

# Breaking the Limits

*by dumbles*

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## A Tarnished Beginning

*Chapter 1 of 1*

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He sat there amid the glowing hall and joyous voices, not feeling a thing. How could someone feel when all was lost. They all disagreed, of course, everyone was just happy to be back. Food lined the plates in front of them, and the ceiling overhead, bewitched to show the sky outside, was a clear blue with stars beginning to shine.

"Dennis," whispered Natalie urgently, "eat something. You're skinny enough as it is, try and eat."

The voice sounded as if it was miles away, part of some other world that he no longer belonged to. He looked down the long House table and caught the eye of another like him.

But she wasn't like him, not really. She seemed perfectly content with the circumstances. Laughing aloud with all of her friends, enjoying the feast, happy to be back at Hogwarts. No, she wasn't like him, even if she had suffered as well.

Suddenly, she was behind him. "Let's go," Ginny said, and she pulled him up from the table. They slipped out of the Great Hall, trying to leave unnoticed by the rest of the school. He had no idea where she could be taking him; surely if they were missed, they'd be in great trouble, especially on the first day of term.

Before his mind could comprehend it, a door had materialized out of nowhere. Dennis and Ginny entered the room, which appeared to be a cozy little room, perfect for talking. Pillows littered the floor, and Ginny plopped down on them, motioning for Dennis to join her.

"Let's talk."

As soon as he was seated, he nodded and waited for her to begin, but instead she stared at him with such intensity that tears began to well up in his eyes.

"Dennis, I know you're upset. It's perfectly okay to be upset, and I'm not telling you not to be. You need to understand that by forcing yourself to only feel sadness, and no other emotions, you're only increasing your vulnerability. He never would've wanted you to be like this, Den, you know he wouldn't."

Dennis shook his head, "No, he wouldn't. He would've thought that I should be ecstatic that everyone is free now and that he died for a cause and and..."

He couldn't speak anymore, he was choking on sobs.

"I know how you feel," Ginny said soothingly, "I miss my brother everyday. I feel his absence weighing down on me at all times."

"But you don't!" Dennis spluttered before he could help himself, "You don't know at all! You've got five other brothers that are still alive! Your boyfriend survived, so did your best friend. Your parents are still alive, and almost all of your friends are too! And I've lost my only brother. Yeah, losing your brother hurts, I'm sure, but you have so many others, and you knew the odds! Colin was underage, it shouldn't have happened! How can you say you know how I feel?"

The fierce look in her eyes grew stronger, and tears that were sure to come had been yielded with all of her might. When she spoke, she spoke softly and carefully, choosing each word individually.

"Don't think for one minute that because I have other brothers, that Fred's loss isn't just as great." Her voice shook a little, but she plowed on. "Not only is Fred d-dead, but George isn't the same person, and being around him makes Fred's absence twice as great. My mum spends her days crying, and Percy it doesn't feel like we have him back. It feels like someone else has joined us. He's not the pompous git he once was, but he's not a good brother either. He thinks it's his fault that Fred is dead, and he's about as bad as you. If you think that Fred's death shouldn't affect us because there are more of us, because we survived against the odds, because they're all overage except me, you're so far from the truth you wouldn't be able to Apparate there if you had your license."

Dennis searched Ginny's eyes, hoping to find some sense of anger, but there wasn't a trace. All he found within her strong gaze was understanding, sadness, and pleading for him to understand. He nodded to acknowledge her words, but could say nothing else.

*I wish I had a box of tissues* he thought, and out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a box that hadn't been there previously. He dabbed his eyes and looked at Ginny.

"I'm not sure if you've put two and two together, Dennis, but Colin was in my year." He smacked his forehead. How could he have forgotten? Surely Ginny had been an acquaintance of Colin's at the least. The next time she spoke, she had steadied her voice. "We were close, very close. We were both members of Dumbledore's Army, both underage, and both desperate to make the world a better place." She paused and looked over him carefully.

"I don't think you're ready yet, but when you feel that you are, come talk to me. Harry told me something about death that has made Fred's loss immensely easier to deal with. It could help you, but you need to be ready to hear the secret."

"A secret?" he said in disbelief. "You think some secret is going to make the fact that Colin can't breathe or walk or talk anymore easier to deal with? You've got to be kidding me."

"Dennis," Ginny pleaded, "that's how I can tell that you're not ready. When you feel ready, come talk to me." She slowly stood up and offered him a hand. "Now, we better get going. The feast will be over soon, and we'll need the password to get into Gryffindor Tower, so let's hurry."

Dennis and Ginny left the room and found themselves opposite a tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy being clubbed by trolls. Shock filled Dennis as he realized where they'd been. He glanced back to where the door had been, but it was no longer there. He hadn't recognized it, as last time he'd been inside it had been filled with hammocks and hangings of every house but Slytherin, with steps and a passageway leading to the Hogs Head.

Dennis was much more aware of his surroundings as he journeyed through the castle alongside Ginny this time. The castle had a weird feeling about it. From the moment last year when Voldemort had been defeated, accomplished witches and wizards set to the task of rebuilding the ancient castle to its former glory. Much of it seemed to be exactly as it was prior to the great battle that had taken place within these corridors, yet newer. Other parts of the castle were strangely different. Some of the Dark Magic had left its mark upon the place, and the damage from some of the curses had proved impossible to remove. Then again, some of the areas had been repaired, but only after the architecture had been changed to allow the repair. It gave the returning students an odd feeling; the new and strange mixed with the old and familiar, an uncomfortable feeling that summarized how it felt to be back after the tragedies of last year.

As their path took them closer to Gryffindor Tower, they ran into Jimmy Peakes. Dennis and Jimmy were in the same year and were friendly, but Ginny was the first to greet him as they were fellow members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Dennis swallowed hard. He knew that Jimmy and Colin had both snuck back in last year to fight the battle, something that Dennis had chosen against.

"Password?" the Fat Lady asked. Jimmy stepped forward and smiled at her.

"Moldyshorts!" Jimmy yelled, and the Fat Lady's portrait swung forward to admit them to the Common Room as she called from within her frame, "That he most certainly is!"

After climbing through the portrait hole, they were greeted by Natalie. Ginny took off towards the corner of the common room that contained her friends, and Dennis glanced toward the steps that lead to the dormitories, hoping for an escape.

Jimmy looked nervously at Natalie and decided to run for it, as she looked terrifying when she was angry and concerned.

"Dennis!" Natalie cried, "Where have you been? You disappeared at the feast, and you wouldn't even eat. Where did you get off to?" Her face was stricken and she looked extremely concerned.

All thoughts of escape fled from Dennis as he saw her face. Natalie McDonald had been Dennis' best friend from the first moment he stepped foot inside the Gryffindor Common Room. He remembered how they had huddled in the corner, excited first years, discussing the excursion across the lake, how Dennis had fallen in, and how something had pushed him back into the boat. They had gone over and over the Sorting, and the comments that the Sorting Hat had secretly told them before announcing their House to the entire Great Hall.

"Natty," Dennis said softly, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for worrying you, I really am. I'm not used to him being gone, and I won't be for a while. I'm sorry I haven't been talking to you, and I'm sorry I'm not myself, but I'm not ready to deal with this. I'm going to go get some sleep, and maybe I'll be ready to talk in the morning."

Natalie looked doubtful as she watched Dennis head towards the spiral staircase, but let him go.

"I really am sorry," Dennis muttered one more time before disappearing up the stairs. He found the door labeled 'FIFTH YEARS' and entered to find his good old four-poster bed. He flopped onto it and drew the hangings shut, lost in thoughts of Colin, the Room of Requirement, and secrets of death.

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"You look awful! You've got bags under your eyes! Your clothes aren't on straight; your hair is a mess; you..."

"I get it, Natty, thanks," Dennis said. He knew she was just concerned, but her incessant comments were more than he could bear at the moment. True, he was talking again, and he'd had a bit of eggs and bacon at breakfast, but he wasn't back to his normal self, at least, not yet.

Professor McGonagall came through handing out the course schedules. It looked as if they had Transfiguration first, with the Ravenclaws. Dennis turned to Natty, his mouth open ready to ask his question, but she beat him to it.

"Professor McGonagall said last night, in the speech you didn't feel the need to attend, that she'll be filling in as Gryffindor Head of House until later this morning, when our new Transfiguration teacher and Head of House arrives. Apparently the person has some business with the Ministry or something, I don't know. I do wonder who it is though. Professor McGonagall refuses to give any hints and says she's much too busy to worry about insignificant matters like our curiosity when asked. Personally, I think she just enjoys holding this over us. She knows how excited we are."

"Breathe, Natty!" Dennis said, laughing. It felt good to laugh, to endure one of Natty's trademark rants.

After breakfast, Dennis and Natalie made their way back to Gryffindor Tower alongside the rest of the Gryffindors and grabbed their bags before heading off to class. Ginny took Dennis aside as he reentered the common room.

"How are you?" she asked in a kind, but concerned tone.

"Better," he admitted. "How's the N.E.W.T. course schedule?"

"Loaded!" she cried, glad to be on a new topic. "But at least I don't have nine or so classes to worry about like I did O.W.L. year. What about you?"

"It's nice and full, but it can't possibly be as bad as everyone says. Honestly, the fact that some fifth years are always up in the common room late at night is ridiculous! I don't think that'll happen," Dennis told her.

"Oh, you just wait and see; I can't wait to tell you I told you so." Ginny smirked.

"Come on, Den, let's go, or we'll be late to our first class," Natalie said, ushering him out of the portrait hole.

"Bye," Ginny said.

Before he knew it, Natalie had dragged him all the way down to McGonagall's old classroom. He entered the room to see that the Professor had not yet arrived. Dennis and Natalie took seats together next to Jimmy.

As they waited for the Professor to arrive, they grasped around for a comfortable topic of discussion and landed on Quidditch.

"So is the new captain going to make you try out again?" Dennis asked. "Who is the new captain, by the way? Ginny?"

"Nah, she didn't want it, I suspect," Jimmy said. "They gave it to Demelza, which is smart since she'll be around for another year after this. She was thrilled, and I can understand why, after all that happened to her family being hunted last year. I bet this really cheered her up." He paused, noticing that his comment had created tension among the three, but then continued. "Ginny's dealt with enough. Being captain is an honor, but I think she could do without that additional responsibilities. You know what happened to the whole Weasley family, all the losses and..."

At that point, Jimmy was cut short by the entrance of the Professor. None other than Percy Weasley strode up to the front of the classroom. Dennis glanced to his sides to reveal his shock mirrored in Natalie and Jimmy's faces.

"Good morning class, please take your seats," Percy called. His manner was unlike that which he had had as a Prefect, Head Boy, and Ministry Official. His ability to command respect was intact, but apart from that, it was clear he'd been through a great deal. He still sported his horn-rimmed glasses.

"My name is Professor Weasley. Some of you may have siblings who were at Hogwarts in my time. I graduated the year before the lot of you arrived. I was Prefect and Head Boy in my time, and worked for the Ministry for a spell as well, so I know how to deal with miscreants. I am hoping that includes none of you. I received an Outstanding mark on my Transfiguration O.W.L. and my N.E.W.T. If you have any other questions concerning my abilities, please come find me at another time and I'd be happy to discuss the matter with you.

"As for this coming year," he continued, "the work load will be extremely difficult. Do not expect to get off easily with a new teacher. I intend to teach you all you need to know in order to receive excellent marks on your O.W.L.s. I've decided to cut you a break and refrain from a full out speech on the workload for O.W.L. year, as I'm sure you'll receive one in absolutely every class. But just because I will not be lecturing you on the difficulty of the work does not mean that this year in Transfiguration will not be extremely difficult. If you have trouble mastering the work that is done in class, you will be assigned extra homework to complete in addition to the regularly assigned homework. Do not expect for me to buy lame excuses. You've been well warned, so now, let us start with the first lesson. We will begin with Vanishing Spells."

Professor Weasley handed out snails to everyone, and the class set to work attempting to vanish them. It was by far the most complex magic they'd encountered yet and was proving extremely difficult. As for Weasley's beginning-of-class speech, he seemed to spend quite a bit of time devoted to O.W.L.s for someone who "decided to cut you a break and refrain from a full out speech on the workload for O.W.L. year."

Percy walked around muttering words of encouragement to students, or correcting their improper technique. He flashed a reassuring smile at Dennis' failed attempt at vanishing his snail and continued around the room. When he approached Stewart Ackerley, he bent over and whispered, "Glad to see that you're back after last year. I know it must have been tough for you, but you can feel safe at Hogwarts now."

Dennis was perplexed with what this meant, and Natty didn't seem to be able to make sense of it either. Under cover of the attempts at vanishing spells all across the room, Dennis picked up his bag, crossed to the table Stewart was sitting at, and pulled up a chair next to him.

"Hi, Dennis," Stewart said. "How's it going?"

"Fine, Stew. Listen, I was wondering, what was Professor Weasley talking about when he said that he was glad to see that you're back?"

A dark look flashed across Stew's face, and he grew extremely pale. "Are you sure you want to know? It's not exactly a happy story."

"I'm sure," Dennis said firmly, "Please tell."