

Saving Harry Potter 1: One Depressed Wizard

Chapter One – One Depressed Wizard

All was not well at Number Four Privet Drive. The summer of 1996 was the summer that began with the loss of Sirius Black, and the beginning of the second war against Voldemort. While Sirius' loss affected many people, there was one who felt it more than any other person: Harry Potter. It was this reason that the head of the Order of the Phoenix, Albus Dumbledore, was taking time away from his efforts repelling Voldemort's attacks to visit Harry, and to see to his welfare. Harry was more than an exceptional wizard, the one prophesied to be Voldemort's downfall, or even one of his many students. No, Harry was also one of the most afflicted and tormented boys he had ever known, and since telling Harry everything he knew about his connection with Voldemort at the end of last term, Dumbledore was committed to righting some of the wrongs in Harry's life.

Harry was outside, trimming one of the hedges that lined the Dursleys' back garden. He hung his head low and the clicks of the clippers came in oddly regular, if slow, increments. Dumbledore observed him from a nearby tree, invisible to all but the most powerful of wizards, and silently began to formulate a plan.

"Boy!" yelled Harry's Uncle Vernon. The beefy man waddled over to where Harry was and huffed for a moment before raising a consistently beefy finger. "Hurry up with those hedges. You've got to mow the grass and weed the flower beds before you get any dinner, and don't think you can skive off until dark – you'll just have to keep working through morning."

Harry took a deep breath and sighed, not pausing once in his slow extermination of wayward juniper branches. "Yes, Uncle Vernon," Harry said. There was no life in his voice, and reminded Dumbledore alarmingly of someone who had given up.

Vernon appeared to falter, as if he'd expected more protest from Harry, but then he screwed his face again. "Too right," he said, and without even offering so much as a wet towel to ward off the afternoon heat, waddled back to the house, slamming the door behind him.

Harry continued to clip the hedges, with no noticeable change in pace, until they were completed an hour later. He walked slowly to the small shed, replaced the clippers on the tool rack, and then pushed a small, ancient mower onto the grass. He filled it with petrol, checked and re-checked the engine for the proper settings, and then Harry began to pull on the starter. After five minutes of pulling, the engine finally roared to life, and Harry bent low to catch his breath. Dumbledore watched Harry mow the grass for another thirty minutes before he Apparated away with a small *pop*, its noise masked by the humming engine.

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Harry killed the mower and listened to it sputter for a full minute before it gave up the fight. He would have to change the oil in it soon, but just couldn't muster the motivation to ask for a quart from his uncle. It was bad enough that he had to be around his hated relatives, but interacting with them was too much in Harry's estimation.

He cleaned the caked grass from the blade and housing – lest he face the wrath of his uncle for soiling the inside of his shed -- and pushed the mower back into the garage.

One nice thing about doing mindless tasks for the Dursleys was that he could safely put his mind in neutral and not dwell on the gaping hole in his soul. The wound left inside him by Sirius' passing and the subsequent emotional breakdown he'd had in Dumbledore's office was too large and too fresh. Part of Harry wanted to be away from the Dursleys forever; part of him wanted to find Bellatrix Lestrange and rip her apart. Still another part of him just wanted his whole life to be one long, convoluted dream that he could wake-up from, find himself a normal boy, with normal problems, and without any ties to evil wizards.

Running his t-shirt sleeve across his sweaty brow, Harry noted the sinking sun and estimated he had an hour before it was completely dark. He turned to fetch a pair of worn leather gloves, a small spade, and a white plastic bucket, and then walked towards the first of many flower beds his aunt Petunia kept around their house.

The soil was loose, but the weeds had sunk their roots deep over the last ten months. It was obvious that his relatives hadn't bothered to do any yard work while he was at school aside from paying for a service to mow and trim the hedges. Harry pushed the spade under a particularly large dandelion and wrenched it up. The weed was tossed into the bucket, and he began the process again. Soon, the bucket was full and he took it to a bin to dump it.

The sun set and the rest of the beds were freed of their weeds, just as Harry was having trouble distinguishing them from the flowers. He trudged into the back door, kicked his shoes off by the laundry basket, and made his way to the stairs intent on a long shower. His stomach grumbled, however, as he walked through the kitchen and spied the remains of the roast lamb the Dursleys had for dinner.

"Get cleaned up first," Aunt Petunia said from behind him. "I don't want you soiling my freshly mopped floors." Then, seeming to notice where his eyes had wandered, she added, "There's a plate for *you* on the table."

Harry followed her finger to where a lump of cheese and slice of bread was perched on the plastic plate. His stomach growled again, as if in protest, and he plodded slowly up the stairs.

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Just as Harry was pulling on a clean set of trousers, there was a *pop* behind him, and Harry whirled to find the smiling face of Dumbledore staring back at him.

"Oh, hello," Harry said noncommittally, pulling his zipper closed.

"Hello, Harry," Dumbledore replied solemnly. He gestured at the bed. "Might we have a word together?"

Harry thought his bread and cheese wouldn't be any worse off for it and nodded.

Dumbledore took a seat on Harry's bed, but Harry stayed standing. His professor looked odd indeed perched by his pillow with a portrait of Hedwig behind him.

"I was wondering," Dumbledore began, "how you were doing."

Kicking his dirty trousers into the hamper with his bare foot, Harry shrugged. "I'm fine."

"I'm sure you feel that way," Dumbledore said, "but I was hoping we could talk about some of your other feelings as well." There was an awkward pause as Harry continued to stare at the floor. "You must certainly be feeling sad at Sirius' loss, and perhaps even a bit betrayed."

Harry grunted, thinking that Dumbledore had no idea what it was like to be him.

"Also, I suspect you have a good deal of resentment at being forced to spend time with your relatives."

"No thanks to you," Harry said softly, but with deep emotion.

Hedwig hooted softly, as if in reprimand for Harry's attitude. "Indeed, I am solely responsible for your being here, but I would hope that you could come to terms with the reasons for it."

"What?" Harry shot back. "So that Voldemort can't get to me here? Is that it? I'm not sure you realise it, but it's not *me* that's being attacked." And it was true. The evening *Prophet* had just reported an attack on a part-Muggle family in Wales where the parents were killed and the children tortured before Order members arrived to fight them off.

Dumbledore sighed wearily. "Yes, Harry, you are here for your protection. I wish it were otherwise; I wish that you could be with those that love you, and that you could face Voldemort and end this conflict before more people are killed, however...you are far from ready to face him."

Harry balled his fists and tried to stare a hole through Dumbledore's face. "Yeah? And exactly when will I *be* ready for him? How can I even *get* ready when I'm stuck *here*?"

With a passive face so reminiscent of their recent fight in Dumbledore's office, the professor stared at Harry until the tension started to wane. "That is precisely what I'd like to discuss with you, Harry. Do you remember what we talked about at the end of last term?"

"You mean about the prophecy?" Harry asked, and sank onto the floor. He was tired of standing, but not ready to sit next to his teacher.

Dumbledore nodded and swept his wand around the room, casting a blue light onto the walls, ceiling, and floor that seemed to stick. The light sparkled and glowed for a moment before they seeped into the paint and carpet. "I am specifically referring to the part where it talks about the power you possess, which Voldemort knows not of."

"Right," Harry scoffed. "There's nothing I have that he hasn't got."

Dumbledore rose from the bed and stood to his full height. "On the contrary," he said and sat on the floor next to Harry. "You have the greatest power in the universe flowing through your veins and surrounding you on all sides."

Harry hung his head and didn't answer.

"Love, Harry," Dumbledore pronounced. "Your parent's love is still with you, regardless of how Voldemort seems to have defeated that protection. You have the love of many friends, and the entire Weasley family, Remus Lupin, more than a few of the Hogwarts staff, myself included."

With a sniff, Harry snuck a glance at Dumbledore and then looked away. "You...really?" he asked. He hadn't ever really thought about it like that before.

"I'm quite certain, actually. Just yesterday Molly was ready to hex me for sending you here instead of to the Burrow. She's quite fond of you and is ready to hug and feed you whenever it is safe for you to leave here."

Something Dumbledore said made all the anger he felt return, and then, it melted away just as fast. Harry hung his head once more. "It doesn't matter. None of it matters...." Suddenly, a great wave of pain and sadness overcame him as Sirius' face appeared in his mind.

"Harry," Dumbledore pleaded. "You must realise your potential if you are to defeat Voldemort. I can teach you magic, and how to use it, but you will fail utterly if you do not have the will to live."

He couldn't answer. Something large seemed to have planted itself in Harry's throat and hot tears sprang into his eyes. He would not cry, however, and forced them away. "Go," Harry managed. "Leave me alone."

Dumbledore didn't at first, but slowly, carefully, rose to stand over Harry's balled form. "I will return to make sure you are taken care of, Harry. Remember this, however: I am not the only one that is concerned about you. Your friends despair about your condition every day, and would sooner give their own lives than see you suffer. Such is their love for you."

There was a rustling of robes and a small *pop*. When Harry looked up again, he was alone. Only then, did the tears finally fall.

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That Saturday, Dumbledore summoned together the five students that accompanied Harry to the Department of Mysteries, Remus Lupin, Minerva McGonagall, and met at the Burrow. He was determined to show Harry how much he was loved, and knew that collectively, these people could do it.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," Dumbledore began. "As you are all no doubt aware, Harry is in peril. Although, I must mention that it is not the peril associated with Voldemort; Harry is in danger of losing himself to his grief."

There were several whispers as heads came together. Ginny produced a letter and showed it to Neville, who nodded in agreement. Luna was sketching something in a notebook while Ron looked on, and Hermione was in deep discussion with Remus, her eyes a mask of concern.

"What I've called you here to discuss, is ways that we can help keep Harry invested in his life. I fear that as he gives in to his pain, he will lose the will to live. That is not something that anyone would wish on such a young man as Harry."

Molly stood, wringing her hands in worry. "But, Albus...what can we do?"

"That," Dumbledore replied, "is precisely what I would like to discuss. I have several ideas myself, but it would be well if all of you were to offer some suggestions."

Ginny's hand shot up immediately. "If he can't be taken away from the Muggles, maybe we can visit him."

Dumbledore nodded. "Excellent suggestion Miss Weasley. Anyone else?"

Hermione's hand was next. "We could rotate shifts. There are enough of us here that one could visit each day of the week. That way, he wouldn't be alone, but he wouldn't get burned-out on having just one or two of us meeting with him."

Several heads nodded in agreement.

"I can draw up a schedule and each of us can sign up for a specific day," Hermione continued.

"I'm available on Tuesdays," Luna offered.

"I'll take Sunday," Ron said next. "Someone's got to keep him sane on the weekend."

"And I'll go today," said Molly. "I'll be first so I can soften the idea to his...relatives."

There were more murmurings as people began to request days to visit with Harry. "Well," Dumbledore said, rubbing his hands together. "It seems that we have a solid plan in place. While on your visits, I would exhort you to focus on the positive aspects of your relationship with Harry. Make him feel like you want to be there, that you care for him, and that you need him to be a part of your lives. Each of you has a special relationship with Harry, and I suspect that as you use that in your visits, he will be drawn back to us."

Sensing that the meeting was over, Molly shot to her feet and began to assemble a basket of food. Ginny stood to help her mother and the rest of the students began to talk amongst themselves. Dumbledore caught Remus' eye and they walked into the back garden. There was still much to plan, and the two wizards needed to work out the details of the rest of Harry's summer.

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As the Burrow's guests began to Floo and Apparate away, one of the students stood staring at the two figures talking in the garden. She had known Harry as long as anyone, and knew that it was going to take more than friendly visits to lighten his spirits. The problem was that Hermione didn't know exactly *what* it was that he needed. Problems were something she was notoriously good at solving, however; this would be no different, as long as she had access to reference material, and the problem itself. With her first visit scheduled for Monday, Hermione was anxious to return home to research her friend's problem, and even more anxious to be with Harry.

Saving Harry Potter 2: Hermione's Visit

Chapter Two – Hermione's Visit

Monday morning arrived painfully slow for Hermione. She had endured the uncertainty of knowing Harry's condition for thirty-six hours before she would be allowed to visit him on Privet Drive. Sure, she had heard about Molly's and Ron's visits, but there was a difference between second-hand accounts and seeing him in person. In fact, hearing about Harry's situation from Ron and his mother only increased Hermione's worry, as it didn't appear that their plan to bring Harry back from his depression was working out very well at all.

When Molly came back early from her visit on Saturday evening, Hermione knew there was something amiss. When she saw most of the food still in the basket Mrs. Weasley carried, Hermione's suspicions were confirmed.

"He said he wasn't hungry," Mrs. Weasley had said.

The frown on her face and the worry lines across her brow, however, told Hermione there was more to the story than that.

Ron's visit was worse. Hermione could somewhat rationalise Harry's reticence to open up to Ron's mother, but Ron himself should have been more capable of eliciting a response from their friend.

"We just...stared at the walls. All day," Ron reported. "If it had been anyone else, I'd have left straight away. The only time he seemed to react was when I told him about the explosion at Fred and George's shop."

Well, that was something, Hermione thought. Even she had laughed when Ron came to Grimmauld Place after working in his brothers' shop and told her about the catastrophic results of one of their new products. If Harry hadn't responded to hearing about Fred and George blowing out the back wall of their shop, and littering Diagon Alley with thousands of their sweets... Hermione would have been more concerned. A hundred witches and wizards turned into animals, enlarged, floating, and vomiting simply *had* to be laughed at.

So it was with some trepidation that she prepared to Floo to Arabella Figg's house with nothing but her wand to keep her company. It was going to be a tough job, to get Harry to respond to her, but she was determined to do it.

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A pall of nervousness overcame Hermione as she watched her watch tick closer to nine. She leaned forward towards the mirror in her bathroom and poked at a tiny red mark above her left eyebrow. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mum lean into the door frame.

"I put your lunches on your bed," she told Hermione. "Are you certain you don't want me to come with you?"

Hermione shook her head vigorously. "No, Mum. I told you that it's going to be awkward enough as it is with me being there." She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and began to wrap a purple band around it. "His aunt and uncle are already cross enough that there's witches and wizards visiting every day. They'd probably call the police if even more showed up."

Her mum frowned at this pronouncement, obviously not too keen on letting her daughter be alone with a boy all day long. Hermione huffed and began to brush out her ponytail. "Honestly, Mum," she said exasperatedly. "We've been over this before. Harry needs his friends now, and I'm one of them."

There was a pause while Hermione examined her dress for lint. She ought not to have been so forceful with her mother, but her anxiety over Harry had simply been too much to keep inside.

"All right," Hermione's mother said at last. "I understand you need to help Harry, but I wonder if we might be able to have him here or something..."

Hermione cut her off. "That won't work, either. I told you that Dumbledore insisted he would have to stay with his relatives for at least a month before he can leave."

Another frown appeared on her mother's face, but then she softened into a grin. "Very well. I'll expect you to call if you have any problems," she said with mock sternness. "Here's a few pounds if you need anything extra." She dropped a couple of coins into Hermione's hand, which she pocketed immediately.

"Thanks, Mum," she said and gave her a quick, warm hug. She glanced at the clock on the wall again and let out a small squeak. "I'm late!"

Hustling past her mother, Hermione darted into her room and tucked the two sack lunches on her bed into her book bag. If Harry was as withdrawn as Ron had said, she'd just have to read to herself while he brooded. At the very least, Harry would have someone there for him.

Running down the stairs, Hermione stopped in front of the fireplace and turned to see her mother descending slowly into the living room. "How do I look?" she asked imploringly, running a hand lightly over her hair.

Her mother smiled. "Perfectly fine for visiting a friend. Off you go."

Hermione returned the smile and took a handful of gritty powder from the ceramic jar that had been added to their fireplace two days before. "Mrs. Figg's!" she yelled and tossed the powder into the grate. A large green flash erupted and Hermione stepped in.

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The walk from Mrs. Figg's was uneventful, though she did get a sense that there were several people looking oddly at her as she crossed over to Privet Drive. Arriving at Number Four, she gave a tentative knock before re-adjusting her book bag's strap across her shoulder.

There was a shuffling sound behind the door before it burst open and she was faced with what could only be Harry's Aunt Petunia.

"Hello," Hermione said softly. "I'm Hermione Granger." Then, when it became clear that she wasn't going to get a response from this woman, and with a bit more force, she said, "I'm here to see Harry."

Petunia's cold eyes glanced over Hermione's head and swept up and down the lane. When she seemed satisfied that no one was ready to leap out from the bushes, she pulled the door open more fully. "Come in," she barked and stepped back to allow her entrance.

As soon as Hermione had crossed the threshold, the door was shut and Petunia was on her way back to the kitchen. "He's up there," she said with a vague gesture towards the stairs.

A contemptuous feeling wormed its way inside Hermione at the thought of Harry being subjected to this rude behaviour. She started towards the stairs, keeping her eyes on the back of Petunia as she set dishes into the washer. So intent on sending ill-will at Harry's aunt, that she didn't see the large mass on the stairs until she'd bumped into it.

"Oh!" Hermione said with a start and jumped back. "I didn't see you..."

But at the look on the boy's face, Hermione stopped speaking. It was obviously Harry's cousin, Dudley standing on the bottom step and staring at her with the most peculiar look. Hermione's cheeks burned at the obvious way his eyes were travelling over her figure. "I'd like to get past," she said pointedly, growing more and more annoyed at the grotesque look on Dudley's face.

Dudley didn't stop looking at her, but did move into the living room. Hermione brushed passed him, just quickly enough to not touch him and hurried up the stairs, all the while feeling his piggy eyes glued to her backside.

Once on the landing, Hermione knocked on the only door that could have been Harry's (the cat flap and four locks made it obvious). There was no answer from behind it, so Hermione closed her eyes and pushed the door open.

"Harry?" she called and took a tentative step inside. "It's Hermione. Are you... are you decent?"

She thought she heard him say 'yes' and opened one eye. He was seated on his bed, staring out the closed window and thankfully, fully clothed. Hermione opened her eyes fully, stepped over a tray of uneaten toast and water, and set her book bag on the only chair in the room.

He looked up at her and for a second, she thought she saw a ghost of a smile on his face, but then he turned to stare back out the window and it was gone.

Clearing a spot off Harry's desk next to the window, she sat down on it and folded her hands in her lap. "So," she said with an extra measure of brightness, "what shall we do today?" Reaching down into her book bag, she extracted a large book. "I brought some light reading material. If you've been having trouble sleeping, I'm sure this would do the trick."

Harry's eyes flicked over to her book and then back out the window. After a moment, it became clear that Hermione wasn't going to get anywhere with the direct approach, so she replaced the book into her bag and after a small bit of indecision, she hopped onto his bed with him.

"Mum says that I'm being stupid by coming over here. She thinks you'll come out of your shell when you're good and ready and that you might react badly to all the attention." Hermione nervously crossed her legs and snuck a glance at him. "I told her that no one really knew *what* you needed, but that leaving you alone like last year was definitely *not* going to help any."

Harry gave a sigh and let his head fall onto his folded arms.

Just then, Harry's aunt appeared in the doorway and dropped a list on the bed by Hermione's feet. She scooped up the breakfast tray from the floor and cast a sneering look at the two of them. "Harry's to go into town to shop for us today. I expect him back after lunch." Then she turned and left without another word.

Hermione took the list from the bed and scanned it over. She'd never seen a more detailed shopping list in her life.

Cracked wheat bread (not the store brand, mind you, but the good kind)

Two pints of cream (make sure the date it fresh)

A pound of butter

Two dozen eggs (no cracks or you'll get it)

Ten pounds of flour

Two corned beefs (it must be seasoned!)

And on and on it went. She caught Harry looking at the list and she smiled. "Sounds like we're going on an outing. You ready to leave now?"

He shrugged, but there was something alive in his eyes that she'd not seen since before the Department of Mysteries. They hopped off the bed (well, Harry sort of slid off) and she waited for him to tie on his trainers.

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The rest of the day was marginally better than the first. Harry wasn't as withdrawn as he'd been with her before they left the house, but he still only spoke in grunts and vague murmurs. She did most of the shopping for him, as she'd been with her own mum loads of times. Harry seemed content to let her, too, and while the conversation wasn't stunning, she couldn't help but feel she'd done some good.

"Hand me a sack, Harry," Hermione said, pointing absently to the roll of plastic vegetable sacks by the fruit stand as she eyed the cabbages. Harry silently tore one off and handed it to her. Two heads of cabbages were selected and placed in the sack. With an expert twist, the leafy vegetables were tied securely and placed in their shopping cart. She moved a sharp pencil down the list and crossed out that item – only three left.

"Right," she said and began to walk towards the dairy section, Harry following obediently behind with the cart. They passed the sweets aisle and Hermione noticed that his eyes lingered on a box of candy bars. She stopped and considered her options. If she spent Petunia's money on candy, it would be obvious and Harry would get in trouble. Her hand moved to the pocket of her dress and the answer became clear.

Without consulting Harry, she picked two of the same candies and held them in her hand, so as not to give Harry a chance to override her decision. As she turned back towards the dairy section, she caught a glimpse of Harry's expression, curiosity mingled with a tiny smidgeon of humour. Hermione hid her smirk by turning away from him and they finished their shopping.

They paid for their groceries and then the candy separately, garnering another interested look from Harry. Taking two sacks each, they began their walk back to Privet Drive. Hermione had moved the candy into her book bag with the lunches she'd packed and began thinking of a place they could eat together. It was well past noon and her stomach was squirming uncomfortably with hunger. What was worse, her arms felt like lead as the sacks of food seemed to gain more and more weight the longer they walked. Somehow, she had gotten the two corned beefs.

Harry seemed to be oblivious to her plight, however, as he was slightly ahead of her and couldn't see her struggling. Hermione sighed and shook her head with a smile. She couldn't blame him, really. It was hard enough to get him to see beyond his own grief these days, but somehow, Hermione felt like he was at least moving in the right direction, if not moving particularly fast.

"Er... Harry?" she asked when the sacks threatened to tear her arms completely off. They stopped and he turned to look at her. "Could you...?" She didn't get a chance to finish the question when he swooped in, took both sacks from her, and continued down the pavement.

It was a full five seconds before Hermione scurried after him. "You don't have to take them all," she explained, worried that it would be too much for him.

"Nah," he said with a dismissive nod of his head. "We're almost there anyway."

Hermione was so shocked that he'd spoken, and that he had acted so normal that she didn't say anything until they'd reached the door.

They unloaded the groceries and sat heavily on the sofa. Aunt Petunia was nowhere to be seen and so they felt justified in their relaxation. Hermione closed her eyes for a second and relished in the relative quiet of the living room. She opened her eyes and found Harry staring at her, a mysterious expression on his face. He didn't blink, however, when she caught him at it and somewhere in the pit of her stomach, there was a lurching feeling, as if she'd been walking down a flight of stairs and missed a step.

"You want some lunch?" he asked and stood.

Hermione stood as well, feeling a bit dizzy. She chalked it up to the exertion of their walk from the store and took the two lunches and candies from her bag. "Sure," she said holding out one of the sacks. "My treat?"

Harry smiled and nodded. "I know the perfect spot."

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By the time night came and it was time for dinner, Hermione walked reluctantly back to Mrs. Figg's and Floo'ed home. She had begun the day with anxiety over how Harry would react to her being there. After hearing about the unqualified failure of Mrs. Weasley and Ron at bringing Harry out of his shell, Hermione was more than relieved to discover a little bit of the old Harry still inside him and happy that she could coax him to let those bits loose for a little while.

After a long meal and a longer narration of the day's events to her parents, she washed the dishes and climbed into the tub for a soak. Smiling at her success, she considered the odd look Harry'd given her before lunch and the strange sensation it had caused inside her. Smiling into the bubbles in her bath, Hermione dipped her head underneath the water and began to wash her hair. It was going to be a long week until she could go back to Little Whinging.

Saving Harry Potter 3: Real Progress

Chapter Three – Real Progress

As the next week progressed, Hermione received a disturbing owl from Luna, explaining that the younger girl had spent an enjoyable day with Harry talking about Wrackspurts and Umgubular Slashkilters. When Hermione asked if he'd responded at all to her conversation, she replied, "Oh, no.... He didn't seem at all interested, but I'm sure that's because he's still worried about the Rolfang Conspiracy. If he didn't want to talk about Fudge's Umgubular Slashkilters, then he'd have said so."

Hermione cringed at this bit of news, but was even more upset when she got Ginny's report.

I'm really worried about him, now. You said he responded well to your visit, so I was certain that we'd get along fine. After I punched Dudley in the stomach for grabbing my bum, he smiled just a bit, but he still didn't talk much. I wonder if he might be ill. I don't think he'd blink if I danced naked in front of him. (Don't tell Mum I said that.)

Notwithstanding the certain measure of shock that Hermione felt at Ginny's suggestion to help Harry recover from his depression, she also felt a tiny stab of anger that anyone would think to try that, as long as 'anybody' wasn't her. Just as that particular thought ran through her mind, however, her cheeks burned with embarrassment and she grabbed her book on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, flipping randomly until she found an interesting part to re-read. Her head was quite full thinking about Harry's problem without having to entertain such silliness.

The problem was that while Hermione was convinced more than ever that Harry was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, (after reading for several hours about it) she just didn't think that any of the suggested therapy techniques applied to Harry. She couldn't get any anti-depressant medication (and didn't really think that would be the best solution) and the several types of psychotherapy either required so much study to get right that she'd be twenty before being able to begin to help him, or they simply didn't apply. Family therapy was out because he didn't really have one, group therapy would be an option once he was back at Hogwarts – but she wanted to do something *now*– and exposure therapy wasn't very likely to happen unless they could get Voldemort to visit Harry in a controlled environment. She snorted at the last idea and closed her book. No, Hermione was just going to have to find another way to help Harry cope. If only she could find the answer in one of her books.

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Monday arrived and found Hermione once again dressing for her visit to Number Four Privet Drive. This time she selected a short-sleeved polo shirt and jeans. Mum looked in as she was brushing her hair before the mirror.

"Not as fancy this time?" she asked with a smile.

"Mum, Harry doesn't even know that I'm a girl," she protested. "His corpulent cousin, however, thinks that I'm available, so I'm trying to tone it down a bit," she said, nodding with satisfaction after pulling her hair from her face with a hair elastic.

"If he doesn't know you're a girl, why are you bothering?" her mum asked.

"Because he's my friend, Mum, and he needs me, whether he knows it or not," she said fiercely.

The walk up Magnolia Crescent from Mrs. Figg's house was over in a trice. Instead of having to knock on the door, however, she found Harry sitting under a plum tree in the front garden.

Harry didn't acknowledge her as she approached.

She sat down carefully, hoping the grass wouldn't stain her bum and placed her book bag on the ground between them. "Hi, Harry," she said tentatively.

He didn't blink and Hermione let out an exasperated sigh. This was going to be more difficult than she thought.

"You, um, want to go inside? I've brought the latest *Quidditch Illustrated* magazine," she said, tapping the bag in front of her. "I thought maybe we could read together or something."

There was still no response. His eyes were slightly unfocused and the wind played with his hair so that he looked like a mannequin more than a living person.

A sudden image of Ginny shaking her naked bum in Harry's face flashed in her mind. With her lips pressed together, Hermione decided that enough was enough. If Harry insisted on being stubborn, then she would just have to take action; drastic action.

"Fine," she said determinedly, standing. She looked around to make sure they were secluded. A tall hedge bordered the north and east portions of

the garden, with the house on the west. Only the south was exposed, but Hermione decided it was a risk she'd have to take. She unbuttoned her shirt and pulled it off over her head. "I'll just have to resort to extreme measures," she said dramatically.

Harry's eyes followed her movements and his jaw dropped open.

Emboldened by his reaction, she reached behind her back to fiddle with the clasp of her bra. "I'm warning you, Harry, I'm not to be ignored."

Harry's face had turned bright red as he stared unabashedly at her and then he seemed to come out of whatever trance he'd been in and leapt to his feet. "What are you doing?" he hissed through his teeth, grabbed her shirt and holding it over her front. His eyes were now clamped shut. "Have you gone mental?"

"No," Hermione said calmly backing away from his attempts to cover her, even as she felt a slight warmth in her own cheeks. "I'm prepared to do *anything* to get you to pay attention to me, Harry," she said with the faintest quiver in her voice. "I'm not going to let you treat me like you treated Luna or Ginny."

When he didn't say anything, except to stare at her feet, she briefly considered making good on her threat to unhook the clasp of her bra and throw it to the ground between them, just to make sure he wasn't faking. He seemed to read her mind, however and held out her shirt again.

"Please put your clothes back on, Hermione," he pleaded. "I promise I won't... I won't ignore you any more."

She considered his request, searching his face for any sign of deceit – it would be just like Harry to fake sincerity simply to get her to comply. Still, she could tell by the way he kept sneaking glances at her that he wasn't faking it this time. "All right," she said at last, grabbing her shirt and putting it on. "But if you clam up again, I'll just have to take everything off."

Harry's cheeks flamed crimson and he nodded his head. "All right, all right," he said, holding out his hands. "I'll talk to you." Then he looked her in the eye as re-buttoned her shirt and with a slight grin, said, "But only you."

Finished dressing, Hermione smoothed her hair down and picked up her bag, feeling much better about herself now that she was covered. "That's a good start," she pronounced. "Shall we go inside? I really do have the latest *Quidditch Illustrated*."

There was a slightly hungry look in his eye as she said this, but she found that it was nothing compared to the look he'd let slip onto his face for a brief second as her shirt cleared her head.

*

Once inside, they retired to Harry's bedroom, careful to leave his door open and Hermione handed over the magazine. He was quite engrossed with it, seeming to want some sort of distraction to avoid the awkward topic of her decision to strip in his front yard. So Hermione wandered around his room and began to finger the few books he kept in the open. An unused dictionary and thesaurus sat on a tiny shelf next to the window. His Herbology text and a recently acquired copy of *Advanced Potion Making* sat open on the sewing machine-sized desk under it. She'd already read those so her eyes continued to search for something else, landing on his open trunk. Then she caught sight of something that looked vaguely familiar to her. A white leather-bound book that had the letters 'J' and 'L' embossed on the spine in gold. She pulled this book out of his trunk, careful not to disturb anything else and sat on the floor by his wardrobe.

It turned out to be a photo album of Harry's parents and of him, when he was a toddler. "Harry?" she asked quietly. He looked over the top of his magazine. "Do you mind if I look at this?"

He hesitated for a second and then shook his head. She raised an eyebrow at his nonverbal answer and he rolled his eyes. "Yes, you can look at my ruddy photos," he said, in obvious irritation at having to speak.

Smiling at him for his obedience, she began to scan through the pages, coming upon a moving picture of Harry in the bath, as naked as the day he was born. She giggled, holding it up for him to see. "Now I can say I've seen *you* without your clothes on."

Harry stared at her, that same strange look she'd seen on his face last week, and then he smiled, too. "Well, at least I've seen you in the buff in person."

Hermione flushed. "Well... that's... that's completely different," she spluttered. "I was doing it for a reason."

His smile turning into a full smirk, Harry let the magazine drop to his lap. "And it worked just fine, Miss Granger. I'll have to remember that little trick if you ever get moody and intolerable."

The heat on her face increased so that she hid it behind the photo album, focusing on baby Harry splashing in the black and white water. She couldn't be certain, but as she snuck another look at him over the album, she could have sworn that he was actually playing with her.

The next page had a picture of him and Sirius on it, with Harry's godfather holding a miniature broom out and James putting his son on the seat. It hovered for a moment and then wandered off the frame, only to repeat the scene over again.

"I didn't know your dad and Sirius taught you how to fly on a toy broom," she said absently, laughing at the scared, but determined expression on toddler Harry's face. When she looked up at the Harry in the room, however, all humour left her. "What?"

She could tell he wanted to clam up again, but he didn't. "I didn't know, either," he managed. "Not until I got that picture from Remus last week. He said he found it in a box at Grimmauld Place, when he was...." His voice broke and Harry made a show of clearing his throat. "When he was cleaning out his things," he finished quietly.

There was an awkward pause in which Harry shifted uncomfortably on his bed and began to stare out the window. His face closed off and Hermione knew that if she didn't do something, he'd revert back to his depressed self. Not wanting to strip down in Harry's bedroom, she decided to try a different tactic.

She placed the album back in the trunk and sat tentatively on the edge of his bed. He was still staring, unseeing out his window. "Maybe if you... talked about him?" she suggested. "I read that if you can discuss your experiences with someone that it can be a sort of therapy for you."

"I don't need therapy," Harry ground out. His expression had changed from open and lost to hard in a second. "I don't need to talk about it and I *don't* need to be babied."

Hermione's lips pressed together again. "If that's what you want..." She retrieved the photo album and sat down, this time right next to Harry. He could act like a prat all he wanted to, but she wasn't going to shy away from his temper like she had last year.

She had flipped to the pages of pictures devoted to his time at Hogwarts and stopped when she came across one of her and Harry under a tree by the lake. It must have been during fourth year when Ron was fighting with him about the tournament. She fingered it, wondering why he'd chosen to put this in when there were so many others of all three of them together.

So intent was she on the picture that she was a little surprised to hear a voice come from beside her.

"I miss him," Harry said simply and quietly.

Hermione didn't know if saying something was necessary, so she continued to stare at the picture. It seemed like so long ago that they'd been under that tree.

"I wish I had listened to you..." he continued, and she looked up to see his face half hidden in his hands. "About the Ministry. You said it could have been a trap and you... you were right."

It seemed as though all the concern she had for him surfaced at once, crystallized into a single, solid thought and she it became clear exactly what he needed. She lifted her hand and placed it on his shoulder. "I wasn't right, Harry," she began. "I wasn't right about a lot of things last year and I'm going to be wrong about loads more in the future."

He pulled his hands away from his face slightly so that he could see her out of the corner of an eye.

"I was wrong to tell you not to go rescue Sirius," she continued when he said nothing. "I was suspicious and the part of me that wanted you to be safe took over and..." but her voice caught. She wanted to tell him that he was being selfish for taking all the blame for Sirius' death, that there were dozens of people mourning his dead godfather, including her, and that he was loved, not least of all by her. "But Harry," she said with thick emotion. "I went with you anyway. I went with you when I thought..."

"That Voldemort might be there and we'd all be killed," finished Harry for her.

Hermione looked at Harry, who was staring back at her, his face shining. "Yes," she whispered.

Carefully and slowly, he took her hand from his shoulder, held it tightly and then slid along the wall until his head rested on her arm. "Thanks," he said, sniffed, and then was quiet.

A strange jumble of emotion swirled within her. Fear, uncertainty, and the sensation that Harry had just touched something deep within her all made her dizzy trying to keep up with it all. After a long while, she decided that she would stop fighting her heart and, pushed her free hand into the hair at the back of his neck.

The air felt heavy in Harry's room, and Hermione had the urge to throw open the window. Just as her mind was racing to come up with a plausible way to do this, there was a movement at the door, and Professor Dumbledore's long purple robes appeared.

Harry didn't seem to notice, however, and Hermione did not give him reason to suspect that their time together was being interrupted. She did move her head enough to see Dumbledore looking at their joined hands and the hand that she had placed behind Harry's neck. She blushed and there was a twitch behind the Headmaster's long silver beard.

Dumbledore inclined his head, made a gesture that seemed to indicate he'd be returning later, and left the room, closing the door noiselessly behind him. Hermione felt Harry sigh beside her. She thought quickly of all the reasons why Dumbledore would leave them in a room together, alone, with the door closed, and could only think of one. As this came to her, she gasped, pulled herself away from Harry, who sat up immediately and every time she'd been alone with him came back to her with remarkable clarity.

"What?" he asked, clearly distressed that she was now standing and no longer next to him.

"I, er..." she began inelegantly looking anywhere but at him. "I just remembered something... important... at home."

Without waiting for his reaction, she grabbed her book bag and opened the door. Dumbledore was on the other side still, having a conversation with Petunia. They paused when she appeared, red-faced and avoiding all eye contact, and then Hermione sped between them and down the stairs.

The last thing she heard from Number Four was Harry's voice through his bedroom window. "Hermione, come back!"

She did not turn back, but not because she did not want to. No, she wanted very much to go back to Harry, but had been too frightened by her sudden realisation and needed time to think things through.

It was a long walk back to Mrs. Figg's; much longer than it was just half an hour ago.

Saving Harry Potter 4: Hermione's Quest

Chapter Four – Hermione's Quest

Dumbledore left the Dursleys shortly after Hermione, just as interested in her reasons for leaving as Harry obviously had been. His conversation with Petunia had been necessary, if not pleasant. Still, his main concern centred on Harry and whether what he'd seen playing out on Harry's bed had in fact been what he'd hoped it was, then the answer to Harry's problem could very well be a single letter away from being manifest.

He Apparated to Hogsmeade and then walked swiftly to Hogwarts, through the entrance hall with a nod at Filch and on up to his office. Fawkes was asleep on his perch, his head tucked underneath a wing to keep out the light of the day. A sheaf of parchment was stacked on his desk next to several bottles of emerald ink and a collection of eagle feather quills. After considering the situation for a moment, taking care to make sure he was not mistaken about Harry's behaviour around Hermione, he sat at his desk, pulled a single sheet of parchment from the stack, chose a clean quill and dipped it in a new bottle of ink.

Once the letter was completed, he charmed the ink dry, folded and addressed it to Remus Lupin, and then made his way to the school owlery. It was crucial that this letter be delivered as soon as possible.

*

Remus Lupin had lived through better days. After a terrible transformation the week before without the aid of Wolfsbane, he'd healed slowly and was still stiff and sore from the agonizing transformation. Resting in his bedroom at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, his thoughts turned to Harry, and the visit he'd had with him the day before the full moon. He'd been alarmed at the depth of Harry's depression, but was not overly surprised by it. Who had the right to be depressed if not him? He had always marvelled at the boy's seemingly inexhaustible ability to rebound from emotional shocks that would have seen grown men committed to St. Mungo's. Still, Remus could not conclude that Harry would recover from this shock if something was not done to forestall its effects. This was why he was so glad to have spoken with Hermione after the meeting at the Burrow.

Her concern for him was evident, but there seemed to be a deeper level to it than he'd remembered. They had clearly grown close over the intervening years since he had been their Professor. Remus toyed with the idea of trying to match them together, but immediately dismissed it as being too interfering. Harry wasn't exactly in the right frame of mind to find love.

He walked to the kitchen, conjured a pot of tea, and began to rummage around the pantry for something to eat. With Molly gone back to the Burrow, there had been a distinct downgrade in the quality of meals served at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. Just as he was about to settle on a few slices of toast, there was a great crashing sound from the entrance hall. Thankfully, there was no accompanying shriek from Mrs. Black's portrait – a carefully applied Silencing Charm had taken care of that. He put his bread on a plate and set it on the table when a smiling, pink-haired Tonks appeared in the doorway.

"Wotcher, Remus," she said with a wink. "Tucking in to a spot of tea?"

"Hi, Tonks," he replied and began to charm the bread into toast. "I'm afraid I'm not much of a cook, but there's more than enough bread for the both of us. Care to join me?"

She beamed at him and took a seat. "Love to," she said.

*

By the time the mail owl arrived for him, Tonks was napping upstairs before her next shift of Auror duty. Remus rewarded the owl and then carefully unfolded the letter.

Dear Remus,

As you are aware, Harry has been suffering from severe depression over his recent loss of Sirius and likely, because of the tremendous burdens that are uniquely his to bear due to his connection with Voldemort. I will not attempt to disguise my concern for him and hope that you share in that concern. If so, please assist me in helping Harry heal from this trauma and, hopefully, to become more powerfully entrenched in that which will enable him to defeat Voldemort once and for all. I am speaking, of course, of love.

While visiting with Harry's Aunt Petunia, I was fortunate to intrude upon Harry visiting with a young lady that I think has a special place in Harry's heart. He seemed to react to her in ways that no one has yet been able to duplicate. In fact, if I may be so bold, I believe that he may have developed romantic feelings for her. It is no surprise to me that he has come to this realisation, for Hermione Granger is a gifted witch, has demonstrated time and again her love for him, and is in very many ways a good compliment to his personality. This development has the potential to accomplish our goal of helping Harry, if we can somehow persuade Hermione to evaluate her own feelings on the matter and at the very least, exercise the platonic love that she most definitely has for him.

I admit to not being sure if she returns his romantic feelings, for just as I discovered them together, she left in very great haste. Having not

been involved in the wonderful world of romance for quite a number of decades, I am calling upon you to covertly investigate Hermione's feelings for Harry and if she is indeed inclined to think of him that way, to encourage the development of this relationship. It could very well mean the difference in young Harry's life.

*Faithfully,
Albus Dumbledore*

The letter dropped to the table, where the tea service had recently been. Having just been musing on this very subject, Remus considered again his thoughts on matching Harry with someone. If Dumbledore was correct in his observations, however, perhaps he had half of his problem already solved.

He thought about the situation for a full thirty minutes, debating how intrusive he could safely be and still accomplish his goal, before making up his mind. He performed a complex charm to duplicate the letter and then made several modifications to the duplicate, including an Attraction Charm and an Eyes-Only Charm. Knowing that Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were arriving that very night to prepare for Harry's arrival, he took the letter to an upstairs room and placed it on one of the nightstands. Then, with a smile that hadn't graced his lips for many months, he went back to his room to begin preparing for the rest of his plan.

*

Hermione arrived at Grimmauld Place after a bumpy yet quick ride on the Knight Bus. Ginny and Ron were with her and they stepped off together in front of Number Twelve as Stan Shunpike was pulling their trunks toward the door. Ron helped Ginny with her other bags but Hermione refused his assistance.

"Don't worry about me," she said distractedly, waving off his outstretched hand. "I can handle it on my own, thanks." She really *could* handle it after all but her mind was so occupied with Harry that she couldn't be bothered with Ron at all.

They'd fought like third year again and it was really more than she could handle at the moment. He wanted to tease her for her success with Harry, but it ended up coming across as rude and mean spirited. Even Ginny had told him to sod off.

They walked inside and were pleasantly surprised to see the portrait of Mrs. Black, completely uncovered and completely silent. Her face was contorted in rage as she stared hatefully at Hermione. Her lips were moving soundlessly, with flecks of spittle flying from them.

"At least they've figured out to shut up that old bat," Ron said cheerfully, as if they'd never fought. He always did that – acted as if none of their bickering ever mattered.

Mrs. Black turned to shout at Ron and Hermione detected the words "blood traitor" and "filth" plainly before she turned away.

"Good thing, too," Ginny said from beside him. "Or I'd have been tempted to cut the thing out with a knife."

Hermione snorted despite herself and Ron became distracted by a movement from the kitchen door.

"Hello," greeted a tired-looking but smiling Remus Lupin. "Glad you three could make it." He took Ginny's trunk from Ron and motioned towards the stairs. "Why don't you ladies make yourself comfortable? I'd like to speak with Ron about a few matters."

Ron's ears immediately perked up. "Did I get an owl from...?" but he looked apprehensively at Ginny and with slightly pink ears, didn't finish.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at the younger girl and together, they walked upstairs, leaving Ron to talk with Remus.

Ginny threw her book bag unceremoniously onto the floor by her bed and flopped exaggeratedly onto it. "I'm going to hate O.W.L. year," she said with a half-hearted kick at the offending books. "I can already tell."

"No you won't," Hermione retorted as her eyes snapped to a letter sitting on the nightstand. "It's just dismal-looking now because you haven't found out how exciting the subjects are." The wax seal broke easily and she had the briefest recollection of something she wanted to ask Ginny before she began to read.

Dear Hermione,

As you are aware, Harry has been suffering from severe depression over his recent loss of Sirius and likely, because of the tremendous burdens that are uniquely his to bear due to his connection with Voldemort. I will not attempt to disguise my concern for him and hope that you share in that concern and that you will desire to assist me in helping Harry heal from this trauma. This will hopefully allow him to become more powerfully entrenched in that which will enable him to defeat Voldemort once and for all. I am speaking, of course, of love. While visiting with Harry's Aunt Petunia, I was fortunate to intrude upon the two of you together. If I may be so bold, I believe that he may have developed romantic feelings for you. It is no surprise to me that he has come to this realisation, for you, Hermione Granger are a gifted witch, you have demonstrated time and again your love for him, and is in very many ways you are a good compliment to his personality. I admit to not being sure if you return his romantic feelings, having not been involved in the wonderful world of romance for nearly nine decades. I am calling upon you to covertly investigate your feelings for Harry and if you do indeed have romantic feelings for him, I encourage you to act on this. It could very well mean all the difference in young Harry's life.

*Faithfully,
Albus Dumbledore*

A thousand thoughts flooded through her mind as she scanned the parchment again. Her face became slightly pink at the notion that she might have non-platonic feelings for Harry. Still, there was a small bubble of self-satisfaction in knowing that someone else had noticed. Perhaps it meant that Harry felt the same way towards her?

"What are you looking at?" Ginny asked suddenly, sitting beside Hermione on the latter's bed.

Hermione quickly folded the parchment and was about to slip it into her book bag when it burst into flames, leaving the ghostly silhouette in the smoke of a wolf, howling at a transparent moon. Both girls gasped.

"What on earth?" Hermione began, momentarily distracted from her thoughts of Harry holding her hand the day before.

"Someone's tampered with that letter," Ginny commented. "I've seen Fred and George do it loads of times to the ones they've been sending to Lavender from Ron. Only... the smoke from their letters always showed two foxes sniffing around a chicken coup."

While Hermione wasn't familiar with any charm that would have resulted in her letter bursting into flames, or why it would show a distinctive picture in the smoke, she did know that something wasn't adding up. Professor Dumbledore wouldn't just send a letter to her that was so... direct. Maybe if she was of age, but even then, it just wouldn't be Dumbledore's style. He might send something like that to her parents, however, and the thought of her mother's voice asking a million questions about why she was on Harry's bed with him made her face flame in unrealized embarrassment.

"Ginny," she said suddenly. "What were Fred and George doing with that charm? Were they writing their own letters to Lavender, or something else?"

"No," Ginny replied with a giggle. "They'd trained Pig to come to them every time Ron sent *Lav Lav* a letter." Ginny made a face at Ron's pet name for his girlfriend. "Then, they would change the letter around to make Ron sound even more pathetic than he normally is."

"So how do you know the letters exploded and showed two foxes if they went on to Lavender?"

Ginny smirked. "I guess Ron figured it out one day when he got a particularly funny letter from Lavender. Never did find out what it said that tipped him off," she remarked. "He caught them in the act of charming it and the spell went off by mistake. It was the funniest thing I've seen since they left instructions to Peeves to attack Umbridge. Ron was *not* happy."

The wheels were moving fast in Hermione's mind. Her letter had been tampered with and she was going to figure out who the perpetrator was. Besides, she needed *something* to distract her from the fact that every time she thought about Harry, she felt like running to Number Four to spend more time on his bed.

*

That evening, Hermione lay on her bed, three books on magical courting principles from the newly opened Grimmauld Place library and a trashy novel borrowed from Ginny in front of her. They hadn't been much help with her current fascination with Harry, but they did allow her to put her energy into something constructive.

Currently, there were three crumpled pieces of parchment next to the romance novel and one that was halfway full with a list she'd been working on. Actually, it was two lists, but since they were designed to help her make her mind up about the same thing, she considered them one list.

Why I am or am not romantically in love with Harry Potter

Why I am

- 1.) *He's loyal*
- 2.) *He's handsome*
- 3.) *He's got a saving people thing*
- 4.) *He makes me laugh*
- 5.) *He can be really smart when he wants to*
- 6.) *He's brave*
- 7.) *He makes me want to be better than I am*
- 8.) *I cry when he gets hurt*
- 9.) *I cry when he's rude to me*
- 10.) *I cry when he's sad*
- 11.) *I smile when he's happy*
- 12.) *He's got a cute bum*

Why I am not

1.) *He can be intolerably cruel to people*

2.) *I have to prod him to do his work*

3.) *He frightens me when he's angry*

4.) *I cry when he's rude to me*

She threw down her quill after thinking for a full hour about reasons she didn't love Harry romantically. Scanning the list again, she reluctantly came to the conclusion that her reasons for not loving Harry were not only dwarfed three to one by the reasons she did, but that some of the things in the smaller list weren't reasons at all and some were even mirrors of the reasons indicating that she did feel more for him than just friendship. It was terribly confusing and altogether frustrating. When Ginny came to call her down for dinner an hour later, a similar, if not identical list about why Harry would or would not love her was sitting in front of her. Despite her misgivings about whether Harry's reciprocated these feelings (the memory of Harry's head falling slowly towards hers always managed to pop into her head when she had these thoughts), Hermione was rapidly spiralling into a conclusion that not only deeply frightened her, but it excited her in a way that was completely irrational and altogether wonderful. Unless she was mistaken somewhere in her analysis, it was quite possible that she was in love.

Saving Harry Potter 5: Saving Harry

Chapter Five – Saving Harry

Hermione awoke the next morning to the sounds of Ginny getting dressed. She rose sleepily in her bed and noticed that her back was killing her (she had fallen asleep pouring over her notes and research after coming back from dinner). The lists were still on her bed, but her ink bottles and quill had been moved off to her nightstand. Ginny was smirking at her as Hermione rubbed her aching spine.

"It's no wonder you're back hurts," the younger girl remarked, slipping a pair of worn and baggy jeans on that Hermione was sure Ron had worn three years ago. They still had faded mud stains on them. "If I slept in my clothes, I'd be aching, too. It's a trick just to get me to wear a bra, but I could never sleep in mine."

Hermione now became aware of the places where the elastic from her bra was cutting into her skin. "Oh.... Right." She reached back and through her shirt, unclasped the offending device, instantly relieving the pressure.

"Course," Ginny continued, now brushing her long red hair out in front of a mirror, "if I had as much to support up top as you, I'd have no choice but to wear one." She frowned at herself in the mirror and then finished pulling her hair into a ponytail.

"They're a mixed blessing, I can tell you," Hermione replied, pushing her lists and notes together and began to search for her bag. "I'd rather be small and avoid the slack-jawed looks your brother gives me than to have them to use on a boy that I'm *really* interested in."

Ginny's eyebrows shot up as she turned around. "So you've given up on him, then?"

"Who?" Hermione asked. "Ron? Absolutely. Sometime in the distant past, he might have been an option, but I just can't see us going anywhere past snogging and groping."

Ginny snorted. "There's something to be said for snogging," she said flippantly and sat on the bed next to Hermione. "But you're probably right; he's too much of a git to deserve someone like you. He needs someone more.... shallow – someone who'll be able to tolerate his immaturity."

Hermione nodded in agreement, more sure than ever that while Ron was a very good friend most of the time, and that she admitted noticing his attraction for her, it just wouldn't have worked. She needed someone more sensitive, more caring and understanding. Someone more like....

"I couldn't help but notice your lists," Ginny said, interrupting Hermione's internal musings.

Looking down in her hands, the words 'Why I am romantically in love with Harry Potter' leapt off the page and her face flamed scarlet. "Yeah," she said nervously. "Silly, aren't they?"

"No," Ginny answered firmly. "It's not silly at all to think about Harry that way. I can't think of a girl in our years that hasn't. Even Pansy Parkinson has had dreams about Harry without his clothes on."

Hermione gave Ginny a shrewd look. "You aren't still...."

Ginny shook her head. "Not any more. Like I told you last year, I've given up on him. You've got to have mutual attraction for it to work, and let's be honest... he's never given me the time of day."

Hermione looked at her list again and considered Ginny's words. Mutual love was extremely important; that was one of the points that kept cropping up over and over in her research. It just wouldn't work without it, and Hermione couldn't bear the pain of having a failed relationship with her best friend. It would tear her heart out.

"And," Ginny continued. "From what Dumbledore said in that doctored letter, it looks like you don't have anything to worry about."

Tossing the lists aside, Hermione flopped back onto her bed. "But what if Dumbledore's seeing things that aren't there? What if Harry was just latching onto me because he sees me as a replacement for his mother? What if..."

Ginny stood abruptly and with a sharpness that surprised her, said, "Hermione!" Hermione quickly propped herself on her elbows to look into Ginny's face. "Just stop it! Stop trying to overanalyze everything and just... take a chance for once in your life. You're not his surrogate mother, that's *my* mum's job! He fancies you, and you're just denying it."

The blazing look on Ginny's face forced all thoughts of protest out of her mind. "Okay," she said sheepishly. "What do I have to do?"

"Talk to him," Ginny said. "Do what I never did and tell him how you feel."

Hermione's insides lurched unpleasantly at this notion. "How I feel?"

"Yes," Ginny said firmly. "Tell him and if he feels the same way, then it will all work out fine. If he doesn't have feelings for you, then you've lost nothing."

While a small, dissenting doubt appeared in Hermione's mind, she did not voice it. She'd simply have to wait until next week, when it was her turn to see Harry at Privet Drive again before deciding if she was going to take Ginny's advice or not. In the meantime, Ginny's reminder of the modified letter gave Hermione something else to divert herself with. There was a werewolf who had some explaining to do.

*

Remus was not there, however, as it was his day to visit Harry.

This did little to improve Hermione's already over-anxious disposition about Harry, who she was now working out mathematical probabilities about him being in love with her. Whenever Ginny would spot this behavior, or the far away look on her face, the younger girl would issue a loud bang from her wand and give Hermione a pointed look. This happened far more often than Hermione would have liked.

As the day wore on, Hermione found herself pacing in the library, having gone through every book on the subject of romance, and unable to work the motivation up to start reading about anything else, she could do nothing to distract her from her anxiety. The focus for her nervousness was now on how she was going to confront Remus about the letter and the fact that it wasn't getting any closer to the time when he should be returning from his visit.

She was dealt a further blow, when she consulted her calendar and discovered that her next visit with Harry was going to be on his birthday – the day he was supposed to leave Privet Drive and come to Grimmauld Place. Instead of being able to talk about things with him in a fairly neutral, if not ideal environment, she would next see him the day he returned to the one place that was sure to make his depression worse – the place once owned by his now-dead Godfather, Sirius Black.

By the time Remus had finally arrived, Hermione was close to a nervous breakdown. But when she rushed to this kitchen, where he had gone to fetch a cup of tea, she found him surrounded by Mrs. Weasley, Ginny, Ron, and Tonks, all of whom were asking how his visit had been.

"Settle down," Remus said wearily. "Let me get a cup of tea and then we'll sit down and I'll tell you all about how Harry is doing."

Hermione wanted to scream at him for forging a letter from Dumbledore almost as much as she wanted to extract every ounce of information on how Harry was doing. So instead, she did neither and let him related his visit to Number Four.

"Harry is both better and worse," he said at last, as she cradled his mug with both hands. They had all surrounded him at the table where they sat. Hermione could feel the anticipation like a hot, wet blanket that threatened to suffocate them all. "We had several conversations throughout the day, and that was much improved over the last time we met. Most of the discussion was centred around magic, however. He seemed keen to know the mechanics of Apparating. After the fifth or sixth question, I knew what he was after and refused to talk about it any more. That's when things started to get ugly."

Ron looked confused, but Ginny seemed to have come to the same conclusion as Hermione, gave the older witch a small smirk and drank from her teacup. "Why would Harry want to know about Apparation?" asked Ron, knotting his brows together in thought.

"Because he wants to leave his aunt's house at all costs," Hermione answered. "He wants to be with us, here."

"Precisely," confirmed Remus.

"So why can't he?" Mrs. Weasley interjected. "Why can't he be with the people that love him?" Remus made to reply, but Mrs. Weasley had already stood and was walking toward the fireplace. "I'm going to have a word with Albus this instant." Before anyone could protest, however, she was gone in a swirl of green flames.

Remus just shook his head. "It's no good. I've already spoken with Dumbledore. There's nothing for it until his birthday." Then, slowly, calculatingly, he turned his eyes onto Hermione and said, "We'll just have to keep on with our visits."

Hermione flinched. "But... I'm not supposed to visit Harry until the day he's to come here," she explained.

The older wizard didn't bat an eye, however. "Then we might have to modify the schedule."

*

Hermione had been so taken back by the news that Harry was going to be forced to stay with the Dursleys until his birthday and even more unnerved by the strange, hopeful look in Remus's eye when he'd changed the schedule so that she would be visiting Harry the very next day, that she completely forgot to ask Remus about the letter. Mrs. Weasley had returned an hour after she left, sooty and defeated. Remus had been right; Dumbledore was not going to budge on the issue of Harry staying with his relatives.

So it was with a great deal of trepidation that Hermione ate her breakfast the following morning. It seemed to her that everyone was under the impression that she had some magical power to fix Harry's problem. While she *had* been the only one to get Harry to react positively to her in the last couple of weeks, it didn't seem very likely that even her visits would be able to reverse his anger and indignance at being forced to stay with the Dursleys.

It was while she was having these thoughts that a loud *crack* thundered through the walls of Number Twelve. At first, Mrs. Weasley, Ginny, Ron, and

Hermione all thought it had been a bolt of lightning striking one of the trees that lined the road on Grimmauld Place. Then, Hermione realized that there was no rain forecast for the day – she had checked the night before when she was planning her day with Harry.

“What do you reckon?” asked Ron, who had taken his eyes of a recently received letter from Lavender for the first time that morning.

“It almost sounded like...” Hermione began.

“Someone Apparating,” Ginny finished.

“Wands out!” Mrs. Weasley said quickly, pointing hers from the dishes she had been washing to the doorway leading to the entrance hall.

They all did the same and followed her into the hall. There was no one there, and just when Hermione was about to breathe a sigh of relief (maybe it had been a backfiring lorry) someone turned the doorknob on the large front door.

“Stay back!” Mrs. Weasley said protectively, placing herself between them and the door. She jabbed her wand at the door and it squelched shut, just as the intruder was about to gain entry. “Ron, Floo Professor Dumbledore! Tell him we’re under attack!”

Hermione stood next to Ginny as Ron ran back into the kitchen, her wand slipping slightly in her hand from sweat.

The door exploded inward, showering them all with splinters and Mrs. Weasley shouted a Stunning Spell into the smoke that occupied the doorway. The spell hit and they heard a dull thud as the attacker hit the floor. As the smoke cleared, Hermione trained her wand outside, just in case there were more of them, but there was no movement.

Mrs. Weasley let out a gasp of surprise and moved quickly to the person she had stunned. Hermione caught a glimpse of familiar dark hair and gasped as well. “Harry!” she yelled and abandoning all pretense, rushed to his other side, pointed her wand at him, and said, “Enevrate!”

Nothing happened.

“Enevrate!” she yelled again. The blue light hit Harry just as it had before, but he did not awaken.

There was a flurry of popping sounds outside and Hermione barely recognized Kingsley, Hestia Jones, and another Order member scanning the area with their drawn wands. Dumbledore appeared a second later, having apparently come in through the kitchen Floo and surveyed Harry over his half-moon spectacles.

“This explains the Apparation Alarm we received not fifteen seconds before Mr. Weasley’s frantic Floo call,” he said solemnly. “We will need to move him to a room. Molly? Please call Madame Pomfrey and have her bring a basic supply of energy restoring potions.”

Mrs. Weasley nodded and hurried off to the kitchen. Professor Dumbledore conjured a stretcher and placed Harry on it.

“Professor?” Hermione asked frantically. “Why won’t he wake up? He’s only stunned isn’t he?”

Dumbledore did not smile. “No, I believe he has used a dangerous amount of his magical power Apparating himself here, and will need some quick action to ensure he does not die from the effort.”

Hermione stood, stunned and did not reply. Dumbledore moved Harry on his stretcher up the stairs and out of sight. It was some time before Hermione could force herself to move.

*

Ginny, Ron, and Hermione all sat on the floor outside Harry’s makeshift infirmary room. Madame Pomfrey had come, examined him, administered her potions, and left without a word to anyone outside the room. Mrs. Weasley and Dumbledore remained inside.

After what seemed like hours, they left Harry’s room. They immediately got to their feet and sent hopeful looks at the adults.

“Please keep me updated on his condition, Molly,” Dumbledore said. “I’m already late for an appointment with Cornelius. I daresay he won’t be too surprised at my tardiness, but I really should be going.” Then with a slight wink in Hermione’s direction, he swept down the stairs and presumably, back to Hogwarts.

“How is he?” Ginny asked first. “Will he be all right?”

To Hermione’s surprise, Mrs. Weasley smiled. “I think so, Ginny. He’s awake and after some decent rest, he’ll likely make a full recovery.” Then, as Dumbledore had done, she turned to look at Hermione with an odd smirk on her lips. “He keeps asking for you, Hermione. Best not keep him waiting.”

Feeling as if she was in some kind of fog, Hermione tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and nodded. Ginny gave her a reassuring smile and Ron simply looked perplexed by it all.

Slowly, she pushed the door open and walked inside. Harry was there on the bed and she distractedly noticed that it was the only furniture in the room. “Hi,” Hermione said timidly, straining to keep her hands still by clamping them together at her waist. The door shut behind her, seemingly of its own accord.

Harry simply looked at her, his eyes more alive than they’d been since she’d last seen them. She was frightened; being alone with him when he was angry was always intimidating, but she had determined that she would not shy away from him this time. “You want to sit?” he offered, patting the bed

next to him.

Hermione couldn't help a flush of embarrassment at the memory of the last time they'd been sitting on a bed together. "Yes," she said, a little breathlessly and sat, unable to restrain herself from stealing glances at him as he stared unabashedly back at her.

"Thank you," he said after a moment of silence. "For visiting me this summer."

Trying to smile, Hermione ended up nodding instead, now staring fixedly at a small hole in the knee of her jeans. "Thanks for not being angry with me."

Harry shifted in the bed, sitting up more fully and Hermione instantly pushed him back down, catching his eye again. "Mrs. Weasley says you need to rest." All protest vanished from his face as she let her hands linger on his shoulders. "You need to regain your strength," she finished quietly and finally managed to pull her hands away.

A thick silence shrouded them once more and Hermione's fidgeting increased. "Why would I be angry with you?" he asked at length.

She did not answer at once, but chewed on her lip as she considered her answer. "I don't know. You've been so angry lately that I guessed you'd be angry with me for trying to visit you. Or that you'd be upset that I was being bossy and forceful with you when you didn't want me to be." She blushed. "Like when I took off my top."

She thought about all the times during the past couple of weeks that she'd felt bold for asking him to do things he clearly didn't want to do, and wondered why he hadn't blown up yet.

"I didn't mind that so much," he replied and she was surprised to see a self-satisfied grin on his face. It changed her disposition almost immediately.

"You would," she huffed. "Bet you hoped I'd drop my trousers as well, didn't you."

This seemed to disarm him, as his smile faltered. "Well... yeah," he said, his grin returning with full force. "Now that you mention it."

She smacked his shoulder and he winced. "You!"

"Me," he retorted snarkily. "Your Harry."

And for the second time in as many minutes, the mood shifted dramatically. She cleared her throat. "Why did you Apparate here, Harry?" she asked, her honest curiosity mingled with a desire to deflect the inevitable conversation a little longer. "It seems like you really wanted to be here? Was it just that you wanted to leave your aunt's?"

Harry shrugged. "That's one reason," he admitted. "But it wasn't the only one." Their eyes met. "I mostly just wanted to see you again."

Her eyes fell once more. There seemed to be a nervous edge to his voice that hadn't been there when she first entered the room.

"Why did you... erm, leave? The last time you were at Number Four?" he asked, a definite hint of uncertainty shrouding the question.

Hermione gave a nervous giggle. "That's the thing," she said, straightening her back and folding her hands in her lap. "I think I may have... well, something happened with you that day and I... had to think about it a little. That's all." If Harry sounded nervous, it was nothing to how she felt inside. The normally easy way in which she normally formulated her thoughts seemed to have escaped her, and she was left with a jumble of feelings instead.

"Hm," was Harry's only response, until he sat up again.

She tried to push him back down, but he shook his head. "No, Hermione. I need to be sitting up for this," he explained and she stopped trying to force him back down.

The effort to sit clearly took its toll on him and he had to rest his head against the wall before he opened his eyes again. "Something *did* change that day you came to visit me. Hell, things have been changing for me for a long time and it took me until now to realize what it all meant."

He had her complete attention, save for the piece of hair that always stuck up from the back of his head; the one that made her hand itch with wanting to smooth it down. "What changed?" she asked, pulling her eyes back to his face.

"You."

"No I didn't," she replied, confused.

Harry grinned. "Well, not you precisely, but maybe how you treated me. How I saw you, and how... I don't know... how we *feel* about each other changed." When Hermione's confused expression didn't go away, he screwed his eyes up and muttered under his breath. "Merlin I'm horrible at this."

"No," Hermione protested. "Keep going, you're doing much better than me."

He sighed and nodded his head, seeming to steel his resolve. "The thing is...." He hesitated and placed a shaky hand on hers in her lap. "The thing is," he said more softly, "I think I like you a lot more than I did before.... I mean, you're more important to me than you used to be. Something's changed and it's... better."

In a moment of restored clarity, Hermione suddenly knew exactly what she needed to do. They locked eyes again and she felt, rather than saw the things he wanted to say reflecting in them. Her stomach unclenched, her mind cleared of all the uncertainty and doubt and she leaned toward him. She took his hand in one of hers and placed her other one on his shoulder. He tilted his head ever so slightly and she closed the distance.

Nothing could have prepared Hermione for what happened next. It was as if all the things she'd read in all the books on romance and relationships had suddenly caught fire in a maelstrom of emotion. She let the last of her defenses fall away and fell into their kiss.

When they finally broke apart, both surprised and more than a little pleased, Hermione giggled. "I like you too, Harry," she said.

He grinned and moved his head towards her ear and with a delightful tickling sensation, whispered, "Thanks for saving me, Hermione Granger."

The End