

Take the 'H' Train, Hermione

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Fresh oil and warm steam mingled with the smell of a thousand bodies on the platform, which were rhythmically undulating in their attempt to arrive at their various destinations. Amazingly, they seemed to settle into a pattern all by themselves, somehow finding a way to not bump or jostle each other despite the close quarters they were forced to keep.

A sharp whistle blew two tracks over, startling Hedwig in her cage, and she voiced her dislike with an indignant squawk, sending baleful looks to her owner, Harry Potter.

"I'm sorry, girl," he said, trying to sound soothing at the same time he was craning his neck to locate his friends. She nipped at his fingers through the thin bars of her cage and Harry let her, too intent on the immanent arrival of Ron and Hermione to pull them back.

He walked through the gateway that separated the Muggle and Wizarding worlds and smiled at the sight of a large scarlet steam engine sitting on the tracks, poised to take him back home – to Hogwarts.

"Oi! Harry!" came a deep holler that only partially resembled Ron's usually mellow voice.

"Ron!" answered Harry, turning to part the crowd and meet with his friend. A mass of brown bushy hair masked his sight however, and he felt the wind pushed from his lungs.

"Oh, Harry," breathed Hermione into his shoulder. "It's so terribly good to see you." She pulled away from him and held his shoulders, not giving Harry a chance to reciprocate the affection. "Are you well?" she asked sincerely and he almost averted his gaze at her penetrating stare, oddly discomfited by her scrutinization of him.

"As well as could be expected," he temporized, finally putting his cage and trunk down long enough to hug her properly. After a moment, he could hear Ron clear his throat and he released her. "Sorry.... I'm much better now, though. Now that I'm with you two."

Ron seized his opportunity and grabbed Harry in a manly hug. "Sorry we couldn't come get you, Harry...but..." He trailed off and Harry knew exactly what Ron hadn't said. Dumbledore.

The elderly wizard had been dead set against having Harry leave Privet Drive that summer and the protection that living with his hated relatives supposedly afforded him. No matter how the three of them had rationalized things through their summer correspondence, he couldn't help but think that he'd rather face Voldemort than spend another moment with his browbeating uncle, simpering aunt, or terminally spoiled cousin.

"It doesn't matter now," he said, taking another deep breath of the free air on the magical side of the platform.

Hermione continued to stare at Harry, but her gaze was no longer anxious or probing. Instead, he could feel her concern morph into affection, the kind he had felt often from his friend over the past two or three years and it calmed his nerves.

"Come on," she said softly, pulling on his arm. "Let's get on board and find a seat before the carriages fill up. We've got a lot to catch up on." She smiled and let him grab his belongings before they fought the crowd of departing students stepping onto the Express.

Ron pushed through first, clearing an opening down the bustling corridor of the train until they found the last empty compartment. Except it wasn't the last one.

"Hey," said Ron quizzically. "What's with the extra car?"

Harry and Hermione looked over his shoulders and through the window of the door that should have been the last car. Instead of open tracks, they saw another door through which only darkness could be seen. "Don't they usually connect all the cars together so we can patrol?" asked Ron, looking askance at Hermione.

"Absolutely," she said, still looking oddly at the closed door. "I'm going to go ask the driver about it." She dropped her trunk and the carrier that held Crookshanks outside their compartment and trudged back up the corridor.

"Let's get settled," said Harry as he hefted his trunk into the overhead bin before putting Hermione's next to it. Hedwig and Crookshanks were set on the floor by the window and Harry and Ron collapsed onto opposite benches.

"Chocolate Frog?" offered Ron after a moment, holding out a pair of them in his hand. Outside, a whistle blew and the train lurched forward, slowly building speed as it left the platform.

"Sure," said Harry, somewhat excitedly, grabbing one and tearing off the wrapper. "It's been ages...." He quickly bit off the head before it had a chance to hop off. "You get these in Diagon Alley?" he asked, curious because Harry hadn't been allowed to travel to the Wizarding street in London to get his own books and consequently, hadn't been able to get anything extra, like enchanted sweets.

"Fred and George," explained Ron as he chewed thickly on his frog. "They're doing amazingly well and made more money over the summer than Dad has all year."

Harry stopped chewing. "Wow," he said, amazed. "I never imagined that..."

"Sod off!" came Hermione's obviously distressed voice into their compartment, interrupting them. "Don't you dare touch me Malfoy, or you'll be the one begging for mercy."

Ron and Harry glanced at each other for a split-second and bolted for the door.

"Come on, Granger," said Malfoy cockily. "Even for a Mudblood, you've got to be good for a shag."

As they came up behind Hermione, Harry could see Ron's face go red and knew that it would only take one more smart remark from the Slytherin boy for the situation to get ugly. Crabbe and Goyle were flanking their leader, having grown impossibly taller and broader, but apparently dimmer as they were still doggedly following Malfoy around.

"Well," Malfoy drawled with a smirk. "Potty and the Weasel. I bet one of you'd know, wouldn't you?"

Ron lunged forward, but Harry and Hermione kept him back for the moment.

"Wouldn't you like to know," said Harry with sudden understanding. "Tired of doing it with your mates and want to know what a real woman is like?"

Hermione sucked in her breath and Ron faltered in his attempt to pummel the no longer smirking boy in front of them.

"You think you're clever, don't you, Potter," he spat. "Well, I'd be watching your back on this train ride, if I were you." He sent one more leering grin to Hermione, raking his eyes up and down her body and said, "The Dark Lord has his uses for even the filthiest of witches."

Ron lunged again, but the three boys disappeared into the next car, leaving Ron with clenched fists and grinding teeth.

"Let them go, Ron," said Harry calmly. "They're not worth it."

Ron snorted derisively. "It'd be worth ten detentions with Snape to wipe the smug look of that ferret's face."

"He'll get his, Ron," said Harry as he looked pensively at the door where Malfoy and his bunch had just been. "Everyone who follows Voldemort will get what's coming to them in the end."

Hermione's eyes glistened in the sunlight streaming through the windows. She cleared her throat and said, "Thanks, Harry...Ron."

Once again, Harry averted his gaze, still feeling her eyes on him. "Let's get back to the compartment."

"We can't," said Hermione, gesturing at Ron. "Ron and I have got to go to Prefect's meeting now. I was coming to fetch him when *the git* showed up."

"Oh," said Harry distractedly. "I'll just wait for you then?"

"We'll be back as soon as we can," she said, touching his hand lightly before turning to walk back to the front of the train.

"Real soon, mate," added Ron who shoved his hands in his pockets and followed.

About an hour later, after the plump witch with the food trolley had come by and deposited a healthy load of treats in their laps, Harry and Ron were playing a game of chess while Hermione read a book and absently stroked Crookshanks' long body. The noon sun was bright in the clear sky, promising a warm day and Harry was glad to be inside the magically cooled carriage.

"So, did you ever find out about the new car?" questioned Harry, who had just remembered to ask.

"No," Hermione said, flipping the page of her book and placing a scrap of parchment in the fold to mark her place. "The driver didn't know anything and I didn't want to bring it up in Prefect's meeting in case someone there shouldn't know about it."

"Oh," said Harry as Ron's remaining knight savaged his rook. Hermione continued to stare at a spot just above Harry's head and he knew that the wheels were turning in her head. "What do *you* think, then?"

Her eyes snapped to his and their edges crinkled as she smiled. "I think that Dumbledore expects something to happen on the trip and that it's part of his way of protecting the students."

The train lurched suddenly and sent Ron's pumpkin juice sloshing over the chess board and into his lap.

"Bloody –" began Ron, but was stopped short by a glare from Hermione. "I'll just go to the loo and get this cleaned up, then?" he said sheepishly and walked out of their compartment, hands held akimbo as he continued to stare at his wet pants.

Harry chuckled and wiped the board and pieces clean as he put them away. Hermione was fiddling with the hem of her dress as if she was nervous

about something and kept staring up at Harry before quickly looking away. When the chess set was put away, Harry leaned back in his seat and folded his arms across his chest, waiting for Hermione to say whatever it was that was eating at her.

She looked up at him again and he raised his eyebrow at her questioningly. A sigh escaped her lips and she clasped her hands together in her lap, as if to force them to remain still.

"Look," she said with some effort. "Let's just.... Let's go give that car another look." Her hand shot out and grabbed his, pulling him off his seat with such force that he nearly continued forward into Hermione, but stopped himself just in time.

She stood quickly too with the result that they were now standing inches from each other, well past the personal space that was almost always kept between them. Harry could hear her breaths coming in quick spurts.

"What are you so nervous about?" he asked, but found that he was just as nervous as she appeared to be and was asking himself as much as her.

"Harry," she said slowly, before taking his hand and lightly patting it. Their eyes met and Harry's stomach flipped. "We need to know what's in that car. If the driver didn't know anything about it, then it could have been put on the train by anyone," she explained.

"Oh," said Harry, strangely disappointed that she was still talking about the extra car. "We'd better go look at it then."

Harry followed her out into the corridor and to the still closed carriage door. She pulled the handle and Harry was surprised when it opened. The sound of the rushing wind and clacking wheels assaulted their ears, a thousand times louder than when the door had been shut. Hermione took out her wand and Harry followed suit as they walked over the precarious linkage holding the cars together.

Hermione's foot slipped and her arms shot out for balance before Harry grabbed her and they tumbled to the small platform by the last car's door.

"Thanks," she said with a strain. "I think."

Harry rolled off of her and helped her stand as they faced the door. She raised her hand again to open it, but Harry stopped her. "Let me do it."

She nodded and just before his hand touched the worn brass handle, it opened inward of its own accord. They shared a nervous glance and she nodded as he brandished his wand yet again and stepped into the car.

Hermione's hand was pressed into the small of his back and he reached back to grasp it as they walked out of the narrow entryway and into the interior itself. Harry heard the door click shut behind them and a light suddenly flared to life, illuminating the room.

A long squishy couch was situated on their right, underneath a large window where they could see the landscape still whipping by. Immediately in front of them, was a partition that reached from floor to ceiling, opening on the left to what he assumed was another compartment.

"That's strange," said Hermione, still pressed behind him.

"What's strange?" he whispered, training his wand on the hallway.

"This car," she said as she walked around him and towards the couch. "It's not a regular Express car."

"Obviously," said Harry peevishly. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and a little more loudly, said, "It means that it's been tacked on to the train. It's not a car they normally use for transporting students."

Still perplexed, Harry didn't do anything but keep an eye on the hallway, now inching over to it to see what was on the far end. "If it's not an Express car, and the driver doesn't know that it's here, then it can't be meant for anything good."

"Right," said Harry, suddenly making a decision. "Let's get back inside and tell –"

The train gave another shuddering lurch, sending Harry sprawling backwards into Hermione and they both toppled onto the couch, Hermione's breath coming out in a *whoosh*.

Harry tried to get up, but the car lurched again and a squeal of metal sent shivers up his spine as they were thrown off the couch and onto the floor. A giant clunking sound announced that their car had been disconnected from the rest of the train and soon, their carriage had come to a noisy stop on the tracks.

Rolling over, Harry pulled Hermione up from underneath him and examined her. "Are you all right?" he asked gently as she gasped for breath.

Nodding, she held tightly to her chest as her breathing slowed. "Just...knocked...the wind...out," she explained.

Relief swept over him, but was tempered by the knowledge that something had happened with the train. He jumped up and walked quickly over to the door they had come through. In the distance, he could see the Express still moving forward, odd flashes of coloured light radiating off it from time to time, then it turned a corner and disappeared.

"Oh no." Hermione was next to him, looking out the window longingly and as her face fell, she turned and buried her head in his shoulder.

Harry held her awkwardly as she let out muffled sobs, realizing that hugging her in front of a hundred people when he hadn't seen her in over two months was much easier than doing it alone as she cried into his tee shirt.

"Why can't we just have a normal year of school?" she said savagely to his chest. "Why can't we just go to class, take notes and do well on our exams?" Her fists were balled as they lay pinned between them. "I'd even suffer through another year with Umbridge if we didn't have to deal with anything else."

Still nervous, Harry could only continue to rub small circles on her back. He felt her shaking in his arms and she let out a small chuckle. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said with a laugh. "Here I am blubbering along and we've got a crisis to deal with."

They separated and Harry nodded his head. "Should we try the door?" he offered.

She reached out to open it, but jumped back with a yelp when her hand touched the handle. "It shocked me!" she said, incredulous.

"Let me try," said Harry, who was also jolted when he touched the smooth metal. "Sodding...thing!" he said irritably, as he shook his hand to work the numb feeling out of it.

Surprisingly, Hermione didn't scold him for his rude language and simply folded her arms. "Maybe we should see what's in the rest of this carriage?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said before he found his wand on the floor and walked over to the hallway. "It looks like we're going to be here a while."

The hallway opened up into another small room that had a lone double-bed against one wall and a small chest of drawers on the other. The far end of the carriage held a loo and another door. Harry was brave enough to try the handle but was met with the same level of success and another stinging hand.

Shaking his hand in frustration, Harry sat heavily onto the bed. Hermione paced quietly around the compartment, head held low in thought.

"If it were a trap set by Death Eaters, we'd already be Portkeyed away or something..." she said in mumbled phrases almost too quiet to hear.

Hermione turned on her heel and walked away from Harry, then as she came back, he heard her again. "Or maybe they're just waiting for the best time to attack, taking..."

A low chuckle erupted from Harry's throat and Hermione whipped her head around. "What?" she asked as she fussed with her hair, trying to pull it into a plait on the back of her neck. "We really could use some logical thinking here, Harry. It's no time for private jokes."

She sat sulkily on the bed next to him and Harry finally stifled the laughter. "I'm sorry," he said in what he hoped was a contrite tone. "It's just that you're pretty cute when you've got a thousand thoughts whinging their way through your head."

Her cheeks tinged pink, Hermione looked outside and shot to her feet. "Harry!" she said pointing out the window. "Is that Mr. Weasley?"

Harry turned around and stared to where she was pointing. Three wizards were walking around the grass on the side of the tracks. One of them was short and had balding red hair. "I think it is," he exclaimed excitedly.

They waved their hands frantically, trying to get his attention, to get anybody's attention, but Mr. Weasley and his companions didn't seem to notice.

Yelling didn't work either and soon, the three men left the area and walked in the direction of the Express.

"Why didn't they notice us?" wondered Harry. "It's ruddy difficult to miss a big carriage in the middle of the tracks."

"I don't know," said Hermione, sinking back into her thoughts. She studied the ground outside the carriage for a moment and then her eyes went wide with surprise. "Harry! Look at that tree and tell me what you see."

Harry followed her finger again and tried to figure out what significance the small birch had on their current situation. "It's a weeping birch tree, Hermione. I'd guess about ten years old."

"Look at the shadow," she said exasperatedly. "Then look at the carriage's shadow."

He examined the dark spot extending slightly from the tree's trunk and then looked to the ground in front of them. "The carriage doesn't have a shadow," he said slowly.

"Precisely," said Hermione in a tone that suggested Harry had just performed extraordinarily well on an exam. "No shadow means the carriage isn't reflecting light, or in other words..."

"It's invisible," finished Harry for her in a flash of understanding. "But isn't there a revealing spell or something they could cast to cancel the effect?"

"Not for something this big," she explained. "In fact, it would take a really powerful wizard to charm the train to be invisible in the first place."

"You mean someone like Voldemort?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Don't get panicky," she said as she sat back down on the light brown comforter. "It could just as easily have been Dumbledore that cast the charm... Or a team of Ministry enchantment experts."

Harry leaned against the wall and folded his arms, watching her out of the corner of his eye. "Then why didn't Mr. Weasley or those other wizards know to counteract the charm? They were just walking around aimlessly."

"You have to know where the object is to cancel a spell that big, Harry, even if you knew the counter-charm," she said, mirroring Harry's position against the headboard. "Besides, they wouldn't necessarily know if Dumbledore did it in the first place. He could have easily cast the spell without telling anyone."

Harry huffed peevishly, but didn't make any further argument. Either way, if it was Dumbledore or Voldemort, they couldn't do a thing about it but wait for their fate to be decided for them. Something Harry had never been good at doing.

"Ugh," said Hermione as she rubbed her temples with the tips of her middle fingers. "I've got a horrible headache," she said before lying down on the pillow next to where Harry was seated.

He got up immediately and walked to the loo. "I'll be right back," he said over her shoulder as she continued to rub small circles around the affected area.

As he walked back into the compartment, wiping the lingering bits of water on his hands with his shirt, he paused to watch Hermione rest. Her breath came in even intervals, making Harry tired just watching her. He made to head to the couch, but her eyes popped open and she pinned him with her sleepy eyes.

"Where are you going?" she asked as she motioned for him to sit next to her. "We still haven't finished talking."

Hesitating, he fought a small internal battle between propriety and the needs of the moment. Deciding that being with Hermione was more important than avoiding a potentially embarrassing situation, he sank onto the mattress and leaned against the headboard, linking his hands behind his head.

"There we are," she said softly and rolled over, folding her pillow under her head and closing her eyes yet again.

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A creaking sound woke Harry and he rubbed a spot of drool from his chin before raising an arm to straighten his glasses. His left arm was pinned underneath Hermione's head and she had wrapped her arms around his torso, still breathing heavily as she slept.

Harry's cheeks heated and his heart began beating furiously in his chest as he weighed his options. Wake Hermione and act as if nothing had happened. Try to slip away from her unnoticed and pretend she had slept alone, or....

A soft murmur escaped Hermione's lips and she clung more tightly to his chest as soon as he tried to move away. Unwilling to wake her from her sleep, he resigned himself to his fate and looked around the car. It had grown dark outside and the lights inside had automatically dimmed, casting a pale glow about the carriage's interior. Not knowing how they had been turned on in the first place, Harry tried to figure out how they had gone down, seemingly of their own accord.

After a few more minutes of private rumination, Hermione stirred beside him and the awkward feelings returned. She yawned thickly and pulled a hand off his chest to stifle it.

"You awake?" he asked tentatively.

She froze for a second, and then pushed herself slowly up from her reclined position. "Yeah," she said, trying to press her hair flat.

"How's the headache?"

"It's fine," she said, looking at him strangely. "Uh, Harry? How did I get over here?"

"Dunno – I started out over on this side and you were on that side," he said, using his hand to indicate the spots on the bed where they started out. "You fell asleep and I was going to go move over to the couch, but I guess I fell asleep too."

They sat next to each other for a moment and she shrugged before saying, "Sorry for using you as a pillow. I usually...uh...hold my second one when I'm sleeping."

For the second time in the last ten minutes, Harry's face became unnaturally warm and he was glad he hadn't been drinking anything just then, or he was certain it would have been plastered on the partition five feet away. Hermione didn't seem to be much more composed. He had to check twice, as the dim light made it difficult to be sure, but Harry was certain there was a tinge of pink on her cheeks. "It's not a problem," he said with an easy smile. "I've certainly slept in worse situations before."

Her light chuckle was like a balm to his nerves and he let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding.

"It's dark out," she said as another yawn overtook her.

"I noticed," he said cheekily. "It does that when the sun goes down, you know."

His smart remark earned him a slap on the shoulder, but it was worth it to see her smile return. But her good humour was short-lived as she gazed seriously up at him. "Harry?" she asked uncertainly.

"What is it?"

"Do you...do you think Voldemort will go after my parents?" Her sudden change in demeanour had caught him off guard and he didn't quite know how to respond.

"I don't know..." he said hesitantly. "Did someone tell you they'd been targeted or something?"

"No," she said, shaking her head slowly. "But I have these nightmares sometimes.... And my parents are always being killed or tortured by Lucius Malfoy or that horrible LeStrange woman."

"I didn't know you had nightmares." It was bad enough that Harry had to endure visions of Sirius falling through the veil over and over again, or to see Cedric being murdered, his eyes lifeless and cold.... Now his best friend was being haunted by what might happen to her family.

Seeing her frightened, teary-eyed, and looking altogether helpless changed something in Harry and he resolved right then to make sure nothing happened to Hermione or her parents. He lifted a gentle arm and invited her back to his side. She hesitated for a second before he prompted, "Come here." That was all it took for her to snuggle back into his arms.

"Hermione," he said tentatively, lightly fingering a piece of her hair with a shaking hand. "I'm scared, too." He could see her glance at him out of the corner of her eye. "I can't guarantee that nothing will happen to your parents, but I can promise to be with you no matter what the future holds."

She hugged him closer and it gave Harry the will to continue. "When the war is done and Voldemort's gone," he said, hesitatingly, but when she looked up at him, the words came tumbling out. "I might not be around to see you and Ron celebrate together. And one thing I've learned from Sirius is that I can't go around living life with a giant stack of regrets on my shoulders."

If she was surprised that he had mentioned his godfather's name, she didn't show it. "Oh, Harry," she said with a sigh, averting her gaze before pulling his hand into hers. "It can't be that bad, can it?"

Harry gave a small snort and absently rubbed the thick part of her palm between his thumb and forefinger. "One of us has to die, Hermione. Either I kill him, or he kills me."

She gave another shuddering sigh and let her head tilt forward, hiding her face with her hair. "Ron's going to be sore he missed this conversation," she said wryly.

"You like Ron, don't you," he blurted before he could stop himself. It wasn't a harsh accusation, though that's what Harry was feeling inside at the time. His voice was surprisingly soft and almost conciliatory.

"Of course I like Ron," she said desperately, pulling free of him to wring her hands together and turned to look at the darkened window with some degree of longing.

Harry's face fell and his insides clenched painfully.

"But I like you too and it's taken me all this time to work through how I feel about both of you and although I really didn't think I'd have to choose between you, somehow...somehow I knew it would come to this." She sighed heavily and forced her hands to remain still on her lap. "Harry," she said resolutely, capturing his gaze. "I couldn't bear the thought of losing either of you. Your friendship or anything we might try to make of it...is important to me," she said, pausing as they searched each other's eyes. Harry felt exposed...naked under her scrutiny and it was intensely frightening and wonderfully thrilling all at once. Then she leaned closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder again. "But I guess fate has a way of deciding things for us."

Harry blinked and swallowed heavily, trying to come to terms with where this conversation had taken them. "What are you saying?" he asked slowly.

He felt her chuckle and snake her arms around his waist, pulling him closer to her. "I'm saying," she said with a watery smile, "that in the end, I didn't have to choose between you and Ron. That in the end, it was you that was here for me – with me...and not him."

Harry turned to look at her and found that she was staring at him with wide eyes and wet lashes, not entirely different than how it had been with Cho several months before. Though when Harry would think about it later, it would be with the understanding that Hermione's smile spoke of affection, understanding and true joy at being there with him.

They leaned forward together and a sudden panic filled Harry like a thousand pixies trying to beat their way out of his stomach. Her breath caught his face and he found it hard to concentrate on where to put his nose when their lips first touched. It was hesitant at first, cautious and tender.

Their hands fumbled around each other until they found a comfortable place to rest and with that distraction out of the way, he leaned in to kiss her properly. Unfortunately, Hermione leaned in at the same time and their teeth banged painfully together.

"Sorry," they murmured together as Harry ran his tongue across his teeth to check for blood. She smiled and shook her head as they reached for each other's lips again. This time, Harry let Hermione take the lead and things went much more smoothly. As they continued to explore each other, Harry's understanding of girls changed. Hermione had always been his friend, had always been there for him, but as he kissed her and tasted the sweetness in her mouth, he realized that there was so much more to girls than curves, giggles, and perfume. He realized that when it came to this particular girl, she was much more than a simple friend.

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Later that evening, after more talk and more kisses, they ate the last of the chocolate frogs and cauldron cakes from the Express that had been in the pockets of Harry's jumper and held each other on the bed. Harry was content like he hadn't ever been in his entire life and he silently wished that he could stay in Hermione's arms, separated from the world for a long, long while. It was not to be.

The sound of something scratching at the roof of the car startled them from their semi-conscious state and they grabbed for their wands. The scratching persisted and was joined by the shouts of men from the outside.

“Over here!” they heard one man shout.

“I told you they’d be found,” said another, closer than the first.

Something knocked against the side of the carriage and Hermione’s trembling form nestled into his side as they stood facing the door they had come into, wands trained on its middle. Another knock, this one louder and then the sharp buzzing of spell before their hair stood on end as the wards around the train fell.

Harry swallowed and gave Hermione a one-armed hug. “We’ll be okay, Hermione.”

“I know,” she whispered as she gave him a squeeze back.

More voices came from just on the other side of the door, mingled with the shuffling of feet on gravel and then the door knob turned. Harry and Hermione let off two simultaneous spells which knocked the hat off the person who had ducked in time to avoid the spells.

“Blimey!” said a familiar voice as he toppled from the platform and back onto the tracks. “They’re in there!”

Another head popped into view and Harry aimed at it, but did not fire.

“Hello,” said the man as he climbed onto the platform and filled the doorway, blocking their escape.

“*Lumos*,” said Hermione and a brilliant beam of light illuminated the shape in front of them at the same time as the lights in the carriage flared to life.

“Ron? Is that really you?” asked a shocked Harry.

“What’d you think? That You-Know-Who would be the one to collect you in Dumbledore’s escape carriage?” said Ron with a quirky smile on his face.

When Harry and Hermione just stared dumbly back at him, another head popped up behind him and Ron said, “You *did*, didn’t you?”

Professor Dumbledore walked serenely into the carriage, ducking slightly in the doorway and stared down at the two teens with a slightly amused expression.

“I see our two wayward Gryffindors have been located, Mr. Weasley. Fifty points to Gryffindor, I think.” The elderly wizard looked between their locked hands and Ron, who was beaming with pleasure at earning so many house points on the first day of school.

Harry and Hermione let out a shared sigh of relief and lowered their wands. “*Nox*,” said Hermione to extinguish her wand, but also put out the lights in the carriage.

“Shall we get on to school, then?” asked Professor Dumbledore, motioning towards the exit.

They nodded and walked out together, Harry helping Hermione jump down from the platform. Once on the gravel between the tracks, they saw most of the Order members staring back at them. Tonks winked at Harry and sent him a cheeky smile while Mrs. Weasley grabbed them both up in a big hug. Remus Lupin was standing off to the side with a blank expression on his face and the rest of the Order seemed content to just stare.

Ron pulled Harry off to the side as soon as his mum had let go and they walked down the track, following Dumbledore’s lead.

“How’d you find us?” asked Harry with a glance at Hermione, who was chatting happily with Ron’s mum.

“It was Hedwig who did it,” he said motioning to the white blur circling overhead. “Once Dumbledore told us what he thought happened to you, I ran and grabbed her cage from the dorms straight away.”

Harry smiled and slapped his friend on the shoulder. “Well I’m sure glad it was you and not some Death Eater who got that flash of brilliance.”

Ron’s smile faltered for a second. “Was it horrible?” he asked sincerely.

“What? Missing the sorting again?” Harry said, trying to lighten the mood a little.

“No,” answered Ron. “Being locked up with Hermione all day.”

Harry couldn’t keep it in and a great booming laugh came out his mouth, startling the rest of the Order. “No, Ron,” he said as he caught eyes with Hermione again. She was smiling at him and he realized that things looked much more agreeable than they had just a few hours ago. “No, being locked up with Hermione was the best thing that could have happened to me.”

Ron looked at him as if he’d lost his mind, but as they continued to walk up the tracks to where Ron said they would Portkey back to Hogwarts, Harry couldn’t help but feel that Voldemort or not, the world was a much better place to be in when Hermione Granger was at his side.