

Going Home Ron

Ron Weasley sat with his family and friends in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, telling and retelling the story of his months in the woods with Harry and Hermione.

Harry's alive, I knew he couldn't be dead, he tricked You-Know-Who somehow and killed him and now it's over—and Hermione kissed me, I think she might really like me, I know I really like her—

The knowledge of the deaths their side had suffered, Professor Lupin, Tonks, his own brother Fred, tried to shred away his buoyant happiness, and at moments almost succeeded, but he couldn't be sad for long. The war was *over*, they'd *won*, Harry was *alive* —

“Ooh, look!” Luna's voice rose above the noise in the Hall. “A Blibbering Humdinger!”

Ron grinned to himself. *I'm glad Luna made it through. World would be less interesting without her around.*

Down the table, a flash of pale hair caught his eye, as Draco Malfoy turned sharply as though to see what was behind him.

Who cares about you anymore? Ron dismissed the Slytherin with a snort. *Harry used your wand to kick You-Know-Who's arse, that's probably what you'll go down in the history books for. That and being the most spineless little gobshite to ever walk through Hogwarts' doors. To think you used to get your kicks going after Neville...*

Not anymore, I don't think. His friend and fellow Gryffindor was sitting at the next table over, trying to simultaneously get some breakfast into him and answer questions from a gang of adoring-looking people, mostly girls, who kept staring awestruck at the gleaming sword sitting on the table beside him.

Always knew he was a real Gryffindor at heart. That just proves it.

Unbidden, the memory came to him of saving Harry's life in the process of retrieving this same sword from the bottom of a frozen pool, of using it to destroy the locket Horcrux which had sent him away from his friends, the Horcrux which had brought to life his deepest and most secret fear, that Hermione cared about Harry the way Ron had fumblingly come to realize he wanted her to care about *him*...

Wonder who'll fall for Neville? Have to be someone out there for him, especially after this, they'll be queuing up to date him. Ron glanced over the girls beside his friend, finding his eyes lingering longest on the Patil twins, though he was quite sure they weren't right. Something about them, though, reminded him of the girl he thought would be.

As if I'd know, great overgrown pillock that I am. Neville'll do a lot better that way than I will. He'll know what he's looking for, and stick to it once he's found it.

He smiled ruefully at Hermione, finishing a portion of scrambled eggs with her usual careful neatness. *Not like me—I never quite know what I'm after until it runs me over...*

But he'd found something good now, and he was going to do his best to keep it.

She seems to like it when I think about other people. Have to work on doing that more.

A rustle between them, and a familiar voice, though nothing was visible. “It's me,” Harry murmured. “Will you come with me?”

Hermione set down her fork at once, Ron swung his legs over the bench, and together they left the Great Hall. Ron cocked his head as they ascended the marble staircase, listening to Peeves singing a victory song he'd obviously composed himself:

*We did it, we bashed them, wee Potter's the one,
And Voldy's gone moldy, so now let's have fun!*

“Really gives a feeling for the scope and tragedy of the thing, doesn't it?” he remarked as he pushed a door open for his friends, making Hermione giggle slightly. Harry's lopsided grin became visible as he pulled off his Invisibility Cloak, which had served them so well through the war.

He looks like he needs some sleep. About a week's worth, maybe. I probably don't look so good either. But there's something weird...

Ron frowned, trying to track down what was odd about Harry's expression.

He almost looks like he's still waiting. Like he thinks it isn't over. But what could happen to us now? You-Know-Who's dead—what else could go

wrong?

"I think I ought to tell you what happened to me," Harry said as they walked down the hallway towards the next flight of stairs up. "I went up to Dumbledore's office to use the Pensieve, to see the memories Snape gave me, and I found out he used to know my mum, they were kids together..."

Ron listened dumbstruck to a story which forced him to revise every opinion he'd ever had about his greasy-haired Potions Master. *I knew he spied for the Order—but he killed Dumbledore because Dumbledore asked him to? And to save Malfoy from having to do it? He shook his head. Missed a bet on that one, Professor—maybe Malfoy's not a killer, but he's still never going to amount to anything.*

And quite frankly, the idea of Severus Snape in love with Harry's mum made him feel slightly ill. Of course, the idea of Severus Snape in love with anyone would have made him feel ill.

He was on our side, he was brave and all that, but he was still a git who favored Slytherin and took points off Gryffindor just because he could, and I don't think he bathed more than once a month. But now he's dead, so it doesn't matter anyway...

Harry moved on in his story, and Ron thankfully abandoned thoughts of Snape to listen to what had happened in the forest. Hermione's eyes were enormous as Harry recounted using the Resurrection Stone, walking with his parents and Sirius and Lupin towards his certain death, stepping out to face Voldemort and feeling the Killing Curse strike him—

"And the next thing I knew, I was lying in a bed," Harry said, pushing aside a tapestry. "Or sort of lying—someone was holding me up, hugging me, saying my name and crying. Someone with loads of red hair."

Hermione drew a long breath. "Your mum," she whispered. "She was really there, wasn't she?"

Harry nodded, his eyes bright behind his glasses. "As real as we are. Realer, if that makes any sense."

"Your dad come too?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, he showed up a couple minutes later." Harry grinned. "Sirius and Lupin were with him, and you'll never believe who else."

"Not—Wormtail?" Hermione hazarded tentatively.

"Nah, not him," said Ron, dismissing this thought with a wave of his hand. "Snape, maybe?"

"You're both right," Harry said, his grin broadening. "Maybe this won't be so hard after all."

"What won't?" said Hermione.

Ron wasn't sure he could say anything. *Wormtail made it to wherever Harry's parents are? I mean, sure, I tried to stop that hand from killing him, but I'd have done the same for anyone...*

Still, who was he to say who should and shouldn't get rewarded after they died?

Maybe it was enough that he let Harry live, and that I got his wand and used it to help get us all out of there. He fingered the grip of the brittle rod of chestnut he'd won that night. Or maybe it works by different rules than anything we understand. That sounds about right.

He'd missed whatever Harry had answered to Hermione's question, Ron realized as he started listening again. "—there for long, just in to say hello and then gone," Harry was saying. "And Snape didn't stay much longer. He thought something was awfully funny, though, he had that look on his face he always used to get when he knew Neville was going to make a mistake in class. Mum kept glaring at him, but he didn't seem to notice much."

"So then it was just you and that same four you got out of the Stone?" Ron asked as they climbed another flight of stairs. "What happened with them?"

"They told me I had a choice." Harry looked down at the two wands in his hand. "I could stay there with them, and they'd try some other way to 'finish what needs doing,' was the way Lupin put it. Or I could come back and try and fix things myself. Trouble was, if I did that, I wouldn't have a lot of time after killing Voldemort to get it all done. And one of the people I'd need probably wouldn't be too willing to help." He smiled. "But Sirius told me a way to get around that, and it worked just like he said it would."

"Harry, you're not making any sense," said Hermione. "What else did you come back for, if not to kill Voldemort and have your life afterwards?"

"And who do you need besides us?" Ron added.

"You'll see. Both of you." Harry came to a halt at the gargoyle which guarded the Head's office, now slumped over on its side and looking rather bewildered. "Can we go up?" he asked.

"Feel free," groaned the statue.

Harry climbed over it, Hermione following him. As Ron started to do the same, he thought he saw something around the corner behind him, but it was gone when he turned to look.

I'm seeing things. Too bloody tired...

The staircase lifted them into the office as it always had. They stepped inside, and Ron nearly stepped right back out at the thunderous applause and cheering of the portraits hanging on the walls. Nor was he alone—Hermione emitted a little gasp at the noise, Harry yelled in shock, and a squeak came from further down the stairs behind them—

Who's back there?

Ron whirled in time to see a pale, pointed face topped with familiar silvery hair ascend into view.

"You!" He grabbed the front of Malfoy's robes and dragged him into the office, shoving the Slytherin into the nearest wall and making his gray eyes bug out satisfyingly with the impact. "What're you following us for? Don't you get it yet? You *lost*, it's *over*, there's nothing else you can do to us—"

"Ron, let him go!" Hermione shouted.

Grudgingly, Ron released his grip. Malfoy gasped in a breath, then straightened his robes and hair. "Potter brushed against me on his way past," he said, staring at Harry, who stared right back. "I looked around to see who it was, but no one was there, and then I saw you two getting up and leaving with a big patch of nothing between you, just about his size. So I thought I'd come and..."

"And what?" Ron demanded. "Spy on us? What for? Your Dark Lord's dead, if you hadn't noticed—"

"Let him finish, Ron," snapped Hermione. "The war's over, there's no need to be rude to him."

"No need to be rude to him?" Ron gaped at her. "After all he's done to us—after he's threatened us, tried to kill us, stood and watched you get *tortured*, Hermione?"

"You think I *liked* that, Weasley?" Malfoy shouted before Hermione could answer. The portraits had all fallen silent and were watching in fascination. "You think I *liked* listening to her scream? Watching her bleed? In my own *house*?"

"Well, why didn't you do something about it, then?" Ron challenged. "Why didn't you ever speak up—"

"And say what?" Malfoy sneered. "You stupid Gryffindors have it so easy. You were born on the side you're on, just like I was, but if you'd wanted to join mine, you could have done, any time you wanted. *Howwell do you think that would work for me?*" The words came out in a snarled hiss, reminding Ron startlingly of the Parseltongue word he'd used to enter the Chamber of Secrets. "How long do you think I'd have lasted if I even *hinted* around my father, or my Aunt Bella, that I didn't always care for everything they did and I might not want to do it myself?"

"A gilded cage," Hermione murmured. "And you didn't even know it was a cage yourself until this past year, did you?"

Malfoy shook his head jerkily. "I tried," he said, looking at her with something like pleading in his eyes. "When they brought you in, when they wanted me to tell them who you were. I tried to pretend I didn't know you. But then Mother remembered you from Madam Malkin's, and I knew it hadn't done any good." He turned away, but not before Ron saw something sparkling on a pale cheek.

Who knew Malfoy could cry? And over Hermione, of all people...

"Nothing I do ever does any good," said a choked voice. "But you three—all you have to do is wait around and everything falls into your laps. That's why I've always hated you so much. Because everything works for you, everyone thinks you're wonderful. Even now, you've won the war, you're heroes, and if I stay out of Azkaban it'll only be because I can claim I was a kid and didn't know any better. And I don't think my parents will get off anywhere near that easy, not this time."

Ron had a strong urge to beat his head against the wall. *I don't believe this. I'm feeling sorry for him. I'm actually feeling sorry for Draco sodding Malfoy.*

He glanced over at Harry. His friend was leaning against the edge of the Headmaster's desk, watching Malfoy closely, with a sparkle in his green eyes of—could that be happiness? Even more, triumph?

Add it to the list of things that don't make sense. Like Malfoy blubbering in front of us.

But if he were going to be truthful about it, Malfoy wasn't blubbering. He might have shed a tear or two, his voice might have sounded thick, but he was back to his usual self as he turned to face them again. "So, now that you're all feeling disgustingly sorry for me, what I actually came up here to ask was, can I have my wand back *now*, Potter?" He shot Harry a look of challenge. "Now that you've told the world you took it off me, and used it to get a better one?"

Harry tossed Malfoy's wand in his palm, seeming to weigh it. "You can have it on one condition," he said, looking up. "Have a drink with us."

"A drink?" Malfoy and Hermione said in chorus, then looked at one another in surprise (on Hermione's part) and disgust (Malfoy's).

"Yes, a drink." Harry pretended to lift a goblet. "You take something liquid and you put it in your mouth, and then you swallow it."

"Very funny, Potter," Malfoy said coldly. "Why do you want me to drink with you? I thought you hated me."

"Maybe I do," Harry shot back. "Maybe I'm trying to poison you. But since I'm planning on pouring all our drinks out of the same bottle, I'd have to poison us all, and you can judge for yourself whether or not I'd do that."

Malfoy looked from Ron to Hermione, then back to Harry. "It still doesn't make sense," he said. "Why would you—"

"And you say I'm thick," Ron snapped, fed up with the Slytherin's stupidity. "Ever occur to you he's trying to say he wants peace? Or a truce at least? Merlin's robes, Malfoy, get your head out of your puckered-up pureblood arse for once!"

Hermione shot him a look. "Ron's right, though," she said, taking one step closer to Malfoy, who watched her warily. "This is Harry's way of saying he doesn't want to fight anymore. That we may never be friends, but he'd like it better if we could stop being enemies." One hand rose to her neck, to the thin scar Bellatrix's knife had left behind. "And for what it's worth, I believe you. About not liking what you had to watch."

Malfoy stared at her fingers as though they were the tip of a wand pointed at him. "I hate seeing blood," he said softly. "Anyone's blood. Pure or not. And I wanted it to stop, I would have done anything to make it stop, but I couldn't. Do anything, I mean. It wouldn't have worked." He cracked half a smile. "Like I said. Nothing I do ever seems to."

"I think even you can manage having a drink," said Harry, looking up at Dumbledore's portrait where it hung on the back wall of the office. "Professor, is there anything like that around?"

"Why, yes, Harry, there is." Dumbledore beamed down benevolently at the little group. "Severus kept a rather special bottle in the bottom left-hand drawer of the desk. I doubt he would begrudge it to you today."

Harry was already on his way around the desk. "Hermione?" he called over his shoulder. "Think you can make us some goblets?"

"I'll try," Hermione said, drawing the walnut wand a bit doubtfully. "You know I'm not as good as I could be with this."

Malfoy regarded the wand in her hand with a bit of amazement—obviously he had recognized it as his Aunt Bella's—but said nothing, for which Ron was grateful. He thought one more sneering or self-pitying comment might well have forced him to punch the little ferret in the face.

And I swear, if he so much as starts to call her a Mudblood...

Harry emerged with a dusty bottle in his hand just as Hermione finished conjuring a fourth long-stemmed glass goblet. "You're sure about this, Professor?" he said, looking at Dumbledore's portrait again. "I mean, I'm doing the right thing?"

"Absolutely, Harry." Dumbledore's face was solemn, even a bit stern, and Ron wondered what they could be talking about. "You may even have left it a bit longer than you should. But I have no doubt Sirius will be able to improvise as usual."

Malfoy looked openly bewildered, and Ron and Hermione exchanged puzzled glances. What had Sirius got to do with anything?

"Hope so." Harry uncorked the bottle in his hand with Malfoy's wand, sniffed at it, and smiled. "Trust Snape to keep the good stuff for himself. Oak-matured mead, just like you tried to give the Dursleys that one time, Professor, only they wouldn't take it." He came around the desk again and poured for them all. "Didn't know what they were missing."

Ron accepted the goblet Harry handed him absently, his mind wandering. *Oak-matured mead... that sounds familiar, except I know I never saw Harry's relatives with Dumbledore...*

Hermione picked up two goblets and held one out to Malfoy. "In case you really want to convince us you've changed," she said. "You can take it down below, we don't have to touch at all."

Malfoy started to fit his palm around the base of the goblet, then stopped. Slowly, his hand came up until it was at the same level as Hermione's, which was wrapped around the goblet's stem. He reached forward and slid his fingers around the cup of the goblet, brushing them against Hermione's as he did. "It's a new world," he said. "I'd better learn to live in it."

"That sounds like a toast to me," said Harry, lifting his own goblet. "To a new world, and a better one. And to better lives."

"Better lives," Ron and Hermione echoed, lifting their goblets in response. Malfoy raised his with only a nod, then sipped from it, as did Hermione. Harry put his to his lips, glancing from one to another of the group.

Ron took a drink and was surprised by the taste, sweet and tangy and familiar. *I knew I recognized the sound of it. Oak-matured mead, oak-matured mead... come on, Weasley, think, where've you had this stuff before?*

"Your wand," Harry said, holding it out to Malfoy, who snatched it with the hand not holding his goblet. "And I think I should probably put the Elder Wand back where it was."

Ron nearly choked on his second mouthful of mead. "What? Harry, are you mad? It's the best wand there ever was, it's unbeatable, and it's yours, mate, yours by right..."

"But I don't want it." Harry reached into the pouch he wore around his neck and pulled out his own broken wand. "I was happier with mine." He lined up the pieces of his wand and touched the Elder Wand's tip to them. "*Reparo!*"

Hermione lowered her goblet from her own second drink and smiled. "Some things can be fixed, I guess," she said as Harry picked up his wand, seemingly as good as new. "And I think you're quite right about the Elder Wand, Harry."

"And I think he's mental," muttered Malfoy, draining his glass. "Not that it matters."

"That wand's more trouble than it's worth," Harry said, with the force of someone making a proclamation. "And quite frankly..."

In the silence of his pause, Hermione's tiny sigh as she crumpled to the floor was entirely audible. Malfoy stared from her to Harry to the empty goblet in his hand, a look of horror growing on his face, then flung the goblet into the opposite wall, shattering it, and turned to run. His knees buckled before he'd got more than a few steps, and he collapsed limply and did not move again.

Ron's hands and feet went cold and numb as he recalled where he'd tasted oak-matured mead before.

Slughorn's quarters, on my birthday... the day I nearly died, from poisoned mead...

He heard his own goblet smash on the floor, but did not see it fall. His eyes were fixed on Harry, his best friend, the last person in the world he'd thought capable of something like this.

But is it really him?

What if we missed a Horcrux somewhere along the way?

What if it wasn't You-Know-Who that died down in the Great Hall?

Harry smiled at him and raised his glass, as though he were toasting Ron's death. "Quite frankly," he repeated in the softest of tones, "I've had enough trouble for a lifetime."

The floor came up to meet Ron, and blackness began to cover his eyes. The last thing he saw was Harry tipping his head back to drink the entire goblet of mead in one go.

Showing off how he can never die...

The sweet aftertaste of mead and the bitter knowledge that his family would be following him very soon indeed accompanied Ron as he fell.

Well, most of them will. Fred went on ahead of us.

At least he and George won't be apart for long.

And then he knew nothing more at all.

Going Home Draco

Draco Malfoy had always suspected that it would be Harry Potter who killed him. Whether it would be accidental or deliberate, done with wand or poison or a simple shove down a flight or ten of stairs, had been open for debate until just a few minutes ago.

Poison, quite possibly my poison if some of that mead got to Dumbledore after all. And it looked deliberate enough to me, or why was he smiling like that?

Still, he certainly hadn't expected Potter to take out Weasley and Granger (*and himself*) just for a clear shot at him.

I'm not that important to him anymore. The Dark Lord's his priority, or was.

But the Dark Lord was dead now. He'd been killed not three hours earlier, by an apparently miraculously resurrected Potter.

Resurrected. Might be something in that. Did he see whatever's on the other side—if there is anything, I reserve my judgment—decide it was too good to pass up, and come back long enough to finish his business and pick up his best friends?

But why take me along, if that's what he was after?

The questions were both legion and unanswerable, and would remain so as long as he stayed face down on this grassy hillside...

Wait, grass? We were indoors, in the Head's office. Cold fear prickled down the back of his neck. Could this be—

No. I'm not going to play games with myself. I feel alive, I want to be alive, I'm going to assume I'm alive until I see some reason to believe I'm not.

And since I'm alive, I might as well see where I am.

He rolled over and opened his eyes.

Blue sky arched over his head, coming down all around to meet green hills like the one on which he lay. Potter, Weasley, and Granger were strewn across the sloping ground near him, looking like a set of Hogwarts student dolls dropped by some giant child. All of them were breathing, and Weasley and Potter were starting to stir. Granger lay quietly, her chest the only part of her that moved.

She almost looks like she did after...

Draco shook his head, trying to banish the image. *No. No, no, no. Not going to think about that.*

But it was too late. His mind was already showing him Granger's pain-wracked face, reproducing her piercing screams interspersed with her terrified insistence that the sword the Snatchers had brought in along with her and Potter and Weasley was a fake they'd found in the forest. He ground the heels of his hands into his eyelids, trying to block it out, but the screams in his ears went on even though the vision had vanished—

"You!"

Draco snapped his head up. Weasley was on his feet, wand pointed straight at a groggy Potter, looking angry enough to play Beater with his bare hands. "Don't even think about it," he snapped as Potter made to reach for his own wand. "Keep your hands where I can see them!"

"Ron, what are you doing?" Granger asked, sitting up. "Why are you threatening Harry?"

"Harry?" Weasley laughed, a brittle sound without any true humor in it at all. "You think this is Harry, Hermione? After what he just did?"

"What he just did?" Granger looked bewildered. "You mean poured us a drink?"

"A drink? He poured us a *poisoned* drink!" Weasley's hand tightened around his wand. "We missed a Horcrux somewhere, Hermione, this isn't really Harry, it's You-Know-Who, he's taken Harry over and now we're *dead!*"

"No, we're not," Potter said wearily.

"Bollocks," Weasley retorted. "You might've forgot, or maybe you didn't know, since you're *not Harry*, but I've had poisoned mead before and I know what it's like—"

"*I am Harry, and I didn't forget.*" Potter got slowly to his feet, keeping his hands away from his pockets. "Yes, the drink was poisoned, but it had to

be, and I don't know if I can explain why, because we're not where I thought we'd be by now."

"And where's that?" Weasley produced a sneer Draco would have been proud of. "All tucked up cozy in bed with Mummy and Daddy? In case you forgot, Harry, *if* that's really who you are, some of us have families who're *still alive*, and who might have liked to see us the same way again!"

"Which is why I did what I did!" Potter yelled back, lifting his head with an effort. "You think I'd have scared you like that if I had any other way to do it? I was on a timetable, Ron, I had to get you all to drink within a certain number of words, and it looks like we ran over, because this isn't anywhere I recognize—anyone else?" He turned to look at Granger and Draco. "Either of you know where we are?"

"I've never been here before," said Granger as Draco shook his head. "And what do you mean by 'number of words,' Harry? What's going on?"

"I—" Potter shut his eyes for a second, and Draco was struck by his pallor, by the lines in his face. "I really don't think I can explain right now, Hermione—"

"Hardly surprising," said a woman's voice, strong and cool, as its owner materialized practically at Potter's elbow. She was tall and dark-skinned, broad of shoulder and hip, wearing robes of a rich sapphire blue, and Potter sagged against her with a moan of relief.

"No, given that you seem to have worn through all your reserves and be operating strictly on the power of your will, I find it not surprising in the least that you cannot explain something as complicated as the current situation," the woman went on, stroking the back of Potter's neck. "Rest for a moment. I will do what I can."

"Excuse me," said Granger diffidently, "but who are you?"

The woman smiled at her. "I am Harry's godmother," she said.

"Harry hasn't got a godmother," said Weasley shortly, his wand now aimed at the woman. "He had a godfather, but he's dead now."

"Which would make it foolish of me to pretend to be a person you know does not exist, would it not?" The woman kissed the top of Potter's head. "So perhaps you should amend your statement to say that *as far as you know*, Harry has no godmother."

"What good would that do?"

"It would make your second statement, unlike your first, the truth." This smile was slow and teasing. "A subject about which I know a great deal."

"So how about some truth about us?" Draco said, deciding the moment was ripe. "Are we dead, or aren't we?"

"You are far from dead," said the woman, looking up at him without any mockery that he could detect. "The shells you inhabited in the world you left behind, those are indeed dead, but that world was ended in any case, so those deaths have done no harm."

"Pardon me for asking," said Granger rather squeakily, "but did you just say the world ended?"

"I did indeed."

"Oh." Granger looked as though she'd have far preferred discovering she'd been hearing things.

"But my family!" Weasley finally managed to articulate. "Our friends! They'll all be—"

"No." Draco had seldom heard so flat a negative. "Your family and friends live, and are safe and well. You will see them again soon, after you have conquered this final obstacle." The woman pressed Potter's arm, and he lifted his head from her shoulder, looking surprisingly restored for such a short rest. "Trust in one another and in yourselves, be ready both to make and to accept sacrifices, and you will escape this place safely."

"And if we don't?" Draco asked flippantly. He wasn't trusting any Gryffindors, especially not the one who'd just poisoned him, without a bloody good reason.

The woman pointed past his shoulder.

He, and the Golden Trio with him, turned to look.

A wall of blackness covered the horizon, soaking up hills and sky, moving perceptibly nearer to them with every passing moment. A breeze blew past, bringing a chill and the stench of death.

Draco felt his knees go weak.

Black monsters...

It had been his childhood nightmare, dreamed once a week when his life was going badly, never gone for more than a month even in the best of times. He could run as far and as fast as he wanted, he could hide in as many tiny cracks and crevasses as he pleased, it didn't matter to the black monsters. They were tireless and inhumanly patient, they could follow him anywhere and wait outside any hiding place, trickling in the cold and darkness they brought with them to let him know they were there. And when hunger or tiredness or some other need brought him stumbling out, there they would still be, and even if he could escape them this time, he knew it wouldn't always be so easy.

They caught up with me a few times. And I knew, when they gathered around me, what they wanted me for. They wanted to eat me, not my body but my soul—everything that makes me really me—to destroy me, make it like I never lived, like there was never a Draco Malfoy at all—

He had always managed to wake, gasping for breath, before they could get that far, and been able to comfort himself that the black monsters were only in his nightmares. But then had come his third year at Hogwarts, and the escape of Sirius Black from Azkaban, and he had been forced to face the knowledge he'd been avoiding for most of his life.

Black monsters, or something so much like them that it made no difference, were real.

That stuff out there is to do with them. I know it is. He stared into the distant blackness, aware that he was shaking and unable to spare the energy to do anything about it. *Maybe it is them, just so many of them that they look like a wall. And they're coming closer—we have to move, we have to get out of here—*

There was nothing, *nothing* he would not do to avoid being caught by the black monsters.

Even work with Gryffindors.

Under protest, but that was going to happen no matter what.

Draco turned around again. The woman was gone, and Potter, Weasley, and Granger were all watching him. "Well?" he said, drawing his wand. "What're we waiting for?"

"You," said Weasley, giving him an unfriendly look. "Did you *have* to drag him into this, Harry?"

"Yes." Potter's tone was flat.

"You couldn't have left him behind for the world to end around him?"

"Ron, shut up," Granger snapped. "Before that black thing gets here, please, let's go!"

"I..." Potter flushed. "I don't know which way."

"Away from that," said Draco, pointing at the advancing blackness. "Do we need another direction?"

"You stop it too," Granger said, shooting him a glare. "I'll do Silencing Charms on you all if I have to, don't think I won't."

"And she will," Weasley muttered.

"Hermione's right," said Potter, drawing his own wand. "We should go. Come on, everyone."

At a half-jog, they set out.

Draco let his mind wander as he ran. *"Be ready to make and accept sacrifices," eh? I'd rather be accepting than making, if it comes down to it... but I suppose there are a few things I could give up, if it means I get away from that.* A glance over his shoulder confirmed their speed was just barely equal to that of the black wall—it seemed to be holding still behind them, but would surely make up ground on them if ever they had to stop—

Just as he thought that, he ran slap bang into Granger, knocking them both to the ground. "Stupid Mu—" he started to say furiously, and discovered a wand tip in his face.

"I've been looking for an excuse to hang you up by your bollocks for years," Weasley informed him. "Call her that just once and I'll have it."

"Will you back off, please, Ron?" said Granger from underneath Draco, her voice bearing the unmistakable sound of frayed patience. "I can take care of myself, you know."

"Apparently not well enough to know not to stop when you're running away from something," Draco retorted, rolling off her. "Why did you, anyway—"

He looked up and felt his mouth dry.

Their way was blocked by an immense stone wall, stretching from horizon to horizon and up to the sky, perfectly parallel to the approaching blackness behind them. He could see the door in it, just behind Weasley, but he could also see the immense padlock, and the sign dangling from it.

If only it said "I open when stupid blood traitors stop running their mouths."

Granger got up and examined the sign. "It says," she announced, "'Pay me with the proof of your trust.'" Her forehead wrinkled in thought. "That sounds familiar somehow..."

"Everyone come here," Potter interrupted. He was several feet away, peering into a large round hole in the ground. "I think I've found the key."

Granger and Weasley crowded in beside Potter, leaving the other side of the hole free for Draco. Granger pointed her wand into the hole. "*Clavis revelo!*"

Ten feet down, hanging on a projection of rock, the key to the lock on the door sparkled in Granger's spell.

"Merlin's stones," said Weasley, staring down at the key, which Potter's wandlight was now pinpointing. "And let me guess—it's just like the cup and the diadem, we can't Summon it?"

Potter nodded. "I tried Summoning already, and *Wingardium Leviosa*, and a couple other things. I think it's proof against magic; the only way to get it is to grab it."

"And I don't think any of us want to try levitating ourselves, or each other, down there," said Granger, paler than usual. "What if we got hold of the key and it made the magic on us stop working? We can't see how deep this hole is..."

"Could even be bottomless," said Weasley, peering into its depths. "So what are we supposed to do, then?"

Granger and Potter both looked at him. So did Draco, as the obvious answer came to him.

"What're you looking at me like that for?" Weasley asked in a tone which said he already knew the answer and was trying to hide from it. "What're you thinking?"

"I'm thinking we need that key," said Potter, glancing over his shoulder. The black wall was three hills away but closing the gap relentlessly. "And we don't have a lot of time to argue about it. Malfoy."

Draco jumped at being addressed and met Potter's eyes.

"You take one leg, I'll take the other?" his rival asked, indicating Weasley with his head.

I never thought in a million years I'd be cooperating with them—but it's a choice between them or that...

Draco nodded and stood up to come around the hole.

"Hold on a second!" Weasley protested. "I haven't said I'll do it!"

"We don't have a choice, Ron," said Granger quietly. "We need that key, and we need it now. Harry and... Draco won't let you fall."

"Since when d'you use my given name, Granger?" Draco demanded.

"Since we need each other to survive this!" she shot back. "And since, for some reason which is still a mystery to me, Harry thought you were worth saving out of a world which has apparently ended!"

"It wasn't about being worth it, Hermione," said Potter with a sigh. "You'll understand when we get out of here. Ron, lie down, we'd better tie our hands on to be sure we don't slip, and we should probably be anchored up here so you don't drag us in..."

A few moments later, Draco found himself in a position he wasn't sure he'd have been able to imagine until it happened. His legs were flat on the grass of an otherworldly hill, with a rope around his waist keeping him from plunging headfirst into a bottomless pit, where his top half was currently dangling, supporting the left leg of Ron Weasley.

With Harry Potter on the right. And Hermione Granger hovering up above us, calling commentary.

"A bit to the left, Ron—no, sorry, my left, your right—careful, don't knock it down—you're almost there—easy—easy—"

"Got it!" Weasley shouted at the same moment as Granger's joyous shriek. "Pull me up!"

Draco pulled with a will, getting his own body above ground on the first yank and most of Weasley with the second. Granger Vanished the ropes as she passed, Weasley scrambled to his feet and stumbled to the door, Potter was up and holding out a hand for Draco—

Why does he have to be so nice?

Draco took the hand and pulled himself up by it, and he and Potter ran for the door Weasley was now holding open, just as the black wall swept over the last hill but one to theirs. Weasley let the door go, and it slammed shut and melted into the wall.

"Oh, wonderful," said Potter.

Draco turned around and silently seconded this.

They'd got through a wall just in time to run into another wall. This one, instead of being smooth and featureless stone, was overgrown with ivy and other clinging vines, and it had a very definite top about thirty-five feet up. There was a large archway in it, blocked by a portcullis, but Draco could see the raising mechanism on the other side and it looked to be in order.

And if there were anyone on the other side, or any of us could get over this thing, that would help...

Another sign hung on the portcullis. Potter squinted at it. "Pay me with the joy of your youth," he read aloud. "What's that about?"

Granger sighed. "I had a feeling this would happen," she said. "All right, I've been able to keep it hidden for the past seven years, but I can't keep it hidden anymore." One hand drew her wand, the other went to the clasp of her robes and opened it—

Weasley goggled as Granger's body, clad only in a tee shirt and soft trousers, was revealed. Draco allowed himself a look of tolerant amusement, though secretly he was rather impressed himself. *Who'd have thought she'd strip down so nicely?*

"What've you been hiding, Hermione?" Potter asked, sounding bewildered.

Granger kicked off her shoes, performed a charm on the bottom of each bare foot, then did the same to the palms of her hands and tucked her wand into the waistband of her trousers. "This," she said, and turned to the wall and grasped two handfuls of ivy. A moment later, she was higher than any of their heads, grinning down at them, her cheeks flushed. "I like to climb things. Trees, walls, rocks—clay cliffs are fun, but you have to take a shower after and you'd better not expect to wear whatever you went climbing in again—"

Weasley made a little moaning noise, his eyes fixed on one portion of his girlfriend. Granger sighed. "They're called legs, Ronald," she said. "I've always had them."

"They didn't always look like that," Weasley said in a monotone. "And they weren't always right there..."

"This is exactly why I didn't want anyone to know," Granger said with a sigh. "I was afraid you'd never take me seriously again once you found out."

"How about you just climb, Granger, and worry about being taken seriously when there aren't things out to eat our souls?" Draco said, dividing his tone nicely between sneering and patronizing, in his own opinion.

"How about you shut your pointy inbred little face, Malfoy?" Granger replied coolly before turning back to her climbing.

Good. She's off her "all in this together" kick. I'll help them as long as I have to, but if I could get out of here myself and leave them behind for that black wall to get, wouldn't that be great?

A voice in the back of his mind stopped him cold. It was his father's, and it was intoning one of the first lessons he'd ever learned, one of the first tenets of the pureblood code of honor.

"Debts must be paid."

Draco looked sidelong at Potter and Weasley, who were both watching Granger climb—she was good, she'd nearly reached the top already—then returned to his thoughts.

They didn't have to come back for me and Goyle at the Room of Hidden Things last night. Plus, it's starting to sound like Potter saved me again this morning. By poisoning me, yes, but let's not get into sophistry. As much as I might not want to admit it, I owe them my life.

And debts must be paid.

Potter and Weasley cheered as Granger waved down cheerily at them from the top of the wall. Draco managed a half-hearted wave in return. His mind was churning.

I'll help them through whatever else this place has to throw at us. Save them if they need saving. But will that be enough? Will it put us even? Or will I still owe them?

The portcullis clanked and started to rise. Potter, carrying Granger's robes, and Weasley, with her shoes, were ducking under it before it had even reached shoulder height. Draco followed, mired in thought.

Play it as it flies, he decided. Get out of here first, and figure it out when we're somewhere that makes sense again.

He looked up.

Whenever that might be.

They had come to the bank of a wide river. It looked too deep to wade and too fast to swim, and there was no bridge in sight. For one wild moment, he wondered if he should help Potter and Weasley conjure up a bridge, and expect to find Death waiting in its center to give them gifts...

Er, no. For one thing, that would require them to be my brothers. For another, I've already had as much experience with that particular story as I want, given what Potter said in the Hall and what he was telling these two on the way to the Head's office...

The inevitable sign was posted on a stake at the edge of the river. Draco went to one knee to scan it. "Pay me with the points of your pride," he read aloud. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Do you truly wish to know?

It was a woman's voice, whispering in his ear, gentler and less strident than that of the dark woman who had called herself Potter's godmother.

Speak softly, as if to yourself. I will hear.

"Go on, then, tell me," Draco muttered without moving his lips. "What's this one mean? Who's it for?"

It is for you, child, and it is the final obstacle to pass. If you can overcome it, you and these other three will be free of this place and able to go home. If you cannot, the black wall you have seen will overcome you, and you will be forever lost.

"I think I like the first one better," Draco said dryly, and heard the woman chuckle. "What's involved?"

You must give up the three things which make you proudest to be you. The woman paused, as if she were nervous about telling him the rest. You must be willing to forever abandon your Hogwarts House, your purity of blood, and the name you bear.

For the first time since he could recall, Draco Malfoy was stunned speechless.

Going Home Hermione

Hermione Granger stepped hesitantly closer to the boy kneeling on the riverbank, seven years of insults and threats running through her head.

But he looks like he really needs help, and I know he won't take it from Harry or Ron. Stupid boys and their pride.

So that leaves me. "Mudblood" or not.

Strangely, the insult had never bothered her as it did Ron, or even Harry. She thought it was probably because she had been raised Muggle, and no one in the Muggle world would have understood the term even if they'd heard it used.

Funny, really, how most of the people who're called that won't even know it's insulting at first..

She sat down beside Draco Malfoy, who had his head bowed and his arms resting on his upthrust knee. "Anything I can do?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know." The voice which usually sounded so bored was now thick with suppressed emotion, fear or anger or desperation or all three. "Think you can solve an unsolvable problem?"

"You never know." Hermione kept her hands in her lap, though her need to help his pain made her tremble. "Tell me what it is?"

"Oh, nothing important," Malfoy said with an attempt at his usual tones. "Just the question of whether I should destroy myself or wait for that black stuff to do it."

"What?"

Malfoy jerked a thumb at the sign in front of him. "Read that."

"Pay me with the points of your pride," Hermione read as directed. "So you have to give up something you're proud of?"

"Not just one thing. Three." Malfoy smiled, though it looked more as if someone were forcing the corners of his mouth back. "My House, my name, and my blood. Only problem is, take those away..." One hand jerked abortively up and down, as though he wanted to sum himself up but found too little there to do so. "What's left?"

Hermione closed her eyes and invoked a few of Ron's favorite swearwords.

I don't believe I'm going to do this.

Of course, I've done it before, but for a different reason...

Banishing memory, she opened her eyes, leaned forward, and slapped Malfoy smartly across the face.

Malfoy's hand flew to his cheek as he stared open-mouthed at her. "What the—"

"You are unbelievable," Hermione snapped as she might have to Ron in one of his sullen moods. "Are you actually saying that you think being a Slytherin and a Malfoy and having pure blood are the only things that matter about you? The things that define your existence?"

"Last time I looked, that's how it worked," Malfoy snapped back. "You think something else?"

"Yes, I do!" Hermione tightened her fingers around two handfuls of her robes, trying to keep her temper from running away with her entirely. "I think there's a lot more to you, you've just never bothered to look for it, because those were the easiest things to define yourself as! But guess what? The world where any of those made a difference is *gone!*" Not trusting her hands, she pointed out the way they'd come with an elbow. "And I don't think it's coming back!"

And that ought to bother me a lot more than it does. All of this ought to bother me more than it does. Harry poisoning us, that woman saying our world had ended but our friends were all right, these challenges like something out of a bard's tale... why doesn't any of it frighten me?

Maybe because I know I don't have the luxury of being frightened—if I can't hold my end up, we'll all die, for good this time...

"Well, guess what?" Malfoy countered, mocking the tone she'd used to him. "I don't know how to go looking for other parts of me, and there isn't time even if I did know how! And I'm not about to give up everything I *know* just to pass some stupid test!" He glanced the way she'd pointed, and his face flickered for just an instant into a child's mask of fear. "Except... if I don't, that black stuff..."

"You don't have a choice, Draco," Hermione said firmly, a certainty locking into place in the back of her mind. "This isn't just a test for the sake of having a test. It's something you have to do, you have to learn, before we can leave here. Just like Ron had to learn he could trust you, and he could still trust Harry." A thread of a giggle escaped her. "Even though he did poison us all."

"Should've known better than to take what he offered me," Malfoy—*Draco*—grumbled, watching her from the corner of his eye.

"And I..." Hermione felt her cheeks warm, but kept talking. "I had to learn, I have to keep learning, that looking silly isn't the end of the world. That I need to have fun sometimes. And that there's nothing wrong with Ron liking to look at me."

"All right, more than I needed to know." Draco pressed his hands to his ears. "Do you have a point here?"

"My point is, the things you named—your House, your name, your blood—you needed them back where we came from. But here, and wherever we're going after this, you don't. They might actually hurt you, if you keep holding onto them."

Draco gave her a skeptical look.

"Think about it like this." Hermione pointed at the wall she'd climbed. "Suppose you had to get over that like I did, to escape enemies who wanted to kill you. And suppose you had money with you, a lot of money, because you knew that once you got over that wall, you could never come back. What you took with you was all you could keep."

A slow nod answered this.

"Could you have done what I did, if your pockets were full of Galleons?" Hermione tossed the question lightly into the air and waited.

"I don't think I could've done what you did *without* my pockets full of Galleons," Draco said honestly. "Somehow I never imagined the Gryffindor Wondergirl could climb like a demiguise."

"Thank you." Hermione pressed her hands to her cheeks, trying to cool her blush. "But my question stands, Draco. Could you have climbed over that wall weighed down like that?"

"No." The answer was prompt and firm. "And I wouldn't try, either. Gold's no good to a dead man."

"And neither will your name and your blood help you any if that stuff catches you," Hermione said, feeling horribly guilty for invoking his obvious fear—*but if it gets him moving...* "None of it changes you, Draco. Not the real you. Not the only person who noticed us leaving the Great Hall."

"That's just because Potter bumped into me," Draco objected.

"Or the person who was willing to help Ron get that key."

"Because I don't want to die!"

"Or..." Hermione hid her smile and made her voice completely neutral. "...the person who's been talking to me for five solid minutes and not insulted me once. Who actually complimented me a moment ago."

Draco's face went brilliant pink.

"I know what this seems like to you—" Hermione began.

"Do you?" Draco interrupted, glaring at her. "Do you really? How would you feel if it happened to you? If you had to give up your precious Muggle parents, and leave your lion's den, and have some of that magical blood you think is so worthless running in your body? How would you like it?"

"If that was the only way I could keep living, I'd do it!" Hermione shouted, her temper breaking its bounds at last. "I could have been a Ravenclaw anyway, it's not like my House really matters except that it let me meet the two best friends I've ever had, and no one's asking you to give up your parents, just your name! And for your information, I do not think magical blood is worthless, only that it's not the most important thing about a person—or even an important thing at all! Who cares what your parents were? What matters is who *you* are!"

"You think so?"

"I *know* so!"

"Fine!" Draco was on his feet, his hand on the Slytherin crest sewn to his robes. "Prove it!"

With a violent tug, he ripped the serpent free and flung it at her feet.

Hermione tore the lion from her own robes and dropped it atop the snake without an instant's hesitation. "I rather like being Hermione," she said. "I don't suppose you'd let me keep that part of it, and just drop the Granger?"

"Well, if you must," Draco drawled. "I, being *who I am*, don't intend to settle for half-measures." His lips twitched. "Weasley won't care for it. One less thing for him to twit me on."

"Ron will leave you alone about this," Hermione said firmly. "Trust me."

"Oh, I do." Draco drew his wand and took it in his left hand, bringing it down awkwardly across his right palm. A line of red appeared there, and he

hissed but made no other sound. Hermione made a neat incision on the palm of her own right hand, wondering a little, in the back of her mind, at the ease and sureness of her movements, as though she were treading the measures of a dance she'd learned long since.

"Oi, Potter, Weasley!" Draco shouted over her shoulder. "Either of you know how to Bond a Vow?"

Harry and Ron turned away from their quiet conversation. Ron looked astounded, Harry surprised and pleased, as though one of his new Quidditch players had done better than he expected. "I think we both can," he said. "Are you ready, then?"

"No, but I'm not likely to get readier by waiting," Draco retorted. "Which of you wants to do it?"

"Why are you making a Vow at all?" Ron asked, coming over to them. "Something to do with getting us out of here?"

"You could say that." Draco shook his hair back and went to one knee.

Hermione did the same. "Scared, Malfoy?" she inquired, holding out her hand.

Draco looked at the hand, then back up at her face. She saw his throat work, but his voice when he spoke was perfectly level.

"You wish," he said, and clasped his hand around hers. The unfamiliar blood stung her cut, but she did not flinch, and neither did he.

Harry and Ron had a silent conversation consisting mostly of nods and shrugs. Finally, Ron drew his wand and placed it against their two hands. "Go on, then," he said. "What're you Vowing?"

Hermione spoke first. "Will you, Draco, ever be a member of Slytherin House again?"

"I will not," Draco said steadily. "And will you, Hermione, ever be a Gryffindor after today?"

"I will not."

The first thread of flame slid from Ron's wand in conjunction with his shocked hiss.

"Will you ever use the name Granger again?"

"I will not. And will you ever use either the name Draco or that of Malfoy after this day?"

"I will not."

A second, thicker flame intertwined with the first. Harry was watching intently, Ron in what looked like shock.

Hermione looked straight into the gray eyes across from her. "Will you agree that by this sign of joined blood between our two hands, our bloods are truly joined, and from this day on we are neither Muggleborn nor pureblood but half-bloods alike?"

"I will." The pale fingers contracted around hers. "Will you?"

"I will."

The third flame burst from Ron's wand, wound itself around their hands, and sank into their flesh without burning, and Hermione felt the bonds of her Vow settle onto her, light as love and heavy as duty all at once. She and the nameless blond boy rose at the same moment, hands still clasped. For a long moment, they held one another's gaze.

Then Hermione jerked her hand away and shoved the boy into the river.

He came up spluttering and spitting water. "O! What the hell, Gr—*Hermione*?"

"You looked like you could use a bath," Hermione said airily, grinning. Her pensive, worried mood had vanished, replaced with a feeling that all was right with the world, that nothing could go wrong now.

Rather like I felt when Harry turned up alive. Only stronger, if that's possible.

The boy growled as he climbed out of the river but did not comment further. Halfway through standing up, he froze. "*Whoa*," he said, softly but with great intensity. "*So that's why...*" He straightened his back and looked at Harry. "Was it like that for you, too?" he asked. "Like opening a door, or turning on a light?"

"Not quite," Harry answered. "Mine's still happening. Bit by bit, slow but sure."

"Just so you know, you're neither of you making any sense," said Ron.

"He the final trigger?" the boy asked, glancing at Ron.

"You and him together. Like usual." Harry grinned. "Some things never change."

Hermione's eyes roamed past Harry, and she gasped. "Whatever this trigger is, I suggest you do it now," she said shakily.

Everyone turned to follow her line of sight.

The black wall had just overtaken the ivy-covered stone and was sweeping towards them, annihilating reality as it came.

“So, Weasley,” said the nameless boy in a light tone, drawing all eyes back to him. He might have been at a cocktail party, or in the Great Hall at Hogwarts, for all the notice he took of the approaching darkness. “What’s this I hear about you and my sister?”

Ron had barely time to gape at him before the world tore apart like a scroll, the ground splitting beneath their feet and dropping them all into darkness. Hermione screamed as she fell, and fell, and fell—

And bolted upright, her hair damp with sweat. She was dressed in plain day robes and sitting on a bed in a small and dimly lit bedroom, with another bed across from hers. Judging by the lanky silhouette she could half-see sitting up on it and the muttered curse she’d just heard, Ron was still with her.

But where’s Harry? And Malfoy, or whatever he’s going to call himself now? For that matter, where are we, and how did we get here?

A knock sounded on the door, scaring her nearly out of her wits. Ron swore again, adding a flourish or two she’d never heard from him before.

“You’d better not say that where Mum can hear you,” said a well-known voice as the door creaked open.

“Ginny!” Hermione was off the bed before she knew what she was doing, but Ron’s outflung hand stopped her where she stood. With his other, he drew his wand from within his robes.

And it is his wand. The one he lost at Malfoy Manor. Why didn’t I notice that before?

“Prove you are who you look like,” Ron said coldly, training his wand on his sister.

Ginny flicked the light on, looking singularly unimpressed. “Can I come over there to do it?” she asked. “Or will you hex me if I come any closer?”

“Hermione?” said Ron without moving. “Cover her?”

Hermione sighed. “You’re being paranoid, Ron.”

“Better paranoid than dead.”

He had a point. Hermione found her own wand and aimed it at Ginny.

My wand, not Bellatrix Lestrange’s. I was sure the Death Eaters would have snapped them by now..

Ginny crossed the room to Ron’s side, took one of his hands in her own, and pressed it against the side of her neck. “Feel that?” she said. “That’s the scar I still have from where you bit me when I was five, because Fred and George had convinced you that getting a bad sunburn and not liking garlic bread meant you were a vampire.”

Ron turned a red so deep it looked painful. Hermione carefully did not laugh, instead putting away her wand and hurrying to Ginny’s side to hug her friend.

To her surprise, Ginny nearly squeezed the breath out of her, and there were tears in the Weasley girl’s eyes when she let go. “We’ve all been so worried,” she said, holding Hermione at arm’s length. “But you’re going to be all right now, aren’t you?” She turned to include Ron in this. “Everyone’s going to be all right now.”

“Well, as all right as Ronniekins ever is,” said another familiar voice from the open door.

“I’ve often wondered about that,” seconded an almost-identical voice. “How can someone so smart as our dear brother...”

“Possibly fall for as many of our tricks as he so often does?”

“I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s not smarts he’s lacking.”

“Not in the least. Rather, a certain... worldliness, would you say, George?”

“I might call it cynicism, myself, Fred.”

Framed in the doorway, the Weasley twins—both, as far as Hermione’s disbelieving eyes could tell, very much alive, and with four freckled ears among them—turned their famous grins on their beaming sister and their stunned brother.

“Can’t even say hello, Ron?” said Fred after a moment.

“You died.” It was a hoarse whisper that wouldn’t have sounded out of place in a graveyard. “I saw it. I was there.”

Fred sighed, the laughter going out of his face. “Ron, you’ve just been through a hell of a time,” he said without a hint of teasing in his tone. “You’re going to be confused about some things for a while. I know you think you saw me die, but it wasn’t real, understand?”

“No, be fair,” George said, nudging his twin in the shoulder. “It was real to him. It just wasn’t real for you.”

“For which I’m grateful.” Fred sighed theatrically. “Being dead is so bad for business.”

"I wouldn't like it much either," George put in. "You running off and leaving me all by my poor little lonesome self."

"All by yourself, eh? What happened to that little Muggle bit you were eyeing down in the card shop in the village?"

George flushed. "I thought we agreed we weren't going to mention that."

"You two can stop it now," said Ginny in a bored tone, and turned to Ron. "I can't even begin to imagine what it was like for you," she said quietly, taking his hands in hers. "But I swear to you, Ron, Weasley honor on it, Fred is alive." She favored the mentioned brother with a glare. "And just as much a prat as he ever was."

Moving like a sleepwalker, Ron rose from the bed and went to his brothers, reaching a hand tentatively towards them as if afraid his touch would melt them away. The twins stayed where they were, Fred moving only to extend his own hand to Ron, then draw his younger brother into an embrace more tender than anything Hermione had ever seen from either twin. George hugged them both from the side, and Ginny added herself to the back of the hug.

Hermione's vision blurred, and she shut her eyes and leaned against the wall. *It's like a miracle all over again—more even than Harry, because we knew that Fred had died, we saw his body and touched it, we were sure there hadn't been any mistake...*

Her mind seized on this, and on several strange things the twins and Ginny had said, and began to bat them around, tumbling them from side to side as though it could make them make sense that way.

Fred said his death wasn't real, and then George said it was real to Ron but not to him, not to Fred... how is that possible? Real is real.

And Ginny said she couldn't imagine what it was like for Ron, but she was there. She fought just like the rest of us, she cried over Fred's body...

And earlier, she said everyone had been worried about us. Why? I mean, yes, we broke into Gringotts, but then they saw us again at Hogwarts that same night, and we were all fine.

What is going on here?

"Ah, Harry!" said Fred as Hermione opened her eyes. "Just the man I wanted to see. They're both awake, they seem a bit confused, but that's to be expected; we're going to take Ron downstairs and let Mum and Dad try their hands."

"If Mum can be spared from crying over him," George added. "I don't think there's a dry handkerchief left in the house."

"As if you haven't been doing your fair share," said Ginny. "Budge up, let him in."

The knot of Weasleys in the doorway moved aside, revealing Harry with a large bag slung on his shoulder. It was full of books, Hermione saw as he entered the room, books with bright covers and thick spines. Her fingers itched to get at them.

"So shall we send..." George trailed off, invisible in the hallway, and Hermione had the strangest feeling he'd mouthed something that only Harry could see. "...up here to wait until you're done?"

"If you don't mind. And he doesn't."

Weasleys snickered. "Mind?" chortled Fred. "Him? Not likely!"

"See you downstairs," said Ginny, popping into view for a moment to smile at Hermione and blow a kiss to Harry. He blew one back, then drew his wand and shut the door as Ginny followed her brothers down the hall.

"Please say you've come to explain what's going on," said Hermione feelingly as Harry turned to face her.

"I've come to explain what's going on."

"Thank you!" Hermione raised her hands to the ceiling. "If I had to wonder for one more minute, I was going to bite something!"

Harry grinned, then sobered. "I have to explain sort of roundabout," he said. "Try not to get too mad at me? It's really the only way you're going to understand."

Hermione nodded and composed herself to listen.

Going Home Harry

Harry Potter sat down on the bed across from Hermione, carefully arranging his bag of books so that none of their titles would be visible to her. This story would be hard enough to tell without his friend seeing something she couldn't yet understand.

"So a couple weeks ago, Death Eaters went after this wizarding family," he began, casually, as though he were only telling her about another incident in a years-long war. "They had a load of scores to settle with these people, and they got lucky. Caught them at home, with lots of friends visiting. Most of them got away, but eight of them were captured. Four grown wizards, four kids our age."

Hermione swallowed. Harry had no doubt her imagination was supplying the faces of their schoolmates twisted in agony, blank in thoughtless obedience, or slack and limp in death. He nodded, acknowledging her reaction, and continued. "That was the last anyone heard of them for about ten days—and trust me, they were searching. Then, out of the blue, one of the wizards turns up."

"Alive?" Hermione blurted, looking astonished.

"Yes, alive. Not in good shape, but alive." Harry smiled, thinking of the wizard in question. "He's an Auror, so it's not too surprising. But what he had to say..." He shook his head. "Of all the times for Death Eaters to get creative with torture."

Hermione seemed unsure whether or not she wanted to know, but the word slipped out anyway. "Creative?"

"Yeah. See, the wizard who got away isn't just an Auror, he's an author. He wrote this series of alternate history books under a pen name." Harry patted his bag. "All about what would've happened if the war with Voldemort had gone differently than it did. And the main characters in them are modeled after his friends and their kids." He chuckled, remembering an old family story. "His wife threatened him with bloody death if he put her or any of their kids in the books, so he didn't, but he's there himself. Just to keep anyone from guessing who he really is, he killed off his own character in one of the later books. And that was what saved him."

Hermione frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You know those Daydream Charms Fred and George sell?" Harry asked, looking away from his friend so as not to let her see how much her answer worried him. *Doesn't she remember anything at all?*

"Of course I do, what about them?"

"Some wizarding books have magic like that on them, set up as a game. You can go inside the book and become one of the characters, do what they do in the book as nearly as you can and see if you can get through it the way they did, because that's how you win." Harry looked up and met earnest blue eyes. "This wizard's books had that magic on them. And all the people kidnapped had a character based on them. The Death Eaters charmed them into the books—"

"Well, that's not so bad!" Hermione laughed aloud, her face full of relief. "Honestly, Harry, you had me thinking—"

"You don't understand, Hermione." Harry spoke flatly, holding back his anger at her flippancy. "These people didn't know the ending, and they didn't think it was a game. They thought it was their *lives*. Because the Death Eaters used Memory Charms on them first, to make them forget who they really were. None of them remembered they'd ever had any other life."

And some of them still don't.

"Oh," Hermione said in a small voice. "I'm sorry. You're right. I didn't understand."

"It's okay." Harry refocused his anger towards the people who deserved it, the people who had made this conversation necessary in the first place. "The Death Eaters added some twists to the magic. The usual way things work is that you have to stay alive through the entire book. If you die, you lose. Fall out of the book, wake up in your real body, start all over again. But there are also places you can go and a spell you can use to save your place in the game and wake yourself up, because not everybody has the time to play it all the way through."

"I'd assume the Death Eaters took that away," said Hermione. "I mean, how would anyone believe the world was real if they learned a spell to 'save their place'?"

"You're right. But that's not all there is to it." Harry reached into the bag and traced the raised letters on one of the books' covers. "The Death Eaters made dying in the book the only way any of the people they were torturing could ever get back to the real world. And the people really had to believe they were dying for it to work. If someone told them, 'This isn't your real life, just let me use the Killing Curse on you and you'll be back to reality,' even if they believed that person, the Curse wouldn't work right. It would kill their body in the book, but it wouldn't send their mind and their soul back to their real body. They would just drift away, and their real body would die too."

Hermione's eyes were as wide as Luna's. "That's horrible! How could they—no, I forgot," she corrected herself with a snort. "These are *Death Eaters*. They were probably picking on 'Mudblood scum,' weren't they?"

"No, actually, everyone they grabbed was either half-blood or pure this time. But that's not important now." Harry found the thickest of the books in his bag and grasped it but did not pull it out. "Remember what I was saying before, that one of the wizards they took was the bloke who wrote the books?"

"And he killed off his own character—" Hermione broke off with a squeak. "Of course, of course! When his character in the books died, that meant he woke up in real life!"

Harry nodded, grinning. "And because he'd written them, he kept half-recognizing everything that was going on, and some part of him knew he was going to die. When it came true, he realized something wasn't right. So when he woke up, and three Death Eaters came in to try to get him under control..." He laughed aloud. "I wish I could have seen it. He grabbed the smallest one and swung him around like a Beater's bat. Knocked the other two off their feet. Then he snatched all their wands and Apparated home."

"Good for him," Hermione said fervently. "Could they trace his Apparition? Did they find the others?"

Harry sighed. "They tried, Hermione. But they ran into a brick wall. The Death Eaters had put the place where they were doing this under Fidelius."

"Oh no!" Hermione's hand went to her mouth. "But then how—"

"I'm trying to tell you that," Harry interrupted delicately. "If I may?"

"I'm sorry. Go on." Hermione clamped her lips shut.

"They were able to get a general area from the Apparition trace, but no more than that," Harry said, letting his fingers trail across a slimmer volume inside his bag. "But that particular wizard coming back when he did told them more than you'd think. It gave them a timeframe to work with, to judge how fast the Death Eaters were playing out the books."

Hermione forbore from asking the question, but her lifted eyebrows asked it for her.

"They knew the author's character died at the end of the fifth book in the series," Harry elaborated. "And he was able to tell them how long it took the Death Eaters to set everything up before they started the books going, and it wasn't more than a day. So when he came back, ten days later..."

"Two days a book," Hermione murmured, her eyes calculating. "Give or take a bit. You could probably read most books aloud in a day or so, but you'd need more time to *do* everything that's depicted... but if you assume they go straight from event to event and don't bother with the in-between bits..."

"Except when they needed to let them sleep, to keep them from running insane," Harry corrected. "And they'd just work that in as a regular night's sleep for some random day in the story."

"It makes sense." Hermione shuddered. "Horrid sense, but sense. So they knew when this wizard got away that the Death Eaters had finished with five of the books—how many are there?"

"Seven. Just seven. But the wizard was able to tell them one more thing." Harry rubbed a bent corner on the book he knew was the last of the series. "The Death Eaters weren't going to let the books end the way they should have."

"Because a proper ending, even in an alternate history, would have Voldemort defeated." Hermione nodded. "Were they going to change it and make Voldemort win instead?"

"Pretty much." Harry weighed how much to tell her right away and decided to steer a middle course. "The hero of the books gets killed at one point. The Death Eaters planned to have someone tell him what was going on just before that happened."

"So that he would die in both places," Hermione said, staring at a point above Harry's head, her expression one of concentration as she traced the Death Eaters' logic. "He'd be expecting to wake up in the real world, and instead he'd actually die... but if he was supposed to die anyway... oh!" Her gaze snapped down to Harry's face. "He was like you, wasn't he? He was supposed to look like he'd died but live and kill Voldemort, and instead the Death Eaters were going to make him really die so Voldemort would win!"

"That's about it," Harry said neutrally, suppressing a snort of laughter. *Yes, Hermione, he was a lot like me...* "But before that could happen, another of the grownup wizards died in the book world. He'd figured out something wasn't right just like his friend, but it was for a different reason." Pain shot through him as he thought of the man who'd taught him how to properly care for a kneazle, who'd been the willing "prey" for his first hunting lessons when he'd finished his Animagus work. "It was because, in the books, he'd changed sides. He was a Death Eater. He suggested it to the author himself, for a laugh... and then the Death Eaters made him actually do it."

Hermione blinked hard, her eyes brimming. "Did he have to hurt anyone?" she asked softly.

Harry nodded, his lips set. "He killed at least one person. Probably more. Helped bring Voldemort back to power. And when he tried doing a good thing for once, it killed him instead. But he knew, deep down, this wasn't how his life should have gone, and he'd heard the Death Eaters talking, Hermione. He'd heard them laughing about a Fidelius Charm, and kidding the one who was the Secret-Keeper about making sure to stay healthy. So when he woke up, when he remembered what was going on and what he'd heard, he knew what he had to do." He let his lips draw back from his teeth in a grin like that of his Animagus form. "He found the Death Eaters' Secret-Keeper. And he killed him."

And that meant everyone who'd been inside the secret became a Secret-Keeper instead, just like us with Grimmauld Place—"Hermione drew in her breath sharply. "Including that one wizard who got away!"

"Exactly." Harry patted the book under his hand fondly, with its great winged shadow against the moon. "And he and his friends were checking obsessively to see if the Fidelius might have gone down. They knew within a couple minutes when it had, and they got themselves there, and they kicked Death Eater arse." He scowled, remembering. "But the Death Eaters had even planned for that. They had one last trick set up."

"What?" Hermione leaned forward, obviously fascinated.

Harry tried to think how to put it. "Call it a dead-man switch," he said finally. "They'd made it so if they lost control of the magic on the books, if they stopped running the show, the book-world would end when the story did, as soon as the last words were spoken. It would fall apart, and anyone still in it would die. Really die, not just come back to their bodies. And the people who came to the rescue couldn't reverse it, and they couldn't go in and tell the kids—the other two wizards both got out a little while after their friends turned up, so it was just the four kids left inside—they couldn't go in and tell them that they all had to kill themselves, because would you believe that if it happened to you?"

"Not likely." Hermione shook her head. "And they couldn't explain that the world wasn't real, because then it wouldn't work. It's sickening—it's like they planned for everything. The Death Eaters, I mean." She hugged herself, shivering, then took a closer look at him. "But you don't look upset, and you would if they'd all died, so they must have been rescued somehow..."

"They were," Harry said, and hesitated for a second before committing himself. "Or should I say, *we* were."

"We?" Hermione repeated faintly.

"Yeah. We." Harry stood up, hoisting his bag. "Have a look." He crossed the room in two steps and spread the contents of the bag across Hermione's duvet, sitting down on the other side. "These are what the Death Eaters were using."

Hermione reached for the book on the top of the pile with shaking hands. "The Philosopher's Stone," she whispered. "Our first year." She flipped through a few pages quickly, reading bits and snatches of lines, then looked up at him, her eyes brimming over. "Is this all we are?" she asked, her voice trembling. "Are our whole lives fake? Copied from a book?"

"No." Harry put as much certainty as he could muster into his tone. "No. There's a lot about us that isn't fake. I'm still Harry. You're still Hermione. We still go to Hogwarts. We're still best friends with Ron, and he's just figured out he wants you to be more than that." He grinned. "You don't seem to mind it too much either. I'm still going with Ginny, we still know Luna and Neville, we'll still have McGonagall for Transfiguration when we get back to school in September, Hagrid will still be out in his house with Fang, inviting us down for tea..."

"Back to school?" These words seemed to have penetrated Hermione's stupor when no others had. "But we missed our seventh year." She stopped. "Or did we? You said this only took two weeks... two weeks, to live seven years..." Her voice dropped into silence. "Harry, what's today?" she asked after a moment's thought. "What's the date, the whole date?"

"It's 19 August," Harry said, holding out his wrist so that Hermione could see his watch. "19 August, 1997."

"Ninety-seven," Hermione repeated. "We haven't missed it, then! We can still go back!"

Harry smiled at her eagerness. "Yes, we can go back. I'm planning on it, if only to get in another year of Quidditch—ow!" Hermione had smacked him on the forehead with *Philosopher's Stone*. "Kidding, Hermione, I'm kidding! I need those N.E.W.T.s, if I want to get into the Auror program. Which I do. But Quidditch is good too."

"Of course it is." Hermione was clearly thinking hard. "So these books tell the story of an alternate world. A make-believe. Which explains why Fred's alive when we thought we saw him die." She pushed aside *Chamber of Secrets* and *Prisoner of Azkaban* to pick up *Goblet of Fire*. "What really happened with Voldemort, then? And the war? Is it still going on?" Her fingertips brushed the glossy cover of the book. "And why can't I remember it for myself?" she asked quietly. "Why do I still feel like this world is the true one?"

"They said it would take everyone a different amount of time to remember," Harry said. "You saw how it happened with Ray—as soon as he got rid of the stuff that was holding him back, it all came to him in a flash."

"Ray?" Hermione followed the lines of the book's cover illustration with a finger. "Who's Ray?"

Harry stifled a laugh. *Tact, Potter, tact. It's not her fault she doesn't know*. "Kid you swore an Unbreakable Vow with," he said. "Though he doesn't usually look like that."

"Oh, him. I'd wondered what name he was going to use now." Hermione's voice had gone dreamy. "What does he usually look like?"

"A bit like you. Brown hair, blue eyes—"

"I don't have blue eyes."

"Yes, you do." Harry pointed at the mirror hanging on the wall. "Go have a look."

"I think you've mixed me up with Ron," said Hermione, but she got to her feet, cradling *Order of the Phoenix* in her arms. Harry unobtrusively drew his wand as his friend approached the mirror.

Hermione looked and gasped, dropping the book. Harry's nonverbal *Wingardium Leviosa!* caught it before it could land on her feet, lowering it to

the ground beside her instead.

"I have blue eyes." Hermione stared at her reflection, a hand coming up to touch her cheek. "How can I have blue eyes? Both my parents—my parents were—"

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you," Harry said quickly, Summoning the book back to him. Hermione followed it, shaking her head slowly. "About that café in Tottenham Court Road, where Dolohov and Rowle attacked us. You said you weren't sure if the magic you did to make them forget us would take, because you'd never done a Memory Charm before, only studied the theory." He focused on keeping his voice calm and even. If he got agitated over this, so would Hermione. "But back at the Burrow, you told Ron and me that you'd changed your parents' memories, to make them think they were named Wendell and Monica Wilkes."

"I was frightened in the café, Harry, I misspoke!" Hermione was gripping the duvet, her knuckles white. "I was trying not to think about my parents, because I knew I'd only worry!"

"Can you tell me your parents' real names, then?"

"I'm sorry?" Hermione's voice squeaked on the final syllable.

"Your parents' names. The ones they had before they were Wendell and Monica." Behind his back, Harry crossed his fingers and hoped. *If this doesn't work...*

Hermione hiccupped once. "I don't know," she whispered. "I don't know their names." Another hiccup. "I don't know anything about them at all." Another. "The only thing I know—" Another, with a sniffle behind it. "—is that they loved me. Very much." She looked up at him, terror and grief warring for place in her expression as her eyes brimmed over. "But they aren't real, are they? And people who aren't real can't love..."

"Hermione, I want you to think about something," Harry said, Summoning the tissue box on the nightstand for her. "The people who changed your memories like this, they were Death Eaters. And Death Eaters are the ones who can't love. Death Eaters who love stop being Death Eaters. Like Master Severus." He slid a finger across the cover of *Half-Blood Prince*. "He was one of the wizards they kidnapped with us, did you know that? The Death Eaters hate him, because he came back to our side and helped end the war. Because he loved my mum."

Hermione nodded, blotting at her eyes.

"Or Narcissa Malfoy." Harry smiled, remembering. "She said I was dead when I wasn't, out in the forest. She wanted to get into the castle and find her son. Because she loved him."

"But that wasn't real," Hermione objected. "It was in the book world, it wasn't real."

"But it was based on a real thing that happened." Harry picked up *Deathly Hallows*. "Years ago, before any of us were born. The Order had stumbled across one of Voldemort's Horcruxes, and found a way to use it to locate the rest of them. They left the diary for last, because they knew they couldn't break into Malfoy Manor quietly. When they finally went for it, Mrs. Malfoy saw Aurors in her house and panicked, because it meant she'd go to Azkaban, and she was pregnant."

"And babies die if they're around dementors," Hermione said, her voice settling back to normal. "I remember that from sixth year Defense."

"Right. So she found a couple of Order members, and they made a deal. Her baby would live—he'd look different, but he'd live—if she would tell them where to find Voldemort." *The unbelievably condensed version, but it gets the point across.* "And both sides followed through. The Order killed Voldemort, and the baby who would've been Draco Malfoy lived. Because Mrs. Malfoy, Narcissa, loved him that much."

"Well, that answers another question I had." Hermione blew her nose. "About the war, and Voldemort. But it still doesn't tell me anything about my parents."

"Yes, it does." Harry flipped open *Deathly Hallows* to search for a certain place. "Hermione, you remember your parents loving you, right?"

"Right."

"And Death Eaters can't love. They can't even understand it." Harry looked up from the book. "How could they have given you fake memories of love when they don't know what love is?"

The relief which filled Hermione's face reminded Harry poignantly of his own feelings when he'd awakened from Voldemort's Killing Curse to realize whose arms were around him, whose voice was speaking his name. "Your parents are real, Hermione," he said quietly. "And they do love you. They just aren't Muggles."

Hermione laughed shakily. "So there's that bit of my Vow fulfilled," she said. "I never was a Muggleborn. And my last name's not Granger either, is it?"

"No. It's not." Harry found the place he'd been looking for. "And because you grew up magic, you didn't feel like you had to prove yourself by being in the 'best' House, so you didn't fight the Hat and it Sorted you into Ravenclaw."

Hermione goggled at him. "How did you—"

Harry grinned at her. "You told me. And I think I've figured out what will trigger your memories." He handed her the book, which was open to the chapter called "The Bribe." "Look at that scene. Tell me if you think there's anything wrong."

Hermione began to read. Barely two pages in, she lifted her head in puzzlement. "There's something missing," she said. "Something I said. After Remus says that about the baby being a hundred times better off without him..."

"That's because it wasn't in the book," Harry told her. "You said it all on your own. But it will be. Padfoot really likes it, he's going to put it in the next edition, and of course that means the Muggle editions will all have it..."

Hermione was staring at him. "Did you say Padfoot?" she asked. "As in, your godfather?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Are you telling me," Hermione said carefully, "that *Sirius Black* wrote these books?"

"Yep." Harry leaned on his hands. "Right proud of them, too. Don't worry about telling anyone, Luna's dad published it in *The Quibbler* a few years back so nobody'll believe you anyway."

Hermione looked at the book between her hands and went into semi-hysterical giggles. Harry let her. She needed the release.

"But that brings up something *e/se* I wanted to ask you," she said when she was done and blotting at her eyes again. "If I've never been a Gryffindor, how did we meet? Why are we friends?"

"We've been friends our whole lives." Harry let his eyes drift shut, hearing again the stories he had always loved. "You were five days old when I was born, and your mum and dad brought you along to the hospital. You started crying, that woke me up and I started crying..." He shrugged one shoulder. "Instant bonding, baby style."

"So, our parents are friends?" Hermione asked.

"You could say that." Harry opened his eyes. "Or you could say that the reason I never had to fight Voldemort is that your dad took a curse for my dad. And then his friends were willing to take chances to try to save his life." That, of course, was yet another long story, but he thought he could see the flickers of dawning memories beginning in Hermione's eyes...

"Was he with us?" Hermione asked, returning her gaze to the book. "Was my dad taken by the Death Eaters too?"

Harry wished he could lie, but Hermione deserved the truth. "Yes. And he may never be able to look at Charlie's wife again. His own fault, really," he added. "If he hadn't got her to help him prank Padfoot's cubicle at work, I don't think that particular pairing would ever have happened."

Hermione produced a weak giggle, but it faded. "So I have a mum I don't know yet," she said. "And a dad I do."

"Pretty much." Harry thought it might have been his Marauder side that prompted him to add, "And a twin brother."

"A what?" Hermione's head came up fast.

"Well, when you swear a blood-oath with somebody, that generally makes you brothers... except, in your case, that'd be brother and sister..." Harry shut up as Hermione threatened him with the book. "In any case, your mum's with him right now. He had a really bad time of it, worse than almost anyone."

"I can't imagine why," said Hermione dryly. "But where's my dad, then?"

"Far's I know, right here." Harry flicked his wand at the door. It swung open.

The man standing beyond it stepped into the room. "Harry," he said, nodding politely. Then his eyes went to Hermione. "Hello, Kitten," he said softly.

Hermione set the book aside and got to her feet. "I thought you'd know what to say," she murmured. "And I stand by what I said at Grimmauld Place." Her chin was up even as her eyes, the same blue as the man's, filled with tears. "No child could ever be ashamed to claim you as a father."

Harry slipped from the room as Remus Lupin pulled his daughter into his arms.

So that's Moony and Hermione sorted—I don't think anyone else would dare call her "Kitten," which is how she knew she was the real thing. He strolled down the hall, ticking off the list of abductees as he went. Ron's with his family, he'll be fine. Ditto Uncle Peter—talk about poetic justice, that the Death Eater who was the Secret-Keeper, the one he killed, was the same one he rescued Aunt Evanie from all those years ago. Master Severus and Padfoot are probably off having one of their winding-each-other-up contests, with Uncle Reggie and Dad to help them out.

So that just leaves Ray.

Harry sighed. The Death Eaters' faux world would leave its mark on them all, but perhaps on no one deeper than on Hermione's wisecracking twin Reynard.

He hates fighting, he couldn't care less about blood, he doesn't have any grandiose dreams—he's a Hufflepuff, for Merlin's sake! Yes, his soul is the same one that could have lived in Draco Malfoy's body, but he didn't, because that body died from dementor exposure before it could ever be born, and Aunt Veri made him a newborn as Moony and Aunt Peri's son!

The idea was dizzying, but Harry'd had a long time to get used to his godmother Veritas Black and her half-sister Pericula Lupin, and the strange talents of Healing each had in place of the usual wanded magic he knew so well.

Aunt Veri heals the body, which is why Padfoot wrote her into that temporary world he had to pull us into when the Death Eaters' magic tried to kill us before we could get away. Even though my body there wasn't exactly real, she could still give me enough strength to finish what I had to do. Plus seeing her was a big relief—it meant I hadn't muffed things up completely and actually killed us all.

But Aunt Peri heals the soul. Or at least starts it healing, and helps it along the way. If anyone can help Ray handle that he acted like a pureblood brat for what felt like seven years, she's the one.

Besides being, you know, his mum and all.

And with order thus restored to his world, Harry Potter, age seventeen, trotted down the stairs of his parents' cottage in Godric's Hollow to see about helping his mother with dinner.