

Chapter 9

"I need your help," Harry said as he let himself into Dumbledore's office and collapsed into the familiar wing backed chair.

"Harry, you're smoldering," Dumbledore pointed out calmly as he set down his quill.

"What? Gah!" Harry yelped, catching sight of the smoke coming from the right sleeve of his robes.

Frantically, he patted at the glowing embers on the now charred and frayed cuff until he was certain it was out.

"Spell gone awry?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"Dragon," Harry grunted.

"A Dragon?" the headmaster asked, lifting a bushy white brow and causing his forehead to wrinkle more than usual.

"With everything going on, I completely forgot about it," Harry said with a sigh. "Hagrid won a Dragon egg in a game of cards with Voldemort and decided to hatch it in his hut. You know, the one made entirely of wood."

Dumbledore looked utterly confused as he stared at Harry, and it was only after a moment's thought that he realized just how ludicrous it sounded.

"Under Voldemort's instructions, Quirrell kept his face covered and invited Hagrid to play cards when they met at the Hog's Head. He did it to get Hagrid drunk enough, and used the egg as an incentive, to get him to talk about Fluffy." Harry explained.

"I see," Dumbledore said, stroking his beard. "That is quite troubling, but you knew this would happen, did you not?"

"Well, yes," Harry said. "I know how to stop Voldemort from getting the Stone without giving anything away, but I forgot about Hagrid hatching the egg and trying to raise a Dragon like a new puppy. I really need your help with this. You know how much trouble he'll be in if that thing gets spotted."

"Indeed," he agreed. "Do you know how I handled it last time?"

"You didn't," Harry said. "Ron, Hermione, and I found out about it, and so did Malfoy. We were worried about Hagrid getting in trouble, so we sent a letter to Charlie. He sent a couple of friends to pick it up and take it back to the reserve in Romania."

"Then why not simply do that again?" Dumbledore asked.

"Because last time, we got caught," Harry said, frowning at the memory. "Malfoy went to McGonagall the same night we sent the Dragon off. I forgot my cloak at the top of the Astronomy Tower, and we all ended up getting in trouble. We all lost fifty points each, and she gave us a detention with Hagrid. He took us into the Forbidden Forest to find what was killing the Unicorns. It's Voldemort, by the way. He's drinking their blood to stay alive. Of course, since fate hates me, I ran into him. Firenze saved me, but all things considered, I'd rather not go through that again. It took us weeks to convince Hagrid to get rid of the Dragon."

"That does seem like quite a harsh punishment," Dumbledore said. "I suspect Minerva was simply reminded of your father and was trying to curb your penchant for breaking the rules, noble as your reason may have been."

Standing up, Dumbledore walked over to the large window looking out over the grounds and clasped his arms behind his back.

"I suppose I'll have to have a talk with Hagrid. At least it's a nice night for a stroll," he said, then turned back to look at Harry as he stood to join the professor. "Are you sure it's wise to change this particular event?"

"I don't see why it would matter," Harry told him. "Stopping it shouldn't change anything."

"Change is a funny thing, Harry," Dumbledore said as he stared off into the distance. "Even the smallest ripples can become the largest waves, given enough time."

"Yeah, well, you might want to prepare for a tsunami, because I plan to change a lot," Harry said firmly.

"For the better, I'm sure," Dumbledore replied agreeably. "However, changing too much too soon could have disastrous consequences. Might I suggest a compromise?"

"What do you have in mind?" Harry asked.

What Dumbledore had in mind, was a way to keep most of the events the same, but with less painful outcomes for everyone involved. Well, almost everyone, Harry corrected himself with a smile. If he wasn't such an insufferable git; he might have felt bad for Malfoy.

Ever since coming back from Christmas break, Snape had seemed to completely turn over a new leaf. He wasn't nice by any means, but he wasn't attacking his students anymore, and he started acting like an actual professor for once. Malfoy had learned that the hard way when he got three days detention for trying to throw ingredients into Hermione's potion during their first class back. The entire room had been stunned to see Snape step in and, not only stop it from happening, but punishing Malfoy with detention and assigning him an essay on the effect of mixing Gurdyroot with a Wart Removing Salve.

He'd even stopped attacking Harry at every turn, and instead acted as if he wasn't even there. It probably wasn't the change his mum was hoping for, but Harry was more than happy with the

outcome. It was one less thing to deal with while he planned the downfall of one of the most powerful Dark Wizards to have ever lived.

If there was one thing Harry had learned over the years, it was patience. While trusting his instincts had always served him well, rushing in headfirst had cost him more than he cared to remember. He didn't plan on playing the game Dumbledore did, waiting decades to make his move, but he now knew better than to charge ahead without knowing as much as possible before hand.

So, that was why he was willing to go along with Dumbledore's plan and keep things as close to the original timeline, at least as far as Voldemort was concerned, until it was time to strike. If everything went to plan, Voldemort would be gone for good by the time his fourth year was over. The war would be won before it even began, and he and his friends would be able to all live long, happy lives.

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"This thing weights a ton," Harry grunted as he carried the crate containing Norbert up yet another flight of stairs.

"What did you expect, it's a Dragon," Hermione hissed. "Now be quiet or we'll be caught."

Panting, Harry struggled to keep the crate from banging into the stairs as they climbed higher and higher towards the Astronomy Tower. By the time they finally reached the top, Harry arms felt like they were made of noodles, and Hermione looked about ready to collapse.

Too bad Ron was still in the Hospital Wing due to that infected bite from Norbert, he thought. They really could have used an extra pair of hands.

Oddly, he couldn't help but think how cute Hermione looked with her frizzy hair sticking to her sweaty forehead.

"Now what?" Hermione asked.

“Now, we wait,” Harry said.

Exhaustedly, the two sat on top of the crate and leaned against each other for support. Feeling her warm body against his, and her bushy hair tickling his cheek, Harry finally felt like he was getting his best friend back. No matter how much he tried to reassure himself that saving lives was worth it, for a while he’d worried greatly that he may never get back that special bond they had. Seeing the rule abiding Hermione Granger breaking curfew to help smuggle an illegally hatched Dragon out of the school really let him know that no matter how much some things changed, she wouldn’t be one of them.

“What are you smiling at?” Hermione asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

It was only then that Harry realized he’d been staring down at her with a smile on his face. She furrowed her brow and bit her lip, looking at him as if he were a puzzle to solve.

“It’s just – exciting, isn’t it?” Harry asked.

“More like terrifying,” Hermione muttered with a roll of her eyes. “If we’re caught, we’ll be expelled for sure.”

Hermione’s oversized front teeth dug deeper into her bottom lip as she worried her hands. Without thought, Harry reached out and took her hand in his. A simple, comforting gesture he’d used with her many times in the past. She stared at their clasped hand, then looked up at him with a blush running up her neck. Just as she opened her mouth, two people on brooms and wearing heavy cloaks, landed at the edge of the tower.

Quickly, Harry let go of her hand and stood up, slipping out from under his dad’s cloak.

“You must be Harry,” A female voice said.

Grabbing their hoods, both of the fliers pulled them back to expose their faces. They were different than the people Harry remembered seeing last time. Probably because this was happening a couple of weeks sooner than last time, he thought.

One was a young woman in her mid-twenties with short, light brown hair, dark green eyes, and a small, thin scar running along the left side of her jaw. The other was a short, stocky man who looked to be a few years older than the woman. His dark hair was done in a short buzz cut, his jaw wide and square with thick stubble.

"Yeah. I'm Harry, this is Hermione, and that is Norbert," he said, pointing to the crate just as it gave a shake.

"I'm Clara," the woman said. "And this big lug is Brian. As much as I'd like to stay and chat, we should probably get out of here quickly."

"Right," Harry said with a nod as he and Hermione helped the two Dragon Handlers tie the crate between their brooms.

"What kind of name is Norbert for a Dragon, anyways?" Clara asked.

"Hagrid named him," Hermione said.

"Ah, that explains it," Clara replied with a fond smile. "Some things never change. Well, that should hold him. We'd better be off."

"Thanks," Harry said.

Clara looked back at him as she mounted her broom and gave him a wink.

"No problem, just try not to make a habit out of this," she told him.

Carefully pushing off the ground, the two took to the air and slowly disappeared into the night.

"I'm so glad that's over with," Hermione said in relief.

"Me too," Harry said, picking up his cloak and stuffing it in his pocket. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Both of them smiled as they descended the stairs, only to come to a dead stop as the bottom when they ran into a surprised looking McGonagall and a smug looking Malfoy. Hermione gasped and clutched at Harry's arm as she paled drastically. McGonagall's face went from surprised to angry as she glared at the two of them.

"Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, what are you two doing out of bed at this hour?" she asked sternly. "In all my years, I've never –"

"Ah, good evening, Professor McGonagall," Professor Dumbledore said as he appeared behind Harry and Hermione.

Hermione paled even further, but Harry breathed a sigh of relief and pulled her closer.

"Professor Dumbledore, I've just caught all three of these students out of bed well after curfew," McGonagall said in such a disapproving tone that Hermione looked away and down at her shoes.

"I'm sorry professor, I must have misheard you," Malfoy said. "It sounded like you said all three of us."

Professor McGonagall whirled around to face him and crossed her arms over her chest with her lips pressed together thinly.

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy, all three of you,” she said sternly. “Don’t think I missed the fact that you waited until an hour after curfew to come tell me two Gryffindor’s were out of bed just to make sure they got into trouble, not to mention the ridiculous tale about a Dragon you told me.”

“Actually, that part is true,” Dumbledore said, causing McGonagall to spin back around and stare at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. “You see, a couple of weeks ago, Hagrid came to me with news that someone was trying to sell him a Dragon egg over at the Hog’s Head. Naturally, he was concerned for its welfare if someone less scrupulous were to get their hands on it, so he bought the egg, and came to me for advice.”

“See, I told you,” Malfoy crowed triumphantly. “I saw all of it the night they snuck out to his stupid hut.”

“I wasn’t aware you were there as well, Mr. Malfoy,” Dumbledore said with a raised brow, causing Malfoy’s mouth to snap closed with a click and his face to pale. “As I was saying, given the dangers of transporting an unhatched egg, I was asked if we could hatch it here and allow it to grow for a week or two until it was strong enough to make the journey to Romania. Given their closeness with Hagrid, and the unique opportunity of seeing a Dragon hatch, he invited Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, and Mr. Weasley to come witness the event.”

“But they were out after hours, and out of the castle,” Malfoy whined.

“Indeed, they were,” Dumbledore agreed. “However, if you had read the school rules, you would know that being out after hours is allowed as long as a student is given permission by a member of staff, which they were.”

“And tonight?” McGonagall asked, now glaring sternly at Professor Dumbledore.

“Ah, well, you know how Hagrid has always wanted a Dragon, and how – let’s say – emotional he can be,” Dumbledore said. “Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger offered to bring the Dragon up to the Tower to meet the Dragon Handlers. I felt that, after helping Hagrid to raise him, it was only fitting they be there to see him off.”

McGonagall's lips thinned and she tapped her foot as she stared at Professor Dumbledore.

"Why wasn't I informed of any of this?" she asked stiffly.

Dumbledore blushed and twirled his bread with his finger while looking away like a scolded child. It really was a superb bit of acting, Harry thought.

"I'm afraid that's my fault," he said apologetically. "You see, with all the paperwork involved, it simply slipped my mind."

It was almost comical to watch such an old, powerful wizard act like a scolded schoolboy while Professor McGonagall tried, and failed, to stay angry at him.

"Next time, I would appreciate a warning if students from my house are going to be dealing with highly dangerous magic creatures," McGonagall said after a long moment.

"Of course," Dumbledore said amicably.

"Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger," McGonagall said, causing Harry and Hermione to look up at her while the latter bit chewed her lip nervously. "Ten points each for helping a member of staff. However, I expect to be informed about any future late-night excursions. Is that understood?"

"Yes, professor," Harry said while Hermione nodded, looking too stunned to speak.

Malfoy scowled heavily and glared daggers at them.

"As for you, Mr. Malfoy," she continued. "That's twice you broke curfew without permission, and you waited until the last minute to notify a professor about your suspicions. Had you done

so sooner, this whole mess could have been avoided. That will be fifty points from Slytherin and a night's detention."

Malfoy's cheeks turned pink as he balled his hand into white knuckled fists in impotent fury.

"If I might make a suggestion," Dumbledore said, holding up a finger. "Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger have also volunteered to help Hagrid discover what had been attacking the Unicorns in the Forbidden Forest. Perhaps Mr. Malfoy could be of some assistance?"

"But that's servant stuff," Malfoy sneered.

"That's enough," McGonagall barked sharply. "Since you like following your classmates around at night, it sounds like a fitting punishment. You'll meet with Mr. Filch in the Entrance Hall at ten. Now, all of you, off to bed."

Furious, Malfoy gave Harry and Hermione one final, poisonous glare before stomping off towards the dungeons. As he headed back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry glanced over his shoulder at Dumbledore with a small smile. His blue eyes twinkling, the old man gave him a quick wink just before he disappeared around the corner.

"I can't believe Professor Dumbledore stood up for us like that," Hermione said in awe as they stepped into the common room.

"I know," Harry said.

"It's like he knew what was happening the whole time. But why would he let us do everything ourselves instead of just helping us?" she asked.

"He's Dumbledore," Harry said with a shrug. "Maybe he thought letting us do all the work would teach us something."

"Maybe. Anyways, I'm going to bed. It looks like we've got another long night ahead of us," Hermione said before suddenly lurching forward and hugging him tightly. "Good night, Harry."

Before he could reply, Hermione let go of him a dash off up the stairs to the girl's dorm, her cheeks glowing red.

"Good night, Hermione," Harry said with a soft smile on his face.

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With Ron still in the Hospital Wing, Harry and Hermione walked towards Hagrid's Hut for their unofficial detention. While he knew everything was going to be alright, Harry still felt tense as he looked out at the Forbidden Forest, knowing what he would face tonight.

Hermione seemed to notice and tried to distract him by talking about classes and homework. As she rambled on, he realized he wasn't the only one that was nervous. Oddly, trying to keep Hermione calm gave him something to focus on and eased his own nerves. When they reached Hagrid's Hut, he was still nervous, but his body was much less tense.

"Hi Hagrid," Hermione said as he met them outside his hut.

"Hermione, Harry," he greeted them sadly with a sniffle.

"You're not still going on about that Dragon, are you?" Filch asked derisively as he approached with Malfoy following sulkily behind. "You're going into the forest tonight. Got to have your wits about you."

With those rather ominous words, Filch left Malfoy with them and skulked back to the castle, his lantern held high in the moonless night.

"Right," Hagrid said, shaking off his melancholy and picking up his crossbow. "We'd best get to work. Come on, Fang!"

With a whimper, Fang walked out of the hut and bounded after them.

“What are we after exactly?” Malfoy asked.

“Dunno,” Hagrid said, then came to an abrupt stop and nearly causing Hermione to crash into him. “Look.”

Walking a short distance away, Hagrid bent down and dipped his fingers into a small pool of liquid silver on the forest floor.

“Unicorn Blood,” he said heavily. “One of ‘ems been hurt, and not long ago judgin’ by this. Let’s see if we can find ‘em ‘fore it’s too late.”

“Wait until my father hears about this,” Malfoy hissed. “This is far too dangerous for students to be doing. Aren’t there Werewolves and Vampires out here?”

“Werewolves only change on the full moon and there are no Vampires living in England,” Harry said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “But if you’re too scared, feel free to run back up to the castle. I’m sure Filch can find you some bed pans to scrub.”

Hermione covered her smile with her hand as Malfoy scowled at him.

“I’m not scared, Potter!” he hissed, only to squeak and whirl around as a stick snapped out of the range of their wand light. “What was that?”

“Sounded like a stick,” Harry said smartly.

This time, Hermione couldn’t hold back a chuff of laughter. Malfoy glared at her with a malicious sneer.

“How dare you laugh at me, you –”

“Quiet,” Hagrid said in a hushed tone. “We’re not gonna track anything with you three bickerin’. Maybe we should split up. Hermione, you come with me, Harry, you an’ Malfoy go that way.”

“Er, Hagrid, maybe it would be best if Hermione and I went together and you stayed with Malfoy,” Harry said. “We can send up sparks if we see anything.”

Hagrid looked between the three of them as Malfoy scowled petulantly.

“You’re probably right,” he admitted. “Don’t go too far. It’s easy ter get lost at night. And don’t go chasin’ after anythin’. Just send up sparks and stay put ‘til I get there. Understand?”

With nods from both of them, Harry and Hermione took off down a trail to the right, while Hagrid, Malfoy, and Fang went left. The darkness was oppressive as the sounds of the Forest carried on around them. Hermione stayed close to him as she looked around nervously, her shoulder constantly bumping into his almost as if to reassure herself that he was still there.

Ahead of them, they suddenly heard the sound of hooves pounding along ground before the entire forest seemed to go silent.

“What was that?” Hermione asked in a hoarse, scared whisper.

“Get behind me,” Harry said, pulling her back to shield her.

Even with all his skills and knowledge, things had already changed, and he couldn’t be certain of anything.

“Lumos Maxima,” Harry said, lashing his wand out like a whip.

The bright ball of light jumped from the end of his wand and stopped to hover thirty feet in front of them and twenty feet in the air, illuminating the forest in front of them. Hermione jumped and whine as there, not ten feet from them, Quirrell, covered in a heavy black cloak, sat atop a still kicking Unicorn, gorging on its blood. Nearby, a young, golden foul stood by and watched helplessly.

As the light spilled over him, Quirrell looked up, his face covered in shadow and his mouth gleaming with dripping quicksilver. Slowly, he raised himself up and glided inches off the ground towards them. Behind Harry, Hermione tugged at his jumper, trying to pull him back. But he stood his ground and leveled his wand.

“Stupify!” he yelled loudly.

The bright red Stunning Hex flew past Quirrell as he slipped to the side, but Harry wasn’t expecting it to hit. He was only trying to call attention to himself, hoping for someone to intervene before he had to show more of his skill than he wanted to. As Quirrell floated upright and landed on his feet, Harry clutched his wand, ready to fight if he must.

The sound of rapidly galloping hooves brought a wave of relief. Just like last time, Firenze leapt from the brush and reared at Quirrell, nearly knocking him over. With an inhuman hiss, he turned tail and flew along the ground off into the darkness.

“Harry Potter, it is too dangerous for you to be out here,” Firenze said.

“Hold that thought,” Harry said.

“Harry!” Hermione yelled as he took off running towards the Unicorn.

Sliding on his knees, he came to a stop next to it, watching as its chest rose and fell in weak, labored breaths. It was still alive, but only just.

"It is too far gone, Harry Potter. There is nothing you can do," Firenze said sadly.

"I can try," Harry said, looking at the foul.

He didn't have the first clue on how to treat Unicorns, but he knew how to trust in his magic. Not a minute ago, he was willing to risk his own safety to keep his abilities a secret, but now, watching a foul about to lose what was presumably its mother, he couldn't stop himself from acting.

Holding the tip of his wand over the gaping wound in the Unicorn's neck, Harry focused on what he wanted. Slowly, with intense concentration, the wound began to close. He didn't know how long it took, but when the last of the skin sealed itself back together, Harry felt utterly exhausted.

Reaching down, he ran his hand along the smooth hair on the Unicorn's side, feeling its breathing steadily becoming stronger. Hearing leaves crunch, he looked up to see the foul walk up cautiously and nudge its mother's nose with its own. Weakly, the Unicorn pushed back. Harry smiled as the foul neighed, its horn glowing gold for a brief moment. It looked like the Unicorn would make it.

He looked up at Hermione, only to swallow thickly when he saw not only her and Firenze, but Hagrid, Malfoy, and two other Centaurs, one he recognized as Bane, all staring back at him in surprise. Harry mentally cursed as he scratched the back of his neck, frantically thinking of a way to explain this.

"Harry, how-" Hermione broke off, shaking her head.

Harry could only shrug.

"I don't know," he said, which was mostly true. "I just wanted her to get better."

"Great job, Harry," Hagrid said, beaming. "Yeh saved her life fer sure, though she'll still prolly be weak fer a few days."

"We'll watch over the Unicorn until it is strong enough," The older Centaur he couldn't name told him while still watching Harry closely. "The forest is not safe, Hagrid."

"Yeah, righ'." Hagrid said sheepishly. "Suppose I should be getting' this lot back to the castle. C'mon, kids."

Glad to be getting out of there, Harry patted the Unicorn gently and stood. He'd only gotten a couple of steps when he felt a tug on his jumper. When he turned back, he found the fowl pulling at him gently with its teeth. Looking at it curiously, he watched as its horn glowed a bright gold. Harry basked in the warmth of the magic radiating outward when it suddenly bent forward and touched its horn to his hand.

The golden magic quickly spread up his arm in a wave until it covered his whole body. It was the most calm and serene feeling he had ever experienced as the warmth spread over him. A moment later the glow faded to nothing, but the warmth and calm lingered on.

"Harry, are you alright? What was that?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"That is a very special gift," Firenze said slowly.

Harry looked down at the fowl, and suddenly, he knew her name.

"Thank you, Sara," Harry said, rubbing her head.

She leaned into his touch, and when he stopped, she walked back over to her mother and laid down protectively next to her head. With a smile and a wave, Harry turned and walked back to Hermione who was watching him closely. He knew he would be bombarded with questions, but right now, the calm he felt wouldn't allow him to worry.

"Thanks for chasing that thing off, by the way," Harry said to Firenze.

"You're welcome, Harry Potter," he said, bowing his head.

"Yeah, thanks fer lookin' out fer him, Firenze," Hagrid said. "I best get them back to the castle, night Bane, Magorian."

On the long trek back to the castle, Hermione bombarded him with questions about how he healed the Unicorn, and what that glow did to him. Behind her curiosity, he could see her very real concern for him. Smiling, he assured her he was fine, but played ignorant about how he healed the Unicorn. Truthfully, he didn't understand how he was able to use such magics, but he was glad he could. Although, in the future, he would need to be more careful about when he did things like that, if it could at all be helped.

Harry was tired and ready for bed by the time they returned to the empty common room, but Hermione pulled him to a stop before he could climb the stairs.

"I just wanted to say thank you," Hermione said, her cheeks flushed as she avoided his eyes. "That was really brave of you, protecting me like that. I was just so scared, I couldn't move."

"It's alright, Hermione," Harry told her with a smile. "Everyone gets scared."

"But I was useless," Hermione said, hugging her arms around herself. "The hat wanted to put me in Ravenclaw, but I told it I wanted to be in Gryffindor, like Dumbledore. What if it was right? What if I'm not brave enough to be a Gryffindor?"

“You’re plenty brave, Hermione,” Harry said, wrapping his arms around her in a comforting hug until she relax and hugged him back. “You could’ve run away and left me there by myself, but you didn’t. Even though you were scared, you still stayed with me, and I’m grateful for that.”

“I couldn’t just leave you to fight by yourself,” Hermione mumbled into his chest.

“Exactly,” he told her with a smile. “Could you imagine someone like Malfoy staying there with me? I bet my vault he would have screamed his head off and run straight back to the castle.”

Hermione gave a watery chuckle, “You’re probably right. He’s not exactly the brave sort, is he?”

“Definitely not,” Harry agreed.

“But I haven’t exactly made a lot of friends here,” Hermione said. “Not like you. What if I should have gone to Ravenclaw?”

“You know, the Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin,” Harry admitted.

Hermione pulled back just enough to stare up at him, her eyes wide in surprise.

“Really?” she asked.

“Yeah, apparently it would ‘help me on my way to greatness’, or some rubbish,” Harry said with a snort. “The only greatness I would’ve achieved in that house was murdering Malfoy and Snape in their sleep.”

Hermione tried to give him a stern look, but it was ruined by a smile twitching at the corners of her lips.

“See, forget that stupid hat,” Harry said with a small smile. “You chose Gryffindor and that’s what matters, not what some motheaten rag or anyone else thinks. And as for friends, you’ve got me, and I know Daphne and Susan consider you a friend, and Tonks, and Penny. I know you don’t get along well with Lavender or Parvati, but you get along with Fay and Sally-Anne just fine.”

“I guess,” Hermione said smiling shyly before hugging him tightly. “Thank you.”

Harry smiled as he hugged her back and rubbed her back gently. They stayed like that for a few seconds before pulling back and looking at each other from just a few inches apart. Before he even realized what he was doing, Harry leaned forwards and kissed her softly on the lips.

He wasn’t sure what made him do it. Maybe it was because he finally felt like he was getting his closest friend back, maybe it was because she just looked so cute smiling up at him, or maybe, it was just because he’d always wanted to but never had the courage before it was too late. In his old future, he knew her marriage to Ron wasn’t the happiest. She’d come to him in tears more times than he could count, and he’d always regretted not telling her how he felt. When Ron and Hermione had started getting together, Harry had been solely focused on ending Voldemort with the certainty of death constantly lingering in the back of his mind. At the time, he’d just wanted his friends to be happy, and hadn’t really thought about his own happiness until it was too late.

Hermione stiffened when their lips connected, but she surprised him with how fast she relaxed and melted against him, her breasts pressing against his chest while her lips moved with his. Cautiously, Harry ran his tongue along her bottom lip. With a light, breathy moan, her lips parted, and he could taste her breath as her tongue touched his tentatively. Seconds later, they were snogging heatedly, his hands moving down to cup her bum while one of hers ran through his hair.

Eventually, they pulled apart to catch their breath, and Harry thought Hermione looked absolutely adorable as she stared at him flushed and breathless.

“We – we really shouldn’t be doing this here,” she said, nervously looking around the empty common room.

Harry smiled at her, knowing it was just her nerves getting to her as she tried to think through and analyze everything in that brilliant mind of hers. Reaching out, he grabbed her hand.

"Follow me," he said with a lopsided grin.

Leading her over to a tapestry of a prancing lion hanging near the boy's staircase. Taking out his wand, he the small Gryffindor crest hidden in the background near the tail. With a quiet click, the tail sprang out like a door handle and the wall behind the tapestry popped open to reveal a room hidden behind. As Harry pulled the door open the rest of the way, torches sprang to life and lit up the surprisingly large, private bedroom with a large, ornate desk, bookshelves, and a wardrobe.

"What is this?" Hermione asked.

"It's the room used by the Head Boy, if they're in Gryffindor," Harry said. "The Head Girl's room is hidden on the first-floor landing of the stairs to the girl's dorms, so I can't get into that one."

"How did you even know this was here?" Hermione asked, staring around the room in awe.

Harry smiled at her, knowing it was her dream to one day be Head Girl.

"Fred and George showed me," Harry lied.

Well, it wasn't entirely untrue. They had showed him where it was and how to get in, but that had been back in his old time in his third year when they needed him to play look out so they could prank Percy. He doubted she would ask them about it, and even if she did, it would be expected for them to deny it.

Walking up behind Hermione, Harry wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed the side of her neck. Turning in his arms, she looked at him nervously.

“Harry, I don’t know if I’m ready to, um...” she said, trailing off awkwardly.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” Harry said, brushing her hair behind her ear.

Leaning forward slowly, Harry kissed her again as his hands slipped under the hem of her jumper and touched the bare skin of her waist. Hermione inhaled sharply through her nose, arms wrapping lightly around his shoulders as they kissed. He kissed her slowly while his fingers ghosted lightly over her smooth, soft skin, her muscles occasionally twitching under his gentle touch. Harry wanted to give her time to relax and get comfortable with him, but she surprised by, rather bravely, sliding her hands down his chest and slipping them under his shirt.

Breaking the kiss, he smiled at her as he rested his forehead against hers. Hermione smiled shyly at him, her cheeks flushed pink as her fingers traced along the panes of his abs. Grabbing the hem of her jumper, he tugged it upwards while looking at her in askance.

Biting her lip, Hermione hesitated just a moment before nodding. She lifted her arms as he pulled the jumper up over her head, baring her bra covered chest and causing her bushy mane of hair to puff up wildly. As she smoothed it out, Harry grabbed his own shirt and pulled it over his head. While Hermione’s eyes raked over him, he took a moment to drink her in. Her bra was quite plain but looked a size too small which made her breasts bulge up over the top. Compressed by the tight fabric, they looked quite a bit larger than he’d expected them to be.

Trailing his eyes down, she was surprisingly fit, with a thin, tiny waist and defined abs. Harry realized he’d been staring a bit too long when he noticed her start to fidget with her hands. Looking back up at her nervous face, he smiled and pulled her close.

“You’re beautiful, Hermione,” he told her softly.

As she smiled back at him, Harry grabbed her hand and led her over to the bed. Sitting on the edge, he pulled her forward until she was straddling his lap on her knees. Tilting his head up, he kissed the column of her throat. As he worked his way down to her collarbone, his hands trailed down her back to cup her small, firm bum through her tight jeans. Hermione’s hands threaded

through his hair, a small moan leaving her lips as he kissed and sucked at her skin. Slowly, he made his way down to kiss the tops of her breasts. He smiled as her fingers tightened slightly in his hair and she gently tugged him closer.

Sliding his hand up her back, he toyed with the clasp of her bra, letting her know his intent and giving her plenty of time to stop him. When she didn't, he unhooked the clasp which caused her bra to spring forward as the tension was released. Harry continued kissing her chest as he reached up and slipped the straps down her shoulder.

Hermione let go of his hair, her hands trembling just slightly as her bra fell down into his lap. Her pale, perky breasts jutted from her chest with light pink areolas capped with slightly darker, small, red nipples. Sliding his hands up her sides, Harry cupped her full, soft breasts, more than large enough to fill his hands as he caressed them gently.

Leaning forward, he buried his face between her warm, fleshy mounds and kissed the center of her chest. Hermione ran her fingers through his hair with a moan as he turned his head to the side and began kissing his way along the inside of one of them. Harry alternated between soft kiss, gentle sucked, and lightly grazing his teeth over her delicate skin as he inched his way towards the tip while Hermione panted lightly above him.

Suddenly, he opened his mouth and wrapped his lips around her entire areola, his tongue circling around the stiff nub in the middle as he sucked lightly. Hermione gasped, arching her back just before a low moan left her lips.

Lifting her up, Harry turned to the side and laid her down on her back, settling on his knees between her legs. His prominent bulge ground against her mound through their jeans while he switched to the other breast, his hand cupping and caressing the one he abandoned. Hermione moaned under him, her hips bucking lightly.

After spending quite some time playing with her breasts, leaving both with small, red love bits, Harry kissed his way down her stomach. As he reached for the button of her jeans though, her hands grabbed his, causing him to look up at her.

"I don't think I'm ready for that," Hermione said breathlessly.

"Alright," Harry said, placing a kiss just above the waistband.

"Sorry," she said.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," he told her as he crawled back up her body and kissed her on the lips.

"It's just – I know you've done a lot more with the other girls and -"

"And it doesn't matter what I do with them," Harry interrupted gently. "This isn't a competition, Hermione."

"Thank you," she said with a grateful smile, then bit her lip nervously. "So, what does this mean, for us?"

"What do you want it to mean?" Harry asked in return.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I like you, Harry. I just don't know if I want to be with someone that already with so many other girls. You've already got two or three mistresses, you still need two wives, and then there's the other girls like Tonks and Penny who still don't know what they want. I – I just don't know how I feel about all that."

Harry smiled at her, trying to hide the disappointment he felt, even though he could understand it.

"Then how about we just stay close friends who occasionally act like a couple until you know how you feel about it?" Harry asked.

“You mean like friends with benefits?” Hermione asked, her lips twitching.

“If you want to call it that,” Harry said, smiling at her.

“I think I can live with that, for now,” Hermione replied with a smile.

“So, does that mean I get to do more of this?” Harry asked.

Leaning down, he kissed her deeply, his tongue dancing with hers for several seconds until he pulled back, leaving her breathless.

“Yes,” Hermione said, looking a little daze.

“And this?” he asked, sliding down to take one of her nipples between her lips.

Hermione’s only response was a light moan as she arched her back. Smiling, he stayed with her in the unused Head Boy’s room for quite a bit longer, though they didn’t go any further than they already had.

For the first time in weeks, Harry had to relieve himself by hand behind the silenced curtains of his four-poster bed. Despite that, he still fell asleep with a smile on his face.

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He didn’t know entirely how, but Susan, Tonks, and Daphne, who joined them at the Gryffindor table for breakfast that morning, instantly noticed something was different between them.

“Well, it’s about time,” Daphne said, smirking at Hermione’s blush.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hermione said.

“Aw, come one, ‘Mione, no need to be embarrassed,” Tonks said, bumping her shoulder teasingly. “So, how far did you two get last night?”

As Tonks wiggled her eyebrows, Hermione looked at Harry, who could only shrug his shoulder.

“We... kissed,” Hermione admitted blushing.

“I’m so happy for you,” Susan said, hugging her from the side. “Harry’s a really good kisser, isn’t he?”

“Just wait until he kisses you lower down,” Tonks added with a salacious grin.

Hermione’s face went bright red as she covered her face. A moment later, she looked across the table at Harry.

“How do you put up with her?” she asked.

“You get used to it,” Harry said with a shrug.

Thankfully, Tonks eased up on the teasing as she and Susan tried to get more details out of her. Harry smiled as he watched Hermione gradually relax and start a playful banter with the other girls. As the Great Hall filled up, and they were joined by Sue and Penny, along with his female teammates for a bit.

He was so glad to see Hermione making friends, he never noticed some of the older Gryffindor’s glare at him for further down the table.