without looking up, Harry simply shook his head.

“Come on, mate, don’t worry about it. They’re not worth it,” Ron told him with a punch on the arm.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed at the red-headed Gryffindor. Surely he could see that a punch on the arm after just being bullied like that was the last thing that Harry needed.

“Yeah, they’re just a bunch of snake-heads,” Seamus Finnegan agreed. “Just ignore ’em.”

“Maybe one day someone’ll actually stand up to them and they’ll stop trying to push their weight around,” said Neville.

For some reason, Hermione seriously doubted that.

“Come on, we’re going to be late for Herbology,” she pointed out.

-oOoOo-

Harry trailed along behind his classmates, his mind flicking from image to image of his first couple of days at Hogwarts.

When he’d first met Hagrid, he’d been told that he was famous. The people that he’d met at the Leaky Cauldron had drummed that lesson home. Everyone there had wanted to shake his hand and pat him on the back and ‘welcome him back’ to the wizarding world.
All for something that he couldn’t remember doing. And more than that, for something that he wished had never happened.

He’d lived. His parents had died and Voldemort, the most evil wizard of the age had been defeated and disappeared. He’d stopped a war simply by failing to be killed. But without his parents, he wondered if it was worth it. Even when he’d simply thought that they’d died in a car crash like his Aunt and Uncle had told him, he’d wished that he’d died with them. There was nothing in his life at the Dursley’s that made him want to live.

More times that he could count he’d dreamed what life would have been like if his parents had survived. He’d dreamed of birthdays and presents; hugs, kisses and being told that he was loved; kicking the football around the backyard with his dad and jumping on his parents bed in the morning.

All things that he’d never experienced.

Instead, his life had been filled with chores, bruises, broken bones, too little food and a cupboard that steadily grew smaller as he got older. And then there were the names. Freak. Boy. Weirdo. Scum. Scarhead. Useless. Waste of space. The list was endless.

Hogwarts was supposed to be somewhere new, somewhere where he had a chance of escaping that life.

Until Malfoy brought it all screaming back.

Scarhead.

Freak.

The hundreds of students from all houses and all year levels that stared at him, whispered about him, pointed at him and simply wouldn’t leave him alone. Half the time all they seemed to want to do was to get an eyeful of his scar. The rest of the time everyone just wanted to meet him, to shake his hand and to become the best friend of ‘the-boy-who-lived’.

But he could tell.

Very few of those people who wanted to be his ‘friend’ actually meant it. They just wanted to be ‘in’ with the ‘celebrity’. Hermione was different. So was Neville. And Fred and George Weasley had spent the last two days busy making fun of the whole idea. Ron, though, was one that he wasn’t sure of. He could go either way and Harry was reserving judgement.

All he prayed for was that people would get tired of it soon and leave him alone so that he could make some sense of this strange new world.

-oOoOo-

“Ah, yes,” Professor Snape said in his quiet, silky voice. “Harry Potter, our new … celebrity.”

Hermione frowned and risked a glance at the boy beside her. Harry was slumped down in his chair obviously trying to make himself as small as possible.

Her attention was snapped back to the potions master as he began extolling the virtues of potions. His love of the subject was clear and his knowledge was reputed to be second to none. The rumours around Gryffindor Tower stated that Professor Snape favoured the Slytherins above all others, but Hermione didn’t put any stock in that. He was a teacher. Teachers didn’t show favouritism.
“… I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even put a stopper in death – if you aren’t as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach,” Professor Snape continued.

Hermione leant forward. She knew that she was atrocious when it came to cooking and both she and Harry had agreed that potions should be very much like cooking, something that Harry was adamant that he was particularly good at (gathering ingredients and mixing the right amounts together correctly to make some new). She was determined to learn the art of potion making as well as she learnt everything else. That is to say, perfectly.

“Potter!” Professor Snape suddenly whirled on her partner, “What would I get if I added powered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Instantly a page from their potion book appeared before Hermione’s mind’s eye and her hand shot up. Professor Snape, though, completely ignored her, his eyes focused solely on Harry. For his part, Harry’s eyes darted this way and that before he shook his head.

“I don’t know, Sir,” he said quietly.

“Tut, tut – clearly fame isn’t everything,” Professor Snape sneered.

He turned as if to walk away before spinning back around.

“Let’s try another. Where would I look if I told you to find me a bezoar?”

Almost before the question had finished being asked, Hermione’s hand was once more in the air. Surrupetitiously glancing around, Hermione could see her fellow Griffindors looking shocked and pityingly towards their poor classmate. The Slytherins, meanwhile, were in near hysterics at the inquisition that Harry was being put under.

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“I don’t know, Sir,” he said quietly.

“Thought that you wouldn’t open a book before coming, eh, Potter? Tell me, what’s the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?” Professor Snape continued.

Once again, Harry looked around and Hermione saw him first lock his eyes on her and then Neville before looking back at the potions master.

“I don’t know, Sir, but I think Hermione does. You could ask her,” Harry replied, making Hermione’s eyes nearly pop out of her head in disbelief at not only the rudeness of his answer but the casual way that he’d just brought her to Professor Snape’s attention.

“Ten points for your cheek, Potter,” Professor Snape replied, his voice a bare whisper that still managed to carry to the entire room. “Neither fame, nor celebrity, nor even know-it-alls will be tolerated in this classroom. And for your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful that it’s known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat that can save you from most poisons and as for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, also known as aconite. Well? Why aren’t you all writing this down?”

Instantly Hermione’s quill was in her hand and she was scribbling down the information onto her parchment. Sneaking a look beside her, she could see that Harry’s eyes were glistening. But she was sure that she was the only one to notice – his head was too far down with his messy black hair providing the perfect cover from any other prying eyes.

The lesson went quickly downhill from there.
As hard as she was trying, only the Slytherins, and particularly Malfoy, were able to get anything nice said to them the entire time that they were there. All the Gryffindors were ridiculed and sneered at continuously the entire time that they were mixing a simple potion to cure boils.

Harry, she noticed, caught the brunt of it. For some reason, Professor Snape simply seemed to hate him. Everything that happened, from Seamus’ cauldron melting to Neville ending up drenched in the potion was deemed to be Harry’s fault. By the end of the lesson, Professor Snape had taken a total of forty points from the boy beside her.

Hermione couldn’t understand how the professor could act like that. She’d never ever imagined that a teacher could show so much malice towards a student. She’d just watched it happen and she still couldn’t believe it.

And when Harry was the first to run from the classroom, his eyes once more looking like he was about to burst into tears, Hermione couldn’t fault him in the slightest.

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Harry pounded through the hallways as fast as his legs would take him. Black clad bodies appeared in front of him but he simply swerved, ducked and dodged the all.

He could feel the tears threatening to fall but he was determined to hold it in, to not give Snape the satisfaction of him crying. At least not until he was safely in his four-poster bed with the curtains firmly closed around him.

It took ten long minutes to run up from the dungeons where potions was held and across the castle before he managed to reach the foot of the stairs that led to Gryffindor Tower.

Barely pausing, Harry put his foot on the first step and looked up. A wall of black was heading straight at him. There was no way that he’d be able to slip through them all without a gaggle of them stopping him and wanting to stare at his scar. Breathing heavily, he flung his head backwards and forwards trying to find somewhere that he could hide until they’d all passed.

And then he saw it.

Just off to one side of the bottom of the staircase, a suit of armour stood in a small alcove. Within seconds Harry had squeezed to one side of it and slid along the wall to reach the lee of the staircase itself. As he started to slip down the wall to sit on the ground, he froze.

Right beside him, underneath the very stairs themselves, was a tiny door.
Hermione was worried. And when she was worried, she did the one thing that came naturally to her – she hit the books.

Flying lessons were approaching. On brooms. And as this was one of the major devices that witches and wizards used for transportation, she knew that she had to learn it.

Oh, there were other magical means of transportation. Apperating (instantaneously disappearing from one place and reappearing in another), of course, but you needed to be of age and hold a licence for that. The Floo Network was another. This one basically involved stepping into a fireplace, stating your destination and being magically transported to another fireplace. But flying was the main means of transportation, especially for underage wizards and witches.

There were just two things wrong with magic brooms as far as Hermione could see. Firstly, a small, thin piece of wood seemed a very poor support system for flying around on. The other was the fact that flying meant that you had to go up. And she was terrified of heights.

Thus, she scoured every book that she could find on flying. _Quidditch Through the Ages_ was a good one and gave countless tips on how to mount, fly and direct a broom. _Through the Air: Magical Modes of Transport_ was another. But all that that book showed Hermione was that there other, safer, means of flying than brooms. Like carpets. Much larger and able to support a much bigger weight. Unfortunately, there was some bizarre law that made them illegal in the United Kingdom.

All through breakfast on that fateful Thursday morning of Gryffindor and Slytherin’s first flying lesson, Hermione went through every single fact that she’d learnt about broomstick flying. Neville and to some extent Harry and Dean Thomas (both raised in the muggle world), hung on her every word, soaking in every tip that she knew.

Flying discussions were interrupted by, ironically enough, the post owls. Or, more specifically, a large brown barn owl. She landed neatly in between the jug of pumpkin juice and the plate of scrambled eggs right in front of Neville.

“It’s from my Gran,” Neville explained as he reached out to untie the brown paper package from the owl’s leg.

A glass ball the size of a large marble fell out into Neville’s hands.

“It’s a Rememberall,” he explained as the first-year Gryffindors looked on in interest. “Gran knows I forget things – this tells you if there’s something that you’ve forgotten to do. Look, you hold it tight like this and if it turns red … oh …”

Hermione looked on in fascination as the ball suddenly turned scarlet and Neville’s face fell. Before anyone had a chance to question Neville about what it was that he’d forgotten, the Rememberall was suddenly snatched out of his hands.

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The arrival of Neville’s Rememberall was also being closely observed from the staff table.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was paying close attention to the first year Gryffindors. Or, more specifically, one particular Gryffindor first year.
Harry Potter had arrived at his school in a most perplexing way.

Firstly, it’d been Dumbledore’s intention that Harry have the felicity of being absorbed into the Weasley Family. As far as the Headmaster was concerned, they would be the perfect avenue for Harry to learn about the magical world. With seven children, four of whom were now at the school, including one the same age as Harry, he’d been sure that they’d make the perfect friends for the boy and the perfect influence on him. Dumbledore paused and frowned at that thought as he re-evaluated that idea in the face of the twins.

Molly, too, with her mothering would be the perfect surrogate for the boy. To that end, he’d ensured that Hagrid conveniently ‘forgot’ to tell Harry how to get on to Platform Nine and Three Quarters while also ensuring that Molly knew to look out for the boy. Her owl stating that she’d missed him on the platform but had seen that he was indeed safely on the train was unexpected in the extreme.

When Harry had first walked into the Great Hall, Dumbledore had taken in his appearance and had been startled. Only the years of schooling himself to sit quietly without showing his emotions to the Wizengamot (the wizarding world’s parliament) had prevented him from rushing to the boy to personally check over his health.

Harry was thin. Even his robes couldn’t completely hide the fact. And he was also small. As much as Harry looked like his father, James was never that small in comparison to his classmates. If he had to guess, and Dumbledore prided himself on the fact that his guesses were almost always right, then he’d say that Petunia and her husband hadn’t been looking after the boy properly.

Watching the boy, now, Dumbledore noticed that he’d seemed to have formed firm friendships with both Neville Longbottom and Hermione Granger. There were others of course, but those two were obviously the closest to Harry. This was unfortunate in the Headmaster’s opinion. Hermione was a muggle-born and while Neville was a pure-blood, his grandmother, Augusta, was a force to be reckoned with. Not like the easily influenced Weasleys.

A movement caught the corner of his eye and Dumbledore switched his gaze to the Slytherin table. Young Mister Malfoy was pointing out Mister Longbottom’s new Rememberall to his ever present friends.

A simple, “Minerva” was all that was necessary.

He watched as Professor McGonagall descended on the possible mischief that Mister Malfoy was about to pull. With barely a few words, the Slytherin three quickly left the hall.

For the rest of breakfast, Headmaster Dumbledore leant back in his chair, one hand running continuously through his beard as he calmly contemplated his smallest Gryffindor.

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“Stick out your right hand over your boom and say ‘up!’,” instructed Madam Hooch.

Hermione eyed the grey haired, yellow eyed teacher sceptically before looking down once more at the old broom beside her.

“Up!” she commanded.

Unsurprisingly the broom didn’t move a twig. Hermione wasn’t sure how to feel about that. On the one hand, she desperately wanted to excel in learning how to fly a broom, just like everything
else that she did. But on the other hand, she had absolutely no interest in even holding a broom, let alone mounting it and flying away.

“Up!” she tried again.

This time it rolled over as though it was trying to get away from her.

Frowning down at the uncooperative broom, Hermione tried to rationalize her thoughts. This was an assignment that she was going to succeed in. Already her broom was starting to respond. She just had to make it listen to her.

Glancing around, she surreptitiously evaluated her classmates’ progress. It pleased her to see that she wasn’t the only one to be having problems. Neville beside her was still trying to convince his broom to leave the ground. Others, though, Harry, Ron and Malfoy among them, had their brooms in hand and were ready for the next part of the lesson.

Narrowing her eyes, Hermione put as much volume into her command that she could. “Up!”

Smack! The force that it slammed into her palm was almost painful.

“Right, then,” said Madam Hooch. “Mount up and I’ll come and check your grip.”

Reluctantly, Hermione swung her leg over her broom and gripped the shaft with both hands.

“Relax, girl, you don’t need to throttle the thing,” Madam Hooch frowned at the white knuckles holding on to her broom when it was her turn to be evaluated.

With some difficulty, Hermione did as she was instructed before finding her hands being slid backwards and twisted slightly. She grudgingly admitted that that grip actually felt a little more natural and easier to maintain.

“Now, then,” said Madam Hooch once she’d been around to check on everyone, “when I blow my whistle, kick off from the ground hard. Keep your brooms steady, rise a couple of feet and then lean forward to land again. On my whistle – one – two – ”

Even while Hermione was still steeling herself for that first kick off, a black blur shot into the air from her right. Her mouth dropped open at the sight of Neville climbing higher and higher, far faster than what she thought was possible.

“Neville!” she screamed.

“Come back, boy!” Madam Hooch bellowed.

But Neville didn’t seem to know how to. His yells for help slowly started to dwindle the higher he went. And then he started to slip. Hermione watched horrified as she saw Neville’s feet slip out from the broom until he was just holding on by his hands. His legs dangled away below him, flapping in the breeze.

And then the inevitable happened.

The black clad Neville plummeted to the ground, landing in a heap not far away. But even from that distance, it was easy to hear the snap of a bone breaking.

Madam Hooch was with him in an instant.

“Broken wrist,” she muttered as she helped Neville to his feet. One hand cradled the other and
tears streaked his face.

“None of you is to move while I take this boy to the Hospital Wing,” Madam Hooch commanded. “You leave those brooms where they are or you’ll be out of Hogwarts before you can say ‘Quidditch’! Come on, dear.”

Madam Hooch had barely cleared the courtyard before Hermione heard Malfoy’s drawl.

“Did you see his face, the great lump?”

Parvati Patel, one of the other Gryffindor girls, immediately stuck up for their stricken friend. “Shut up, Malfoy!”

“Ooh, someone fancies Longbottom!” Pansy Parkinson shrilled before sticking her fingers down her throat and pretending to throw up, eliciting laughter from all of the Slytherins.

“Look! It’s that stupid ball that Longbottom’s Gran sent him,” Malfoy announced as he pounced on the fallen rememberall.

Hermione watched as Malfoy arrogantly began tossing the ball up and down while looking around the courtyard.

“Now, where should I leave this for the fat toad to find?” he wondered with a snigger to the other Slytherins.

An odd expression suddenly appeared on Harry’s face as he slowly turned to face the blonde boy. Hermione knew that there was something familiar about it, and it struck her that it was exactly the same as the expression that he wore just before they’d entered the Great Hall for the very first time when he’d revealed that he hated bullies.

“Give it here, Malfoy,” Harry said in the hardest voice that Hermione had ever heard him use.

“No. No, I don’t think that I will,” Malfoy replied nonchalantly. “No. I think I might leave it on one of the roofs.”

Laughing, he mounted his broom and took off.

“Harry! No! Madam Hooch told us not to move – you’ll get us all in trouble,” Hermione stated quickly as he grabbed up his broom.

For a split second, she could have sworn that there was a moment of indecision on his face as he looked at her. Unfortunately, it was dispelled by Malfoy.

“Come and get it, Potter!” the Slytherin taunted.

In an instant, Harry was in the air, shooting after Malfoy.

Hermione watched spellbound, hands over her mouth as she saw the two boys face off fifty feet up in the air. A puff of wind sent a snatch of voices back to the ground, but it wasn’t enough to be able to hear what was being said.

Suddenly, Malfoy drew back his hand and tossed the rememberall as hard and as far as he could. Hermione could see what was going to happen before it even happened. The ball arced high in the air before heading straight for the edge of the grass. She just knew that it was going to smash into pieces and she determined to gather every piece up to give back to Neville.
But she hadn’t counted on Harry.

Like a flash he darted across the sky after the errant ball. Flattening himself against the broom, he dove down, straight for the ground. At the very last instant, he leant back, one arm outstretched, before toppling onto the grass and rolling over and over.

When at last he stood up, Hermione could see Neville’s rememberall clutched safely to his chest, a massive grin plastering his face. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“HARRY POTTER!”

Hermione’s hair whipped around as she sought the voice’s owner.

Professor McGonagall stood in the archway to the courtyard. Even from that distance, she could tell that the stern teacher was vibrating with her anger.

“Never in all my time at Hogwarts,” she began.

Hermione stepped forward to defend her friend, along with Ron and the rest of the Gryffindor. But Professor McGonagall simply put up one hand and cut them all off.

“Potter. Follow me. Now!” Professor McGonagall commanded.

The combination of Professor McGonagall’s anger, Harry’s slumped shouldered dejection and Malfoy’s glee made Hermione positive that she was seeing the last of the black haired boy.

She swallowed hard. She’d been sure that, given time, he could have been her first magical friend.
“Harry?”

“Hi, Hagrid!”

Harry knew that he was bouncing slightly, but he couldn’t help it. He was just too excited.

“Can I come in?”

Hagrid’s eyes narrowed. “Why aren’t you in class?”

“Professor McGonagall gave me the rest of the lesson off so I thought that I’d come down to see you,” he beamed.

“Alright’ then, come on in,” said Hagrid, smiling through his bushy beard.

Harry had barely taken a step through the door when the great slobbering mess that was Hagrid’s dog, Fang, attacked him.

“Hi, Fang,” said Harry as he desperately tried to stay on his feet and avoid Fang’s tongue at the same time.

“Get down, ya dozy dog,” Hagrid said before bustling off to make some tea.

Two cups, one normal sized and one Hagrid sized, were put on the table along with a plate full of rock cakes. Harry eyed the cakes warily. He’d tried one the last time that he’d visited. In Harry’s opinion, Hagrid was absolutely amazing in all but one vital area. He couldn’t cook for nuts. And as someone who’d been cooking at least two meals ever since he could reach the stovetop while standing on a chair, he knew the difference between good and bad food. Unfortunately, that didn’t stop him from taking a rock cake anyway. He just liked Hagrid too much to risk hurting his feelings.

“So why’d Professor McGonagall let you out of class?” Hagrid asked when he finally joined Harry at the table.

“Well, you see, today was our first flying lesson,” he babbled happily, “and Neville had a bit of an accident. Broke his wrist, I think. Anyway, Malfoy stole Neville’s rememberall and when I told him to give it back, he just threw it away. But I caught it and Professor McGonagall saw it and told me to follow her. I thought I was going to get expelled or something, especially when she took me to see Wood. That’s Oliver Wood. But it turns out that all Professor McGonagall wanted was to put me on the Gryffindor quidditch team. I’m the new Seeker!”

For a second, Harry thought that he must have spoken too quickly or didn’t tell the story right because Hagrid was simply sitting there staring at him, his tea mug frozen half-way to his mouth. Suddenly, he slapped his hand on the table top, spilling tea everywhere.

“Harry, that’s amazin’!” Hagrid roared with delight. “Seeker! And on the team in yer first year. Firs’ years never make the quidditch teams! Seeker! Hah! Good on yer, Harry.”

He slapped the table again, smiling fondly at Harry.

“Yer know, yer dad was on the Gryffindor quidditch team too. He played chaser. But he didn’t make the team until his third year.” Hagrid told him.
“My dad played quidditch?” Harry asked in wonder. He’d never heard anything about either of his parents before.

“Sure he did,” Hagrid replied. “Hang on, I reckon I’ve got a photo of him here somewhere. Do ya wanna see it?”

Harry nodded harder than he ever had before. He was about to see his first ever picture of his dad.

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Harry only just made it to charms class on time. He’d stayed much longer with Hagrid than he’d originally planned. But getting to see the photo of his dad and to see him smiling and waving up at him was amazing.

And it wasn’t just James Potter that he got to see, either. The old photo that Hagrid had finally dug out from the box under his bed also had his dad’s three best friends in it. Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew, Hagrid had told him.

Harry had determined then and there to send Hedwig with a letter to each of them as soon as he had the chance. People who actually knew his dad, probably his mum too. He just bet that they’d have heaps of stories to tell him. Maybe even a spare photo or two lying around that they could give him. It’d been an absolute wrench handing the photo back to Hagid before he had had to leave for class.

Slipping in the door, Harry scuttled up between the desks to take his spot between Hermione and Neville.

“Harry!” Hermione squealed, then, in a more accusing tone, “where’ve you been? We thought that you’d been expelled!”

“Nah,” he grinned back. “I’ve been down at Hagrid’s.”

“What happened with Professor McGonagall?” Neville asked.

Harry looked around before leaning in and whispering, “she put me on the quidditch team. I’m the new seeker.”

“Seeker! But first years are never allowed on the team,” Neville’s face was as shocked as he sounded.

“Apparently Professor McGonagall’s made some sort of allowance,” Harry replied.

“Brilliant!” Ron breathed in awe from the far side of Neville. “You must be the youngest player in a century!”

Harry nodded. “That’s what Wood said, too. Oh, Neville, before I forget, here’s your rememberall.”

“Thanks Harry,” Neville smiled.

“Could I have everyone’s attention? Thank you,” tiny Professor Flitwick squeaked. “Today we’re going to start on a new charm. Mister Thomas, if you could pass everyone a matchstick, please.”

While Dean was walking around the room, Professor Flitwick continued.
“Today we’re going to begin working on the *locomotor* charm. This is a useful little spell to move objects around, and is especially used in conjunction with the *wingardium leviosa* charm which levitates objects. The two spells combined are most commonly used to have objects follow you from place to place, especially heavy items for example furniture. Of course, the larger the object, the more magic that must be applied and the harder it is to do.

“We won’t be starting on *wingardium leviosa* until next week. And combining the two spells will wait until next year when you all have a much firmer control of your magic. Today, our aim is to simply make the matchstick that you’ve been given slide along the desk in front of you. Watch closely as I show you the wand movement and incantation.”

Harry’s eyes fixed on the tiny professor’s wand.

“The incantation is, of course, *locomotor* combined with the name of the object that you wish to move. For today, the incantation is *locomotor matchstick*. The wand movement begins with a small circling motion, followed by a sharp jab at the object in question. Then it is simply a matter of swishing your wand in the direction that you wish the object to move. Thus …”

Professor Flitwick’s wand pointed a matchstick on the desk before him. Following the incantation, the matchstick trundled from one side of the desk to the other and back again, before the tiny professor looked up at them all with a smile.

“You’ve seen how it’s done and I know that you all did your homework and have read the theory, so begin practising.”

Harry glanced nervously from side to side before looking down at the matchstick in front of him. Doing the practicals in class always made him nervous. He hated being where others could see what he was doing. At least he’d been able to avoid doing homework with his classmates, instead secreting himself in his special little place.

Hearing both Hermione and Neville to either side of him already beginning, Harry sighed and cautiously pointed his wand at the small piece of wood.

“**Locomotor matchstick,**” he intoned, swirling his wand and jabbing it forward.

With a quick flick of his wand, the matchstick took off. Harry watched horrified as it zoomed straight at Hermione. With a squeak, he lunged forward, flattening himself across the desk and squashing the stick flat before it could go too far.

“Harry! What are you doing?” Hermione asked angrily; her own matchstick had yet to move, despite a number of attempts.

“Um, nothing,” he replied, feeling his face go red, “I just … slipped.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, but he quickly looked away. Trying to get her attention off of him, Harry once again pointed his wand at the matchstick in front of him.

This time when he said the incantation, he made sure to not only put the emphasis in the wrong part of the words, but he also let his wand work be a bit lazier. With a smile that he desperately tried to keep off of his face, Harry saw his matchstick fail to move at all.

It wasn’t until just before lesson ended that he finally allowed his matchstick to move once more, this time much slower and not as far. By then, just over half the class had already succeeded in making their own matchsticks move. Hermione of course, was the ‘first’, although both Neville nor Ron had yet to succeed.
He never once noticed that Professor Flitwick had been keeping a very close eye on him throughout the entire lesson.

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The teacher’s lounge had a magnificent view of the Black Lake but rarely was the view admired. On the rare occasions when the various Hogwarts professors gathered there, they barely even glanced out of the window that took up most of the far wall. The collection of comfy chairs surrounding the fireplace on the opposite wall seemed to have a much greater appeal. Of course, the small cabinet to the side may have had something to do with it as well.

“Another gillywater, Minerva?” Pomona Sprout asked, holding the bottle aloft.

A couple of seconds pause was followed by a soft sigh and a glass lifted high. “I think I will, Pomona. I had the third year Gryffindors in my last class for the day.”

Poppy Pomfrey, the castle’s mediwitch chuckled. “The twins I take it? What’d those two red-heads do this time?”

Professor McGonagall scowled. “Somehow they managed to transfigure all of the Slytherins bags into spiders the size of labradors. Don’t ask me how they did it, but it took me nearly half the class to change them all back.”

“I trust you gave them a suitable punishment. Perhaps banning them from quidditch this year might curb their enthusiasm for breaking the rules,” Professor Snape drawled from where he sat working at one of the tables.

“Don’t worry, Severus, they were punished. Three nights detention working with Mister Filch,” Minerva shot back. “And they’re both staying on the team. They’re the best beaters that Gryffindor have had for nearly a decade and I fully intend to have that Cup out of your office this year and back where it belongs. In my office.”

“Now, now, Minerva, don’t count your dragons until they’re hatched,” Pomona replied, pointing her mug of mead at her rival, “I think my Hufflepuff team has a good chance at the Cup this year.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that, Pomona,” the Head of Gryffindor House replied with a smile. “I think that we may just have the ticket to win this year.”

“Yes, I heard about Mister Potter’s inclusion.” Filius Flitwick replied. “A first year Seeker. He must be good. But then, his father was a particularly good quidditch player as well.”

Minerva’s lips thinned but she held her tongue, not wanting to betray her hand, while across from her, a low hiss of air betrayed Professor Snape’s displeasure.

“Speaking of our newest Mister Potter,” Filius continued, “have any of you noticed anything odd about the young man?”

Minerva looked sharply at her colleague. One of her Gryffindors had done something odd?

“No, I can’t say that I have,” she replied. “He’s fairly quiet in class, not quite as studious as I would have hoped for, but he shows promise.”


“Can’t say that I agree with that assessment, Severus,” Pomona replied. “He certainly knows his
way around the gardens and how to handle the plants in my greenhouse.”

“Why do you ask, Filius?” Minerva asked, trying to head off the impending argument.

“It was the strangest thing,” he replied. “We were starting to work on the *locomotor* charm in class today and I’m positive that on his first attempt, young Mister Potter succeeded to the extent that his matchstick fairly flew across the desk. But before I could be sure, he threw himself across the desk covering up his matchstick and then proceeded to use the shoddiest wand work that I’ve ever seen.”

“Obviously a fluke,” Severus pointed out.

“No, I don’t think so,” Professor Flitwick replied slowly. “Just before the end of class I’m positive that I saw him determining how many others had already succeeded in working the charm before adjusting his technique and performing the charm perfectly.”

“You believe that he has more skill than he’s showing?” Minerva asked, scandalised at the idea of a student intentionally underperforming.

“I’m not sure,” Filius replied. “It certainly looked that way. And I’m sure that we all remember how gifted his mother Lily was at charms.”

“Hmm, thank you, Filius, I think that I’ll keep a little closer eye on Mister Potter from now on,” Minerva assured them all.
If there was one thing that Harry had learnt since starting at Hogwarts, it was that no matter how hard anyone tried, secrets just couldn’t be kept secret.

Oliver Wood, and to some extent, Professor McGonagall, had insisted that Harry’s inclusion on the Gryffindor quidditch team should be kept secret. But before the next evening’s dinner had even started, nearly the entire school knew.

First had come Fred and George Weasley. Ron’s twin brothers ambushed Harry in the corridors between lessons to drape arms across his shoulders and steer him in to the closest empty classroom.

“How’s our newest, dearest friend,” the first one said seriously.

“It’s come to our attention,” the second one continued

“That you fancy yourself as a quidditch prodigy…”

“And the way that our esteemed leader…”

“Our fanatical leader, I believe you mean, my dear brother,” the first twin corrected.

“Quite, correct, brother mine, our fanatical leader, has been extolling your flying skills…”

“Then you must be exactly that,” their speech concluded with a mad grin.

Harry swivelled his head backwards and forwards between the two identical redheads. There was no way that he could tell which one was which.

“What … what are you two talking about?” he tried, attempting to hide his new Seeker status.

The twins shared an amused look between them before simultaneously patting him on his shoulders.

“Harry, there’s no need to deny it to us,” he was told.

“We’re on the team, too.”

“We’re the Gryffindor beaters.”

“Oh,” Harry exclaimed. “It’s just that Wood told me not to say anything.”

“Don’t you worry about Oliver. He can get a bit one track minded, if you know what I mean,” the twin on the right explained.

“Anyway, gotta go, Harry, History of Magic, you know,” the other twin explained.

“Yes, it’s time for our nap.”

And with that, they were gone.

But they weren’t the last to approach him. The next were the three Gryffindor chasers – Alicia Spinnett, Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell – all pulling him aside to congratulate him on making the team. And once the quidditch team knew, the whole of Gryffindor House wasn’t far behind.
The rumour quickly spread to the other three houses. A first year making the team was something that just couldn’t be kept secret. Of course, Harry found himself even more the centre of attention than he had been. Everyone stopped to point at him, or stare at him or to whisper behind their hands as he passed.

If there were any that still didn’t know about his accomplishment, then the six post owl carrying a long thin package unexpectedly arriving over dinner told the tale to all. It may have been wrapped and the note may have insisted that it not be opened until safe in the dormitories away from prying eyes, but a broomstick will always be recognised by its distinctive shape.

The only fact that Harry (along with Neville, Ron, Dean and Seamus) was able to keep secret for that night was the make of the broom. A Nimbus Two Thousand – one of the best brooms that there were for quidditch.

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“Harry, wait!”

Hermione watched as the black haired boy vanished through the dungeon door as fast as he could.

Throwing the last of her potion ingredients and cauldron into her bag along with her books and quill, Hermione hurried from the potions room.

It’d been another dismal lesson. Professor Snape had, once again, simply instructed the class as to the page number of the potion that they were to be brewing and left them to their work. There were no explanations of the correct way to prepare the ingredients or hints and tips to the brewing process. Instead, the potions master had simply walked around the room, praising the Slytherin’s efforts and degrading every Gryffindor’s attempt.

Harry, as usual, seemed to cop the brunt of Professor Snape’s jibes and snide remarks. Hermione could see the way that Harry’s hands shook every time that Professor Snape even began to approach their table – it was no wonder that his potion had turned an off-green colour instead of the milky white that it was supposed to be.

Never in a million years would Hermione have ever imagined a teacher to be so knowledgeable about their subject area and yet so abysmal at the actual teaching of it. Let alone being capable of scaring their students with such glee in the process.

And yet, Professor Snape managed it. And this had actually been one of the better ones for Harry. Professor Snape had only deducted forty points from him.

Weaving through her classmates as quickly as she could, Hermione chased after Harry. He had a good lead, but there was only one way to go: up.

At the top of the stairs she thought that she caught a glimpse of him heading left. If her guess was right, then he was heading back towards Gryffindor Tower, just like he did after every lesson. But he was always too quick for her and made it up to the boy’s dormitory faster than she could make it to the common room.

Not this time, she determined. She wanted to catch him, to make him stop and to reassure him that what happened in potions wasn’t his fault.

A group of yellow trimmed black robes belonging to some Hufflepuffs slowed Harry down and Hermione tried to put on a burst of speed to catch up – not any easy thing to do with the weight of her bag hanging off of her shoulder.
Suddenly, he was off again and this time, just before she could catch him, a mass of Gryffindors thundered down the steps from the tower, cutting her off from her prey. When they’d finally cleared the way, it was only to see empty stairs before her. How Harry’d managed to climb to the top so fast was beyond her, but Hermione knew that she’d lost her chance once again.

Slowly, she climbed the stairs and, after giving the Fat Lady the password, climbed in through the portrait hole. From there, it was a simple trudge across to her favourite red squishy armchair. She dragged it around slightly so that she could more easily see the stairs that led to the dormitories before plopping down.

With a sigh, she pulled out her transfiguration homework, quill and ink bottle and settled in for the wait for Harry to re-appear.

It was over an hour later before she saw the first first year Gryffindor emerge from the staircase.

“Hey, Neville, is Harry coming down for dinner soon?” she asked.

“Harry?” Neville asked, surprise clear in his voice. “Harry’s not up there, Hermione. He hasn’t been there since before breakfast this morning.”

“He hasn’t?” she asked, her mouth flopping open in her disbelief.

Neville simply shook his head.

Then where in the world is he? Hermione wondered.

-oOoOo-

At the same time that Hermione was in the Gryffindor common room working on her transfiguration homework, another Gryffindor was working on the same homework far below her.

In the tiny space that Harry had commandeered and made his own, his quill scratched away across the parchment. Every so often, he would look up and around at the dark, shadowed stone walls before refocussing once more on his essay.

At long last he leant back away from the stool that he used as a desk. Unrolling his scroll, he measured what he had so far. Two and a half feet of small, scratchy writing on the different aspects of transfiguring a needle into a matchstick and how it differed from turning a matchstick into a needle. Pushing his black locks out of his eyes, he nodded. Half a foot more than he needed.

After rereading his essay again, he knew exactly what he needed to put into the real essay that he would be handing in. Pulling out a second piece of parchment from his bag where he’d dropped it beside the coil of rope that he was sitting on, he got back to work.

This part was always trickier. And especially with a teacher that he was still trying to get to know. Professor McGonagall was one of the stricter teachers at Hogwarts and her standards were higher than Professor Sprout’s for Herbology and nearly as tough as Professor Snape’s Potions expectations.

But this type of work wasn’t new to Harry. He’d been doing his homework twice for years (three times if you counted being made to do Dudley’s homework as well). Very early on in his schooling, Harry’d learnt that it wasn’t a good idea to get higher grades than Dudley. In fact, it wasn’t good to do anything better than Dudley. He’d suffered plenty of punishments over the years for those infractions – being locked in his cupboard, no food for days at a time, the back of Vernon’s hand and extra chores were just some of the more common.
So, Harry had found the best system: do the work twice. The first time, he always did it perfectly, or at least as best as he could. The second time that Harry did the work, it was with just the right amount of mistakes to pass the work without failing. There were extra punishments if he failed and caused the school to ask either Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia to come in for an interview.

Be hidden. Don’t stand out. Don’t ask questions. Don’t draw attention.

That was his motto, his mantra at school. Of course, it rarely worked out that way. Especially with Dudley and his gang around to chase him and play ‘Harry Hunting’. But he did the best that he could.

Here at Hogwarts, with all of the other ‘freaks’ like him, there was no Dudley to hassle him, which was good. But there was a Draco Malfoy to taunt him and he’d seen the way that Ron taunted Hermione whenever she excelled in class. There was no way that he wanted to have to put up with that along with all of the other things that everyone seemed to want to stare at him about – that ‘Boy Who Lived’ nonsense and becoming the Gryffindor Seeker.

His heart still thumped madly in his chest just at the thought of the near catastrophe that he’d barely avoided in Charms class. He still didn’t know just what he was thinking. Obviously, he hadn’t been. To perform the *locomotor* charm perfectly first time, way before anyone else was pure stupidity. Thankfully, he’d been able to cover it up and stop everyone from realising and having one more thing to stare at him about.

At his old school, a report card was always sent home and he simply assumed that the same would be done here. And he had no intention of giving Uncle Vernon an extra reason to punish him once the school year finished and he returned to Privet Drive.

The memory of his last report card still brought a combination of anger, indignation and terror to him. The day after his birthday when Hagrid had taken him shopping for his school things on Diagon Alley, his and Dudley’s report cards had come.

Unfortunately, Harry had managed to get a better grade than his cousin in physical education. Vernon’s punishment had been to confiscate his brand new school trunk as being ‘perfect for Dudley to go to Smeltings with’. In its place, he’d received the old, battered trunk that had been sitting in the attic since Vernon’s father had been in school.

When at last he finished his now two foot essay of slightly larger writing, he breathed a sigh of relief. That was his homework all caught up and he could relax a bit. Curfew was still another couple of hours away, which gave him time to read some more of his newest favourite book – *Hogwarts: A History*. Hermione was always quoting from it and some of it had seemed quite interesting, so he’d taken the time to visit the library to borrow a copy. Not that he was going to tell anyone that he’d chosen to read it – that was another thing that Hermione was teased about.

Wiggling down a bit more comfortably on the coil of rope, Harry adjusted his lit wand tip and began to read.
The next weeks passed by nearly in a blur for Harry. Between all of his classes, homework and now Quidditch practise three nights a weeks, he was busier than he’d ever been in his whole life.

But there wasn’t any way that he’d change a thing (except for Malfoy’s endless taunts and that Ron still managed to keep his ‘I’m better than everyone else’ attitude even in the face of the success that Hermione was in all of their classes). He loved learning magic. He still found it amazing that all of the weird things that he’d ever done was actually because of magic. And learning Quidditch and flying on an actually broom was heaven for Harry. Finally, a sport that he was not just good at, but allowed to be good at.

There were spells to learn, books to read and constant practise to put a smile on his face. He was certainly glad that his new cupboard had walls of stone and a strong thick wooden door when his practices went wrong to keep the sound contained. His locomotor spell especially had a tendency to somehow get away from him after his initial success. His quills or the bits of rope that he sent whizzing from one end of the cupboard to the other had an annoying habit of crashing into the walls.

His teachers, too, gave him a lot to think about.

Professor McGonagall had once turned herself into a cat. Harry had no idea how she did it, but the very idea of being able to turn into an animal filled him with awe.

Professor Flitwick puzzled him somewhat. There was just something about the diminutive teacher that screamed ‘not quite human’, but he had no idea what it was. Maybe something to do with his teeth.

Professor Snape’s hatred for him seemed to grow with every lesson. Harry had no idea why he hated him just that he did. And that was a massive disappointment to Harry – potions was one subject that he’d been looking forward to, simply because he thought that it’d be like cooking, and he was good at cooking.

And then there was Professor Quirrell. Defence Against the Dark Arts was absolutely fascinating – when Harry read the text book. But listening to it expounded upon by Professor Quirrell was just the opposite. The subject seemed to terrify the teacher and anything that he was trying to teach, Harry simply lost in Professor Quirrell’s stutter.

It was after one such lesson, when Harry was lost in thought as he was trying to decipher Professor Quirrell’s latest teaching, that Harry thought that he may have actually come across something that could be found in Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Somehow or other, probably because one of the staircases had decided that it needed a sudden change while he was still on it, Harry’d gotten lost. The corridor that he’d found himself in wasn’t one that he recognised, but, when the choice is continuing on or facing the moving staircases again and ending up who knows where, the choice was easy.

Unfortunately for Harry, his wandering led him straight to a locked door. A locked door with something growling menacingly on the other side of it. His hand shot away from the handle faster than thought and before he knew it, he was racing back the way he came. There was no way that he was going to even attempt to find out what animal was locked up in the castle. Or why.

-oOoOo-
As the last days of October dawned, a change came over the castle. A holiday, a big, important holiday in the magical world, fast approached: Halloween.

Hermione’s excitement exploded when she walked into the Great Hall on the morning of October Thirty-one. The entire hall had been transformed.

Thousands of bats lined the ceiling and walls, while thousands more swooped from one side to the other. Candles floated in mid-air, much like they did at the Welcoming Feast. Thick ropes of spider web were suspended in a net above the teacher’s table with ‘Happy Halloween’ spelled out in sparkling letters.

Dozens of gigantic pumpkins were also scattered about. Hermione gasped as she saw them. Most were bigger than she was and the largest was easily big enough to fit Hagrid inside. And with the way that Professor Flitwick was directing a group of fifth years, it looked like that was actually going to happen. Every pumpkin had at least two students intently waving their wands to either carve a design into a pumpkin or to completely remove its middle so that a person could stand inside it.

Unconsciously, Hermione’s wand was mimicking the actions of the pumpkin carvers as her narrowed eyes took in and tried to learn the complex charm.

“Look at her! What’s she think she’s doing?” Ron’s voice snapped her back to table laid for breakfast.

“Looks to me as those she’s trying to learn something new, Ron,” Harry replied in a tone that seemed to stop Ron flat.

But as Hermione looked across at the group of first year Gryffindor boys, she wasn’t sure if it really was Harry’s reply or just the pile of bacon on Ron’s plate that stopped him from once again making fun of her.

Unfortunately, if it was the food, breakfast soon came to an end and they were off to classes.

The instant that Professor Flitwick announced that they were now ready to learn the levitation charm, wingardium leviosa, Hermione tuned everyone else out. She’d been looking forward to this for weeks. Unfortunately, Professor Flitwick had decided to wait until everyone had mastered the locomotor spell before he was ready to move on, which meant that Hermione had had to wait.

Once again, she was the first to succeed. Her feather rose the instant that she incanted the spell. Professor Flitwick’s excited cry of, “Oh, well done! See here, everyone, Miss Granger’s done it!” was music to her ears.

As she looked proudly around, she noticed that Ron was having difficulty. Only wanting to help, she tried to show him how it was done and even went so far as to correct his pronunciation.

And that’s when it all went horribly wrong.

Hermione watched Ron jerked away from her, a scowl on his face and fire dancing in his eyes. But I was only trying to help, she thought morosely.

Shutting her eyes against the pain of impending tears, she turned the other way, but Lavender didn’t seem to want her help either.

Quietly, she once again faced the front of the classroom and tried to content herself with working
on making her feather float up and down. But her heart just wasn’t in it. Every time that she tried to help someone, she’d been rebuffed.

She’d thought that being here at Hogwarts would be different. But it wasn’t. It was exactly like it was back at her old school. No one ever wanted her help. No one ever wanted to be her friend. She’d always known that she was different. And when Professor McGonagall had come to her home and told her that she was magical, she’d thought that that explained everything. Obviously, she’d been wrong.

By the time the lesson ended, she was feeling so miserable that, for once in her life, she’d dawdled. She was actually the last to leave the classroom.

But as it turned out, she hadn’t dawdled enough. Just down the corridor, but still well in hearing range, Ron, Dean, Seamus, Lavender and Parvati were heading towards their next class.

“IT’S no wonder no one can stand her,” Ron stated loudly, “she’s a nightmare, honestly.”

Suddenly, there was no stopping the tears. They cascaded down her cheeks. She knew he was right. She had no friends here. No one cared or simply talked to her. No one wanted to study with her or spend time with her. Not even her own dorm mates.

Knowing that no one would even care or probably even notice, Hermione barged through her classmates, headed for the nearest toilets. For the first time in her life, Hermione had zero interest or intention of going to her next class.

-oOoOo-

Hermione didn’t show up for History of Magic. She’d been in Charms class, but, as Neville had forgotten his book and needed a quick detour up to Gryffindor Tower before class, he and Harry had raced off before anyone else had even begun packing up.

Something had happened. Harry was sure of it. It just wasn’t like Hermione to skive off a class. Not even History of Magic where the ghost of Professor Binns could drone on for hours without actually imparting any interesting information.

This was something that always disappointed Harry. He’d read the textbook. He’d forced himself to stay awake and be attentive, or at least as attentive as possible, in every lesson. He’d even taken some notes – admittedly not as many or as diligently as Hermione, but some at least. Everything that he’d heard told him that History of Magic could be one of the most fascinating subjects taught at Hogwarts. If it’d been taught by almost anyone else.

“Hey, Lavender, Parvati, wait up!” Harry called after class when they were all on their way back to the tower to drop off their bags.

The two girls paused and turned back to watch him running to catch up to them.

“What’s up, Harry?” Lavender asked.

“Have you seen Hermione?” he asked. “She didn’t come to History.”

Parvati shared a nervous looking glance with her best friend before answering. “Um, I think she’s in the toilets still.”

“For all of class? Is she sick?” Harry asked.

“Um, no, I think she’s still a little upset,” Lavender replied.
Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Why is Hermione upset?”

Lavender’s eyes moved off to the side and tracked Ron as he walked past. “I think she might have overheard something.”

With a quick lunge, Harry’s hand fell on Ron’s shoulder.

“Alright, there, Harry?” Ron asked nervously as he turned around.

“What’d you say to Hermione?”

Ron’s eyes darted around the corridor. For some reason he couldn’t seem to meet Harry’s eyes. “Nothing really. At least nothing that everyone else wasn’t thinking.”

Harry let his hand drop. He’d been on the end of more taunts, comments and snide remarks in his life than he could remember. Often they were the ones that hurt worse than the physical blows that he’d taken.

Instantly he whirled back to Lavender and Parvati. “Which toilet?”

“The girl’s toilet on the second floor near the Charms corridor,” Parvati replied.

Without a second thought, Harry was racing back the way that they’d come.

“But what about the feast?” Ron yelled after him.

-oOoOo-

“Hermione?”

Her head came up at the sound of the voice. It was faint and through the stone walls and thick wooden door, not to mention also having to travel as far as the last cubicle, it was almost impossible to identify.

“Hermione? Are you alright? Are you still in there?”

This time she took more notice. She thought that it was a boy’s voice. And one that sounded familiar. She had no idea how long she’d been ignoring it. It could have been minutes. Possibly hours.

Her grief and sobs had blocked out everything outside of the stall that she’d barricaded herself in. Ron’s words and the looks of agreement on the faces of everyone around him still haunted her.

“It’s no wonder no one can stand her. She’s a nightmare, honestly.”

Every time she replayed the scene, she broke down again. Her sobs echoed around the toilet. Others had come and gone and not one had asked if she was alright. Not one had even tried to find out who was crying in the end cubicle.

She knew it now more than ever before. No one cared about her. No one would even miss her if she wasn’t there. It was just like her old school all over again. There were only two people in the whole world who’d ever cared about her: her parents.

She’d been miserable for weeks now. The first day on the train, she’d thought that Harry and Neville would be just the first of many friends that she’d make. But that hadn’t happened. Neither of the two boys had become her friend. Sometimes she thought that there was the beginning of
something, but …

Even her own dorm mates hated her. Lavender and Parvati were always talking and giggling together, forever leaving her out of whatever gossip had attracted their attention and shooting glances at her.

And she was expected to stay here for ten months of the year with only a brief two week reprieve at Christmas? She couldn’t do it. There was no way that she’d survive seven years of such utter misery and isolation.

Scrubbing her hands across her face, she resolved to do the only thing that she could do. She simply had to leave. To go home to her parents. To go back to the only place where she knew that she was loved.

“How?”

There was that voice again. Someone, it seemed, had actually come to find her. Her curiosity quickly got the better of her and she decided to find out who it was.

After drying her eyes and wiping her nose once more, Hermione hesitantly crept towards the door. Quietly she opened it and looked out. And then down.

There, sitting hunched against the wall was Harry. His bag was tucked in beside him and his head was down on his knees. She had no idea how long he’d been there, but judging by the dim light in the corridor, she knew that classes must have finished long before.

“Harry?” she asked quietly.

His head snapped up and she gasped at the concern clear in his piercing green eyes.

“Ungk”

The grunt combined with the sudden revolting stench caused Hermione to turn her head to the left. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

A troll. It could only be a troll. Twelve feet tall with bulging chest and muscles. Head the size of a melon. Skin a sickly grey. Clothed only in a raggedy loincloth. Oh, and carrying a club the size of a small tree. Her mind processed it all and came to the right conclusion, but right at that moment, her brain wasn’t in control of her body.

“Ahhhhh!” she screamed, backing away.

Her terrified screech echoed around her as she sought refuge in the same cubicle that she’d been crying in before.

The heavy pounding of half-tonne footsteps followed her and she curled into the smallest ball that she could.

A terrific smashing directly over her head announced the stall being obliterated by a single swing of the troll’s club. Wooden shrapnel clattered all around her as she peeked up at the menace towering above her.

With a growl, the club swung up and Hermione knew exactly where it was aimed – right for her head and she squeezed her eyes shut.

But the blow never came.
When next she dared to peek up, it was to see the troll spinning around, a small dark cloaked figure clinging desperately to its back.

“Hermione! Get out of here!” Harry grunted as his legs were flung this way and that as the troll continued to spin, its massive hands pawing to rid itself of the nuisance that was Harry.

But there was no way that Hermione had any intention of moving. She was petrified with fear.

She shrieked again as the troll finally caught something and threw it to the floor. Her heart restarted as she realised that it was only Harry’s bag and not the boy himself.

Books, quills and ink bottles scattered across the floor as the bag tore. Bright swathes of ink splashed in puddles and Hermione found her eyes fixated on the brilliant shades mixing together.

A large grey foot came down on one of the many ink patches and slipped out. Two sinks were obliterated as the troll unsuccessfully tried to catch itself before face planting on the solid tiles, smashing them into tiny pieces.

One of Harry’s hands came out from around the troll’s neck and his wand pointed out.

“Locomotor quill!”

Hermione watched in fascination as a quill shot across the room and straight up the troll’s nose.

The troll’s bellow of pain snapped Hermione’s hands to her ears in a desperate attempt to shield them from the noise. A hand grabbed her elbow and she shied away. Snapping her eyes open, she saw a very dishevelled Harry in front of her.

“Come on!” he rasped urgently.

Scrambling to her feet, Hermione grabbed his hand and together they bolted for the door.
“Where have you two been?”

Professor McGonagall’s stern voice slid the two first years to a halt as a flurry of teachers appeared from around the corner that they’d been racing towards.

“Professor … troll … girl’s toilets,” Harry wheezed.

A sharp, piercing glance was all that they were spared before Professors McGonagall, Snape and Flitwick strode, or in Snape’s case, limped, towards the toilets.

“Don’t even think about going anywhere,” Professor McGonagall threw over her shoulder.

Harry and Hermione shuffled closer to the wall as Professor Quirrel scuttled past them. He threw them a nervous look as he patted as his large purple turban.

Hermione slumped against the wall, head down. Harry eyed her carefully, trying to see if she’d been hurt at all, but her bushy hair had fallen to cover her face from his scrutiny.

“Hermione? Are you alright?” he asked tentatively.

A nod was the only response that he got and before he could question her again, he was distracted by the returning teachers.

“Well, I think that it’s safe enough at the moment for you two to tell us what in the world you thought you were doing down here with a troll on the loose?” Professor McGonagall’s thin lips asked.

“Oh, Hermione was in the toilets and then that troll just barged in and started wrecking the place,” Harry tried to explain.

Professor Snape straightened from where he’d been rubbing his leg and scowling at Professor Quirrel, in the process letting his robes fall to hide what looked like a large bite mark to Harry.

“I’m sure that Mister Potter here was simply playing the hero instead of doing as he was told. He seems to have a propensity for not following instructions,” he intoned.

“What instructions, Professor?” Harry asked, confused.

“All students were instructed to head straight from the Great Hall to their common rooms, Mister Potter,” Professor McGonagall supplied.

“Oh, but we weren’t at the feast,” Harry replied.

“You weren’t at the feast?” a surprised Professor Flitwick squeaked, “why ever not?”

“Well,” Harry began, glancing at Hermione, not sure what to say.

Suddenly, Hermione straightened. “We weren’t at the feast because I was … I was … upset and h-hiding out in the toilets. Harry, I think, came to find me.”

“I see,” Professor McGonagall’s eyes narrowed. “Then could you kindly explain what happened to the troll? It was unconscious on the floor with a quill stuck up its nose!”
“Um, that was me, Professor,” Harry admitted quietly. “I saw it go into the toilet where Hermione was and I … I wasn’t thinking. I jumped on its back and then it fell down and I used the first spell that I could think off – the *locomotor* spell – and the quill went up its nose and then I just grabbed Hermione and we ran for it.”

Harry sheepishly looked around at the four teachers, only to find various combinations of shock, disbelief and outright terror (on the part of Professor Quirrel, of course) plastered on their faces.

“I’d be dead if it wasn’t for Harry,” Hermione spoke up in as strong a voice as Harry’d heard her use since the ordeal began.

Professor McGonagall was the first to find her voice. “Five points from the both of you for not being where you were supposed to be. And Mister Potter, twenty-five points for sheer dumb luck! Now, if you aren’t injured at all, straight to Gryffindor common room, thank you.”

Harry nodded, desperately trying to contain the smile that threatened to break out on his face.

“Mister Potter? I believe that this is yours,” Professor Flitwick stated, holding out Harry’s repaired bag, before leaning in. “I’ve repaired your belongings, but if I was you, I’d think about getting a new quill.”

-oOoOo-

A wall of noise hit them the instant that the Fat Lady’s portrait swung aside to admit their entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room.

“There they are!” Fred Weasley (or was it George?) exclaimed, hand outstretched in Harry and Hermione’s direction.

“The Heroes of the Hour!” George, or at least the other twin, declared.

“The Terroriser of Trolls!” Fred declared as he and his brother rapidly approached.

“Whoever said that the club was mightier than the quill …” George told the air in general.

“Never met these two!” They finished together as each twin hoisted one of them on to their shoulders.

Suddenly, the whole of Gryffindor House seemed to be crowding in close, reaching out to shake their hands, slap them on the back, clapping, whistling, cheering, banging mugs on tables and stomping feet in excitement.

Hermione grinned nervously and shot a look across at Harry. The poor boy looked stunned, as though he was trying to shrink within himself and disappear.

Eventually, they were released to stand on a table, where the red-headed twins plopped down, rested their heads on their propped up hands and batted their eyes at the pair of them in adoration.

“So, tell us, Boy-Who-Lived-To-Terrorise-Trolls, what’s the best way to rescue the Damsel in Distress?” George asked, eliciting a swathe of laughs and giggles from the packed common room.

“And remember, there’s no need to gloss over the details or leave anything out,” Fred stated.

Harry looked around, unsure what to say or do.

“But, how do you already know?” he finally asked. “We came straight here. We haven’t told
anyone what happened.”

“Except the professors,” Hermione corrected him. “And I doubt that they told you all.”

“Right you are, Hermione,” Fred replied.

“The Fat Lady told us,” George finished.

“What these two buffoons are forgetting to say, is that you were standing beside the portrait of Wendell the Weird when you were talking to the professors earlier and he rushed straight up to tell the Fat Lady,” Alicia Spinnet supplied.

“Then, if you’ve already heard the story, you won’t need to hear it again,” Hermione stated as she tried to get down from the table.

The twins though, were having none of that.

“Oh, no, you don’t, Hermione,” Fred stated, pushing her back towards the centre of the table, “we all want to hear the story properly.”

Harry sighed as he looked around at the expectant faces and came to a quick decision. Best to get it over with quickly.

“I was waiting outside the girl’s toilets for Hermione,” he began.

“What were you doing in there that made you miss half the feast?” Lee Jordan, the twin’s best friend, interrupted.

“Is that something that we really need to know, Lee?” Fred asked.

Hermione scowled in the direction of the group of nervous-looking first years.

“I think that might be girl-talk, boys,” Angelina Johnson stated forcefully, and Hermione had the impression that the Gryffindor Chasers would be pulling her aside later for a quiet word.

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “a troll suddenly appeared.”

“How big was it?”

“How can a troll just appear? Wouldn’t you smell it first?”

Harry paused in confusion at the questions being shouted at him.

With a shrug, he continued. “After it went into the girl’s toilets and I heard Hermione scream, I just had to do something. I wasn’t thinking really. I sorta just jumped at it and landed on its back and hung on. And then, for some reason, it fell over.”

“It slipped in the ink from the bottles that smashed after it ripped your bag apart,” Hermione supplied.

Harry gave a nod to thank her for explaining that.

“Then I just locomotored my quill and it went up its nose,” Harry continued.

“Ew, troll boogers!”

“You still got the quill, Harry? Can we have it?” the twins asked eagerly, receiving an eager nod.
“You used *locomotor* on a quill this early in first year?” Percy Weasley asked. “That’s impressive magic.”

Harry shrugged, eager to get to the end of the story so that he could get off the table and escape up to his dorm and his bed.

“Once it was down, I just grabbed Hermione and we got out of there.”

“And that’s where the professors found us,” Hermione concluded.

“Yep, just as we thought,” Fred said looking at his brother.

“Heroes just can’t help being heroes,” George stated with a grin.

“Uh, guys, can we get down now?” Harry asked.

Two long arms reached out to pluck Harry and Hermione back to the ground.

“Let’s get this party rockin’!” Lee shouted.

Mugs were pushed into their hands as Fred held his own newly acquired mug in the air.

“To Harry and Hermione! Showing a troll what being a Gryffindor is all about!”

-oOoOo-

Harry successfully hid his amusement behind his large, chipped tea cup. Beside him, Hermione was frowning hard at the rock cake in her hand and attempting to gnaw at it with the side of her mouth.

He knew from past experience that that was probably the best way to eat one of Hagrid’s rock cakes. Thankfully this time, he’d managed to pass on the cakes in favour of some treacle that Hagrid had made. There wasn’t any improvement in this cooking either. Harry was of the firm belief that his giant friend should give up while he was behind and simply take all of his meals up in the Great Hall with the rest of the school.

But then, Harry mused, he’d miss out on getting to spend time with Hagrid. And getting to see some more pictures of his parents that Hagrid had managed to dig up.

“Hagrid,” he asked, trying to distract himself from the faces that Hermione was pulling, “what sort of animal is in the third floor corridor?”

“Who tol’ you about Fluffy?” Hagrid asked.

“Fluffy?” Harry repeated, before shaking his head. There was no way that the growls that he’d heard behind the locked door belonged to anything that could be named ‘Fluffy’.

Hagrid’s eyes darted backwards and forwards and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Forget I said anythin’.”

Harry waited, staring at Hagrid, refusing to look away. Finally, Hagrid relented.

“Alrigh’, ye don’ have to stare like tha’,” he grumbled. “Yeah, Fluffy’s mine. He’s a … dog, o’ mine.”
Harry looked across at Fang and tried to imagine the growls that he’d heard coming from the big boarhound. Somehow he couldn’t do it and not just because Fang was the gentlest dog, in a slobber-you-to-death kind of way, that Harry had ever met. He just didn’t think that Fang would be capable of producing a deep enough sound.

“A dog?” he finally said.

“Yeah, a dog. A big dog, o’ course.”

“How big, Hagrid?” Hermione asked and Harry could imagine her wondering the same thing that he was – why would you keep a big dog locked up inside a corridor of a castle?

“Well,” Hagrid replied reluctantly, “have you studied cerebus’ yet?”

Harry shook his head in stark contrast to Hermione’s queasy-looking nod.

“Tell me, you don’t have a cerebus in the school, Hagrid,” Hermione pleaded.

But Harry was no longer listening. Instead, his mind jumped back to the bite mark that he’d seen on Snape’s leg after the defeated the troll and he just knew that somehow, the potions professor had had a run in with Fluffy.

A small, nervous sounding knock interrupted Hermione’s lecture on the amount of exercise that an animal needed in relation to its size.

“Come in,” Hagrid called.

The wooden door was pushed open to reveal a pack of small, scared looking faces.

“Um, we … we were wondering if we could talk to … to Hermione for a minute,” a nervous Ron asked.

After giving Harry a baffled look, Hermione rose from her chair and walked through the door. Harry quickly scrambled after her to watch from the doorway.

It seemed that Ron had been nominated as spokesman. All of their classmates, except Neville, clustered tightly behind the red-headed boy.

“Um, we just wanted to say sorry for what we said the other day,” Ron mumbled.

Harry raised an eyebrow. From what Hermione had eventually told him, it’d just been one red-haired git who’d made so much fun of her that she’d ended up running of crying to the girl’s toilets. It seemed that Hermione had left something out of her story.

Lavender and Pavarti, Seamus and Dean were all nodding emphatically along with the apology. In the silence that followed, Harry saw them scuffling their feet nervously in the dirt.

“Thank you for apologising,” Hermione eventually replied.

“Maybe we can start again? As friends this time?” Lavender blurted.

“Yes, yes, I think I’d like that,” Hermione smiled.
Chapter 9

Hermione watched wide-eyed as Harry’s broom spun wildly across the sky, Harry obviously only holding on by the skin of his teeth. She felt a scream building and slapped one hand over her mouth even as her other hand grabbed at her stomach. She was sure that she’d be sick well before the Quidditch game was even half over.

“Why do people play this game?” she groaned.

“Are you mental? This is the best game in the world!” Ron retorted, spinning around to stare up at her aghast from the seat in front.

“I’m muggle-born like you, Hermione, but I’m with Ron on this one,” Dean stated. “This is unbelievable!”

Hermione shuddered. The match between Gryffindor and Slytherin had only been going for a little over ten minutes and it was already looking to be the most violent and dangerous game that she’d ever seen.

Fourteen people flying through the air on tiny pieces of wood, chasing after four balls, two of which were magically designed to seek out and injure as many people as possible was insane as far as she was concerned. And once you add in that four of those people, including the unpredictable Weasley twins were tasked with helping those metal Bludgers along towards the other players, it was more than she could stand.

Grudgingly, she had to admit that the flying skills that she was seeing from the six Chasers and the two Keepers was amazing. The way that they seemed to know instinctively where each other was, being able to pass the Quaffle without even looking, had her jaw dropping more than once.

Harry, at least, she’d been happy to see had stayed well away from danger. At least for the first part of the game. He’d flown higher than anyone else and circled the pitch, out of danger. But then, he’d dived into the thickest part of the match, seeking a tiny golden spot that she hadn’t even noticed.

That was when Slytherin’s keeper, Marcus Flint, had rushed out at him, causing the tiny Gryffindor’s broom to spin out of control.

Around her, the spectators were going wild. They didn’t seem to feel the same way that she did about the game.

Everyone was on their feet in an instant, roaring either their support – the Slytherins – or their disdain at the tactic – everyone else. Even Lee Jordan, the commentator for the match, was yelling abuse at Flint.

If she had her way, she’d get Harry off of that broom and down safe on firm ground and not let him into the air ever again. But she knew that that was simply her fear of heights talking, something that Harry obviously didn’t share, at least, not judging by the look of pure joy on his face.

She sighed in relief once Harry had regained control of his broom and sped back to his spot of watching over the game like a hawk. Only to have his broom start bucking and jerking him about.

“What’s wrong with Harry’s broom?” Seamus asked.
“Can’t be anything wrong with his broom,” Ron retorted. “That’s a brand new Nibus Two Thousand. There ain’t gonna be anything wrong with that broom.”

“Well, something’s wrong,” Hermione stated. “It looks like it’s trying to throw him off.”

She watched, horrified, as Harry was jolted this way then that ever higher by his out of control broom. Around them, the rest of the Gryffindor stands also quickly became aware that something was wrong with their Seeker. Arms were raised and pointed. Gasps and groans and cries of outrage and panic swept across the crowd.

Across the pitch in the teacher’s stand, Hermione saw Professor McGonagall standing tall, one hand covering her mouth as her eyes fixated on Harry.

Ripping her eyes upwards once more, she watched as one of his hands came loose and he was slammed face first into his broom. With only one hand holding on, it was inevitable that he’d slip. Harry rolled awkwardly to his left even as his broom jerked to the right, sending him spinning down and around his broom.

For a brief instant, Harry lost his hold with both hands and he was left dangling upside down with only his legs wrapped around the broom for support, tearing a scream from Hermione. Somehow, even with the yanking backwards and forwards, he managed to swing upwards once more to grasp the broom with his hands.

Fred and George, along with Alicia, Angelina and Katie had completely abandoned the game and were circling underneath Harry, evidently hoping to catch him when the inevitable happened. Even Oliver Wood, the most diehard of Quidditch fanatics, had left his post in front of the three rings and was flying as fast as he could towards Harry.

Without warning, Harry’s legs came loose and he was left dangling by his hands. Hermione sobbed as she watched his body swinging about beneath the ever jerking broom. One hand came loose and she could see Harry looking wildly down, but by now, he was far too high for her to be able to see the terror that she was sure must be etched on his face.

Once more, Hermione tore her gaze from Harry to look at the teachers. All but two of them were on their feet, horror stricken expressions on their face. Professor Dumbledore had his wand raised, ready to perform some spell to catch Harry, she presumed.

But both Professor Snape and Professor Quirrel were still seated, both with eyes trained on Harry. The way that Professor Snape’s mouth was moving, Hermione wondered whether he was offering up some kind of prayer for the boy, which didn’t make any sense at all to Hermione, until she belated realised that he must be incanting some kind of spell.

A piercing scream from dozens of voices broke her train of thought and Hermione switched her eyes to the sight of an empty broom floating off by itself. She shot her eyes down to see a small figure plummeting towards the ground.

Tears spilled from her eyes, nearly blinding her from the sight of six crimson and gold cloaked figures converging on Harry.

In one massive bundle, they collided and Hermione’s eyes continued downwards, only to realise that all she was seeing was empty air.

Sobbing in relief, she hugged Hagrid beside her as she realised that the Gryffindor Quidditch Team had caught their Seeker.

Cheers erupted around her. Whistles, claps and shouts deafened her. Other girls were crying in
relief, just like her and Hermione suddenly realised that all of Gryffindor House had only had eyes for one of their own. Not one had been watching the game since the drama began.

Slowly, awkwardly, tipping first one way then the other, the mass of brooms sunk towards the ground.

Suddenly, when they were still a couple of metres from the ground, a black haired body struggled up to stand straddled between Fred and Oliver’s brooms. Then, for some bizarre reason that Hermione couldn’t fathom, Harry simply launched himself from the brooms, straight out into the open air.

Hermione watched, her heart in her mouth as Harry plummeted towards the ground.

He landed awkwardly on his feet before rolling over and over. She watched breathlessly as he struggled to his hands and knees and began to cough and splutter and finally threw up into his hand. The silence of the stand was broken as Harry sat up on his haunches and held a small golden ball high in his hand.

The snitch, it had to be the snitch. Hermione didn’t know how, but somehow, Harry had the snitch! Looking across at the board, she added the extra one hundred and fifty points to the board an instant before Lee Jordan.

“Harry’s caught the snitch! Harry’s caught the snitch! Gryffindor win!” his amplified voice was only just able to be heard over the roar of not only the Gryffindor stands, but also the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff stands as well.

Hermione slumped back into her seat, her jelly-like legs unable to hold her up any longer.

If this was the way that Quidditch matches usually went, she really didn’t know if she could stand to watch another.

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The entire stadium erupted in pandemonium.

Everywhere Harry looked, people were either yelling and screaming, cheering or jeering or running at him. It was this last group that had him suddenly panicking, especially with the grim expressions on more than one of them.

His quidditch team-mates were the first to reach him. All six of them were laughing hysterically at the unexpectedness of their win. Fred and George pounded him on the back and tried to lift him in the air but were fighting a losing battle against the three Chasers.

Alicia, Angelina and Katie had thrown themselves around his neck, hugging him and kissing his cheeks over and over in amongst their laughter. All the while, Oliver was staring at him dumbfounded, the broadest smile on his face and what looked to be tears in his eyes.

“But he didn’t catch the snitch!” Slytherin’s captain, Marcus Flint was protesting the win. “He nearly swallowed it! It shouldn’t be allowed!”

“There’s no rule to say that you can’t catch it in your mouth,” Madam Hooch, the game’s referee replied. “The Gryffindor Seeker caught the snitch, that’s all that matters. The result stands.”

Harry saw the scowling Flint glare at him with daggers in his eyes before storming off to join a bunch of Slytherins that included a Draco Malfoy that looked to be imitating a wide-mouthed frog vomiting.
“Mister Potter,” Madam Hooch caught his attention as she attempted to get a word in through the ever growing Gryffindor scrum, “as soon as we recover your broom, I’ll be confiscating it until it’s been checked over for tampering.”

Oliver blanched out of his stupor at the statement. “But you can’t! Harry needs his broom for training!”

“Mister Wood,” Madam Hooch scowled, “surely you saw that Harry’s broom had been jinxed? There’s no way that I’m letting him back on it until I’ve stripped it down and checked it out completely.”

Oliver’s response was lost in the appearance of the school’s medi-witch.

“Let me through, let me through,” Madam Pomfrey insisted as she attempted to pry the three girls off of her potential patient. “I saw your fall and the foolhardy leap that you made at the end, Mister Potter. Did you hurt yourself at all? No broken bones or pulled muscles or aches anywhere?”

Harry barely managed to shake his head and ensure her that he was fine before Professor McGonagall’s grim expression filled his vision.

“Mister Potter! What in the world caused you to do something so idiotic as to leap those last three metres to the ground without support? No quidditch game is worth intentionally injuring yourself that way!”

“But Oliver said …” Harry protested.

In a flash, Professor McGonagall rounded on her fifth year Quidditch captain. “Wood! What have you been telling this poor boy?”

Oliver’s face paled under her fury. “Um, ah, I, ah, I may have, ah, mentioned that I, ah, I expected him to catch the snitch … ordietrying,” he finished faintly and in a rush.

“What!” Professor McGonagall exploded. In an instant, she’d caught him by the ear. “Come with me, Wood, I think we need to have a little talk about your priorities.”

Just before dragging the poor Wood off, Professor McGonagall paused and turned back to Harry with a small smile on her face. “Well done on winning the match,” she said with a nod.

The break in the gathering crowd that the departing professor made was filled with a rush of bushy brown hair.

Harry froze and would have backed away if he could at the sight of the determined face of Hermione running at him. Thankfully, Katie and Angelina were still nicely positioned to keep her at a respectable distance from him.

“Harry, Harry, are you alright? You didn’t hurt yourself? You fell from such a height and then to jump that last bit …” she asked in a rush before continuing without waiting for an answer. “That was the stupidest, craziest, most idiotic thing that I’ve ever seen! You scared me half to death! I don’t ever want to see you do that again! Promise me you won’t!”

Harry nodded emphatically, not because he was particularly interested in promising anything, but more because the determination in Hermione’s chocolate eyes screamed at him that the consequences of disobeying would be far worse than falling off of his broom from fifty metres in the air.
“I promise, Hermione, no more jumping off my broom after the snitch,” he said quickly.

“Right, now that that’s sorted,” said Fred.

“It’s time to head to the common room,” George finished.

“Gryffindor won! It’s time to party!” they grinned together.
Chapter 10

Life at Hogwarts settled into something much more comfortable for Hermione than the first couple of months had suggested her magical education was going to be.

Every lesson she was learning something new, something exciting. She consistently mastered spells and potions and knowledge faster than everyone else in her year, but, with Harry’s presence beside her, had learnt to hold her tongue, at least a little bit, when it came to sharing that knowledge with her classmates.

Harry’s rescue of her from the troll after that disastrous charms lesson had caused, if not a proper friendship, then at least a mellowing and politeness with her fellow Gryffindors. Lavender and Pavarti included her in the occasional conversation at night in their dorm room. And while she could tell that Ron still didn’t think that much of her, he at least managed to keep his thoughts to himself.

Everything change, every small difference, now meant that her time at Hogwarts was enjoyable rather than the torture that it was threatening to become, was down to Harry.

He was her constant companion. He was there beside her in every class and at every meal. They walked from one class to the next side by side and, though she was the one doing most of the talking, they talked all of the time. Not that Harry really ever said anything about life before Hogwarts, but Hermione held out hope that that’d change in time.

She’d been hoping that he’d become her homework and study partner too, but that hadn’t happened yet. Thinking about it, she wasn’t sure where he was doing his homework. It wasn’t the library or the common room. She would have suspected his dorm room, except that Neville was adamant that Harry only turned up there just before curfew, and that was only to go straight to bed.

Harry’s disappearances were the one big mystery that plagued her thoughts as the weeks progressed steadily towards Christmas. As soon as the last class for the day was finished, he’d rush off and disappear for the rest of the night. Occasionally, he’d reappear for dinner, before once more vanishing. Every time he did, her frown grew steadily deeper.

She’d tried following him to see where he disappeared to, but not once had she ever been able to discover his secret.

She knew that it all came down to his innate shyness. He absolutely abhorred being stared at. Every time that he noticed someone staring or pointing, he’d scowl, try to flatten his hair over his scar and shrink within himself while increasing his pace to get out of sight as fast as possible.

Unfortunately for Harry, while his fame as the Boy-Who-Lived had faded somewhat within the walls of Hogwarts, he’d managed to make himself even more famous in his short stay in the castle. But then, battling and defeating a twelve foot mountain troll and becoming the youngest Seeker in a century (and an amazing one at that), would tend to do that.

All that aside, there was one more thing that Harry had done that was even more momentous, at least in Hermione’s eyes. He’d become her friend. Her best friend. Her first friend ever. And she cherished him for it.

She tried to not boss him around or tell him what to do like she had done with all of the other kids who’d she’d tried to befriend in her schools before Hogwarts. Honestly, she did. But this hiding
himself away was starting to become too much.

Before the Christmas holidays started, she vowed to find out where he was going. She knew that it wasn’t healthy to be constantly hiding away – and with how much she had hidden away behind books over the years, she knew exactly what she was talking about. No, as far as Hermione was concerned, he needed to be with people to get over his fears and, as his friend, she was going to help him do it.

Besides, she really wanted a study partner.

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“Righto, chaps, put your trowels in the corner and any leftover dragon dung back on the heap. First lesson back after the break, I want a three foot essay on the different types of fertilisers useful for growing common household plants and the merits and disadvantages of using each one,” Professor Sprout instructed as she tugged off her thick dragon-hide gardening gloves.

Eyeing her partner, Hermione darted off to follow the Herbology teacher’s instructions. Ordinarily, she’d write the essay requirements in her diary, but with only two days left of the term, she just didn’t have time. She’d just have to rely on memorising Professor Sprout’s instructions for now.

As expected, Harry left Greenhouse One before she’d even made it back to the table to collect her books and bag. This time, though, he didn’t have as much a lead on her as usual.

With a rush that nearly knocked Ron into the pile of dragon dung near the door, Hermione raced out into the wintery grounds. A lone set of footprints in the snow marked Harry’s passage back towards the castle and Hermione set off after him.

Seeing her quarry taking the steps to the side door two at a time, she lengthened her stride, only to stop dead just inside the door. Once again, he’d disappeared. The corridor in front of her was empty. But this wasn’t she first time that she’d followed him.

With her bag bouncing awkwardly at her side, Hermione raced through the corridors that she’d seen Harry take on every other occasion.

As she burst out of the side corridor, she peered across the crowded hall and up the stairs that led to Gryffindor Tower. Each black cloaked figure was quickly assessed and discarded when they were all discovered to be missing a shock of messy black hair.

Knowing that there was no way that he would have been able to climb the stairs and disappear before she’d exited the corridor, she turned her attention to the crowd in front of her.

A mass of black cloaks swirled in front of her. She searched through them all, quickly discounting and ignoring the blue edged cloaks and the handful of yellow and green trimmed ones in favour of the red-trimmed Gryffindors.

Her eyes darted backwards and forwards and then, in a sudden break in the crowd, she spied a small, lone figure standing at the foot of the stairs. Her eyes narrowed as she watched him watching the crowd. His head swivelled to either side as he took a slow step away from the stairs and closer to the wall behind him.

A sudden flurry of movement hid Harry from her for no more than a couple of second, but it was enough.

A soft huff of annoyance escaped her as she realised that in those precious few seconds, Harry
had once again disappeared. She darted her eyes up the stairs, but he wasn’t there. Rising up on tip-toes, she once more scanned the hallway, but he was nowhere to be found.

There were no classrooms nearby. No doors of any description at all that he could have disappeared into.

Fixing her eyes on the last place that she’d seen him, Hermione marched straight across the hall to stand at the foot of the stairs. She turned around and tried to mimic the last movements that she’d seen him make.

_He’d been moving this way_, she remembered, as she copied the steps that he’d been making towards the wall.

Looking around, she frowned once more. The only object of interest anywhere nearby was a suit of armour standing in the middle of a tiny alcove just to the side of the stairs. Hermione stared at it, her teeth beginning to chew on her bottom lip as she thought.

Glancing around at the thinning crowd behind her, Hermione did the only thing that made any sort of sense to her – she ducked in behind the statue. And gasped. There, in the gloom from the shadow cast by the stairs, was a tiny door.

A lop-sided grin broke out on Hermione’s face.

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Dumping his bag, Harry plonked himself down on the coil of rope that had become his seat any time that he came down to his cupboard. With a soft sigh, he pulled the small wooden bench that he used as a desk closer, using one hand to prevent the spare quill and ink bottle that he kept on it from rolling off.

With practised movement, Harry pulled the parchment that he used to note all of his homework on and wrote down the latest assignment from Professor Sprout, along with the date that it was due.

A sudden burst of light shot his head up and he blinked rapidly at the silhouette standing in the doorway.

“So this is where you’re always disappearing off to,” Hermione’s voice stated.

“H…Hermione?”

He watched slack-jawed as she strode in, closed the door behind her and looked around her. After a moment’s inspection, she grabbed an upturned bucket, frowned at it, dragged it over closer to where he was sitting, before promptly plonking down and locking her eyes on him.

“Hermione?” he tried again through a mouth suddenly gone bone dry.

“Yes, Harry?”

“Um, what are you doing here?” he asked the first thought that popped in his head.

“I wanted to find out where you’re always going. So, I followed you,” she replied happily.

Harry continued to stare at her as she looked around the tiny cupboard.

It was only a couple of metres long and about half that wide. For now, it was tall enough to stand in, but Harry knew that it wouldn’t take much growing before he’d need to stoop if he tried to
It’s a bit … dim and dusty in here, isn’t it?” Hermione asked.

He shrugged, not sure what to say.

Idly, he wondered if simply ignoring her would make her go away. This was his special place. His place to escape to and to be alone in. He’d never considered sharing it with anyone. But then, a cupboard was the one place that no one ever wanted. That’s why he’d been given one all those years ago.

The silence stretched and Harry, starting to feel even more uncomfortable, began fiddling with his bag. He had homework to do. Maybe, he thought, if he simply got to work, she’d take the hint? Unfortunately, he knew that there was no chance of that happening.


Knowing that she’d only keep asking if he didn’t answer quickly enough, Harry sighed, looked up at her and promptly dropped his eyes.

“It feels … comfortable, familiar,” he said quietly.

Peeking up through his eyelashes, he saw Hermione’s eyes widen and then narrow.

“What does that mean, Harry? How could this feel familiar?”

“I used to have a place … like this … at … home,” he said quietly. “No one really ever bothered me when I was in there.”

Hoping that that was enough to answer her somewhat awkward question, he decided to try distracting her. Delving into his bag, he took out his half-finished transfiguration homework, rummaged through the box of scrolls until he found the correct one and set them both up on his ‘desk’.

Flicking his eyes backwards and forwards between the two parchments, Harry tried to settle his mind on where he was up to.

“Is that your transfiguration homework?” Hermione asked. “I finished mine last night. But why do you have two? You’re not cheating are you, Harry?”

Harry skittered backwards until his back was flush against the wall at the force of her high-pitched accusation.

“Of course not, Hermione, this is how I always do my homework!” he desperately tried to defend himself.

Two quick hands flicked the parchments off of his desk into her hands. Harry watched as her eyes darted backwards and forwards across the two essays, comparing them both.

“Both of these are in your handwriting, aren’t they?” Hermione asked slowly, peering at him curiously. “But this one,” here she flourished the already completed homework, “is good. I mean, really good, Harry. Why are you doing it again?” And here she looked back at the half-finished parchment, eyes narrowed once more. “And this time worse? You’d be lucky to get a pass if you handed this one in.”
Inwardly, Harry smiled to himself.

“That’s how I always do my homework,” he told her without thinking.

Once again, Hermione looked down at the two parchments in her hands.

“Which one were you going to hand in?” she asked suspiciously.

“Um,” Harry began, not sure what to say.

“You weren’t going to … You were, weren’t you?” and this time she looked horrified.

Suddenly, she threw the two pieces of parchment down and reached into the box. Fishing out one at random, she opened it, darted her eyes across it, scowled at him and grabbed another. By the time that she’d seen half a dozen, Harry knew that he was in trouble.

“Charms. Potions. Herbology. Every subject’s in here. All the homework we’ve had so far this year. Done perfectly,” she spluttered. Then, in as anguished a voice as he’d ever heard her use, she pleaded with him, “why?”

Dropping his head, Harry knew there was no getting out of this. Hermione was his … friend. He’d never had one before. He loved having someone who wanted to be around him, who wanted to sit next to him in class and at lunch, who was happy to know him and to talk to him. There was no Dudley here to chase her away. And as much as he wanted to push her away, to keep his secrets, he knew that he couldn’t lie to her. Not about this.

“It’s just how I’ve always done my homework … even back in the muggle world,” he tried to explain. “It was always just … better … at … home if I made sure that my cousin Dudley got better marks than me.”

Harry watched Hermione’s mouth open and close as though there were too many thoughts running far too quickly through her head for any one of them to have a chance to escape out of her mouth.

“So you deliberately get worse marks than you could?” she finally asked.

Harry nodded.

“But your cousin’s not here,” she pointed out.

“Won’t make any difference,” Harry shrugged. “My Aunt and Uncle will still compare our report cards and expect Dudley’s to be better than mine, no matter what the subjects are.”

“But that’s …”

Whatever it was, Harry never found out. Hermione suddenly snapped her mouth shut, snatched up the two transfiguration scrolls, grabbed Harry’s hand and pulled him to his feet.

“Come with me,” she ordered.

The fierce expression on her face instantly destroyed any thought that he might have had about disobeying.
“Come in,” Professor McGonagall called in answer to the knock at her door.

She watched, quill still poised over the homework that she had been marking, to see the door burst open and for Hermione Granger to stomp in pulling a clearly reluctant Harry Potter by the hand.

“Miss Granger, might I ask what this is about?” she frowned pointedly at the girl’s hand still clutching Harry’s wrist.

“It’s about this,” Hermione replied, placing two scrolls of parchment on the desk in front of her teacher.

Professor McGonagall swivelled her eyes from the two scrolls, up to the determined, angry look on Hermione’s face, across to Harry who looked to be in some kind of combination of terrified and resigned and back to the scrolls once more.

“Kindly close the door and take a seat,” she instructed. “And Miss Granger, let Mister Potter go. He’s not going to go anywhere.”

The pointed look she gave the boy reinforced her order. Once they had complied, she turned her attention to the scrolls.

The instant that she’d opened the first one, she instantly recognised it as being the completed homework due the following day that she’d assigned to her first year Transfiguration class. The tiny, messy writing could only have belonged to Mister Potter and she sighed inwardly as she steeled herself for the usual barely acceptable work that she’d come to expect from the boy.

After the first few lines, her eyes snapped up and pierced the boy with a calculating look. Harry, though, was refusing to meet her eyes, instead seeming to find something on his boots interesting enough to hold his attention.

Returning to the scroll, she sped through it, paused, looked up once more at Harry, and then read through it again, this time much slower. Absently, she picked up her quill and made a small correction to his third answer and then another minor correction to the answer to the final question. Her quill moved once more to mark a large ‘O’ at the top of the paper.

Suddenly remembering that there were actually two scrolls that Miss Granger had placed on her desk, she picked up the second.

Once again, Harry’s messy scrawl was instantly recognisable. This, too, was a copy of the homework due to be handed in in her next lesson. But this homework had yet to be completed. And what had been done, was exactly as she had expected the first scroll to be. Half-thought out answers and incomplete definitions and examples. Barely good enough for a passing grade.

“I take it this,” and here she flourished the first, complete parchment, “was your attempt at cheating?”

Surprisingly, it wasn't Harry that answered.

“No, ma’am,” Hermione cut in, her bushy hair swaying viciously as she emphatically shook her head. “That’s what I thought at first as well. But it’s worse than that.”

Professor McGonagall sat back studying her two students.
“I think that you’d better explain that statement, Miss Granger.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she replied and Professor McGonagall knew that this was going to be one of Hermione’s famous long-winded and breathless answers, just like she gave in class.

“Harry hasn’t been cheating. Well, I say he hasn’t been cheating, but really, I guess he has been. Cheating himself, that is. But I only just found out. You see, apparently Harry always does his homework twice. Has been for years. Even back in muggle schools. He does it perfectly the first time, like this,” and here she leant forwards to tap the completed homework, “and then he does it again so that it ends up like this,” and here she tapped the second scroll.

Professor McGonagall’s eyes narrowed and she opened her mouth to speak, but was beaten by Hermione.

“He says that he does it because it’s just ‘better’ to do it that way to make sure that his cousin gets better marks than he does,” and here she scowled at her friend. “I think he means that he gets in trouble from his Aunt and Uncle if he does well and even though his cousin isn’t here, he’s still afraid that he’ll get in trouble when he goes home if his marks are better than his cousin’s. Even though Harry’s here at Hogwarts and his cousin is at a muggle school.”

For nearly a minute, Professor McGonagall regarded the young man before her. His head was still down as he refused to look at either her or Hermione. He looked completely defeated, as though he was ready to take his punishment, knowing that there was nothing that he could do to stop it.

Her mind wondered back to that day, years before, that she had spent watching Harry’s Aunt and Uncle’s house before he was left there. From what she could remember of the angry-looking man and the nosy, horse-faced woman, she found it all too easy to believe Miss Granger’s conclusions.

“Is this true, Mister Potter?”

A nod of his messy black head was all the answer he gave.

“And you’ve been doing this for all of the work that you’ve done in my class?” she asked.

Another nod.

“Not just in Transfiguration,” Hermione said. “I found near-perfect work that Harry’d done for Charms, Potions, Herbology, History of Magic and Astronomy.”

“And you believe that by simply getting ‘Acceptable’ on all of your work is good enough, do you, Mister Potter?” Professor McGonagall asked.

A sharp intake of breath accompanied Hermione’s hand slapping across her mouth.

“Harry,” she gasped, “it wouldn’t work. By only just passing, you’ll end up in even more trouble at home.”

Harry’s head shot up, a questioning look in his eyes.

Hermione turned in her seat to face him. “What marks can you get here at Hogwarts?”

Harry frowned at her as he answered. “Outstanding, Exceeds Expectations, Acceptable, Poor, Dreadful and Troll.”

“And if you’re getting ‘Acceptable’ in everything, what will your report card look like?” she asked.
Professor McGonagall watched as the colour instantly disappeared from Harry’s face only to slowly reappear a sickly green.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” he moaned.

Not understanding what had just happened, Professor McGonagall simply conjured a bucket and thrust it at Harry.

Hermione, she guessed, noticed the look of confusion on her face and turned back to explain. “In the muggle world, students are awarded grades from A to F, with A being the highest mark. If Harry was to return home with a report card full of ‘Acceptables’ …”

“Which we would only mark as the letter ‘A’,” Professor McGonagall finished for her, imagining the outcome from the confusion that these particular muggles would have.

“Mister Potter … Harry, what would happen if you were to return home from Hogwarts with a report card that seemed to be better than your cousin’s?” she asked as gently as she could.

She watched his eyes widen and dart backwards and forwards. Sweat glistened on his forehead in his agitation and he looked ready to flee. She could only imagine that he’d been ‘in trouble’ before for telling outsiders what went on in his house.

His response was a simple head shake.

Her heart went out to the boy and she wished that there was something that she could do, but without proof, her hands were tied. This, she decided, was something for her to look into. And something to take up with Albus as soon as possible.

For now, though, she had to deal with a student underperforming, just as Filius had suggested weeks ago.

“Mister Potter, I am going to do three things,” she stated, managing to capture his eyes and hold them. “Firstly, as the Deputy Headmistress and your Head of House, I will make sure that any correspondence from this school is directed straight to you. That includes your end of year reports. Your Aunt and Uncle will not be receiving those reports.”

A look of immense relief crossed Harry’s face and his shoulders slumped as they lost some of the tension that he was carrying.

“Secondly, you will not be receiving any punishment for your past poor performances. Lastly, however, all of your teachers will be informed and I can assure you that they, along with me, will be expecting your written and practical work to greatly improve. An ‘Acceptable’ mark will no long be considered acceptable,” she told him. “Do you understand?”

Harry nodded before once more returning his gaze to his toes.

“Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall said, turning her gaze to her current best student. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Twenty points to Gryffindor for the care that you’ve shown your friend. I hope you realise just how great a friend Miss Granger is, Mister Potter.”

She waited, smiling inwardly to herself as she saw Harry’s head lift and turn with a shy smile to Hermione.

“You’re dismissed.”
Professor McGonagall waited until they were nearly out of the door before saying the one thing that she’d been thinking since she’d first read Harry’s completed homework.

“Oh, and Mister Potter, *this* is the kind of work of which your mother would have been proud of,” she told him, holding up the completed work, the Outstanding mark clearly prominent.

-oOoOo-

“Albus? Do you have a moment?” Professor McGonagall asked as she entered the Headmaster’s office.

“Certainly, Minerva, certainly,” the aged wizard said as he peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles at her. “Have a seat. Lemon drop?”

Minerva paced across the room to take the proffered seat across from the headmaster’s desk, waving away the offer of a sweet.

Albus Dumbledore sat back in his chair and placed his hands on his stomach, eyes twinkling away at her. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s about Harry Potter.”

At this, the Headmaster leant forward, interest evident in his suddenly clearer eyes. “Indeed?”

Minerva nodded. “I was visited this afternoon by a very concerned Miss Granger, along with Mister Potter. It seems that the work that Mister Potter has been producing in his classes hasn’t been what they seem.”

A hand wave indicated that she go on.

“I’m not sure how, but Miss Granger discovered that Mister Potter regularly underperforms in all of his classes. In fact he goes so far as to deliberately make sure that he only produces and hands in work which can at best be graded as ‘Acceptable’,,” she relayed.

“Are you certain of this?” Professor Dumbledore asked. “A twelve year old girl can easily be led astray or mistaken.”

Minerva smiled thinly at that. “Not this twelve year old. She’s the top of my class and from what I’ve heard from the others, the top of all of her subjects. Filius also noticed something in his class a number of weeks back.”

Professor Dumbledore leant back once more and tapped his chin in thought.

“Do you have any idea why Mister Potter is underperforming?”

“I do,” Minerva replied, barely restrained contempt in her voice. “From what little Harry said and the way that he acted, I think that it’s fair to say that he’s been badly treated whenever he’s outperformed his cousin. I’d even wager that that’s not the only instance that causes him to be mistreated at that muggle home.”

Minerva watched him intently as he seemed to study the ceiling for some time. Finally, she couldn’t restrain herself any longer.

“Albus, I told you all those years ago what those muggles were like. Are you *sure* that that’s the best place for Harry? There are countless wizarding families that would take him in in an instant. In fact, I myself …”
“Minerva, we’ve had this conversation many times and my decision has not changed and is not likely to change,” Professor Dumbledore stated firmly. “Being at Privet Drive with his Aunt and Uncle, his last remaining relatives, is the very best place for him to be.”

“But Albus, surely you’ve seen how small he is. He doesn’t look like he’s had a decent meal before coming to Hogwarts for years. Not to mention his demeanour,” Professor McGonagall protested.

“Every other staff member has expressed themselves as being well-pleased with the young man,” Professor Dumbledore reminded her.

Minerva huffed, thinking of a certain Potions Master. “Not every one. And while the boy’s polite and well-mannered, he’s incredibly skittish and shies at the barest hint of rebuke,”

Professor Dumbledore waved these comments aside.

“Harry may not be quite what we’d have hoped the child of James and Lily Potter to be, but he is still healthy and inquisitive and full of life, as you yourself discovered when you put him on your Quidditch team,” he said. “All we need worry ourselves with is his education. I assume that you’ve seen that his schoolwork will henceforth be up to standard?”

Professor McGonagall nodded.

“Then we are doing our job. If it will make you feel any better, I’ll look into his home life myself,” he added, obviously in response to the frown that she knew she sported.

With a nod, Minerva rose from her chair. “Thank you, Albus. That would indeed take a weight off of my mind.”

She didn’t see the frown that crossed the Headmaster’s face as she made her way out of the door.
The one thing that Harry had been dreading for three days happened the morning that the Hogwarts Express was due to take the vast majority of students home for Christmas.

“Look Harry, Hedwig!”

Harry looked up to where Hermione was pointing at the beautiful snowy owl flying through the Great Hall along with all of the other post owls. Her great wings brought her gliding gracefully along the Gryffindor table to land precisely between the plates and bowls directly in front of him.

“Hello there, girl,” Harry murmured, offering her a piece of his bacon. After giving a soft hoot, she wolfed down her treat and extended her leg. As quickly as he could, Harry untied the small package and letter and stuffed them into his pocket. A small, affectionate nip on the finger later, Hedwig took off to return to the Owlery and a well-deserved nap.

“What was that, Harry?” Hermione asked curiously as she tried to nudge his arm aside to give her access to his pocket.

“Nothing, Hermione.”

A frown and a pout indicated her unwillingness to believe him. “It sure didn’t look like ‘nothing’, Harry.”

“I hope I haven’t forgotten anything,” Neville piped up from where he sat across the table from them, “the Express leaves in half an hour and my Gran’ll kill me if I don’t have everything I’m supposed to.”

“Half an hour?” Hermione yelped, looking at her watch. “I better go get my trunk.” With that, she hopped up off of the bench and raced out of the Hall.

“Thanks, Nev, I didn’t think anything was going to distract her,” Harry said gratefully.

“Nothing, Hermione.”

A frown and a pout indicated her unwillingness to believe him. “It sure didn’t look like ‘nothing’, Harry.”

“I hope I haven’t forgotten anything,” Neville piped up from where he sat across the table from them, “the Express leaves in half an hour and my Gran’ll kill me if I don’t have everything I’m supposed to.”

“Half an hour?” Hermione yelped, looking at her watch. “I better go get my trunk.”

With that, she hopped up off of the bench and raced out of the Hall.

“Thanks, Nev, I didn’t think anything was going to distract her,” Harry said gratefully.

“No worries, Harry,” Neville smiled. “So, now that she’s gone, what’s in the package?”

Harry merely groaned and let his head fall forward to bang against the table.

-oOoOo-

The instant that Hermione, Neville and all of the rest of his classmates that were going home had boarded the carriages to take them to Hogsmeade Station, Harry raced up to his dormitory. At first he’d considered going down to his cupboard for some privacy, but with only Ron left of the first year Gryffindor boys apart from himself, he figured that the dormitory was private enough.

Flopping down on to his bed, he took the package and letter from his pocket. Opening the letter first, he read as quickly as he could.

_Dear Mister Potter,

_Please find enclosed_ Founding Fathers: The Life and Times of the Hogwarts Four by Ephaniah Davies and The Complete Guide to Magical Flora of Great Britain by Angela Roustabout. Although Flourish and Blotts do not normally stock or sell quills, I have, as a special favour to
you, purchased and included a quill of the red-tailed kite.

To resize the books to their proper dimension, simply tap the package twice with your wand.

Your Gringotts bank note was precisely the correct method of ensuring a quick, easy payment and I would encourage you to utilise this method for all future purchases.

For your convenience, I have taken the liberty of including a copy of the current books held by Flourish and Blotts for purchase.

Thanking you for your business,

Robert Flourish.

Taking out his wand, Harry carefully tapped the brown paper package twice and watched wide-eyed as it grew nearly five times in size.

After carefully untying the string and removing the paper, Harry admired the quill and thumbed through the two books. A small smile and a nod indicated his approval. The catalogue, a small book almost as big as the regular books, was put aside for later perusal.

When he’d first seen Neville sitting quietly on his bed nearly a week ago wrapping something in brightly coloured paper, Harry’d wondered what he was doing. It was only after a surreptitious glance that he’d realised that the bright green paper was decorated with holly and moving sleighs. And then it clicked. Neville was wrapping Christmas gifts.

It’d taken Harry nearly two days before the thought had occurred to him that he could give Christmas gifts if he wanted to. He’d never actually received one himself, but Dudley had been given hundreds over the Christmases that he’d been with the Dursleys. He’d also never wanted to give a Christmas gift before either. His Aunt, Uncle and Cousin had never done anything nice for him and he’d never felt inclined to do anything nice for them either.

But here at Hogwarts, Harry’d been making friends. Two friends in particular. And he’d wanted to do something nice for them.

Neville had been easy. He loved Herbology and every time that he talked about the greenhouse that he had at home, his face lit up.

Hermione had been a bit more difficult. A book was easily the most logical choice. But he didn’t know which one.

When he’d written to Flourish and Blotts in the hope of getting a book for each of them, he hadn’t known what books to ask for. So, he’d resorted to simply asking the store to send him ‘the newest book on magical plants that there was’, along with a book about the Hogwarts Founders, to compliment Hermione’s favourite book, *Hogwarts, A History*.

Asking for a red-feathered quill was a last minute addition. Professor McGonagall had been so nice to him when she’d found out what that he’d been intentionally doing worse in her class than he could that he felt that he should get her a little something to say ‘thank you’ and a quill in Gryffindor colours seemed about right.

Smiling to himself, Harry carefully rewrapped the book for Neville and tied it back up with the string and wrote a small Christmas greeting on the outside. Then, after chewing his lip in thought for a minute, he pulled out a spare roll of parchment and wrapped Hermione’s gift. Using another small piece of parchment, he wrote ‘To Professor McGonagall, Merry Christmas, from Harry’, and attached it to the quill with a spare bit of string.
All three gifts, along with the catalogue from Flourish and Blotts, were safely stowed away in his trunk. The day before Christmas, he decided, he’d attach them to Hedwig and two of the school owls and send them off.

Feeling happier than he had been for longer than he could remember, Harry wondered out of the dormitory intent on finding the twins or, failing that, finally giving in to Ron and letting him teach him how to play Wizard’s Chess.

-oOoOo-

Christmas morning dawned bright and clear in Crowley. A light dusting of snow had fallen overnight giving the place a feeling of freshness. The white ground was marred only by various animal tracks and the footprints of a lone early morning walker.

In this particular street, the houses were similar enough to tell that they’d all been built at the same time, but different enough to show off the personalities of the families that lived in them.

One particular house, number sixteen, was set back a little further from the road than the others. It was surrounded by a tall fence with a gate set within an ivy-covered arch. The patch of front lawn was bordered by what, once spring came along, would be a riotous array of flowers.

But being the middle of winter and especially with it being Christmas morning, not a soul was to be seen outside.

Inside, however, the small family was awake and gathered in the family room in front of the Christmas tree. Peals of laughter were ringing from the bushy-haired girl as her father wrapped his brand new tie around his head. In itself, this wouldn’t ordinarily be considered amusing. But as this was a magical tie with a quartet of small yellow birds flying around the dark blue tie, and consequently around Dan Granger’s head his daughter had ended up falling over in laughter while even his wife couldn’t completely contain her chuckles.

A series of sharp taps interrupted the fun.

“Is that … an owl?” Dan asked, thoroughly confused by the sight out of his window.

“Hedwig!” Hermione squealed, jumping up and scattering wrapping paper every which way in her rush to cross the room.

In an instant she had thrown the window open allowing the snowy owl to hop inside.

“What a gorgeous owl,” Dan stated, amazed at the sight before him. “I take it you know him?”

“Her, Dad. And of course I know her. She’s Harry’s.”

“The boy from the train station?” Emma asked, remembering the last time that she’d seen such a distinctive owl.

Hermione beamed at her mother. “You remember Harry!”

“But what’s this Harry’s owl doing here?” Dan asked, interrupting his wife’s response.

“Owls are how we send letters in the magical world,” Hermione explained. “I’ve just been using the school’s muggle system because I didn’t think that you’d appreciate owls coming in to the house every week.”

“Darling, if they look like this one, then I think we’d gladly accept letters from owls,” Emma
smiled.

Turning back to Hedwig, Hermione noticed a fairly large package tied to one of her legs.

“What have you got there, Hedwig?” Hermione asked. “You must be really tired if you’ve carried that all the way from Hogwarts.”

A soft hoot let her know that Hedwig agreed with her assessment. After quickly untangling the package, Hermione rushed off to the kitchen, returning a minute later with a small bowl of water and some strips of ham that she’d grabbed out of the fridge.

Hedwig gently rubbed her head against Hermione’s hand before drinking greedily and gobbling up the ham.

“Mum, Dad, can I put Hedwig in the laundry with the window open so that she can have a sleep before she flies back to Harry?”

“That’d be fine, dear,” Emma smiled.

The two adults smiled bemusedly at each other as they watched the beautiful owl step gracefully on to their daughter’s arm before the girl and owl left the room.

“Well, my dear, are you going to open your package?” Emma asked once Hermione had returned.

A brilliant smile lit up her daughter’s face as she raced across the room, snatched up the package that’d been left on the sideboard and plopped cross-legged on the carpet once more.

In contrast to all of the wrapping paper strewn around her from what was left of the Granger’s presents to one another, the dull brown package in Hermione’s hands could only been considered rather ordinary. But to Hermione, it was as though it was the most precious thing in the world. This was the first time that she’d ever received a gift from someone in the magical world. And for it to be from Harry, her first real friend ever, made it extra special.

“Is it from the boy who own that owl?” her father asked.

Hermione slipped the folded piece of parchment out from under the string and quickly scanned it before replying.

“Yes, it’s from Harry,” she beamed.

Bringing her eyes once more to the top of the short message, she read it again.

Dear Hermione,

Merry Christmas! I hope that it was okay that I got you a gift – I’ve never been able to give someone a Christmas present before. I hope you like it, I thought that it’d go with one of your favourite things.

Hogwarts isn’t the same without you here. It’s really quiet and lonely. Usually that’s how I like things the best but I guess I’ve just gotten used to talking to you and Neville. I like having the two of you as friends. I’ve been stuck playing (and getting thrashed at) Wizard’s Chess with Ron a bit since no one else is about and the twins keep disappearing on me.

Anyway, Merry Christmas,

Harry.
Refolding the note, she carefully laid it aside before attacking the package. The string took a bit of wiggling around before she could pull it off and when she unravelled the length of parchment that Harry’d used as paper, it was to find a heavy book come tumbling into her lap.

Picking it up and turning it over, Hermione gasped. Founding Fathers: The Life and Times of the Hogwarts Four by Ephaniah Davies. It was perfect. And Harry was right. This was the perfect book to read along with Hogwarts, A History. A small frown marred her face for a fraction of a second as she considered that this book would have cost Harry a lot more than the set of four quills and colour changing ink that she’d given him.

“What’s that, dear?” her mother asked.

Hermione looked up from where she was tucking Harry’s letter inside the front cover of her new book. “It’s a book about Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw, Helena Hufflepuff and Salazar Slytherin, the four great witches and wizards that built Hogwarts.”

Sliding across to her parents on her knees, Hermione showed them the book and waited impatiently for them to have a quick flick through it.

As soon as it was safely back in her hands, Hermione curled up in her favourite reading chair, opened to the first page and settled in for many, many hours of fun.
“What in the world are you wearing, Harry?”
Harry looked up from the Flourish and Blotts catalogue, so engrossed had he been that he hadn’t even heard the door to the tiny cupboard open.
“Hermione! You’re back!” he exclaimed, a massive grin on his face.
“The Express got in early,” Hermione informed him as she moved to sit on the upturned bucket.
“But you haven’t answered my question: what are you wearing?”
Harry looked down at the dark green jumper with the golden lightning bolt emblazoned across the front.
“It’s a jumper that I got for Christmas,” he told her.
Hermione eyed it critically, her nose crinkled with her obvious distaste. “Did your Aunt and Uncle give it to you?”
Harry violently shook his head. “Them? I don’t get presents from them! No, Mrs Weasley, Ron’s mum, sent it to me.”
“Why?”
“Apparently the twins told her that I didn’t expect any gifts this Christmas and I guess she felt sorry for me,” he shrugged. “It is nice and warm though. And it fits me pretty well.”
Hermione nodded, her mind shooting back to the ugly ill-fitting clothes that he’d wearing the first time that they’d met.
“I see that you got the book. Do you like it?” Harry asked shyly, having realised she was cuddling to her chest.
“Oh, Harry, it’s wonderful. There’re so many interesting facts in here, not just about the four founders, but about the castle too,” she gushed. “Thank you ever so much.”
“You’re welcome,” he smiled. “Thank you for the quills, too, I’ve been needing some new ones since Halloween.”
Hermione smiled. “I know. So, tell me, what’s Christmas like here at Hogwarts?”
“Amazing,” Harry breathed. “The best Christmas that I’ve ever had. You should have seen all of the food! And the crackers! Wow! I got a Grow-Your-Own-Wart kit and a new Wizard’s Chess set and an admiral’s hat and some gigantic luminous balloons from them. There were also some real live mice, but they got away.”
Hermione smiled at his enthusiasm and the way his emerald eyes lit up behind his glasses. “Did you get any other presents?”
Harry nodded. “I got some chocolate frogs from Neville and wait until you see this …”
After digging into his bag, Harry pulled out a length of shimmering silky cloth and threw it over himself.
Hermione gasped. “Is that …?”
“Yep,” Harry said, pulling the cloth off of his head so that it appeared to float in mid-air. “An invisibility cloak. No idea who sent it to me. The note just said that it was my father’s and that I should have it.”
“May I?”
“Sure,” he replied, handing the cloak across.
Harry watched as Hermione admired the cloth before throwing it around herself. Instantly, she disappeared. A small scrape was the only indication that she’d moved before Harry felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he saw a smiling Hermione reappear and hand the cloak back.
“How was your holiday, Hermione?”
“Oh, it was fine,” she replied off-handedly. “Come on, let’s get out of here and go for a walk.”
Harry’s reluctance was plain to see and Hermione relented, sitting back down on the bucket. She regarded her friend carefully. His head was down and he was fiddling an awfully long time with his bag after tucking the invisibility cloak away.
After the conversation that she’d had with him just before Christmas and the way that Professor
McGonagall had also agreed to help him with keeping his academic successes away from his relatives, she’d thought that he wouldn’t retreat back to the cupboard. Obviously, as this was the place that she’d found him after returning to the castle, she’d been wrong.

“Harry, why do you like hiding out in here?” she asked cautiously.

His eyes snapped up momentarily before once more seeking out his bag. “I told you why. It’s so that I could do my homework the way that I needed to.”

“But you don’t have to do it like that any more,” Hermione reminded him. “Besides, there’s no way that either Professor McGonagall or I will let you get away with such poor work any more. Not now that we know what you’re capable of.”

“I’m not that smart, Hermione,” Harry whispered.

“Yes you are! I read all of those rolls of homework that you’ve got hidden away in that box. You should have been getting Outstandings or Exceeds Expectations in every subject. We’ve just got to work on your practical work to bring it up to the same level.”

Hermione saw Harry’s eyes dart to her before a deep crimson blush spread across his face. Her eyes narrowed and the image of a quill darting across the floor and shooting up a troll’s nose flashed before her eyes.

“Have you been hiding that as well?” she spluttered indignantly. “Harry! How could you?”

“That’s no longer an issue. From now on, you are going to do your best. I want to see just how good you are. I bet if you put your mind to it, you’d be better than me.”

Unexpectedly, Harry laughed. It started out as a chuckle and gradually grew. Hermione stared. She’d never heard him laugh before and for some reason, she wanted him to do it again.

“No one’s as good as you, Hermione,” Harry finally managed.

A small wave of pride spread through her at his words and this time she was the one who was blushing.

“I’ll bet you that you are,” she said and then, in a rush of inspiration, she continued. “In fact, I’ll bet you that you can beat me in every subject.”

Harry’s snort of disbelief didn’t stop her. She knew that there was a way to motivate him and if that’s what it took to make him work the way that he should, then she determined to do it. She just wouldn’t allow the fear of him succeeding stop her.

“You beat me in at least one test in every subject and I’ll let you teach me how to fly a broom properly.”

That caused Harry to freeze. While he knew that Hermione had passed Madam Hooch’s flying lessons, it’d been a very near thing. Everyone knew of her fear of heights and her distaste even of getting onto a broom, let alone trying to fly one.

“Deal,” he agreed, reaching out a hand.

After shaking on it, Hermione once again attempted to get Harry out of the cupboard.

“Come on, let’s get to the library to study,” she said.

Once again, Harry refused to meet her eye.

“What’s wrong, Harry? Why don’t you want to be out there?” she asked, starting to get annoyed at his reluctance.

He gulped, looked away, looked back, looked away again and finally spoke in something that started as barely above a whisper.

“Everyone’s always staring and pointing at me. Ever since Hagrid took me to the Leaky Cauldron on my birthday,” he continued. “The whole pub crowded around and wanted to shake my hand and pat me on the back and they just kept coming and coming and coming,” he paused here to shake his head, “and then when we went into Diagon Alley, it got worse. Everyone staring at my stupid scar and falling all over themselves just because I’m ‘The-Boy-Who-Lived’!

“What does that mean anyway? I’m famous because some mad evil wizard killed my parents but couldn’t kill me? They tell me that I stopped a war. A war that I can’t even imagine! And my parents died! I don’t even remember them. I don’t know anything about them at all.

“Hagrid’s shown me a couple of pictures. They’re the first ones that I’ve ever seen of my parents! Who wants to be famous and stared at and pointed at and talked about behind their back because
of that? And it’s just kept happening here at school too. Everyone knows who I am! Everyone knows all about me! I bet I’m the one who knows the least about me! This is the only place that I’ve had to escape. No one knows about it. No one, except you.”

Hermione stared, her hands covering her mouth, tears welling in her eyes. She’d never imagined what it must be like for Harry. She knew what the school was like and the way that he always tried to escape, to hide. For the first time, she thought that she had an inkling of how he was feeling. Firstly being mistreated at home and now finding out that he’s famous in the wizarding world. Her heart broke for him.

“I guess it hasn’t helped that I rescued you from that troll and then became the youngest seeker in a century,” Harry said bitterly. “Just gave everyone even more reason to stare at me.”

“I’ll help you, Harry, if you’ll let me,” Hermione stated quietly.

He looked at her, surprised that she was still there after his outburst. He’d nearly been screaming by the end of it.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll help you find out about yourself. I’ve read some of the books and I’m sure that we can find out about your parents, maybe if we look hard enough, we can find out some other things, like who your grandparents were and where they lived, stuff like that.”

“You’d really do that?” he asked, wonder clear in his voice.

Hermione smiled at him. “Yes, Harry.”

“Thanks,” he said simply, wiping his arm across his face to banish the tears in his eyes.

“How about we go to the library now and see if we can find some old school yearbooks with your parents in them,” Hermione suggested.

“Okay, I’d like that,” Harry replied, snatching up his bag.

-oOoOo-

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore strolled the corridors of Hogwarts enjoying seeing the exuberance of his students after their return from the two week break for Christmas. Occasionally, he would stop and talk to one or another, asking about their Christmas in that grandfatherly way that he’d so carefully cultivated.

Rounding a corner not far from the library, he happened upon a most unexpected and yet gratifying sight. A small, bespectacled, black haired boy walked towards him accompanied by the bushy-haired muggle-born witch that he was so often seen with. But what particularly caught Albus’ eye was the dark green jumper with the golden lightning bolt that Harry was wearing.

“What a striking jumper,” he remarked once the two first years reached him. “If I’m not mistaken, that looks to be the work of Molly Weasley.”

Harry smiled shyly up at him. “Thank you, Sir. Mrs Weasley sent it to me for Christmas.”

“Wonderful, wonderful,” Professor Dumbledore intoned. “I hadn’t realised that you’d had the opportunity to make Mrs Weasely’s acquaintance as yet.”

“No, Sir, I haven’t,” Harry replied. “This was Fred and George’s idea. They got their mum to send it to me.”

“Excellent, Mister Potter. It always warms this old teacher’s heart to see friendships being formed,” he replied, twinkling his eye at the boy.

Professor Dumbledore noted the way that Harry shared a look with the girl at his side. She in turn switched her gaze from the library entrance back to Harry.

“I see that you two are off to the library for a spot of study before classes resume tomorrow, so I’ll let you go. Have a pleasant evening, Mister Potter, Miss Granger.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Hermione replied.

“You too, Sir,” Harry smiled.

Albus resisted the urge to turn and watch the two as they walked past him, instead continuing on his own course down the corridor. A smile appeared on his face as he contemplated what he’d just seen.

He’d been most annoyed that Molly had missed the opportunity to meet with Harry at King’s Cross and to begin the friendship that he had hoped that Harry and the youngest Weasley boy should have had. But no matter, no matter. It seemed that Harry’s friendship with the Weasley
clan was beginning anyway, if in an unexpected way. Albus considered his plans and deemed them worthy to continue. Harry would return to his Aunt and Uncle’s house for the school holidays and, at the appropriate time, he could plant the idea in the twin’s mind that they needed to check up on the boy and to bring him to the Burrow for some of the holidays. And once he was there, Molly’s mothering instinct would take over and with the right suggestion or two, Harry’s short but ultimately tragic part in the destiny of the wizarding world would begin – guided, of course, by the wisest and most powerful wizard alive: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.
Chapter 14

The round table in the very back of the library was littered with books. But these weren’t ordinary books, these were Hogwarts Yearbooks. Each one was covered in a velvety black leather, the Hogwarts crest centred on the front with the year embossed in gold underneath.

It’d taken Harry and Hermione a long time before they were able to find the first of the seven that they were looking for. Every page had to be studied carefully, for, while captions and text filled more than half of each book, it was the photos that needed the most attention.

Wizarding photos differed from their muggle counterparts in one main respect – wizarding photos moved as though five to ten seconds of time had been plucked from the essence of those who were photographed. And of course, sometimes, the person who was photographed walked out of their picture entirely.

Hermione was the first to find what they were looking for – a girl, maybe in fourth or fifth year with dark red hair and striking green eyes that Hermione’d only ever seen on one other person.

“Harry! Is this your mum?” she breathed.

The yearbook was yanked out of her hands so quickly that Hermione was nearly pulled across the table. She watched her friend’s eyes light up and he nodded vigorously.

“Yeah, it is! That’s my mum. She looks just like the photo that Hagrid showed me,” he replied.

Hesitantly, Harry reached out and stroked one finger along his mother’s cheeks, his eyes glistening with the tears that Hermione was certain that he’d refuse to shed. After blinking furiously for a couple of minutes, he began to turn pages, staring intently at every photo that he could see.

Suddenly, he gasped and thrust the book under Hermione’s nose.

“Hagrid showed me this photo, too,” Harry said eagerly pointing to a group of four boys, arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders as they laughed at some long forgotten joke.

“This was in my parent’s fifth year,” Harry continued, his green eyes sparkling. “Hagrid said that it was taken right after a breakfast where somehow all of the Slytherin’s robes were turned a horrid pink with tiny black snakes slithering all around them. No one ever found out how it was done and even though none of the teachers could ever prove it, the whole school knew that my dad and his friends had done it.

“Apparently it took Professor Slughorn, who was the potions master and Head of Slytherin House back then, the whole morning to turn all of the robes black again. Hagrid said that my dad and his friends were always pulling pranks like that. By the way that he was talking, I think that they were even bigger pranksters than Fred and George.”

“What were their names?” Hermione asked.

“Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew,” Harry replied, pointing to each one as they were named.

Hermione nodded, “we’ll look for their names as well, then.”

As she sorted through the yearbooks to find the other six that corresponded to Harry’s parent’s
time at Hogwarts, she stole a glance at her friend. Harry’s eyes were fixed on the boy who looked
almost like a slightly older carbon copy of himself – the same messy black hair, the same round
glasses, the same mischievous grin. Only the colour of their eyes was different – brown for James
and green for Harry.

Emotions flitted across his face faster than she could identify and she tried to imagine what it
must be like to know nothing about your own parents. With a shake of her head, she admitted
defeat.

“Has Hagrid told you many stories about your parents?” she asked.

“A few. Recon he knows a lot more, though. I think I’ll need to go and have tea with him again
soon and get him to tell me some more.”

After putting the unneeded yearbooks back where they belonged, Hermione gathered up the
remaining ones and stood.

“Come on, Harry, it’s nearly curfew. We’ll look at these in the common room.”

With a nod, he stood, the yearbook he was carrying carefully held with one finger marking the
page where the photo of his father was and another where he could find his mum.

“Harry, could I borrow Hedwig to send a letter to my mum and dad?” Hermione asked on their
walk back to Gryffindor Tower.

“Sure, Hermione. Any time. I’m sure that Hedwig’d love the chance to fly. I don’t really ever
have any work for her to do,” he replied.

-oOoOo-

“Kindly turn in your homework to the ends of the rows and pass them to the front,” Professor
McGonagall instructed.

After a fair bit of paper rustling, two piles were sent flying across the room to land neatly on top of
the Professor’s desk.

“Now, books away, it’s time to see how much you’ve all forgotten over the Christmas break,”
Professor McGonagall stated as she flicked her wand at a second pile, sending a sheet to land
neatly in front of each student.

A loud groan caught her attention.

“Is there a problem, Mister Weasley?”

“A test on our first day back?” Ron questioned, causing Professor McGonagall’s lips to thin in
disapproval and for him to instantly change his mind. “Sounds like a good idea to me.”

“I’m glad to hear that. You have thirty minutes. Begin.”

Harry heart pounded as he glanced down the test paper. A combination of short essay type
questions, multiple choice questions and complete the statement questions. He hated pop quizzes.
He’d never completely worked out how to ensure that he would only end up with an average
score.

With a deep sigh, he set to work. Three questions in, a slight movement to his right caught his
attention. Looking up, he found Hermione purposefully not looking in his direction, not that he
knew how that he knew that that was what she was doing. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth as though she was either thinking deeply about her test paper or was fighting the urge to say something important.

A second movement, this time from the front of the class, turned his eyes that way. Professor McGonagall paced backwards and forwards the width of the room as she waited for the test to be completed. Harry could only imagine that she was curious as to how well her students remembered all that she had taught them first term.

The two sights together, Hermione and Professor McGonagall, caused Harry’s breath to catch in his throat. As though it was only yesterday, he remembered the three of them in Professor McGonagall’s office just before the holidays started. He remembered Hermione’s anger and Professor McGonagall’s indignation at the way that he purposefully dumbed down his work in class.

And then he remembered the ‘O’ that Professor McGonagall had given him for his very last homework and the bet that Hermione had made with him.

Deliberately, Harry picked up his test paper and ripped it in half.

The sound caused gasps from those around him and snapped Professor McGonagall’s head around the instant before he’d raised his hand.

“May I have another paper so that I can start again?” Harry asked the instant that Professor McGonagall leant over his desk. “I’m not happy with the answers that I was putting down.”

A pleased expression flittered across the usually stern face of his teacher as she materialised a new test for him. “You won’t be given any extra time, Mister Potter,” she warned.

“I understand,” he replied. “Thank you.”

Instantly, his head went down and his quill began scratching out answers as fast as possible.

-oOoOo-

“Mister Potter, may I see you for a moment?” Professor McGonagall asked as the class was packing up to head to lunch.

Harry sat back down trying his hardest not to worry.

Before long, the shuffling around the door disappeared and Professor McGonagall approached. He saw her look up past him and sigh slightly.

“Yes, Miss Granger, if Mister Potter allows, you may remain as well.”

Harry looked around into the inquisitive eyes of the girl lingering beside the door. At his nod, she rushed over and into the seat beside him.

“Mister Potter … Harry, may I ask why you tore up your test paper and asked for another?”

Harry looked nervously to Hermione sitting beside him and then back to his teacher.

“I wasn’t doing my best work,” he finally replied in a near whisper.

Professor McGonagall nodded once as though she expected this answer.

“Five points to Gryffindor, Mister Potter, for finally understanding that,” she said. “Now, shall we
see exactly how well you did?’”

Harry wasn’t too sure about this idea, but with both Hermione and Professor McGonagall looking expectantly at him, he was forced to nod his assent. Within seconds, the pile of test papers was in Professor McGonagall’s hands and she was rifling through them to find his.

His head lowered and his eyes traced out the pattern in the old wooden desk as a quill scratched away at his paper. In a far shorter time than he was expecting, the quill was placed on the desk in front of him.

“Mister Potter,” Professor McGonagall stated firmly causing his eyes to drag themselves upwards in near fear. “Despite the fact that you did not have a full thirty minutes to complete your test, I see that you managed an answer to every question. And I am very pleased to tell you that, despite not all of your answers being as detailed as I would have liked, you have easily earned yourself an Outstanding.”

Harry looked back up in shock from where his eyes had dropped once more to the desk in front of him. Blinking rapidly, he stared at Professor McGonagall, then at a beaming Hermione, and then back to Professor McGonagall again.

“Are you sure?” he finally managed.

“Quite sure, Mister Potter. Ninety-seven percent is indeed an Outstanding result,” she smiled.

“Could … could you mark Hermione’s too?” he asked.

Professor McGonagall’s eyes narrowed slightly before she nodded and reached for the papers once more. A short time later, her quill was laid down and she smiled at Hermione.

“Outstanding as usual, Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall smiled, “although, you only scored ninety-six percent. I take it you were a little preoccupied this morning?”

Hermione blushed furiously. “Yes, Professor. I was worried about how Harry would go with the test.”

“Understandable. But now that we’ve seen what he’s capable of, I expect you to fully concentrate on your own work. Well done, the pair of you. Now, off to lunch with you,” Professor McGonagall smiled.

Harry grinned at Hermione as they walked from the room.

“So, does this count as my first subject where I’ve beaten you in test?” Harry grinned. “I guess I better start thinking about how I’m going to teach you how to fly.”

The look of panic that crossed Hermione’s face caused him to break out in peals of laughter.
The Saturday at the end of that first week back after the holidays turned out to be rather busy for Harry.

Hedwig began the day by soaring in through the open windows of the Great Hall during breakfast, an obviously large and heavy package tied to her leg. Harry watched, confused, as she made her descent towards the Gryffindor table. He hadn’t ordered anything since before Christmas and he had no idea why his owl would be bringing him something.

The answer to the mystery was solved when the extremely tired but proud bird landed gently in front of Hermione with a soft hoot. Harry watched as Hermione’s excited fingers quickly untied the parcel from Hedwig’s leg before ripping open the envelope stuck to the top.

Feeling slightly affronted at the hard work that Hedwig had been forced to do, Harry pushed his glass of pumpkin juice forward as well as his half-finished plate for Hedwig to eat and drink her fill. A soft hoot of thanks was given before she dipped her beak into the goblet for a drink.

A squeal of delight erupted from Hermione causing Harry to pause in his strokes of Hedwig’s feathers before his hand was squished in between bird and girl as Hermione hugged her thanks to Hedwig.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she said, “you’ve done a marvellous job, Hedwig.”

Once the owl was released, she gave a single hoot before picking up a piece of bacon and launching herself off of the table to fly back to the owlery.

“Here, Harry, this is for you,” Hermione said as she thrust the package that she’d received at him.

“But you already gave me a Christmas present,” Harry frowned in confusion.

“I know that, silly. This is a just because present,” she beamed at him.

Cautiously, Harry held the package in his hands and stared at the girl who had turned in her seat to face him. He didn’t understand ‘just because’ as a reason for a present, but then, he’d only received his first ever presents a couple of weeks ago.

“Well, aren’t you going to open it?” Hermione asked and Harry could see her fingers twitching as though she were dying to do just that herself.

Just as he’d done at Christmas, Harry carefully began to unstick the paper in such a way as to ensure that it wasn’t ripped. In front of him, Hermione giggled, but Harry ignored it. He knew that his method of opening his presents wasn’t considered normal especially judging by the way that Dudley had always torn into his. But presents for Harry were something to be treasured, everything from the wrapping paper to whatever was inside.

At last the paper came free and a soft brown leather bound book tumbled into his hands along with a black box. Turning the book over, he gasped and traced his finger gently over the black embossed words: The Life and Times of Lily Evans and James Potter.

Tentatively, Hermione reached out and opened the book for him. It was completely blank except for the left hand pages that had feint lines on them.

“It’s a journal for you to record everything that we find out about your parents,” Hermione
explained. “You can write down all of the stories that Hagrid or anyone else tells you and all of the facts that we find out and we can even put in pictures too.”

At this last, she plucked the box out of his lap and opened it to reveal a camera and half a dozen rolls of film.

“I know that there’s a way to develop muggle film to make the pictures into wizarding photos, but I haven’t researched how to do that yet,” she continued.

Harry opened his mouth to thank her but through the massive lump that had formed in his throat, all that he was capable of doing was mouthing the words. Savagely, he wiped at his eyes, not wanting to give the tears there a chance to escape.

She smiled at him and for the first time in his life, Harry wanted to give someone a hug. He’d always dreamed that one day he’d be given one, but when it came to giving one, there’d just never been anyone that he’d wanted to hug before. Certainly not the Durleys. But not knowing how, he simple settled for letting his head drop to stare at the cover of the book with his parent’s names on it once more.

-oOoOo-

Hermione smiled tenderly at the boy in front of her. She’d hoped that her idea of a memory journal would work and judging by the book that her parents had sent after the four page plea that she’d sent them, she guessed that her parents had felt that it was a good idea as well.

And now, to see the way he was looking at the small book as though it was the most precious thing in the world, she knew that she’d gotten it right. For an instant, she’d thought that Harry was about to throw his arms around her and hug her, but the moment passed quickly and, while she was unexpectedly disappointed that it hadn’t happened, as it turned out, it was a good thing.

“Mister Potter,” a voice from above them interrupted.

Hermione looked up to find Madam Hooch standing there, a broomstick in her hand.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I thought that you might like to have your broom back,” she said, holding it out to Harry.

Quickly, Hermione plucked the journal and the camera out of Harry’s hand so that he could take back his Nimbus Two Thousand.

“Thank you, Madam Hooch,” he said and Hermione could hear that he was struggling to talk normally, “did you find out what was wrong with it?”

“No, I didn’t,” Madam Hooch scowled. “I stripped it down and even called in Professor Flitwick, but neither of us could find any hexes or jinxes on the broom at all. It seems perfectly fine now. Whatever the problem was, I don’t think that it originated with the broom.”

Harry looked relieved. “Well, I’m glad there’s nothing wrong with it. Thanks for checking it out for me.”

“That’s what I’m here for, Mister Potter. I’ll see you on the Quidditch pitch,” Madam Hooch smiled as she took her leave.

Leaning the broom against the table behind him, Harry turned back with a frown on his face.

“I wonder what made the broom act the way it did during that match?”
An image of a pair of professors staring intently at Harry on his bucking broomstick, their mouths moving, flittered through her mind and she gasped.

“I think I’ve just realised something. I need to go to the library,” Hermione said, as she quickly gave the journal and camera box back to Harry, grabbed her bag and stood up. “Meet me in the library soon?”

Harry smiled. “Yeah, okay. Oh, and Hermione,” he said, stopping her after her first step away. “Thank you for this, it’s absolutely brilliant.”

Her smile lit up her face, “You’re welcome, Harry. I’m glad you liked it.”

-oOoOo-

Harry walked tentatively in through the library doors, unsure of whether or not he should actually be there. It wasn’t that he’d never been there before, but usually, his method of interacting with the library was to simply get in, retrieve the book or books that he needed and retreat back down to his cupboard as quickly as possible.

But this time, he’d agreed to meet Hermione there and he was sure that she wasn’t going to let him run away any more. Besides, he owed her. Not only for the journal which he couldn’t wait to start writing in, but also for helping him realise that he shouldn’t be afraid of doing well in class. Besides that, he liked her and wanted to study with her and the library was a better place to do that than the small dark cupboard under the stairs.

After taking a single step to the side so that he wasn’t standing in the doorway, Harry looked around for his friend.

In front of him, the large circular counter type desk that defined Madam Pince’s area dominated. The stern librarian was looking over the top of her glasses at him from behind her counter and he purposefully refused to look her way.

To either side of the door, a dozen large tables were set aside for students to work at. More tables, both large and small dotted throughout the library were currently hidden amongst the hundreds of bookshelves that held the greatest concentration of magical books in the wizarding world.

One section to his left was cordoned off with a small magical three foot barrier preventing students from entering the restricted section without Madam Pince’s direct knowledge and permission.

As it was still early, not many of the desks were currently in use, although there was a group of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw first years that Harry recognised clustered together at one of the desks. Two of the Hufflepuffs, Susan Bones and Zacharias Smith looked up at him and waved. Somehow, he managed a weak smile and a nod in return.

And then he saw her. Or more correctly, them.

Hermione and Neville were almost hidden in the back right hand corner by the enormous pile of books stacked in front of them. Walking as quickly as he could, Harry negotiated his way to them through the other desks.

“Harry, what took you so long?” Hermione asked when she noticed him slipping into the chair beside her.

“I wanted to put my package away safely in my trunk so that nothing would happen to it,” he explained.
She gave him a quizzical look before understanding dawned on her face. He guessed by her next comment that she understood that he didn’t want to draw any attention to either the journal or the camera.

“I think I’ve worked out what was wrong with your broom at the Gryffindor Slytherin game.”

“You have?” Harry asked as surprised as Neville appeared to be when his head came up out of his book to look interestingly at them. “What was it?”

“I think your broom was being hexed. I saw both Professor Snape and Professor Quirrel were staring at you, muttering incantations. More importantly, neither of them were blinking,” she explained.

Harry stared at her, bewildered.

“But why would Professor Snape or Professor Quirrel try to kill Harry?” Neville asked, taking the words right out of his mouth.

At this Hermione frowned. “I don’t know. But I know an incantation when I see one.”

“Snape definitely hates me. I wouldn’t put it past him,” Harry pointed out grimly.

“I don’t think anyone’d doubt that,” agreed Neville. “But what about Professor Quirrel?”

Harry shrugged. “No idea.”

“Perhaps he wasn’t trying to make your broom buck you off. Perhaps he was trying to save you,” Hermione said slowly.

When both boys stared at her incredulously, she continued.

“He could have been saying the counter-incantation.”

“I guess,” Harry said slowly. “But do you really think he’d know it? I haven’t learnt anything in his class yet. Everything I know about Defence Against the Dark Arts is purely from reading the text.”

“I agree with Harry, Hermione. Professor Quirrel’s almost as bad a teacher as Professor Snape,” Neville shuddered.

“You’ve got to admit that neither of them are very good teachers,” Harry said quickly to the scowling Hermione. “Quirrel’s terrified of his own subject and with all of the stuttering that he does, I can barely understand one word in ten. And Snape! All he does is write up the instructions on the board and walk around insulting us. I don’t know why Professor Dumbledore keeps them around, there’s got to be better teachers out there somewhere.”

“You could add in Professor Binns as well, Harry. I can barely keep awake in History of Magic,” Neville added.

“Professor Quirrel and Professor Snape, Harry,” Hermione corrected.

But Harry only grinned. If correcting how he addressed the two professors was the best that Hermione could do, he knew that she agreed with him even if she wouldn’t admit it.

“That still doesn’t explain why they were saying an incantation while staring at you on your broom,” Hermione stated.
“I doubt we’ll ever know. I’m definitely not going to go and ask them, Professor Snape terrifies me!” Neville stated adamantly.

“Perhaps we should get to work,” Harry stated, cutting off Hermione’s next retort. “What are you guys studying?”

Hermione looked at him, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

“That’s something that we wanted to talk to you about,” she said.

Harry looked between his two friends. Both of them looked nervous all of a sudden and it was all that he could do not to dash from the room.

“Go on,” he finally said through a mouth gone suddenly dry.

“I know that you prefer to study in your … normal … place,” Hermione started with a nervous look in Neville’s direction. “So, we’re really happy that you’re here, Harry and we’re both really looking forward to studying with you.”

His eyes flicked to Neville to see him nodding furiously in agreement with Hermione.

“But just before Christmas, we started meeting up with some others and studying with them and we were hoping that you’d join all of us, not just Neville and me.”

Harry blinked at Hermione’s hopeful expression. He looked down at his hands in his lap and then up to the ceiling and around, thinking desperately. Finally, he looked back at Hermione.

“Who?” he near whispered.

Hermione nodded towards the group of first years that Harry’d noticed earlier.

“Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot and Sally-Anne Perks from Hufflepuff, and Terry Boot, Su Li, Lisa Turpin and Lil Moon from Ravenclaw.”

Harry turned in his chair slightly to get a better look at the group at the near-by table. All of them had stacks of parchment in front of them, piles of books scattered around and quills in their hand. It was easy to see that they were there to study, not to simply goof off or gossip.

While he was looking, both Sally-Anne and Lil snuck glances at the Gryffindor trio but quickly turned back around the instant that they noticed Harry looking at them. He knew them all from class. He’d spoken to them all and had even been partnered with some of them. They’d all been friendly and while they, like everyone else, had stared at his scar, they’d managed not to do it after the first couple of weeks of starting at Hogwarts, unlike others that he could name.

With a sigh, Harry turned back to the hopeful Hermione and the bewildered looking Neville.

“Alright, I’ll study with both them as well as the two of you,” he conceded and instantly held up a hand to stop Hermione from gathering all of the books in front of her. “But not today. Can it just be the three of us today?”

“Sure, Harry, we can start studying as a group next time,” Hermione conceded.

With a grateful smile, Harry opened his bag, “so, what are we going to work on first?”
Chapter 16

The door to the Trophy Room opened by itself. A minute later, it swung closed, leaving the second floor corridor looking exactly like it had been moments before. A few minutes later, the door at the opposite end of the room likewise performed an open-closed manoeuvre by its own accord.

The fact that there were no witnesses to this strange event, either living, ghost or poltergeist, immensely pleased the perpetrator. But then, one would expect the hallways of the ancient castle to be deserted at two o’clock in the morning.

Faint moonlight filtered in through the high windows of the Trophy Room illuminating case after case of cups, awards, plates and honour boards. Every one was filled with names and dates. Most, especially the cups and boards, were almost completely enveloped with engravings. But, after close to one thousand years of magical education, that was only to be expected.

In a blink, a small, black-haired first year materialised in the middle of the room, his invisibility cloak was bundled up and roughly stuffed in a pocket.

Sweeping his bespectacled gaze from one side of the room to the other, Harry wondered where to start.

After reading through the seven Hogwarts yearbooks of his parent’s school years, he knew that both his parent’s names would be in here somewhere. Both James and Lily had been Head Boy and Head Girl in their seventh year. He also knew that Lily had been a Prefect, although, strangely enough, that honour seemed to have skipped his dad, instead being given to Remus Lupin.

But then, his dad had been on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team, meaning that it was highly likely that his dad’s name would be on any Quidditch Cup memorabilia hidden away in the room.

Once again Harry’s gaze travelled the length of the room and he idly wondered whether he should reconsider letting Hermione and Neville in on his idea and waiting until they were available to help him search. But then his stubborn side reassured itself. Hermione and Neville had been practically showing him everything in the library that they could find in the library. Just this once, he wanted to be the one doing the discovering – James and Lily were his parents, after all.

Finally, he decided to simply be logical about it. He’d start at one end and work his way down the hall. Besides, he figured that that way, if he was unexpectedly interrupted, it’d be easy to pick straight back up again from where he left off.

The first cabinet that Harry examined was filled with row after row of Special Service to the School awards. Harry was amazed at the vast number arrayed before him, even considering how old the school was. Not knowing what a person had to do to get one, he randomly plucked one off the shelf and tilted it to get a better look at it in the moonlight.

Awarded to Tom Marvolo Riddle – 1943

And that was it. Nothing else was engraved on the nameplate of the platinum shield with gold edging.

Harry shrugged and replaced the award, relegating the mystery of why these students were awarded this medal to another time. He was just about to move along to the next cabinet, when a
half-hidden award caught his eye. Reaching in, he carefully manoeuvred the award out to where he could see it and gasped.

*Awarded to Edmund James Potter – 1831*

Harry had no idea who this Edmund Potter was, but the fact that his surname was Potter was more than enough to capture his attention. Potter. Harry stared at the name, the edge of the award nearly cutting into his hands with how tightly he was holding it.

*Was this Edmund related to him?* The question swirled around relentlessly in his brain.

Suddenly, he regretted not bringing the camera that Hermione had given him with him. He’d been so focussed on finding out about his parents, that the fact that there would be other Potters and Evanses around just hadn’t occurred to him.

Clutching the award in his hand, Harry shot back up to his feet. Award after award raced past his eye as he studied them all once again only to come up empty. The Special Service to the School award in his hand was the only one given to either a Potter or an Evans.

Determining that he’d be back in the morning with his camera, Harry carefully replaced the award that his possibly great, great, something grandfather had been given and moved along to the next cabinet.

The next two cabinets that Harry checked were devoid of any mention of either his parents or of other Potters or Evanses. But the cabinet after that seemed to be filled with them.

These awards were all in the shape of massive ivory and gold shields dedicated to the various subjects that Hogwarts offered. Looking closer, Harry realised that one name for every year was inscribed for the top seventh year student for each subject.

Lily Evans appeared on two for 1978 – charms and arithmancy. James Potter also managed to achieve the same result for transfiguration. But these weren’t the only Potters that Harry found on the massive shields.

Three or four times every century, a Potter was awarded top honours in a Hogwarts subject. And it seemed that almost every subject was represented at one time or another. Charms, potions, defence against the dark arts, astronomy, transfiguration, ancient runes, arithmancy, care of magical creatures and even some subjects, like enchanting, that Harry didn’t think Hogwarts taught any more.

But strangely enough, as hard as Harry looked, Lily Evans was the only Evans that he could find. And then it hit him. His mother had been muggle-born. Of course, there wouldn’t have been any other Evanses.

Now, he wished that he’d brought along his journal to write down all that he’d found. He could easily tell that he’d be spending a lot of time in the trophy room in the coming days.

A sound at the extreme range of his hearing froze Harry in place moments before he was about to take down the ornate gold Head Girl cup for inspection. A second sound had him moving faster than he’d ever moved before. A quick flick of his hand and a swish of his cloak and he was once more invisible.

Just as the end of his cloak was settling around his feet, the door to the Trophy Room opened. A mangy grey cat preceded the ancient, grimy caretaker.

“What is it, Mrs Norris?” Mister Filch asked his cat. “What’s in here, eh?”
Harry shuffled sideward as quietly as he could, his eyes fixated on Mrs Norris’ stare. He knew that he was invisible, but the way that the cat was looking at him made him wonder if invisibility cloaks even worked on cats.

Thankfully, when Mister Filch and his familiar had entered the Trophy Room, they’d left the door ajar. It wasn’t a large gap, but for the smallest and skinniest of the first years, it was more than wide enough to allow him to escape.

As soon as he was sure that he couldn’t be heard, Harry raced for Gryffindor Tower, hoping against hope that he wouldn’t run straight into Peeves.

-oOoOo-

“You should have seen them all,” Harry babbled, “Edmund Potter, Josephine Potter, Richard Potter, David Potter …”

Hermione watched as Harry was practically bouncing in excitement as they, along with the rest of the Gryffindor and Slytherin first years headed to lunch after their Herbology lesson. The instant that they’d left Greenhouse One, Harry had begun detailing his adventures in the Trophy Room, carefully neglecting the fact that he’d been there in the middle of the night with so many others around.

“I never knew that there were so many Potter witches and wizards! I wonder if they’re all related to me,” he said.

“Well, of course they’re all related to you,” a bored voice drawled. “They’re all Potters, aren’t they?”

Harry froze, Hermione and Neville only a step after him.

“What?” Harry asked, looking back at the blonde-headed Slytherin as he ambled up behind them, his ever present stooges, Crabbe and Goyle, at his shoulders.

“You are a Potter, Potter. So are they. There’s only ever been one wizarding family with the name Potter. Surely even you can add one and one together and get the right answer,” Draco Malfoy explained, the sarcasm dripping from his every word.

“He’s right, Harry,” Neville agreed.

Harry looked between the two, his eyes narrowed.

“How can you be so sure?” he asked.

Malfoy’s snort or derision echoed around the grounds. “I thought that you were supposed to be smart, Potter. Not to mention descended from one of the Most Noble and Ancient Houses.”

“Being a Most Noble and Ancient House means that you can trace your magical ancestors back at least fifteen generations,” Neville explained.

“Are there many of them?” Hermione asked, her interest piqued.

This was something that they hadn’t come across in their library searches about Harry’s family.

“Quite a few, although not as many as there used to be,” Neville replied. “Some lines intermarried, others simply died out.”
“How many are there?” Hermione asked.

“Dunno exactly. My gran’s been teaching me about the Most Ancient Houses as well as all the
protocols, privileges and responsibilities that go along with it, but I don’t remember an actual
number.”

“Why’s she been teaching you that?” Harry asked.

At this, Neville looked embarrassedly at his feet. “For when I’m made Head of House
Longbottom.”

“And what a sorry day that’ll be for the great House of Longbottom,” Malfoy snickered.

“At least Longbottom is a Most Ancient and Noble House, not like the House of Malfoy,” Neville
shot back before looking like he wished that the ground would open up and swallow him for his
audacity.

“Just the mention of the Malfoy name is enough to tell anyone that they’re dealing with more
money and power than the likes of you three can even imagine,” Malfoy snarled. “I don’t know
why they let the likes of you three into Hogwarts – the pureblood squib, the ignorant half-blooded
scarhead and … you.”

This last was said with such loathing that it was only the flicker of Malfoy’s eyes over her
shoulder that alerted Hermione to the fact that what he’d intended to say had been curtailed by
someone coming up behind them.

With a shoulder shoved into each of them, the three Slytherins pushed past and headed for the
castle.

“Hello, you three,” a loud voice boomed.

“Hi Hagrid!” they chorused.

“Can’t stop just now, but how about you three comin’ down for a spot of tea this afternoon, eh?”

“We’d love to, Hagrid,” Harry replied for them all.

As soon as Hagrid was out of earshot, Hermione turned to Neville. “Isn’t Malfoy an Ancient and
Noble Wizarding House then?”

Neville grinned at her as they once more started their trek back to the castle. “The way they act,
you’d think so, wouldn’t you? But no, they only rate a Noble House of Malfoy. I think their
wizarding line only goes back nine or ten generations. Can’t really remember, really.”

“What about the Potters? Any idea how long they’ve been magical for? It must be a while,
judging by the number of names I saw last night,” asked Harry.

“The Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter is even older than the Most Ancient and Noble
House of Longbottom,” Neville replied.

“Wow!” Harry breathed and Hermione saw that he was lost in his own little world.

“How many other Ancient Houses do you know the names of?” Hermione asked.

“Let’s see, there’s Bones, Weasley, Abbot, Greengrass, Black …”

“Hang on, there’s people in our year with those names,” Hermione interrupted. “Hannah Abbot,
Susan Bones, Daphne Greengrass, even Ronald Weasley."

Neville nodded. “Most pure-bloods only marry other pure bloods, they’d never even consider marrying someone with muggle parents. But then there’s other families, like Harry’s, that have never minded who they marry.”

This snapped Harry back to the present. “What do you mean?”

“Well, take your dad, for instance. He was as pureblooded as they come, yet he married your mum, a muggle-born,” Neville explained. “Personally, I don’t think it matters all that much. Look at me. My whole family’s always been pureblood, but they got me and no-one knew if I’d even be magical at all until I was nine, which is really late. And then there’s you, Hermione, you’re the top of the class in everything, and both your parents are muggles!”

Hermione found her mouth opening and closing at Neville’s rather impassioned statement. Finally, she decided that that was something to think about later.

“I’ll tell you more about the Most Ancient and Noble Houses later, if you like,” Neville offered. “But I reckon that if we don’t hurry up, lunch’ll be over before we get there.”

With nods of agreement, the three of them raced up the path to the closest castle entrance.
Chapter 17

A beautiful snowy owl spiralled down towards the four-story ramshackle building, intent on its delivery. Spying an open window, Hedwig adjusted her wings. At the last second, her wings flared and she landed neatly on the sill.

“Hello, there, who do you belong to?” a portly older red-haired woman asked.

In answer, Hedwig shuffled around to hold out one leg.

Dusting off the flour on her hands, Molly Weasley bustled across the kitchen to grab up the water container and some spare owl pellets before moving across to the window.

“Ooh, what a beautiful owl,” an excited voice squealed.

“Don’t scare her, Ginny, it looks as though she’s had a long flight,” Molly admonished her daughter before placing the water and pile of treats in front of the owl. “Now, let’s see what you’ve got there.”

Hedwig waited patiently for the letter to be untied before dipping her beak down and taking a long drink.

Molly, meanwhile, was flipping the envelope over. Apart from the name ‘Mr and Mrs Weasley’ and the address, simply ‘The Burrow’, it was blank. She didn’t recognise the handwriting either.

With a shrug, she opened the letter.

Dear Mr and Mrs Weasley,

I just wanted to write and say thank you for the Christmas gift that you sent me. The jumper’s really warm and fits well. The fudge, too, was delicious.

With thanks,

Harry Potter.

Within seconds of having read the short letter, Molly was dapping at her eyes with her hanky.

“Oh, that dear, dear boy. What wonderful manners,” she murmured.

“Who’s it from, Mum?” Ginny asked, standing up on the chair in an effort to see over her mother’s shoulder.

“It was just from Harry, dear, thanking us for the Christmas gift we sent him,” Molly replied.


Handing over the note, Molly watched with a smile as her overly excited daughter plopped herself down on the chair, the note firmly clenched in her hand.

After hearing the stories that the twins told about the small, shy boy that they’d befriended and finding out that he wasn’t expecting any Christmas presents this year, her heart had gone out to him. She’d known both James and Lily. Indeed, she would have happily taken him in after that awful tragedy.
Her mind had been well and truly made up and she was already halfway through knitting his jumper before Albus had mentioned that Harry would be spending Christmas in the castle without any family and very few friends around to celebrate it with.

Now more than ever, she was glad that she’d followed her heart. She mentally made a note to herself to ask Arthur about maybe taking the poor boy in for some of the summer holidays.

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“So, what’s your secret, Potter?”

Harry froze, staring at the red-haired girl across the table from him. Finally he noticed the small smile playing around the corners of Susan Bones’ mouth and his brain rebooted. That smile clearly meant that Susan wasn’t asking about his life back on Privet Drive. Nor could she know about why Hagrid hadn’t left his cabin in days and had all of the curtains pulled with smoke billowing out of his chimney.

“What do you mean?’ he finally asked, his quill still poised above the potions essay that the ten of them grouped around the table were working on.

“This new work habit thing you’ve got going on,” Susan replied, gesturing at the piles of books and parchment stacked around him.

“Yeah, Harry, you’ve gone from a guy who always seemed to just manage to pass everything to one of the top in the class in just a couple of months. The Hufflepuffs aren’t the only one who’ve noticed either. So have us Ravenclaws,” Lil Moon agreed.

Harry nervously glanced at Hermione, but either she hadn’t heard or else she’d decided to stay out of this one. Her head hadn’t move any inch, although he was certain that her quill had at least paused in her writing.

“Uh, nothing’s changed,” he eventually tried.

“Not buying it, Harry,” Hannah Abbot stated firmly, “I’m with Susan and Lil on this. In the last couple of months, you’ve become the best in the year at Defence, you and Hermione keep switching who’s top in Transfiguration, Charms and Astronomy. And yesterday you were practically dancing around the greenhouse after Professor Sprout gave you back our mid-term exam results.”

“We’re not complaining here,” Susan put in. “We’re the ones benefiting from the way you and Hermione have been trying to outdo each other in every piece of homework that we’ve been given. We’re just curious, that’s all.”

Harry swallowed heavily. It was one thing to tell one person what he used to do before Hogwarts and during the first part of term here. Even that’d been a gamble. But Hermione had proven worth it. She’d become his best friend. The way that she’d been pushing him just enough with her teasing about how she’d never have to get on a broom again was all the motivation that he needed. And to be honest, he was starting to enjoy working hard like this. It even made him curious as to just how well he could have done if he’d always worked like this.

But then, it was quite another thing to tell others. He was already good friends with Neville and if it’d just been Neville asking, then he possibly would have told him at least a little of what his life had been like. Not as much as Hermione knew, but something at least.

And while he thought that in time that he could become friends with Susan, Hannah, Lil, Sally-Anne and the others, he just didn’t feel ready to share that much with them yet. Safe topics like
quidditch and homework and what happens in class was fine, but nothing too personal yet. Something must have given away how he was feeling because, as the silence began to stretch out, Neville blurted out the one thing that would redirect their questions.

“He and Hermione have got a bet on. If Harry can beat her in at least one test for every subject, then he gets to teach her how to fly a broom properly!”

“Really?”

“Now that I’ve got to see!”

“I heard what happened at Madam Hooch’s flying lessons. I didn’t think anything’d get Hermione back on a broom again!”

The babble of excited voices was enough to finally make Hermione give an exaggerated sigh and lift her head.

“Yes, we’ve got a bet on. But no, he’s never going to win,” she flatly stated.

“I don’t know, Hermione. With the way that Harry’s been studying, I doubt it’ll take him long to win,” Lil teased.

“How close are you, Harry?” Terry Boot asked.

“Only History of Magic and Potions to go,” he replied with a shy smile on his face.

“Just those two?” Sally-Anne asked, then after looking around the table, “I think that we can help you get those two. Lisa’s the best in History and I’m sure that between the rest of us we can get your Potions mark up.”

“Hey!” Hermione protested.

“Sorry, Hermione,” Susan grinned, “but the chance to see you on a broom again is simply too good to pass up.”

“Fine. You lot can help him all you want, but you know that Harry’ll never win that bet,” Hermione huffed, although the smile that threatened to escape from the corners of her mouth told what she really thought of the good-natured ribbing. “Even with all of your help, there’s one thing that you’ve all forgotten.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“Professor Snape!”

“Believe me, Hermione, that’s one thing that I’ll never forget,” Harry replied gloomily.

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The birth of any baby should always be the highlight of any day. But when that baby is a jet black, fire-breathing dragon, it’s hard to celebrate. And when you add in that being in the possession of a dragon egg, not to mention hatching it and intending on raising said dragon is completely illegal, it becomes almost enough to make one throw up.

“But Hagrid, you can’t keep him,” Hermione pleaded, not for the first or even the hundredth time. “He needs to be with his own kind.”
“Lil Norbert’s with his mummy, what more does he need, eh?” Hagrid replied automatically, his mind, as anyone could see, more on putting the fire out that Norbert had started in his beard.

“Hagrid, he breathes fire and you live in a wooden house,” Harry tried.

“Yeah, that’s right. What’s tha’ got to do with it?”

Hermione threw her hands up in frustration. “I give up!”

“Bend down a bit, Harry. It’ll make it easier to get a close up photo,” Neville instructed.

Harry stared at his friend. Get down? Closer to the fire-breathing menace?

Still, he complied and promptly shot back up again the instant that Neville had taken the photo. Ignoring for a moment the illegality of Hagrid hatching a Norwegian Ridgeback Dragon, it was a once in a life-time experience and Harry had had no second thoughts about using up nearly a whole roll of film with taking photos of the egg and then Norbert.

Watching as Hagrid sloshed another bucketful of brandy mixed with chicken pieces into Norbert’s feed container, Harry had a thought.

“Hagrid, how much is he going to eat when he gets bigger?”

“Dunno, Harry. The books reckon full grown Ridgebacks eat up to two dozen sheep a day, but it’ll be years before he’s up to eatin’ that much.”

“But Hogwarts doesn’t have a herd of sheep,” Neville tried.

“No worries, we’ll cross that bridge when we get t’ it,” Hagrid waved away the concern.

“Come on, guys, I think Hagrid’s too … busy … to listen right now,” said Hermione.

“Er, right. We’ll see you later, Hagrid,” Harry waved as they made their way out of the cabin.

“We’re going to have to tell someone,” Hermione stated a few minutes later as they trekked back up towards the castle. “There’s no way Hagrid’ll be able to keep Norbert secret much longer and I’m betting that the bigger the dragon gets, the more trouble he’s likely to get in.”

“But who should we tell? I don’t want to get Hagrid in trouble,” said Neville.

“Professor McGonagall,” Harry stated. “I know she’s strict, but she’s helped me before. I know that she’ll help Hagrid as well.”

Neville sighed. “Alright. When she we tell her?”

“Now,” Hermione stated flatly. “The sooner we tell her, the sooner Norbert will be gone and the sooner we can get back to studying for the exams. They’re only seven weeks away, you know.”

The rest of the walk to the castle, along with the journey to Professor McGonagall’s office was made in silence. At the last instance, as the three of them milled around outside her door, it was as though they all had second thoughts. That was until Hermione decided to take charge and marched the last few steps to knock solidly on the door.

“Come in.”

One by one, the three plucked up their Gryffindor courage and entered Professor McGonagall’s office. Neville, the last one in, also shut the door behind them.
“What can I do for the three of you?” Professor McGonagall asked from behind her desk.

After some slight shuffling of feet and looking at everywhere but at the Professor, it was Hermione that finally got the ball rolling.

“We’ve … we’ve come into some … information about … someone and we thought that we needed to tell you, but we don’t want them to get into trouble.”

“I see. I assume that this is about a student. A fellow Gryffindor?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“No, ma’am. Actually, it’s not about a student at all,” Hermione replied.

Professor McGonagall’s eyebrows rose. “A teacher?”

“Um, not exactly,” said Hermione, biting her bottom lip.

“It’s Hagrid, Professor,” Harry blurted.

“Hagrid? You better tell me everything,” Professor McGonagall stated firmly.

“Well, he came into the possession of a dragon egg,” began Harry.

“A Norwegian Ridgeback,” Neville supplied.

Harry nodded before continuing, “and it hatched a couple of days ago.”

Professor McGonagall placed one hand over her eyes and slowly shook her head. “Hagrid does realise that he lives in a wooden house, doesn’t he?”

“We told him that over and over. But he’s really stubborn and he’s been taking really good care of it,” Hermione put in, “but we think that it’s more than even he can handle. He hasn’t been able to do anything except look after Norbert since he hatched.”

“Norbert?” Professor McGonagall asked and then, before they could reply, she held up one hand. “No, don’t answer that. I know perfectly well Hagrid’s propensity for naming the creatures he comes into contact with.”

“He’s always wanted a dragon. It was one of the first things that he ever told me,” Harry smiled. “But we think he’s bitten off more than he can chew. Do you think that you could do something without him getting into trouble with the Ministry?”

Professor McGonagall eyed each one of them intently before replying. “I honestly don’t know. Charlie Weasley, one of my Gryffindor’s from a couple of years back, works at a dragon reserve in Romania. I’ll see if I can contact him and ask him to take Norbert off of our hands.”

“Thank you, Professor,” said Hermione.

Professor McGonagall nodded to the three of them as she got up from her desk and rounded towards them.

“You three head off to dinner. I’ll go and have a little chat with our Gamekeeper. He and his love of dangerous animals is going to get someone killed one of these days,” she finished half under her breath.

“Maybe you should see if Charlie would like to take Hagrid to the dragon reserve, too,” Harry joked.
Professor McGonagall paused at her door, suddenly deep in thought. “That may not be a bad idea at all, Mister Potter. Not a bad idea at all.”
“Pass the gurdyroots, Nev,” Harry asked.

A stack of greenish-yellow roots were shoved across the workbench with one hand, even as the other continued to stir the potion that had Neville’s undivided attention.

The two of them were the only ones in the small, unused potions lab. Hermione had offered to come with them to help, but both boys were adamant that they wanted to do this on their own. With the exams approaching faster than either wanted to consider and knowing that potions was their weakest subject, they intended on spending as much time as they could working through all of the potions that they’d already made that year. Without help. No Hermione and definitely no Snape.

They’d been down there for hours already slowly brewing away. And they had no intention of leaving except for meals and curfew the entire weekend. Oliver had wanted Harry to spend most of the day on a broom working with the Gryffindor quidditch team, but after the successful win that the team had pulled against Hufflepuff and their remaining match still a couple of weeks away, Harry had no problems telling his captain ‘no’ just this once.

Surprisingly, they were both still using the original cauldrons that they’d started the day with. Normally Neville would melt or even blow up his cauldron every other lesson.

“I think that it’s because Snape’s not here,” Neville had said when Harry had mentioned this fact. “I’m usually so terrified of him, that I always get something wrong.”

Harry had simply nodded and realised that the same thing was true for him as well. Without the greasy-haired bat hovering around making snide remarks every other minute, he, too, was able to concentrate much easier. Each of the two potions that the boys had already created, while not being the exact shade that they were supposed to be, were some of the best potions work that they’d ever done.

“What’s the next step, Harry?” Neville asked.

Harry paused to look at their potions book, his silver knife hovering over the perfect slithers of root on his board. “Stir continuously in a clockwise motion for three minutes and then add two finely diced frog’s spleens, before stirring in a counter-clockwise direction for seven minutes.”

Their intense concentration was broken some minutes later, not by the door opening, which they never heard, but by the sound of a sneer coming from right behind them.

“What are you two dunderheads think you are doing?”

Harry jerked, nearly cutting himself with the knife that he still held. He spun to find Professor Snape looming far too close for comfort, looking down at them from behind his long nose.

“Practising our potions, sir,” he said.

“And who gave you permission to be in here?” Professor Snape asked.

“Um, Professor McGonagall, sir,” Harry replied.

“Professor McGonagall was content to allow the two worst potions students in the school unsupervised access to this potions lab, was she?” he scoffed.
“Yes, sir,” Harry gulped. “We’re only practising all the potions that you’ve already taught us, sir, not trying anything new.”

Snape sniffed in clear derision as he slowly rounded the workbench only to peer intently at the four vials on the teacher’s desk.

“These appear to be poor attempts at strengthening solution and shrinking potion, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied, stealing a glance at the shaking boy with his eyes glued to his cauldron beside him.

“And how many cauldrons were sacrificed in making these two … potions so far?” Professor Snape asked.

“None, sir,” Harry answered, trying to mask the anger that was steadily building inside him.

“None?” Snape scoffed. “Is that so, Longbottom?”

“Yes, sir,” Neville whispered, his eyes darting up to the professor before shooting straight back to his cauldron.

With a sudden step forward, Snape peered into the cauldrons in front of the two boys. Harry watched his brow furrow as his eyes swept across the bench taking in each of the ingredients spread out around them.

“An engorgement potion, I take it?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry answered.

“Longbottom, stop your infernal stirring and add in your frog’s spleen before the whole thing blows up in your face,” Snape snapped before turning and sweeping his way towards the door.

“How long were you planning on using this room?” Professor Snape asked from the door.

“All weekend, sir,” Harry replied.

“Then perhaps there’s hope for you yet,” he sneered before the door closed with a crash.

_oOoOo_

Hermione crept into the room not long before dinner. Potion making, she knew, involved a lot of concentration and startling her friends at the wrong time could easily see the work they were doing being completely ruined.

As she walked around the outside of the room, she studied her friends. Both looked frizzled from being around bubbling cauldrons all day. In fact, she didn’t think that she’d ever seen Harry’s hair looking so messy before. Neville was staring intently at whatever it was he was carefully slicing. Harry was likewise engrossed as he stirred his potion. She smiled slightly as she noticed the tip of his tongue poking out in that intense way that he had. He’d been doing that more and more lately, particularly when he was studying and it always made her smile.

Noticing the collection of vials on the teacher’s desk, she crossed the room to study them. A small piece of parchment under each one labelled what they were. Harry’s, it was easy to see, were the closest to being the exact shade of colour that they were supposed to be. In fact, the end one looked to be perfect. Neville’s vials also looked to be some of the best potion work that she’d ever seen him do. All, that is, except the engorgement potion. That one looked to be about on par with
his normal work.

“Oh, hi Hermione, when did you get here?” Neville asked, startling her upright to smile at the boys.

“Only a couple of minutes ago. I didn’t want to interrupt what you were doing,” she replied.

“Hmph, if only Snape was as nice as you,” Harry grunted.

Hermione cocked her head. “Professor Snape, Harry, and what do you mean?”

“The git barged in this morning and just started into us as usual when we were working,” Harry replied.

Hermione glanced back at the vials. “Was it while you were brewing the engorgement potion?”

“How’d you know?” a clearly startled Neville asked.

“Easy. That’s the one that shows the least improvement,” she replied.

“Greasy git,” Harry groused. “Reckon both Neville and I could do alright in potions if he wasn’t our teacher.”

Neville nodded as he tipped in his final ingredient. “Harry’s right. I haven’t melted one cauldron or blown up one potion all day.”

“All we’ve needed is our book and a chance to work without being constantly insulted,” Harry agreed before pausing in thought. “Thinking about it, all Snape does is write up the ingredients on the board anyway. It’s not like he ever really teaches us anything. I wonder if there’s a way to simply ditch him and learn the subject ourselves.”

“No, Harry, there’s not,” Hermione stated firmly. “We have to have a teacher. I think when we’re NEWT students we can have an independent subject, but not until then.”

“Yeah, she’s right, Harry,” Neville said sadly. “Otherwise I’d ditch not only potions but defence against the dark arts and history of magic as well. I’m not learning anything from Quirrel or Binns either.”

“I don’t know, Nev, I’ve learnt how to sleep with my eyes open in Binn’s class,” Harry joked. “And at least he doesn’t smell like Quirrel does. What’s with that anyway?”

“I think it’s garlic. I heard Fred and George saying that it was to ward off the vampires he supposedly met last summer,” Neville replied.

“Whatever it is, it’s revolting. Have you noticed the other professors trying to avoid him as well? Not to mention the death glares that Snape’s been giving him of late,” said Harry.

“We may not like it, but he’s still one of our teachers,” Hermione admonished.

“Oh, come on, Hermione, even you can’t say that those three are good teachers,” Harry replied.

Hermione scowled at him. Neville beside him was clearly in total agreement. But she’d always been taught that her teachers were to be respected and it grated on her that if she was totally honest with herself, then she had to admit that the boys had valid points. Not that she had any intention of telling them that.

“I’ll admit that they’re not as good as Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick,” she finally
I’ll admit that they’re not as good as Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick,” she finally allowed. “But that doesn’t mean that they don’t have a lot that we can learn from them.”

Neville snorted with laughter as Harry managed to get the last word in. A word that, knowing Hermione, she wouldn’t be able to refute. “That doesn’t mean that we couldn’t learn just as much, if not more, simply by reading books on the subject.”

The laughing faces of four boys, their arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders, stared up at Harry.

He’d spent the last few hours engrossed in the memory journal about his parents that he’d been compiling. He’d read and reread all of the stories that he’d written down that Hagrid had told him. He’d examined all of the facts that they’d been able to glean from both the library and the Trophy Room about the House of Potter (which when it was added up, didn’t really amount to much yet) and he’d stared intently at all of the photos, committing them to memory.

Later, he knew, he’d probably regret that he hadn’t been spending that time studying. Hermione would definitely make sure that he regretted it once she found out and started berating him. But right now, there was a promise to keep.

Months ago, Harry’d made a vow to write to the three boys that surrounded his father in this picture. Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. But every time that he’d picked up a quill, he’d been stuck. What exactly would he write to these three men?

However, with the year-end fast approaching, Harry didn’t want to put it off any longer. All he needed to do was to come up with the first letter and then copy it out twice more, with the appropriate name on top, of course.

Slowly, he picked up a quill, dipped it into his ink bottle and pulled a piece of parchment to him.

Dear Sirius,

he wrote before pausing to once more stare at the picture. Finally, after a quick shake of his head and clenching his teeth in determination, he continued.

My name is Harry Potter. I’m writing to you because I recently found out that you were friends with my dad, James Potter, when you went to Hogwarts.

I grew up with my mum’s sister Petunia and because of that, I don’t really know anything about my mum and dad.

I was hoping that you might be able to tell me about them. Any stories or interesting things that you remember would be absolutely great. You can either write to me or

Here Harry lifted his quill in deep thought. Should he dare risk it? Focussing on his dad’s face in the picture, Harry made his mind up. For this, he was willing to take whatever punishment Uncle Vernon dished out.

or you can visit me over the summer holidays. I live at 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey with my Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Harry Potter

After reading the short letter through three times, Harry decided that it’d do. Quickly, he copied the letter out twice more, addressing these to Remus and Peter. Then, snapping the journal shut, he
stuffed the letters into envelopes and thence into his pocket before shooting out of the door.

There wasn’t long until curfew, but he was sure that there was just enough time to get to the owlery and back again.

-oOoOo-

The instant that he stepped into the owlery, a flash of white feathers landed on the window sill beside him.

“Hello, Hedwig, interested in taking a letter for me?” Harry asked as he stroked her soft feathers.

A soft coo and an outstretched leg had Harry’s hand reaching into his pocket for one of the letters.

“This one is for Remus Lupin,” he said after checking the name on the envelope. “I’m sorry but I don’t know where he is. Just do your best, okay?”

After a gentle nip at his finger, Hedwig took off. Harry watched her go before turning to face the mass of owls almost hidden in the gloom at the top of the great domed tower.

“Um, I have two other letters that need delivering. Would any of you like the job?” he asked.

A large tawny owl was the first to respond, followed quickly by a majestic dark brown screech owl. After tying the two letters on and giving them their instructions, Harry watched them hop out of the window and fly off.

He thought it was odd that the screech owl veered straight around towards the far side of the castle, but shrugged, figuring that the bird knew what it was doing.
“Whoever set this ruddy bird on me is gonna get it!” an enraged Ron Weasley bellowed as he came shooting down the steps from the dormitories, a large screech owl flapping closely behind him.

Harry froze in the entryway to Gryffindor common room, staring at the scene in front of him. As soon as Ron hit the bottom step, he veered left and took off at a run around the room, dodging chairs, tables and people, his arms waving madly behind him. The screech owl, though, was not going to be put off that easily. Its hoots of indignation punctuated each flap of its wings against Ron’s head as it berated the boy for failing to take the letter that it had to deliver.

Every Gryffindor in the room was in stitches. Fred and George were actually rolling across the carpet in laughter at their unfortunate brother. As Ron’s hysterics increased, more and more Gryffindors appeared from the stairwells only to start laughing themselves. Hermione, Neville, Lavender and Pavarti were all holding each other up where they sat together on the big chair in front of the fire.

As Ron passed him, Harry noticed a number of red lines down Ron’s cheeks and neck where the owl had scratched him in its effort to force the boy to stop running away. One pocket looked to have been ripped during the last circuit and now, held out in front of him by both hands, was Scabbers the rat.

Scabbers’ high-pitched screeches pierced even through Ron’s roars at the owl and his yelps of pain. The rat’s struggles, whether from Ron squeezing too hard or the threat of the flying predator, were eventually too much for Ron to handle and the rat dropped unceremoniously to the floor.

At once, the screech owl changed direction, talons outstretched as it swooped towards the floor. Seeing this, Ron dove full length, sliding along the floor after his pet as it made a mad dash for the safety of underneath the nearest couch. The owl wasn’t able to change direction fast enough and landed square on Ron’s rear, eliciting an even louder howl, especially when Ron’s head shot up and collided spectacularly with the underside of the nearby side table.

But even that wasn’t enough to deter the determined Ron. Snatching his rat out from his hiding place, Ron regained his feet and took off once more around the room, the owl following on behind.

On Ron’s next pass, Harry frowned, recognising the envelope attached to the owl’s leg. It was the one that he’d tied to the screech owl up in the owlery not long before. Sighing, he stepped forward into Ron’s path and held up his arm.

Immediately, the owl veered from the distraught red-head and landed with an indignant squawk on his arm. Raising his other hand, Harry gently rubbed the owl’s back in an effort to calm the poor bird down.

“You! Are you responsible for … that?” Ron screeched, rounding on Harry.

“Um, yeah, I think so,” he replied sheepishly.

But Ron blatantly ignored any semblance of remorse in Harry’s voice and started bellowing at the top of his lungs.

“What’s the big idea, eh? Settin’ a ruddy bird on me and Scabbers! What’ve I ever done to you?
Did Hermione put you up to this? I’ve tried being nice, but she’s just mental, you know? You had no cause to set that owl on me! Look at these scratches! And it ruined my potions homework! Completely tore it to pieces when I refused to take the letter it was trying to force on me!”

Harry’s mouth open and closed, intent of trying to apologise or at least to try to offer some kind of explanation, but Ron never let him get a word in edgewise.

“If that was some kind of prank, then it was a bloody stupid one. Just … just stay the hell away from me, Potter! I don’t know why you’ve got it in for me and I really don’t care. Just stay away from me!”

And before Harry could respond, Ron stormed off and up the stairs.

The instant that he was gone, wild applause broke out, increased all the more when two red-heads rushed across and fell at Harry’s feet.

“That has to be …” one said as he bowed low, his hands reaching out to touch Harry’s feet.

“One of the best …” his brother continued as he took his turn at bowing.

“Pranks we’ve ever seen …” The first twin was back up only to begin bowing again the second he finished speaking.

“Definitely worthy of master status …”

“We bow to you …”

“Oh, mighty prankster …”

“Please teach us your trick …”

“Of getting the post owls to do your bidding,” they finally finished together, their hands clasped together, puppy-dog eyes blinking pathetically up at Harry.

“Oh, guys, I wasn’t trying …” Harry began.

“Did you hear that, George, a masterful prank and he wasn’t even trying?” Fred intoned.

“Just think what he’d be capable of if he was trying,” George continued, wiggling his eyebrows up and down.

“No, I mean that I don’t know why this owl attacked Ron like that,” Harry tried.

“Of course, Harry,” George said, tapping the side of his nose shrewdly.

“We understand completely,” Fred agreed.

Harry shook his head, intent on ignoring the twins as he awkwardly untied the letter from the owl’s leg. As soon as it was free, the owl took off for the nearest window. Just as he’d suspected, Harry saw the name Peter Pettigrew on the front of the envelope. Obviously, he’d got a bird-brained owl that didn’t know how to deliver a letter properly.

“Harry, you didn’t set that owl on Ron because of me, did you?” Hermione asked, her brows furrowed at him.

“Of course not, Hermione! I wouldn’t do that,” Harry protested.
The look that she gave him clearly said that she didn’t believe it. But then, he could see why she wouldn’t. Over the months, Harry’d had more than one instance of telling the red-head off for continuing to put Hermione down or for mocking the way that she acted in class or for simply constantly calling her ‘mental’.

“We’ll let you keep your secret this time, Harry,” Fred stated.

“But next time, we fully expect to be a part of your marvellous pranks,” George continued.

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again, knowing that he wouldn’t be believed.

Taking his arm, Hermione led him across the common room towards the couches around the fireplace. Around him, he noted the giggles and smirks that still pervaded the Gryffindors. They’d all obviously enjoyed the evening’s entertainment and considered that he was solely responsible.

“You’re sweet, Harry, but you really shouldn’t let Ron’s behaviour get to you,” Hermione was saying as she sat the two of them down. “However, as long as you promise not to do anything like that again, I have a proposition for you. And this is definitely not a reward for what just happened.”

Harry nodded. He hadn’t done anything deliberately in the first place making it a very easy promise to agree to.

“Our bet, if you remember,” Hermione continued, “was for you to beat me in a test in every subject. We both know that there’s no way that Professor Snape is ever going to give you a good mark in Potions. And Potions is the last subject that you need to win that bet. But as a reward for all of the hard work and improvement that you’ve been doing, I’m willing to concede defeat.”

Harry stared at her. “You’d do that? You’d let me teach you how to fly a broom?”

Hermione looked down at her lap and nodded. “But only if you still want to, Harry.”

“Of course I do, Hermione! How’s Saturday afternoon after Quidditch practise sound?”

-oOoOo-

Hermione hunched over her book where she sat half-way up the stands that surrounded the quidditch pitch. Her eyes were directed downwards, but there was no way that she’d be able to tell what the book was about. She hadn’t focussed on a single word since she’d opened the cover. At regular intervals, her fingers would turn a page, but that was purely an automatic reaction.

The sharp snap of a cloak being whipped snapped her head up. A madly grinning Harry hovered on his broom in front of her. His hair, while always untameable, was even messier than usual from the way that the wind had swept it every which way about his head. Both cheeks had a pinkish tinge to them from the cold air a hundred feet up where he’d been training.

“Alright, Hermione?” he asked.

“What? Oh, of course, Harry,” she replied, feeling flustered at his unexpected appearance.

“I’ll just go down and change and then we can get started,” he told her.

At her nod, he leant forward and his broom took off. She watched as he made an insanely tight curve before rocketing across the pitch towards the dressing rooms.

Hermione panicked. She could feel her breath coming faster and faster, even as her heart pounded
in her chest. Absently, she wiped the excess sweat that had just appeared on her palms off on her robes. She knew that she must be mad. Why else would she voluntarily get on a broom again? She hated heights and her last lesson with Madam Hooch had been a complete disaster.

She’d only managed to stay on her broom by wrapping both legs and hands around the shaft in a death grip. Somehow, she’d managed to get the broom up in the air far enough to satisfy Madam Hooch before she ever so slowly brought it straight back down again. It’d then taken the combined efforts of Lavender, Lil and Susan to get her to let go so that she could fall the last two feet to the ground in an undignified mess.

After reliving that most terrible of days for the sixth time in a row, Harry once again startled her back into the here and now.

“Are you ready, Hermione? Everyone else has gone. We’ve got the pitch to ourselves,” he told her with a grin.

Hermione stared at the insane boy in front of her. He had two brooms over his shoulder – his own Nimbus Two Thousand and one of the school brooms. Something, probably her ridiculous need to be the best at everything, forced her feet up under her. She could feel her traitorous mouth smiling away, giving the false impression that she was looking forward to the coming insanity.

As Harry led her down the steps and then across to the centre of the pitch, she knew that he was babbling away, probably offering helpful hints and instructions, but it was all too much for her to take in. Besides, she’d suffered through Madam Hooch’s lessons, plus all of the reading that she’d done before both that lesson and this one. She knew the theory inside and out.

“I was thinking,” Harry’s voice suddenly cut across her terror, “that instead of me making you try to fly a broom all by yourself today, that we might start off with something a bit different.”

Hermione latched on to this idea with her whole being. Whatever Harry had planned had just gained her whole support. Inside she was cheering and dancing and applauding the marvel that was her friend. And then he had to ruin it all by continuing to talk.

“So, to start with, I’ll do the flying for the both of us and you can sit on the broom behind me and just get the feel of what it’s like,” Harry beamed at her. “And then we can see how we go from there.”

Hermione stared at him, her mouth opening and closing until one thought finally made it out. “But I’ve seen the way you fly, Harry. I don’t think I could do that.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Hermione,” Harry laughed, “we’re not going to be chasing a snitch! All I was thinking of was simply flying up nice and slow and then perhaps doing a couple of laps and then coming back down again.”

“Okay, I think that’d be okay,” she managed.

With a grin at her, he pushed his hair out of his eyes and mounted his broom. “Well, come on, climb on behind me.”

The second that she was seated, Hermione’s arms snaked around Harry’s waist and she latched on with all of her strength. Instantly, Harry stiffened, a small gasp escaping him.

Letting go, she leant back, “Sorry, sorry, was I holding too tight?”

“No, no, it wasn’t that, it was … nothing, Hermione, don’t worry about it,” Harry replied before taking a deep breath. “It’s okay, Hermione, I know you don’t like heights and are just feeling
scared. If it helps, you hold on as tight as you like.”

“Thanks, Harry,” she said, glad that his back was to her so that he couldn’t see her blushing.

Once more she wrapped her arms around him.

“Okay, on the count of three, I’ll push us off. One … two … three.”

Hermione’s eyes snapped shut the instant her feet left the ground. She could feel herself wobbling about for balance and the minute changes to Harry’s body as he guided the broom along. The wind flew past, gently at first, but then a little harder as they increased speed. A small squeak of alarm escaped her as she felt the broom tilt away to her left.

“Open your eyes, Hermione,” Harry laughed, “that way when we change direction you won’t get startled.”

Swallowing hard, she obeyed.

The ground had fallen away far below until they were level with the top of the stands. Currently, Harry had then flying along at a little more walking pace, a speed that Hermione was more than happy with. She stared around her, taking it all in and this time when Harry curved them around in line with the stadium, she found that she could cope without squealing in his ear.

Her heart began pounding once more as she unexpectedly felt the broom rise. Her mouth opened to berate Harry and order him to take them back down when her eyes caught sight of the forest beyond the pitch. It was absolutely stunning. All of the different greens and browns stretching out before them was breathtaking. And then they turned slightly, allowing the lowering sun to glint off of the Black Lake beside the forest in a mesmerising display that made Hermione instantly squeeze Harry tighter.

“Oh, Harry, that’s absolutely gorgeous! And this is what you get to see every time you’re up here? Thank you, thank you so much for sharing this with me!”

“No problem, Hermione. Just wait until you’re be up here on your own broom,” he replied.

She gulped, refusing to let her mind wander to that mythical time ahead, in favour of simply enjoying the view before her now.
Every morning for over a week now, Harry had eagerly awaited the post owls. And every morning when the flood of hoots and feathers had finished making their deliveries, his heart sank just that tiny bit more. But that didn’t stop him hoping.

And then, finally, on last Monday morning of lessons before the exams would begin, he got his wish. In fact, his wish came true twice over. A large brown barn owl veered straight from the open window toward where he was sitting at the Gryffindor table. Right behind it, flew a second, slightly smaller and darker owl.

Before the two owls had even completed their landings, he had a strip of bacon in each hand ready for them.

“Who’re they from?” Neville asked as he moved his pumpkin juice out of harm’s way.

Harry, though, was too busy removing the letters to answer.

A deep frown furrowed his brow as he recognised the first letter. It was an envelope that looked remarkably familiar. Turning it around, he saw his very own handwriting: Sirius Black. Across it, though, in vivid red ink, were the words: No Correspondence Permitted to Prisoners of Azkaban Island.

Sirius, one of his father’s best friends, was in prison?

The phrase repeated over and over in his head. It was an envelope that looked remarkably familiar. Turning it around, he saw his very own handwriting: Sirius Black. Across it, though, in vivid red ink, were the words: No Correspondence Permitted to Prisoners of Azkaban Island.

Sirius, one of his father’s best friends, was in prison?

The phrase repeated over and over in his head. Harry wondered what he’d done to land himself there. How did the prankster that he’d heard about, who he’d always pictured being like Fred or George, end up in prison. He vowed to find out. After exams were over, of course.

Thrusting the letter that’d been meant for Sirius into his pocket, Harry turned his attention to his other letter. This one looked nice and thick. At least three or four pieces of parchment, he guessed. Slitting it open with his butter knife, Harry rifled to the end page and looked at the signature: Remus.

The smile that he wore when he looked up at his friends must have been infectious, for they too grew smiles on their faces.

“It’s from Remus Lupin. He wrote back!”

“That’s wonderful, Harry, I’m so happy for you,” Hermione exclaimed.

“Yeah, mate, one of your dad’s best friends, I bet he’s got a few stories to tell,” Neville agreed.

Not able to contain his excitement any longer, Harry dove into the letter.

Dear Harry,

It was wonderful to receive your letter. Yes, I was one of your dad’s best friends, but more than that, I was also great friends with your mum.

It has been a very long time since I saw you last. I was there when your parents first brought you home and at your first birthday party and many, many other times as well.

As much as I’d like to see you again, at the moment, meeting could be problematic, however I
would like nothing better than the opportunity to correspond with you.

I know that you asked specifically for stories about your dad, James, but to start with, I hope that you’ll indulge me in telling you about one of the very first friends that I ever had. She was a delightfully warm-hearted soul who could see the good in others that was often invisible to us ordinary folk. I am, of course, talking about your mother, Lily.

I first met Lily on our very first journey on the Hogwarts Express way back in first year. You see, I was having a bit of difficulty with a door that seemed to be stuck …

-oOoOo-

Not for the first time, Harry poured over the journal where he’d been writing every fact about the Potters and Evenses that he’d managed to find out. But in this instance, he was particularly focussed on one main aspect: the Potter wealth.

The Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter had been around for a very, very long time. In all of that time in the wizarding world, they’d accumulated quite a large number of businesses, buildings, houses and land.

They’d found references to Potters being one of the investors to the company that built the rail-line from London to Hogsmeade. Neville had been even more excited than Harry when he realised that one of the businesses that Madam Sprout purchased her magical plants from was *Pottrarius Magical Plants and Menagerie*, a company based somewhere deep in Brazil and was wholly owned by the Potters.

And then there were the houses. Every continent in the world seemed to have some Potter presence, but nowhere more than in England itself. And that included a reputed island hidden just off the coast of Wales.

Of course, as both Neville and Hermione pointed out, the information that they’d managed to glean from the library were from books that dated from just a few decades old to centuries old. Not to mention that, even if they were right in assuming that Harry was the heir to the House of Potter, he wouldn’t be able to touch any of it until he was of age.

But that didn’t stop Harry dreaming. If there was even a chance that he wouldn’t have to return to the Dursleys …

Shaking his head, Harry once more skimmed the list. Any one would do. Even the smallest. Just one, that’s all that he needed. Except, he was only eleven. In both worlds, magical and muggle, he needed a responsible adult. And that meant that, if he wanted to escape the Dursleys, then he needed an adult who he could trust.

If the muggle world was out, then Harry decided to try the magical. And the only adults that he knew were already in the castle.

After a quick jog to the library, *Hogwarts: A History* was in his hand, and he was skimming towards the back where all of the rules, regulations and by-laws were laid out. Most, of course, seemed ridiculously out of date or as far as he knew, were never utilised.

Like, for example, the clause about students being permitted to hire their own tutors if the school provided professors were deemed to be unacceptable. That was one clause that Harry felt sure should have been useful this year, especially in light of the woeful teaching of Professors Bins and Quirrel and the way that he and Neville seemed to have proved that they could learn more from a book about potions than anything that they’d learnt from Snape.
Finally, squashed between the rules about Hogsmeade visits and the agreement between Hogwarts School and the Hogwarts Express, was the paragraph that he was looking for. He read it through once and his face fell. He read it through again and his shoulders slumped. He read it through a third time and he lost all hope.

No student is permitted to remain at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizarding over the summer holidays, that is, between the end of term in late June until August 31 each year.

And there it was. He was doomed to return to the Dursleys for at least two months every year. Harry let his legs collapse under him as he saw his future unfold. Ten months of living in the castle with his friends, learning magic and having fun, only to have that life squashed and beaten out of him the instant that he returned ‘home’.

For a fraction of a second, he considered running away. But then, that’s what he’d been considering anyway when he was dreaming of the Potter properties that he was sure still existed out there somewhere.

Hermione or even Neville, he was sure, would happily offer for him to spend some of the holidays with them. But he knew that he couldn’t do that to them. Not after they’d spent most of the year away from their own families. He couldn’t, no wouldn’t impose like that. He knew all too well what being without family was like.

What could have been mere minutes or even as much as an hour later, Harry finally realised that there was one other person he trusted who just might be able to come up with some other option for him.

-oOoOo-

The door before him was closed, not an unusual occurrence. Indeed, when he thought about it, he didn’t remember it ever being left open. Inside, he imagined, Professor McGonagall would be working at her desk, her red-tailed eagle quill in her hand. That gave him a small smile. The few times that he’d been in Professor McGonagall’s office since Christmas, she was always using the quill that he’d given her. She’d never said, but he suspected that it had become her favourite.

Harry raised a hand to knock, and paused. He really was in two minds about the whole idea of talking to the professor. Any which way that he looked at it, he just couldn’t see a way that she’d be able to help.

With a shake of his head, he turned away.

“Can I help you, Mister Potter?”

Harry looked up, startled. It seemed that his assumptions were incorrect. Professor McGonagall wasn’t in her office. Instead, she was walking down the corridor towards him.

“Um, no. Oh, I don’t know. Maybe, yes,” he babbled.

Professor McGonagall smiled. “Well, there’s a multitude of answers for me to pick from. How about you come in and tell me what’s troubling you?”

Harry nodded and moved to the side to allow Professor McGonagall to tap her wand to the door before opening it and gesturing him in. Instead of rounding her desk, she settled in to an armchair near the back of the room. With a practised flick of her wand, a tin of biscuits floated across the room and settled itself on the small table between the chairs.

“Have a biscuit, Mister Potter,” she offered once he was seated before choosing one for herself.
Sitting back, she looked him over before gesturing with her hand for him to begin.

“I’ve been thinking about the summer holidays,” he began tentatively, “and about going back to the Dursleys.”

Professor McGonagall nodded, waiting for him to get to the point.

Finally, when the silence became too much for him to bear, he dropped his head and blurted out the one thing that had been on his mind for days. “I don’t want to go back!”

“I take it that your relatives are not … kind to you?” she asked.

Harry snorted. “That’s one way of saying it, Professor.”

“Mister Potter … Harry, I already gathered from the little that you and Miss Granger told me before Christmas that you didn’t have a good home life. I’ll tell you now that I took my misgivings straight to Headmaster Dumbledore and he’s assured me that he was going to pay a visit to your Aunt and Uncle to make sure that they treat you properly.”

Harry easily imagined how _that_ meeting would go.

Uncle Vernon would bluster and rant and rave. Then, after realising that he was talking to a ‘freak’, he’d probably start cowering and agreeing to anything and everything. His Uncle had seen firsthand what wizards could do courtesy of Hagrid and Dudley’s pig tail. But the instant that Harry returned home and finding out that he couldn’t do underage magic, Uncle Vernon would make Harry’s life a living hell. Harry himself would cop everything that Uncle Vernon would have wanted to do to Professor Dumbledore for disgracing his house just by being inside it.

“I don’t think that’ll help,” Harry managed to say.

Professor McGonagall smiled. “Oh, I wouldn’t be too sure. Professor Dumbledore can be quite persuasive when he wants to be.

Not wanting to argue with his teacher, Harry let that go. Instead, he decided to press on.

“I know that I can’t stay here in the castle over the summer holidays. So I’ve been wondering if there was somewhere else that I could stay in the magical world.”

Harry saw Professor McGonagall open her mouth, but decided to quickly continue before she had a chance to say ‘no’.

“Hermione, Neville and I have been trying to find out about the House of Potter. From what we can tell, there’re a lot of houses that the Potters own and I was hoping that I could stay in one of them.”

The pleased expression that flittered across Professor McGonagall’s face confused Harry, but he didn’t have time to decipher it just then.

“Harry, even if I wanted to let you stay somewhere other than with your relatives, I simply cannot,” she told him. “Your Aunt and Uncle are your legal muggle guardians. They have the right to decide where you are to stay over the summer holidays. And when it comes to the magical world, as you’re an orphan, the Headmaster is responsible for you and he’s already said that he’ll talk to your relatives on your behalf.”

She leaned forward and patted him on the knee.
“You’re just going to have to trust Professor Dumbledore, Harry. He’ll make sure that you’re treated right.”

Harry nodded his acceptance. What else was there to do? He’d already figured that he didn’t have any other options. All that he could do was to hope that Professor Dumbledore was able to scare his Uncle into some semblance of niceness.

“Thank you, anyway, Professor,” he said, rising from the chair and heading for the door.
Life inside the castle was far too busy over the next three weeks for anyone to even think about the world beyond Hogwarts.

The final week of lessons, much like the week before it, was pure revision. Every teacher in every subject piled their classes high with homework, both written and practical, essays and pop-quizzes. Professors Flitwick, McGonagall and Sprout also made sure to include time each lesson for their students to have any questions that they needed answering.

And then came the exams.

Every day for the next two weeks, saw the first years bombarded with written and practical exams. Professor Sinistra, of course, held her Astronomy exams over an afternoon and evening.

Every waking moment that they weren’t being tested, Harry, Hermione and Neville found their noses buried in books or else practising their spells in one of the unused classrooms. Occasionally, they met up with the rest of their study group, but found that they revised best when it was just the three of them.

Hermione insisted on having one of the two boys ask her every revision question at the back of each chapter in their text books the evening before each exam. While this annoyed Harry the first time she’d corralled him into the chore, he soon came to realise that it was one of the best ways to prepare for the subject.

Potions, as Harry’d expected, was a complete disaster. Both he and Neville were hissed at almost the entire time that they were working at their cauldron by Professor Snape. Afterwards, Harry judged that, while the potions that they created weren’t the deep blue that they were supposed to be, his mid-range blue vial and Neville’s light blue potion should be enough to see both of them pass. Assuming, of course, that Snape was willing to be fair.

The day after the first years’ had finished their exams, when the fourth years and above were still being tested, their results were posted.

Hermione, as was only to be expected, had aced every test and was awarded as being the top student for every subject for their year level.

Harry, when he saw his results, almost fainted in astonishment. He’d missed out on the being the top of Defence Against the Dark Arts by a mere half a point. That DADA Outstanding, was joined by O’s in Transfiguration, Charms and Herbology; Exceeds Expectations in Astronomy and History of Magic and most unbelievable of all, an Acceptable in Potions.

Neville, too, had done exceptionally well, managing a pass in potions, an O in Herbology and Exceeds in everything else.

The three of them celebrated by packing up a picnic and heading to the shore of the Black Lake where they were eventually joined by most of their study group. The fun and games lasted until nearly curfew, only pausing long enough for Lil, Susan, Hannah and Sally-Ann to duck off to find more food and extra jugs of pumpkin juice.

There was a palpable air of excitement rampant in the Great Hall when Harry entered. The final day of the long three weeks of exams had finally arrived. Just that morning, the seventh years had
had their last NEWT exam in the Great Hall, while the sixth years were completing their final test down in the potions dungeon.

 Everywhere Harry looked, students sported identical grins to the one he himself wore. The tables were already laden with delectable delights that Hogwarts had conjured to help with the celebration. Every table was surrounded by students from a multitude of Houses as the party atmosphere prevailed.

 Here and there, excited conversations were punctuated by the groans of students, who, after a comparison of answers with their fellow classmates, suddenly realised that they hadn’t done as well as they would have liked on their final exams.

 Harry took it all in from where he stood just inside the doors while he waited for his friends. After spending the morning down by the lake, they’d returned to the castle eager for lunch. But both Hermione and Neville had wanted to make a quick side-trip up to Gryffindor Tower first – Hermione to put the book that she’d been reading somewhere safe, and Neville to do the same with the small pot plant that Madam Sprout had given him to look after for the summer.

 A flash of light in the corner of his eye, quickly followed by an enormous crack and the sounds of multiple voices screaming, spun Harry around.

 Without a thought, he raced through the doors and into the castle’s entry hall. The scene before him jerked him to a halt, but not before he’d finished sliding the last couple of feet. His eyes widened as he took in the sight of two of his teachers engaged in a ferocious duel.

 Professor Snape, his black cloak billowing around him, spun, ducked and snapped out his wand. A vicious yellow light shot across the hall only to strike a loud gong as it impacted against the invisible shield that Professor Quirrel had erected.

 “Is that the best that you can do?” Professor Quirrel laughed, his ever-present stutter miraculously missing.

 With a snarl of rage, Snape stood tall and waved his wand in a flurry of different coloured spells at his opponent. Each one was blocked by a lazy flick of Quirrel’s wand. Two ricocheted off, crashing into the stone walls, sending the nearby mesmerised students scurrying away with shrill cries of fear.

 “I won’t permit you to leave the castle with the Stone,” Snape hissed through clenched teeth.

 Once again, Quirrel merely laughed in response. “There’s nothing that you can do to stop me! Dumbledore’s not here and none of the rest of you are strong enough to oppose me.”

 This time, it was Quirrel that went on the attack. He advanced quickly across the floor towards Snape, his wand darting high and low with ominous spells that exploded around the beleaguered potions master. Snape back-peddled quickly, doing his best to block or evade.

 The stone wall to his right exploded sending shrapnel every which way. When Harry once more looked after having had to shield his eyes, it was to see Snape’s cloak nearly shredded with streaks of blood streaming down from cuts on both his face and his arm.

 Harry had no idea what to think. Neither of these teachers were his favourites. In fact, if he’d ever considered the idea of the two of them duelling it out, he would have rooted for the option of the two of them taking each other out in the melee. But there was something different here. Snape seemed to be trying to protect something, a stone of some kind that Quirrel had that he was trying
to steal.

Without even considering how stupid he was being, Harry took half a step forward and yelled at the top of his lungs, “Hey, Professor Quirrel!”

The unexpected distraction was almost enough. Quirrel jerked and looked around, but not before getting one last curse off. Snape, having had the presence of mind to not react Harry’s yell, also managed to get an extra shot off before the world around him exploded.

Quirrel’s last shot at Snape had gone slightly off course. Instead of impacting the shield that Snape had erected, it slammed explosively into the ground at his feet. Tiles and shards of stone erupted, sending Snape hurtling backwards through the air to slam with a sickening crunch into the far wall. His bruised and bloody body lay crumpled at the base of the wall, whether alive or dead was more that Harry could tell.

Snape’s last curse also managed to score a hit, although this was just a glancing blow. Quirrel’s jerk at Harry’s yell pulled him just enough out of the way to allow the curse to merely impact on the ridiculous purple turban that Quirrel wore. It was torn from where it was mounted and sent flying away behind him.

The group of students on the far side of the hall screamed in terror. Looking past Quirrel’s shoulder, Harry could see that they were all fixated on the back of Quirrel’s head.

A sneer of contempt crossed Quirrel’s face for a second before he dismissed Harry to see what had become of his opponent.

“Well, it seems as though you do have your uses, boy,” Quirrel stated, turning back to Harry. “Your distraction was enough to allow me to finish off that insufferable know it all. Of course, if he had realised who he was in fact dealing with, well, let’s just say that that duel was pointless in the extreme.”

Wand raised, he turned in a circle, his calculating eyes obviously assessing those who stood in the entrance hall for any sign of a threat.

Harry, though, stood frozen as he finally saw what had horrified so many others. The back of Quirrel’s head contained a face. A most hideous chalk-white face with the most evil red eyes that Harry’d ever seen and slits like a snake for a nose.

“So, Harry Potter, we meet again,” the face rasped. “You see what you have done to me? You see what I’ve become because of you? You lost me my body, Harry Potter, the night that I tried to kill you. Your father died ever so easily. Your mother begged to join him. And then there was YOU!

Because of you, I’ve been condemned to inhabit the lowliest of my servants, left to feed on the blood of unicorns just to survive! I’ve been reduced to the actions of a common thief by stealing the Philosopher’s Stone in my quest for immortality. And you are the cause of it all! I think that it’s high time that you paid!”

Even knowing that Quirrel was walking backwards straight towards him, Harry couldn’t move. His feet were simply frozen to the floor in his fear. The face of his parent’s killer, the face of Lord Voldemort, had him in his gaze and it wasn’t letting go.

A hand reached out and grasped Harry by the neck, but surprisingly, it wasn’t Harry who screamed in pain and terror. Instead, it was Quirrel.

“Master, it burns! His skin burns!”
“Leave Harry alone!” a commanding voice rang out.

Quirrel barely paid Professor McGongall the slightest attention. A single flick of his wand and the old teacher slumped to the floor.

“Leave the boy!” Lord Voldemort rasped. “We’ll deal with him later.”

As Quirrel turned and began to stride across the entrance hall towards the great wood and iron doors of the castle, Harry found that he could move once again. And move he did. A flicker of black cloaks in the doorway sent him sprinting. As Quirrel’s wand arm started to rise, Harry put on a burst of speed before diving full length at the two girls just walking in the door.

An immense searing pain tore across his back as he crashed into the girls, tearing a scream of pain and anguish from his throat. Gritting his teeth, Harry attempted to extradite himself from the tangle of arms, legs and hair that he was engulfed in.

“HARRY!”

Hermione’s voice screamed across the entrance way and Harry knew instantly that she was going to be Quirrel or Voldemort’s next target.

Scrambling to his knees, Harry pulled his wand free. Instantly knowing that he had no chance against the wizard in front of him, he switched targets and pointed his wand at Hermione and Neville as they rushed down the stairs towards him.

Get back, get back, get back! Get back to safety! Get back away from Quirrel! Screamed through his mind

He saw the bright white curse leave Quirrel’s wand and he held his breath, tears rolling down his cheeks as he knew that his friends were already dead.

Instead, something amazing happened. The two of them were hurled backwards up the stairs seconds before Quirrel’s spell impacted with and obliterated the stairs that they’d been standing on.

Not even trying to understand what had happened, Harry lurched forward, his wand falling from his hand as he dove for Quirrel.

Aiming to prevent Voldemort from alerting Quirrel, Harry stretched forward and clamped a hand across the snake-like mouth. Quirrel exploded in a cry of pain as he tried to swing around to shake the boy off.

Harry, though, simply knew that by holding on, he was preventing the wizard from hurting anyone else. With his right hand still firmly grasped over Voldemort’s mouth, he wrapped his left hand around Quirrel’s head to grab hold of his face too.

Screams of pain tore through the entrance hall. Harry squeezed his eyes shut against the pain that exploded in his hands. Every part of his skin that touched Quirrel felt like it was on fire. He wanted to let go. He longed to let go. But Harry simply refused. He kept his grip firmly in place for as long as he possibly could.

Eventually, though, the pain grew too much. His voice had been reduced to a raspy whimper after the strain of his continuous screams and his body reacted the only way that it could to protect itself – by passing out.
Chapter 22

Harry woke slowly, content in the feeling that he’d just had the best sleep that he’d ever had. He breathed in deeply, before frowning slightly at the feeling of hunger that was slowly growing in the pit of his stomach. With a stretch, he reached out for his glasses, only to find that the set of drawers that sat beside his four poster bed was missing.

Opening his eyes, he looked around. Wherever he was was definitely not the Gryffindor dormitories. Two large white screens sat either side of the narrow bed. A bright square of light above his head could only be a window. Anything further away than that was lost for the moment in the midst of blurriness.

Finding a small cluttered table on the opposite side of the bed from what he was used to, Harry peered at it until a comforting shape made him smile. Putting his glasses on caused a massive gasp to escape. The small table was filled with cards of all sizes and colours, all expressing the sentiments that he ‘Get Well Soon’. Indeed, the cards weren’t confined to the small table. The overflow cascaded across the window sill and some even looked to be stuck to the wall as well.

Two more small tables at the foot of his bed caught his attention. But these didn’t hold cards. No, these tables were piled high with Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans, Honeydukes Chocolate bars, Chocolate Frogs, and other delights that Harry didn’t know the names of. A couple of tiny posies of flowers had managed to survive in amongst the mountain of sugary sweets.

“Tokens from your many admirers,” a wispy voice announced.

Harry looked up to find Headmaster Dumbledore beaming at him. He was rocking slightly on his feet, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Sir?” Harry asked, confused.

“The sweets and chocolates are from your fellow students, all wishing you a speedy recovery after what happened in the Entrance Hall. Alas, that recovery seems to have taken longer than we all would have liked,” Professor Dumbledore explained.

And with that, it all came rushing back. The duel between Snape and Quirrel. Voldemort’s face. Hermione and Neville nearly being blasted. Professor McGonagall falling. The floor under Snape exploding. The searing pain in his back when he jumped at the two girls. Him, trying to stop Quirrel / Voldemort by grabbing hold of their faces.

“How long have I been here?” he asked, picking just one of the many questions floating around in his mind.

“Three days,” Professor Dumbledore replied. “Tonight, we have our Leaving Feast before tomorrow the Hogwarts Express is boarded to mark the beginning of the summer holidays.”

Harry’s eyes widened at the thought of being unconscious for three days. It was no wonder that he was feeling hungry.

“What happened, Sir? What was Quirrel trying to steal? And was that really Voldemort’s face in the back of Quirrel’s head?” Harry blurted.

“Well, considering that I only arrived after you had already dealt with the problem, quite nicely, too, I might add, although you did put yourself at some unnecessary risk, I dare say that you know almost as much about what happened in the Entrance Hall as I do,” Professor Dumbledore replied,
his eyes twinkling as he gazed at Harry.

Harry roughly shook his head. “I know that I saw what happened, Sir, but I don’t know why.”

“Ah, as to that, well, I think that that calls for some speculation on my part.”

Stepping forward, Professor Dumbledore raised his wand and twirled it, creating a plush red lounge chair that he sank into. Then, steepling his hands, he looked at Harry over the top of his half-moon glasses.

“Now, in order to answer your other questions, perhaps it would be best to combine them into some semblance of order. It would seem that some time in his travels, Professor Quirrel encountered Lord Voldemort, or at least, what is left of Lord Voldemort and was unfortunately, possessed.” Here he paused to peer more intently at Harry. “I must say that you are taking the fact that Lord Voldemort is still alive better than most, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “I guess that’s because I just talked to Lord Voldemort.”

“Indeed, indeed. Well, to cut a long story short, Lord Voldemort found out that I was keeping a little something that belongs to a friend of mine here in the Castle.”

“A stone, Sir?” Harry asked.

“A Philosopher’s Stone, Harry,” Professor Dumbledore clarified and Harry could have sworn that he looked somewhat disgruntled that he had to do so.

“Why would he want to steal a Philosopher’s Stone, Sir?” Harry asked.

“Well, my boy, one of the curious properties of a Philosopher’s Stone is its ability to make a person immortal.”

Harry nodded, immediately understanding why that would appeal to the greatest Dark Lord in centuries.

“So, Snape really was trying to stop Quirrel from stealing it?” Harry asked.

“Professor Snape, Harry, and, yes, he was. From what I understand, that duel was something to behold,” Professor Dumbledore replied.

“Guess I did the right thing trying to distract Quirrel, then,” Harry muttered, then, in a louder voice, “he looked like he was hurt pretty bad. Is he alright?”

“Professor Snape suffered a great many injuries but I am quite happy to announce that he, like you, will finally be able to leave the Hospital Wing today. Professor McGonagall also suffered no lasting damage,” Professor Dumbledore smiled.

Once again, Harry nodded, thinking hard. Finally, he decided to simply ask. “Why has Sn … Professor Snape been so hard on me all year?”

“I’m sure that you’ve been told this more than once, but you resemble your father extremely. Except for your eyes. Your eyes are simply Lily’s. But it is in the way that you look like your father that has been the problem for Professor Snape, I believe. You see, once, many years ago, your father and Professor Snape attended Hogwarts together and their … relationship was adversarial, to put it mildly.”

“They hated each other, didn’t they?” Harry asked, trying to understand what he was being told.
“In a word, yes,” Professor Dumbledore replied. “There are other factors, of course, but that will do to be going on with, I think.”

“Yes, Sir,” Harry replied, then, another question popped into his mind. “I didn’t kill Voldemort did I?”

“Your touch was able to hurt him, simply because of the power of the love that your mother left in your blood. But kill him, no, I’m afraid not, Harry. Lord Voldemort is still out there somewhere. He’ll be forced to bide his time but I believe that we will see him again,” Professor Dumbledore stated.

“Why did he try to kill me when I was a baby?” Harry asked.

Professor Dumbledore stared at Harry a long time over his half-moon spectacles before answering. “That, I am afraid, will be a story for another time. When you’re older, I think.” Here, he raised a hand as if to stop any protests that Harry might make.

“Now, I think that my time here is about to be curtailed,” Professor Dumbledore stated as he suddenly rose from his chair before vanishing it.

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey bustled around the curtains and began muttering as she started waving her wand up and down Harry’s body.

When Harry next looked up, Professor Dumbledore was gone. In his place, a dark haired man paused as he walked past the end of the bed. Harry’s eyes met the deep black eyes of Professor Snape before the potions master gave a single nod and walked off.

“Flip over, Mister Potter, so that I can check the cut on your back,” Madam Pomfrey ordered, bringing his attention back to her.

After a quick, queer look to work out what she meant, Harry complied. His pyjama shirt was pulled up for a minute before being flipped back down.

“That looks good, Mister Potter. I’m sure that the scar will fade over time, but it’s clean and clear without infection. Now, I’ll have a tray brought to you and once you’ve eaten everything on your plate and I’ve checked you over once again, I’ll let you leave.”

“Thank you, Madam Pomfrey,” Harry smiled.

With a nod, she bustled off. His tray, when it arrived, was brought to him by the two people he’d been longing to see since he woke up, along with one unexpected visitor.

“Hermione! Neville! Hagrid!” he exclaimed happily.

“Oh, Harry, It’s s’ good ta see ya awake!” Hagrid near blubblered, “when I saw ya after wha’ happened …”

“Yeah, mate, great to see you up and about again,” Neville agreed.

Hermione, on the other hand, seemed to think that words just wouldn’t be enough. Instead, she flung herself at Harry’s bed and wrapped her arms around him in a bone-crushing hug.

Harry froze, unsure what to do. The closest that he could ever remember coming to being hugged before was when he was teaching Hermione to fly. And at least then she was behind him and he didn’t need to do anything. Finally, he brought one hand up to gently rest on her back. Immediately, Hermione’s hold on him intensified.
“Oh, Harry, I was so scared for you,” she said from somewhere near his neck.

“It’s alright, Hermione. Madam Pomfrey fixed me right up,” he said.

He was incredibly thankful that Hermione’s bushy hair hid him from view. He was sure that both Neville and Hagrid would be snickering at him. And just when he was starting to get used to the feeling, Hermione released him and sat up.

“Ah, Harry, I can’t stay long. Gotta finish me packing,” Hagrid said.

“Packing? Are you going somewhere?” Harry asked.

A shy smile broke out on Hagrid’s face. “Yeah, Professor McGonagall got me a new job. Gonna be workin’ with dragons, I am.”

“Hagrid, that’s brilliant,” Harry beamed. “You’ve always loved dragons.”

“And I’ll get to see Norbert, again. That’s where I’m goin’. To the dragon reserve in Romania to work with Charlie Weasley,” Hagrid explained. “O’ course, Professor Dumbledore wasn’ happy. Wanted me to stay, he did, but said he understood. Great man, Professor Dumbledore is, great man.”

“We’ll miss you, Hagrid,” Harry told his biggest friend.

“Yeah, well, don’t want ya to forget me, do I? So, I made this for ya,” he said, thrusting a package at Harry.

“Thanks, Hagrid,” Harry replied, taking the messily wrapped bundle.

Carefully so that he wouldn’t rip the paper, Harry untied the package to reveal a red velvet book. Opening it, he gasped and felt his eyes start to water. There, just inside the front cover, was a picture of his parents, laughing and waving up to him.

“That was on their wedding day,” Hagrid told him. “Knew ya didn’t have any real pictures of ‘em, even with that littl’ book tha’ you’ve been puttin’ together. So, I sent away to all your parents’ old friends askin’ for pictures and put it together for ya.”

In a shot, Harry had climbed up to stand on his bed and wrapped his arms as high around Hagrid as he could reach.

“Thank you, Hagrid, I love it.”

“That’s good, Harry. I’m glad,” he smiled back. “Look, I better get going. I’ll see you three at the feast, later, alrigh’?”

“Okay, Hagrid, see you then,” Harry replied and watched as Hagrid lumbered back around the partitions.

Once he was gone, Harry flopped back down on the bed where Hermione immediately grabbed hold of his hand.

“So, what’s been happening in the castle the last couple of days?” Harry asked, desperately trying to ignore his hand.

-oOoOo-
Harry, with Hermione on his right and Neville on his left, had barely entered the Great Hall when a pair of green-trimmed Slytherin girls ran at him.

“Harry, you’re alright! We were so worried,” Daphne Greengrass said quickly, reaching out a hand to touch his.

Harry paused as he considered the two. Daphne and Tracey Davis were first year Slytherins. He had a number of classes with them, but before today, he couldn’t ever remember talking to them, let alone the two of them approaching him. He knew that his ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ fame was all over the school and after what he’d done to Quirrel, it was back in full force, but for two Slytherins to show such concern just didn’t make sense.

“You don’t remember, do you?” Tracey gasped, one hand covering her mouth in her shock after he hadn’t responded.

Harry shook his head.

“The two girls you saved from that cutting curse that Quirrel shot out. That was us,” Daphne told him.

It was as though a light suddenly popped on in his brain. “That was you?”

The two girls smiled. “That was us,” Daphne stated. “We saw the cut on your back. How you managed to get back up after that and face Quirrel again was amazing.”

“You had blood pouring down your back,” Tracey agreed. “It was horrible.”

“We know that that should have been us. We both owe you a massive debt. If there’s ever anything that you need, you come to us, okay?” Daphne said, once more reaching out to touch his hand.

“Um, okay, sure,” Harry replied, not sure what to think. “I’m glad that you two didn’t get hurt or anything.”

With a last smile, the two Slytherins turned and walked away to their House table.

“That was weird,” Harry commented as the three of them walked towards Gryffindor table.

“Not really,” Neville replied, and then, seeing the confusion in both of his friend’s eyes, he elaborated. “Wizard’s debts are pretty important. If you save someone’s life, then they owe you a similar debt. In most Ancient and Noble families, a life debt like that one that Daphne and Tracey owe you would only be settled by a betrothal.”

Harry stared. “WHAT?”

“Shh, Harry,” Hermione admonished, then, turning to Neville, “is that why Daphne kept touching Harry?”

Neville shrugged. “Probably. But don’t worry, only the Heads of the Houses can make those sorts of contracts and as you won’t be Head of Potter House until you come of age, then Lord Greengrass and Lord Davis won’t have any way to try to marry their daughters off to you.”

“That’s archaic!” Hermione announced, repulsed.

Shaking his head at this strange new facet of the wizard world, Harry took his seat. Suddenly, his head jerked up and he grinned evilly at Hermione.
“Hey, Hermione, if I remember correctly, I saved your life by battling a troll. Shouldn’t that mean that you owe me a life debt, too?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. “I guess so.”

“So, does that mean we’re betrothed now?” he asked innocently, causing Neville to nearly fall off his seat in laughter.

“No it does not. Prat,” Hermione replied, swatting him on the shoulder, “and if you even think about saying anything like that to my parents …”

Her threat, though, was cut off by Professor Dumbledore standing up to the podium in front of the school.

“Thank you, everyone. Another year over and I hope that our brains are all a little fuller with not just knowledge, but also wisdom. Now, as I understand it, there’s one last point to hand out before we announce this year’s winner of the House Cup.

“To Mister Harry Potter, for having the courage and nerve to put his life in danger for not only his fellow classmates and teachers, but also for what is right, I award one hundred points.”

A massive stomping of feet, clapping of hands and whistles broke out across the hall, but nowhere as loud as that which came from Gryffindor Table.

Professor Dumbledore put up his hands for silence and, once he had everyone’s attention once more, he continued.

“Those well-deserved points, however, were not enough to put Gryffindor House in front of this year’s winner, for the eighth time in a row, Slytherin House.”

As Slytherin House Table went wild with their win, Professor Dumbledore clapped his hands and waved them across the hall, causing massive green and silver banners adorned with the Slytherin serpent to appear all along the walls.

“Yes, yes, congratulations, Slytherin. A well-deserved win,” Professor Dumbledore clapped. “Now, on with the feast.”

“Next year, it’ll be Gryffindor’s year,” Harry stated firmly as the table nearly groaned under all of the delicious food that suddenly appeared on it.

-oOoOo-

Harry, Hermione and Neville enjoyed a quiet trip back to London aboard the Hogwarts Express. They’d managed to get a compartment to themselves and, while they had a constant stream of visitors for the first half of the trip, it was just the three of them for the most part.

All of their friends from the study group had popped in to wish them well for the holidays, as had Fred and George Weasley and, somewhat unsurprisingly, Daphne and Tracey. The rest of the Slytherin contingent was still in party mode which meant that they weren’t subjected to Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle sticking their noses in where they weren’t wanted.

Even through the chaos that was a couple of hundred students disembarking from the train, the three friends managed to stick together. Once their trunks were loaded onto a trolley each, their first stop was near the apparition point on the station.

“Hello, Neville,” Madam Longbottom greeted her grandson.
“Hi, Gram!” Neville beamed.

“Mister Potter, Miss Granger,” Madam Longbottom inclined her head. “I trust your year went well.”

“Yes, thank you,” Hermione replied.

“It’s nice to see you again, ma’am,” said Harry.

“Well, have a great holiday, guys. I’ll send you an owl in a couple of days,” Neville said.

“You too, Neville,” said Harry.

Hermione threw herself at Neville to give him a quick hug. “Have a great summer, Neville.”

And then it was just the two of them.

Together they waited their turn to scurry through the invisible barrier that separated the magical world of Platform Nine and Three Quarters from the muggle side of King’s Cross Station. Within moments of stepping through, they located two small groups waiting quietly out of the way.

“Look, Mum, there he is, there he is! Harry Potter!” a high pitched squeak spun them around.

There they found Fred and George, Percy and Ron, along with a dumpy red-headed woman and a small, red-headed girl.

“Hello, there, Harry,” the woman said. “I’m Molly Wesley. And you must be Hermione.”

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other before nodding. “Hi, Mrs Weasley, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Have a great summer, you two,” said Fred.

“Make sure you get into lots of trouble,” continued George.

A whack on the back of his head from his mother saw him change his tune. “I mean, make sure that you don’t do anything we wouldn’t do.”

A second whack changed his advice once more. “Be good, you two.”

“Thanks again for the jumper and fudge,” Harry said after grinning madly at George.

“Oh, you’re welcome, Harry,” Mrs Weasley smiled, one hand wrapped around her to where Ginny was now hiding.

“Well, we better go, our parents are waiting,” Hermione managed to excuse them.

As Harry drew closer to the three Dursleys, his face fell. He could see that his uncle was already annoyed and impatient. The red in his face was growing and his tapping foot was going a mile a minute. Aunt Petunia was looking around nervously. Behind them, Dudley was huddled against the wall, both hands clamped behind him.

“Harry, you have to come meet my mum,” Hermione said, grabbing hold of his sleeve.

“I don’t know if there’s time, Hermione,” he replied quietly, “my Aunt and Uncle are waiting.”
“Please, Harry, just for a minute. There’s something that I want to give you,” she pleaded.

With a sigh and a nervous glance at the Dursleys, he nodded.

Hermione beamed at him and took off on a bee-line for a small, slim woman who looked like an older version of her daughter. Her hair was long and wavy, giving him the impression that it once was just as bushy as Hermione’s. The instant that she saw her daughter, her face lit up with a smile identical to the one that Hermione currently wore.

“Hi Mum! It’s so good to see you again. This is my best friend, Harry,” she introduced.

“Darling, I’ve missed you so much,” Mrs Granger said, giving her daughter a hug before releasing her to shake Harry’s hand. “It’s so nice to finally meet you, Harry.”

“Hi, Mrs Granger,” he replied, glancing back to the fuming Dursleys.

“I know that you have to go, Harry, but I wanted to give you this,” Hermione said as she plucked a rather big package that had been resting between her mother’s feet.

Harry obediently took the heavy item from his friend while frowning in confusion at her. “What’s this for?”

“Let’s just say it’s an early birthday present, okay?” Hermione beamed at him. “Open it later.”

Knowing that it was never wise to argue with her, Harry simply nodded. “Okay, thanks, Hermione. Look, I’d better go.”

“I know. Have a great holiday, Harry,” Hermione said, before jumping in to give him a quick hug.

“You too, Hermione.”

With a last wave, Harry turned to push his trolley towards his Aunt and Uncle.

“Still got that ruddy bird, then?” Uncle Vernon frowned before focussing on the package that Harry had placed on top of his trunk. “What’s that?”

“An early birthday present from my best friend,” he replied.

A grunt signalled Uncle Vernon’s non-interest. “Well, come on, then.”

The holidays had barely begun and already Harry’s only thought was for ten weeks from now when, instead of pushing his trolley out of King’s Cross Station, he’d be pushing it back in, ready to return to the Castle and his friends.

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