

Hermione's Corruption

by Rowan of the Mist

The Final Battle has arrived three years after graduation but a dark figure is watching Hermione. Are the stranger's intentions innocent or malevolent? And how will this affect the Golden Trio?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 4

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Chapter One

The darkness seemed to be coming from every direction with amazing swiftness, and she could feel the life ebbing from her body as her blood drained freely from mortal wounds. She had the impression of footsteps coming towards her, but as she strained to listen, the sounds only seemed to grow fainter. *Probably going away now that they see I'm as good as dead.* The strong cold hands that lifted her upper body from the ground didn't register in her waning consciousness, nor did the owner's urging her to drink.

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The battlefield had been raging with the efforts to defeat Lord Voldemort. Hermione had been fighting near Ron and Harry when a Death Eater's curse had hit her. The dark-clad figure took advantage of her weakened state and continued to torture her slowly despite the chaos surrounding them-then left her to die when she lost consciousness and was no longer interesting prey. She remembered wondering when she fell how her friends were faring and regretted never having the chance to say goodbye.

Witches and wizards had apparated to face each other on an expanse of ground in the West Country. That's when he first noticed her. Through much of school, he hadn't liked the pesky know-it-all. The blood prejudices that had been ingrained in him since infancy wouldn't allow it, but he did respect her amazing intellect and wit. Grudgingly, he also admitted that she had become quite beautiful by their final year, and she had only grown more so since their graduation three years past. When the fighting began, he lost track of her in the melee. The field, suddenly full of lethal rainbow lights, forced all the combatants to focus on the tasks at hand. Then, as he spun away from yet another stream of blue, he caught sight of a hooded figure leaving a witch to bleed to death as it raced off to rejoin the fray. Recognizing the bushy hair, and making short work of his own recent adversary, he sped to her side.

She was nearly gone and he knew he didn't have much time. Quickly slicing the base of his thumb, watching the contrast of scarlet on ivory, he forced her mouth open. "Come on, Granger," he growled. "Drink!" He didn't know why he was doing this; it was really baffling the longer he thought on it.

When he thought she might have had enough he removed his thumb and watched as it healed itself. Again making sure no one was paying any attention to him, and finding everyone keenly interested in staying alive, he picked her gently up and carried her to the forest behind them. Then he waited.

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Hermione awoke quickly, feeling very odd. She saw trees above her, but didn't have much time to dwell on the change of scenery before her body began to jerk violently

and her insides felt like they were curling up inside her. *That Death Eater left me for dead. What is going on?* Suddenly, the shaking stopped, and she felt her heart give one final pump and then die. Putting her hand to her chest, that was now absent of a heartbeat, and seeing that her body had healed, she knew there was only one explanation. "But how," she asked aloud.

"I would have thought you knew the answer to that by now. Weren't you the smartest in our class?"

A voice she recognized from the past came from the shadows, but all she saw in the dim light of the trees were two silver eyes staring back at her.

"Face me like a man, Malfoy!"

Draco came striding out of the darkness and sneered, "Technically, I'm no longer a man."

Temporarily at a loss for words, Hermione asked the only thing that came into her mind. "When did you become one?" Immediately realizing how rude her question was, she flushed as only a vampire can. The little amount of blood that he had let her drink traveled to the apples of her cheeks while the rest of her remained pale as death.

Draco smiled indulgently and she saw the flash of sharp teeth in his perfect mouth. "I was on one of Voldemort's crusades. A curse hit me from behind and I was left for dead, like you. As I was dying, I realized it was futile to try to survive when night was drawing near and the animals would come to me, even if I wasn't dead yet."

Hermione shuddered inside at his frankness.

"Then I heard something, but the woman who appeared came so quickly and silently that I never knew from which direction. I thought she was going to finish me off when I saw her flash her teeth at me, but instead she whispered, 'So pretty' and let me drink from her wrist. I knew what would happen to me if I did, but I also knew I didn't want to die there." He smiled wryly at the irony that he could cheat death forever in his new state.

"Her name was Morgana," he continued. "She hailed from Romania, nearly 400 years ago. She was 22 when she died, and I must say, the centuries have kept her in high form. She taught me what I needed to know, then left me two weeks later." Draco sat down on the forest floor next to Hermione with the air of a king, making her feel honored to be in his presence.

"I re-joined the Death Eaters, letting no one know of my present condition." Draco ran an aristocratic hand through his gorgeous white blond locks.

Hermione fully realized his beauty at that moment and saw that being a vampire had made him truly exquisite.

Shaking herself from her reverie she asked, "Why save me? I thought you would be glad to rid the world, and consequently yourself, of Mudblood Granger." Hermione studied him to see what kind of answer he would give her.

"You already know why, don't you...Hermione?"

She gaped at him. That was definitely not the answer she had expected, and then he had used her first name! She stared into his slate eyes finding desire burning in their depths.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I think I do." She leaned toward him. "How long have you wanted me?" Hermione ran her tongue seductively across her lower lip, teasingly. *He's gorgeous; I do have to admit that any woman - dead or alive - would love to have him. And I'm one of them.*

Running his long fingers through her thick, curly hair, enjoying the shivers it sent down her spine, he replied, "Since our last year at Hogwarts. You were Head Girl and I was Head Boy and working in constant proximity with you was hell." He sighed and looked her in the eyes, never wavering in his intent gaze. "I kept hoping you would give me the time of day long enough to see that I was interested."

Hermione snuggled closer to his side, inhaling his spicy, exotic scent and said, "I'm sorry, Draco, but I thought you loathed me so I just let you be."

He saw her pointed teeth as she smiled and suddenly realized why they were hiding in the forest.

"I'm sorry, kitten. You must be hungry."

Hermione looked startled by those words, but then grew used to the idea and began licking her lips in anticipation. "Yes, I am, Draco," she purred.

Standing up with all the dignity of a pureblood, he gave her his hand and pulled her gently to him. "Come then, we mustn't keep such beauty waiting."

Walking towards the edge of the forest, peering between the trees, they could see the sun was fading from the horizon and the War had ended. Voldemort's body was hanging from a tree not far from where they stood. Draco risked a glance at his arm; the Dark Mark was growing more faint by the moment.

The field was also eerily empty and fear quickly took hold of them. Draco pulled her back into the cover of the woods. "Someone may have seen me take you into the forest, thinking I meant to harm you. Go out there alone, tell your friends someone rescued you and managed to keep you hidden from Death Eaters in the final duration. You have no idea who it was that saved your life as you were too weak from your wounds to focus on his face. But make sure your overzealous friends know that your mysterious knight also had the foresight to bind your injuries, otherwise they'll gallivant across the United Kingdom to castrate the poor sod in a pathetic show for your honor." Draco shared a mutual chuckle with Hermione before he caressed her face one last time, kissed her forehead and was gone with a swish of his black cloak.

His lips left a tingling spot and the searing sensation of passion within her. Hermione smiled to herself, knowing without a doubt that he would return to her. He had saved her life and made her one with himself by sharing his vampiric blood.

Hermione could distinguish his blood from her own as it coursed through her veins. His was powerful. It seemed to dominate her at times. Innately, she knew there was an irrevocable connection between them. All she would have to do to make him come to her was call.

Hermione walked cautiously out of the forest as the light completely faded. Once out in the open field swathed in darkness, she moved with confidence through the sea of motionless bodies. Realizing she had crossed the length of shattered battlefield in mere seconds, she smiled wickedly. Vampires had superhuman strength and moved three times faster than humans. "This could definitely have advantages," she mused.

Even realizing her new powers, she felt vulnerable being out in the open in the unnaturally silent night. Suddenly, she saw people running through the field with wands lit, obviously searching the bodies for someone in particular. It seemed that no one on the ground was alive, and she thought with irony that she wouldn't be walking herself if Draco hadn't *killed* her with his blood only to have *irevive* her again. Hermione chuckled, causing a light to search for the noise and finally spot her. The wand carrier came running her way. She waited patiently for its bearer's arrival.

"Oh, my God, 'Mione!" Ron's familiar voice came to her in the darkness. "We all thought you were dead! I saw that brute knock you down, but then I lost sight of you in the fight, and afterwards we couldn't find you so Harry had us all out looking because he wouldn't give up hope. Oh, I'm so glad you're alive!"

Ron stopped to catch his breath and hug her tightly. When she didn't hug him back he noticed the amused expression on her face and took it for one of shell shock.

Immediately overwhelmed with concern, he apologized. "I'm so sorry! What you must have gone through! I'll take you to the others, and we'll patch you up." He took her hand to lead her and exclaimed, "You're so cold! Here, take my cloak."

He draped it around her shoulders, and she shot a second amused glance behind his back as he led her to edge of the field.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 4

The truth comes out, whittling the Trio to a duo.

Disclaimer: This all belongs to JKR. I'm only playing in a slightly modified universe of her making. No money is being made off this (God, help me, if it were!)

A/N: Thanks as always to my wonderful beta, McGonagall's Cat.

Chapter Two

They came to a makeshift building that lay on the outskirts of the field, half hidden in a clump of trees. This was what had obviously become the infirmary and headquarters. Ron took her inside and led her to a room-turned-office close to the front of the building. Harry was sitting behind a desk in a comfortable armchair he must have conjured, holding his head in his hands. Owls kept flying through the window from important Ministry officials wanting conformation of Lord Voldemort's ruin.

"Harry, I've got her! She's alive!" Ron was practically jumping up and down.

Harry flew out of his chair and around the desk to pull her into a fierce embrace. When he pulled away to search her face, tears were running down his cheeks. "Oh 'Mione!" was all he could say as he continued to hold her hands, reassuring himself she was alive.

'Just what I need,' thought Hermione. 'A weeping Harry. If he keeps this up, he'll get Ron started and who knows what they'll do next.' She sighed inwardly, but kept up her face impassive on the outside.

Harry became concerned. "Hermione, your hands are icicles! Let's get you to the infirmary." He tried to steer her back out the door when they finally heard her speak. Her voice was oddly quiet, reminding Harry of the way the wind sounded, whispering through the trees at night.

"No, Harry, Ron. I'm fine."

They looked dubiously at one another, then back to Hermione.

"Are you sure? You seem...not yourself."

They were both trying to put their fingers on what was wrong with their friend. They knew she was different from the girl they were used to, but just what it was seemed to be eluding them. It worried them more than they wanted to admit. She could have been cursed during the battle, and she needed to have it reversed to be her usual bubbly self, rather than this quiet block of ice in front of them.

Hermione walked back to Harry's desk and perched herself seductively on the corner. She could see they were trying to understand the change in her, but knew they would never guess.

Laughing at them in a cold and heartless way, she slammed and locked the office door with a mere flick of her hand.

Both men jumped in surprise at this uncharacteristic action. Harry caught her eyes, and his blood ran cold to see a flash of something...inhuman.

"Hermione..." Harry started, but he never finished.

She was enjoying herself too much to be interrupted.

"Ah, ah, ah! I will tell you all you need to know in good time, but right now I need a smoke." Conjuring a cigarette between her fingers like an expert, she lit it by tapping the end with her wand. Pulling a long drag, she let it linger in her lungs before exhaling.

Taking in their shocked faces, she laughed again in that chilling way, enjoying her game. 'This is something the old me would never have done. Then again I'm not really me anymore, am I?' Her lips curled wickedly.

"Don't look so unnerved. You act as if you've never seen a girl smoke before? Do you blame me for wanting a fag after that fight?" She waved her empty hand airily. Crossing her legs, she took another drag. Exhaling, the smoke circled around her head, "You say you looked for my body after the fight?"

They nodded mutely, temporarily struck dumb by this new Hermione. Her neutral voice unsettled them.

"Well, you didn't look hard enough during the battle, Ron," she put emphasis on his name. "If you had, you would have noticed that someone had already carried me away." Hermione took a third drag and waited for her words to sink in.

The boys were thunderstruck.

"Where is the bloke! I'll kill him!"

Ron's unexpected bellow scared any owls who had remained to take wing out the window. He definitely looked murderous while Harry was crestfallen and mumbling something indistinct.

Hermione threw down the cigarette and twisted it into the old floorboards beneath the heel of her shoe. Her calmness was beginning to wear on Ron, only infuriating him more. It was just making Harry sick.

She conjured a couple of chintz chairs and scooted them directly behind the boys' knees, knocking them onto the chairs. Stepping lightly down from the desk, she walked behind the high backed chairs. Her voice barely above a whisper she said, "I met Draco Malfoy, or more correctly, he saved me from death, and I awoke in the forest with him."

Almost reading their minds in the stunned silence, she went on. "Oh, yes. Draco Malfoy. The arrogant thorn in our sides during school and loyal Death Eater." She laughed in a noticeably callous tone. "Who would have thought that a Malfoy had always lusted after a Mudblood?" Walking around to face them she noted the look of disbelief and horror on their faces.

Harry found his voice first. "Hermione," he cleared his throat, "did he put a spell on you or hurt you in any way?"

Ron shuddered as his worst fear rolled out of Harry's mouth. The redhead screamed curses in the air against the whole bloody Malfoy family.

Hermione stopped his tirade by placing her icy hand upon his cheek. She remained close enough to him that Ron could smell the tobacco on her breath, and he noticed that there was no heat radiating from her body. But the thought disappeared when her melodic voice spoke words of reassurance.

"Draco did nothing to me that I did not want him to do."

Harry instantly caught the implication of her words. Ron, however, was entranced by her voice and seemed to have not.

"You LET him have sex with you!"

Harry was angry, shocked, but more than anything, he was hurt. Where had the Hermione they had always known disappeared to in these few short hours? She was still acting in a know-it-all manner, but the differences were driving him past reasonable thought.

"Just tell us what happened, damnit! No more games!"

The insinuation behind her words had finally reached Ron's brain, and he looked as though he had been hit by a Bludger. His mouth was hung open in astonishment, his eyes unfocused, as he, too, tried to figure out where the real Hermione had gone. 'Would she really sleep with Draco Malfoy? Willingly,' he asked himself. It hurt his heart too much to dwell on, so, like Harry he just waited for a logical explanation to everything that was happening.

Hermione shrugged listlessly. "As you wish. I'm through with games myself. But I could just as easily drag this out forever. From here on, I have an eternity."

Her smugness was blatantly obvious, and Ron was beginning to look like he would explode again. Harry felt like he could, too. This taunting was too much for him.

Hermione then did something unexpected again. Going to the open window, she whispered into the night. With a sudden swirl of black robes that contrasted with porcelain skin and the spicy smell of a very recognizable cologne, Draco Malfoy stood in the center of the office.

"You called, my pet?"

Hermione was by his side almost instantly. She moved so quickly that the boys never even saw her leave the window. Draco chuckled into her hair, then rained kisses across her face and neck possessively.

Ron growled, "Don't touch her!" He flung himself at his rival, but Draco merely flicked his hand in Ron's direction to send him soaring into the wall.

Harry was next to jump up and avenge his friend, but Hermione hissed at him. He was caught off guard and fell back onto the chair with a cry.

Ron's eyes were huge as he watched the transformation in Hermione. She had gone from cold and distant to he and Harry, to cuddling Malfoy, and then transforming into a menacing creature. She didn't even look human.

Relaxing her facial features once more she glided smoothly back into Draco's arms, purring his name against his neck. He whispered something in her ear, turning her to see the fear and anger on her friends' faces. Hermione and Draco began to laugh with abandon. Their pointed teeth flashed in the moonlight streaming into the room.

Realization dawned with incredible force. Tears came to Harry's eyes and fell to his lap as he comprehended what Draco was and what he had turned Hermione into. Now he understood the coldness in her without a soul there was no reason to be gentle and sweet. He remembered her statement about eternity and saw how it all made sense now.

Glancing over at Ron against the wall with blood oozing from a cut above his eye, Harry saw that his friend had grasped the awful truth, too. The look of total loss on Ron's face was unmistakable. Harry felt the same.

'One of the best friends I have is now lost to me. Forever,' thought Harry. 'Oh, gods, why?!' Emptiness overtook him, face-to-face with this harsh reality.

Ron stood up and yelled at Draco.

"You...you...arrogant, dirty, conniving SLYTHERIN! I can't tell you how much I hate you! One day someone will kill you, it may even be me, and you will rot in Hades for destroying such a beautiful life."

His face was purple from yelling, and tears of rage were rolling down his face.

Draco sneered at Ron, then looked at Hermione.

"Didn't you tell them, kitten?"

"I haven't had time, darling. They were impatient with me because it took me so long to tell them what I've become, so I called you hoping we could tell them together." She smiled sweetly at him, teeth flashing once again.

"Alright, let's tell them." He stated, "It's simple, really. We plan to spend eternity together shagging each other senseless." He pulled her in front of him to put his arms around her waist and pull her backside against his front. Now both of them were staring at Ron and Harry, their eyes flashing cruelly.

Draco broke the silence with his silky voice. "Hermione, my sweet, weren't you supposed to have something to eat? I think we should take care of that before you become too weak. I would have to teach these boys a lesson for keeping you from your feeding time. If we tarry much longer, I'll just give them to you as a present."

Hermione grinned devilishly, shaking her head. "I'm not interested in them. I want some young virgin for my first meal."

"Of course, darling. I should have realized what amazing taste you would have."

She raised a hand in frigid farewell as Draco whipped his long cloak about them, and they disappeared into the velvet night.

A/N: Never fear - the lemons make their appearance next chapter!

Chapter Three

A/N: Please R/R! Let me know what you think of the story so far! Authors need feedback to keep our muses' happy and willing to continue. Big thanks to my new beta, Phoenix, for all her hard work and collaboration!

Ron and Harry sat in their respective places and cried for all they were worth. Even with the end of the War, the Fates still saw fit to send them off with the most painful loss of all.

A resounding silence filled the room, signaling to Harry that Ron had ceased his cursing. The blackness from the night began to cloak the office like a shroud. Goosebumps appeared on the men's arms as the temperature in the room plummeted. The night settled itself throughout the room, again reminding them bitterly of their loss.

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Hermione had watched the master at work as he soothed the lost girl with kind words and gentle smiles. He had reassured the youngling that he would help as he led her to Hermione, who then charmed the girl well enough to lean in and kiss her cheek before the fateful bite.

He found her gorgeous, and the cold glint in her eyes only made her more seductive. Seeing that she was finished, he moved over to her.

"Why, yes. Thank you, Draco."

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A memorial service, to be held in the same field where she was supposed to have fallen, was organized in her honor. The survivors of the War were there: professors, family, friends, everyone whose life she had touched.

There wasn't a dry eye.

"Must feel all the sad energy in the air, poor bloke." He kept walking, blowing his nose much like Mount Vesuvius when it erupted to bury Pompeii.

"You've read how vampires can turn into wolves, right Harry? Do you think... it was one of them-- er, I mean, or are we just jumpy?" Ron's hands were fluttering in nervous anxiety.

There was a sudden commotion behind them. Upon turning around, the boys saw a white wolf running through the throng of people. Harry's mouth fell open, and Ron let out a small squeak when the wolf began to deliberately lope towards them.

Harry was lost in the familiar coffee depths. *Hermione.*

The crowd watched the exchange between men and beast intently, hoping to glean some idea of what was happening. It was obvious by the stricken looks of the men that they had no clue, either.

Ron's face was bloodless, and Harry's scalp prickled in apprehension.

Just as suddenly as the wail began, it stopped, allowing the final note to ring in the air around the gathering. Then the snowy wolf leapt up and ran for the safety of the trees lining the field.

Crawling back up his gorgeous body, she hovered above his face. Draco's eyes were still closed as he recovered from his euphoric high. Once he regained control of his body, he opened his steely eyes to meet her cinnamon pair.

She stared into his eyes, reading in the depths what he would never voice aloud. His metallic ones took in the amazement, sense of power, and deep desire that were reflected toward him.

Similarly, Hermione saw dominance, awe, and a strong desire that spoke volumes on his jealousy. It seemed to her that their relationship was taking a new turn.

Draco wrapped his arms around her to pull her even closer to his chest and then grazed his lips softly across her neck.

Pulling back slightly, she saw the rare expression of contentment on his chiseled features. Hermione enjoyed seeing Draco without the customary sneer, but she liked it all the more knowing she was the only one who ever saw it.

He began to run his long, aristocratic fingers through her chestnut tresses, causing her to moan at the back of her throat from the slight pressure he exerted on her scalp.

Hermione's eyelids fluttered shut. Dark lashes quivered on her pale skin.

With ease born of a creature of the night, Draco pulled his body off the floor, still clutching Hermione.

His actions were so fluid; she only realized they had left the floor when she felt his long strides carrying them to their bedroom. Grazing her teeth against his shoulder, she smirked at the realization that they were not done yet tonight.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 4

Ron and Harry have a chat which lead to some disturbing conclusions.

Disclaimer: These are all JKR's characters. I just like to manipulate them.

A/N: I personally love this chapter ending. I can only hope that you won't stone me for it!

A few more days went by before the guys were willing to discuss what had happened at the memorial service.

Harry was fixing breakfast in his flat when he saw Ron's owl heading for his open window. He knew immediately what it would pertain to. Shaking away the sense of foreboding, he went to the owl now perched on the windowsill and read the letter.

Harry,

It's been long enough. We have to talk about it. I'm free from 5:00 to however late you want to rant about Draco fucking Malfoy.

Anyway, mate. Let me know if you want to talk at your place or mine.

Ron

The word 'Malfoy' had been written in an angry hand, leaving an indentation on the parchment. In the space between the two paragraphs were some ink splotches, as if his friend had been trembling before he calmed down enough to write again. Knowing Ron, it was more than likely.

Tearing off the bottom half of the parchment Harry replied.

Ron,

My flat at 5:30. I'll have lots of Firewhisky.

Harry

Sending the owl back to his best friend, Harry turned to the breakfast that wasn't finished and sighed. Waving his wand, it all disappeared. Even thinking about what would be said that evening made him lose his appetite.

The day went by slowly for Harry. He had numerous job interviews lined up, but they didn't start until next week, as today was Saturday. He tried to distract himself by imagining how the Auror interview would happen. It worked only briefly. Deciding he couldn't stay home and brood, he Apparated to Diagon Alley. He needed to purchase the promised Firewhisky anyway.

Harry spent most of the day aimlessly perusing the wizarding shops that usually made him enjoy his life. All the strange places, smells and people were constantly surprising him. After realizing at eleven years old that he wasn't alone in being different, he finally began to feel accepted. Yes, the incessant talk of being The-Boy-Who-Lived-Twice would grate on his nerves, but it was better than living with his Muggle relatives who acted like he didn't exist at all.

His shopping done, Harry looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly five.

Have to get home and straighten up a bit. He chuckled silently to himself. *Don't know why I'm going to clean up with Ron coming over. He'll just make a bigger mess anyway, especially with the conversation we're going to have.*

Deciding to walk home from Diagon Alley instead of Apparating, since it wasn't that far, he began the journey to his flat. He tried not to think about what they were going to discuss in just a few short minutes; instead, Harry focused on Quidditch.

He remembered the good days at Hogwarts when he was Gryffindor Seeker, reveling in the freedom he felt every time he rode a broom. The feeling of superiority he felt with his entire House cheering him on. The way Hermione had always helped him when he needed it before a match.

Hermione! He'd been doing so well, not thinking about her. He had thought Quidditch was a safe way to go, but then she had been in the crowd cheering, too, and she had taught him that Impervious spell to keep his glasses from getting fogged in the rain. *Idiot!*

Harry was standing at his front door when he began chastising himself for his stupidity. Unlocking the door, he stepped inside. He suddenly swirled around, wand at the ready, his key forgotten where it fell on the floor.

There, a shock of red hair sprouted out of the top of his recliner.

"Ron, I could have killed you! I told you five-thirty." He glanced at his watch. "Its only five-twenty!"

"Humph," came from the other side of the chair that was facing the fireplace.

Setting down the bottle of Firewhisky wrapped in its brown paper sack, he walked over to face his long time friend. Hot tears were flowing fast down Ron's cheeks, leaving trails across his freckles.

Reaching out a hand to place on the redhead's shoulder, Harry searched for something to say. It was always awkward when one of them cried in front of the other, both pretending to be too manly for such things. Both knowing they weren't. Thankfully, Ron beat him to it.

"I can't ... can't s-stop thinking about her." Hiccup. "She was every thing t-to me. I always thought, hoped, that she would be with me in ... in the end. When the War was over and V-Voldemort was dead, she was supposed to love me like I loved ... love her."

His crying became sobs.

"I still love her, Harry. I always will. Aside from you, she was the only one to see me for who I w-was. And she was the only girl I ever saw myself with in the future. But now that's she's gone," he bit out the last word, "there won't be a future for me anymore." He ran his fingers through his fiery hair with a lost look in his blue eyes.

Harry didn't know what to say. He, of course, had known that Hermione and Ron had dated in their seventh year and had been doing fine together well, as fine as Ron and Hermione could.

They would argue over stupid things only to shut each other up in a fierce snog-fest. Of course, their snogging was quite uncomfortable for everyone around them when it escalated into a battle of wills to see who could kiss better than the other. These weird battles for dominance usually resulted in hair tugging, feral moans and removal of some clothing in the common room, before separating long enough to see who could win a race to the Head Girl's private chambers.

Harry shook his head in bewilderment. Out of all their crazy competition, he had never heard either one of them say they loved each other. But, knowing Hermione, she had probably laid down a rule in the very beginning of the relationship to not say "I love you" until they knew for certain.

And knowing Hermione as well as he did, he was also willing to bet that once Ron had tried to say he loved her, she would have cut him short and said in her know-it-all voice, "Now Ron, you don't know that you love me. You couldn't possibly know. We're still in school, so we can't say those things yet. Believe me; I've researched this quite thoroughly."

Harry tried to hide his smirk at the thought.

Deciding to say something, Harry asked the first thing that came to mind. "So, when did you fall in love with her? And why didn't you ever tell me?"

The sudden question abruptly ceased Ron's tears.

"W-what?"

Harry had no idea if it was that he had finally said something, or if the nature of the question had silenced him. Probably the latter.

Idiot, he told himself.

Trying to cover his tracks and shove the rude question under the rug, he blushed and said, "Never mind, mate. If you didn't tell me, you probably had a good reason, and I shouldn't have asked. I'm sorry." Realizing his hand was still on Ron's shoulder, he removed it hastily and shuffled his feet on the rug.

Recovering from his shock, Ron shook his head slightly.

"Don't be sorry, mate. I should have told you, but at one point during seventh year I thought you liked her, too, and I thought you were jealous, and I didn't want to make you even madder at me." He flushed at the admission.

"I know now that you were never jealous of us, so much as you were jealous that we had someone. You were still afraid to date Ginny, in case Voldemort tried to hurt her."

Harry nodded, but continued staring at the floor.

Taking a deep breath, Ron told him, "I didn't actually know that I loved her until Bill and Fleur's wedding, and I saw her in her in those green dress robes, and then I knew. Even all the times that we had gone to her Head Girl's room and ... and ... well, you know!"

Ron's face was a shade darker than his hair now, and when Harry glanced up at him, he almost burst out laughing. Harry nodded his understanding, which allowed his friend to continue.

"Yeah, well anyway," he cleared his throat. "That day it hit me like a ton of Bludgers pounding me all at once. I tried to tell her over the years, but I was never sure if she wanted me to."

Ron was struggling to make himself understood, looking for just the right words.

"At times, I would go to her and begin to let her know, but when I looked in her eyes, there was a warning telling me not to say anything else. Does that make sense?"

Harry looked at him oddly. "You mean the one that meant 'if you do that, I'm going to either kill you or turn you in' when we were off to break the rules?"

Ron paused and licked his lips nervously. "N-no. It was more of a 'don't say another word; now is not the time' type look. Of course, I never knew if I was wrong, because I never told her. And then the night of the Final Battle, when we couldn't find her, my heart broke into a million pieces. How could she be dead before I could even tell her?"

Tears were threatening to return. Taking a moment to compose himself again, Ron continued smiling brightly. "And then I found her. / found her! My heart leapt for joy knowing that I had been given a second chance to redeem myself. To profess my love for her, loud enough for the whole world to hear!" His smile faded as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Then we found out what she was, and that it had been *Dracofucking* Malfoy who had corrupted the one shining star in my life." Ron was speaking in very quiet tones that Harry recognized as bordering on murderous.

Ron's fists were clenched so tightly against his sides that his knuckles were turning white. Popping out of the recliner so quickly that even Harry's lightning fast reflexes weren't ready, Ron was in his face with his wand aimed directly at Harry's heart. Slowly, purposefully and ominously he spoke.

"I am going to impale Draco bloody Malfoy directly through his black, dead, withered heart for takingmy Hermione," Ron growled menacingly.

Harry was truly terrified of his friend at that moment. Looking him in the eyes, he saw a thirst for vengeance such as he had never seen before.

Not even in Bellatrix Lestrange's eyes the day of the Final Battle, when Harry dueled with her before he killed the Dark Lord.

Harry tried to be steady and casual when he spoke next, but the words still wobbled slightly on his lips.

"Ron, mate. I will help you get Malfoy for what he's done, but you need to relax right now. I could do with a shot of Firewhisky, how about you? What do you say?"

Ron's eyes cleared and became calm, deep blue once more, losing their stormy black depths. Glancing down and seeing his wand aimed at his best friend, he took a couple long steps back, breathing heavily. Running his long fingers through his bright hair again, Ron stammered an apology to Harry, mumbling that he should leave.

But Harry just steered him to his couch and told Ron to calm down while he got them a couple of drinks.

Ron sat down on the soft couch with a heavy sigh, trying to keep his long legs from knocking over the coffee table. He stared into the fire, thinking of his beautiful Hermione, plotting how to best kill the bastard Malfoy. He was shaken from his reverie by the clinking of ice cubes by his ear.

Harry handed him a tumbler with a decent amount of throat-burning alcohol on the rocks. Ron noticed he had given himself a fair amount, as well. *A good night for it, too*, Ron thought. Taking a generous swig, he both grimaced and enjoyed the feel of the drink literally leaving a trail of fire down his esophagus.

Neither of them spoke for a while. The only sounds in the flat were the crackling of the fire and the occasional *chink* of ice when they drank. Ron had just emptied his tumbler when Harry broke the silence.

Staring into what remained of his Firewhisky, he asked, "If you're going to kill Malfoy, what are you going to do about Hermione?" Green eyes met blue as they stared at each other from across the coffee table.

"I don't know," Ron whispered looking at the floor. "I know if I don't kill her, she will just kill me to avenge Malfoy."

A single tear ran down his cheek.

"But I can't kill Hermione. I can't. I know what she is, but all I see when I think of her is how she used to be. How we used to be." More silent tears were following in the wake of the first. Harry nodded in the silence, quickly downing the last of his liquor, giving him the courage to say what needed to be said.

"All right, then. I'll kill Hermione."

Piercing emerald eyes met sorrowful sapphire across the table. The redhead nodded.