

Never All Together

by rainfromheaven

"I loved you then, and whatever sin it is, I love you still!" Hermione Granger never imagined that her wildest fantasy of being with James Potter could come true. But while for Hermione it had just been yesterday, for James it had been nineteen years ago. A sweeping tale of how love transcends time, just to prove it can.

Chapter 1: Never the Time and Place

Chapter 1 of 22

"I loved you then, and whatever sin it is, I love you still!" Hermione Granger never imagined that her wildest fantasy of being with James Potter could come true. But while for Hermione it had just been yesterday, for James it had been nineteen years ago. A sweeping tale of how love transcends time, just to prove it can.

A

Chapter 2: No Day But Today

Chapter 2 of 22

James searches his mind for memories of her, not knowing they lie in his heart. Hermione makes one seemingly harmless decision that could change her life forever, and Lily and Harry begin to wonder.

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Chapter 3: Light My Candle

Chapter 3 of 22

James and Hermione spend a little time together and end up firing off sparks.

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Chapter 4: Angel Songs and Wild Imaginings

Chapter 4 of 22

Encounters with James make Hermione feel like she's on a roller-coaster ride. How could she have thought of giving up what she has with Harry for a brief attraction with someone who could not possibly feel the same? But Hermione soon finds out that not everything can be measured by the rational mind.

A

Chapter 5: Over the Moon

Chapter 5 of 22

With the Voldemort's impending second rise to power, the reformation of the Order is considered, and the hunt for Horcruxes is on. Even so, James and Hermione spend one last night together even while deciding to stay apart. Lily and Harry's doubts grow, and Remus and Dumbledore discover something that gives them cause for alarm.

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Chapter 6: Le Grande Projet

Chapter 6 of 22

Hermione has discovered a way to be together with James. An assassination plot, however, threatens the success of the project even before it has started.

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Chapter 7: Right Kind of Wrong

Chapter 7 of 22

Hermione tackles the creation of a Time-Turner amidst the many misgivings she still has.

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Chapter 8: Journey to the Past

Chapter 8 of 22

The past takes center stage as the Marauders recount how Voldemort was defeated the first time around, and Hermione, at long last, solves the Time-Turner riddle.

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Chapter 9: Chasing Rainbows in the Sky

Chapter 9 of 22

Hermione thought the key to being with James lay in the past. Nineteen years back, however, she not only finds James hopelessly in love with Lily, but that even she could not stand him. Armed with nothing but a wand and her own cunning, Hermione finds herself alone in a time and place she does not belong to.

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Chapter 10: Friend of Mine

Chapter 10 of 22

In an attempt to make James notice her, Hermione plans Operation Number three hundred and seventy-nine with the Marauders. It seems like somebody else is being charmed, however...

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Chapter 11: Whatsername

Chapter 11 of 22

Voldemort's darkness is seeping into Hogwarts, and yet James worries himself with the execution of Operation Number three hundred and seventy-nine, Lily concerns herself with the Marauders' drastic change in behaviour, Hermione remembers Remus' furry little problem, and Peter discovers the existence of a certain Hermione Granger.

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Chapter 12: Let Me Be Your Wings

Chapter 12 of 22

James learns that the best isn't always good enough.

A

Chapter 13: It's My Turn

Chapter 13 of 22

It took forever, but now it's time for Hermione to take her fair share of chances without knowing all the answers, and for James to finally start letting go.

A

Intertwined

Chapter 14 of 22

They say that when two paths cross, it's for a reason. As James and Hermione struggle to make sense of the rationale, they unknowingly weave their lives intricately together, thereby sealing their fates and grasping the Wizarding world's in their linked hands.

A

Maybe

In a world of uncertainties, James understands that there is at least one thing—one emotion—that anybody can be sure of.

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Author's Notes: Sorry for the longer wait than usual. I'm afraid I won't be updating as frequently as I used to because I've got a lot of matters to attend to in school ... both academic and extracurricular. I hope this more than makes up for it. Haha. After all, it's longer than I expected it would be, and I didn't even get to include the scene that was supposed to be the final one in this chapter. Oh, well, enough rambling. Enjoy!

Chapter Summary: In a world of uncertainties, James understands that there is at least one thing...one emotion...that anybody can be sure of.

Chapter 15: Maybe

In another lifetime,

It will be forever

In another world where

You and I can be together.

In another set of chances,

I'll take the ones I've missed

And make you mine.

If only for a time.

--- Gary Valenciano (*In Another Lifetime*) ---

"I enjoyed spending today with you," James told Hermione casually as they climbed the stairs to the Gryffindor tower. The unspoken question hung in the air *Did you too?*

"I did as well," Hermione answered, her voice as soft as the clouds she felt she was floating on. James had been so sweet throughout the day, attending to her every whim and now taking the time to escort her back to the common room after dinner. Perfect. So wonderfully perfect. Hermione did not bother asking why he was doing all that he was. To do so would mean that she was questioning his motives, and she didn't want to do anything that could dampen the exciting newness of the relationship she was building with him.

They entered through the portrait hole, and James tossed a bag of sweets from Hogsmeade...which he had bought on their way back into the tunnel at Honeydukes...on the couch. He glanced at Hermione, who was looking expectantly at him and waiting for him to say something. Anything.

For the life of him, he could not. Time stood still as all his senses feasted on the enchantingly beautiful sight in front of him, her features made more radiant by the glow of the candlelight. He gazed at her as he stepped closer, his heart spinning wildly out of control. What was he feeling?

He was so near, Hermione was sure he could hear the nervous fluttering of her heart. She could not tear her eyes away from his, which had taken on a fire she had encountered in him only in her time. A small intake of breath revealed her surprise when he took her right hand, held it up to his lips and kissed it gently, almost reverently. Her voice caught in her throat. Was this really happening?

Equally startled at what he had just done, James almost dropped her hand. Instead, he lowered it carefully and, with his eyes back to normal, said, "I've got to report for my rounds." The slight hoarseness in his voice was the only indication of how intense his feelings were only a moment ago.

Hermione was both electrified by his touch and faintly disappointed at his attempted nonchalance. "Right. Good night then."

James smiled, somewhat relieved that she did not slapped him across the face for allowing himself too much liberty. "Good night." He started to walk away, but turned back after only a few paces. He felt strangely reluctant to be without her. "Are you going to be awake still when I come back?"

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "I can be, if you want me to," she responded shyly.

Tenderness swept over him. "No. I'd rather you rest; you must be tired." He started making his way towards the portrait hole, but stopped again and gave in to that urge to have another look at her. What an exquisite picture she painted. "Good night."

"Good night."

"Sweet dreams."

Indeed. "You too, James."

* * * * *

"Congratulations, mate," Sirius greeted enthusiastically the moment James took his place at the Gryffindor table. "Sunday morning, and you're already up? That's got to be a record!"

"I just didn't want to miss breakfast," James mumbled sleepily as he reached for a silver platter. "They say it's the most important meal of the day. Besides, it's such a magnificent morning. How could I waste it lounging around in bed?" He grinned lazily as his mind conjured up an image of Hermione the way she was last night. "By the way, is Regina awake?"

Remus looked up from his plate and stifled a wry smile. For all James's talk, he guessed this was the real reason he had roused himself this early. "I don't think so."

Marginally crestfallen, James leaned back in his seat. "Oh."

"Isn't one day of being with her enough?" Sirius asked, making it sound as though Hermione was very bad company.

James blinked. "What?"

"I said, isn't one day of..."

"I didn't mean a could-you-repeat-what-you-said what; I meant a what-do-you-think-you're-saying what!" James interrupted.

Sirius shrugged. "I was under the impression you woke up early just to see her again."

"I did...didn't," James denied, faltering.

Sirius guffawed at James's apparent discomfort. "Don't worry, mate. You can tell us."

"She's very nice after all," Peter said, joining the conversation. "It wouldn't come as a big surprise if you do like her."

I like her?

"It wouldn't?" Sirius repeated, flabbergasted.

The screeching of a flock of owls soaring overhead drowned out Remus' comment on that last remark, and James sat up straighter as a small note landed right in front of him. He wasn't expecting any mail. He snatched it and tore it open impatiently, worried it might contain unwelcome news about his parents.

James, thank you for everything. Regina

A big smile spread over James's face as he sat still for several seconds.

"Who was that from?" Peter asked, looking at the parchment his friend was happily staring at.

"Regina," James said promptly, finally looking up, still smiling. He folded the letter, tucked it into his robes and attacked his food with new gusto.

Sirius was observing him very carefully, trying to detect signs that his theory on James's sudden interest in Regina was correct. Failing, he decided to mention it outright and test his friend's reaction. "Well, Prongs, if you keep Operation Number three hundred and eighty up, I'm sure you'll have Evans saying yes in no time."

James gagged on the cured meat. "What?"

"Is that a could-you-repeat-what-you-said what or a..."

"No, it's a what-the-hell-are-you-talking-about what," James interjected petulantly, rolling his hazel eyes. "Operation Number what? Lily what?"

Peter and Remus both tilted their heads toward them, listening intently. Sirius sighed and explained, "Operation Number three hundred and eighty. We stopped at three hundred and seventy-nine, didn't we? Or have you forgotten how to count?"

"And what exactly is the three hundred and eightieth plan?" James enquired, not understanding.

"Trying to make Evans jealous," Sirius answered simply.

James stared at his best friend for a full minute, letting the impact of his statement sink in, before bursting out laughing. "Wait. So you thought I befriended Regina and spent so much time with her because of Lily? Just because of her?" He laughed harder before gasping, "You're too much, Padfoot."

"Isn't that true?" Sirius demanded stoutly. "I certainly didn't buy any of what you said about getting over Evans. You couldn't have...not that easily. And you know what? I could just see this plan working. I saw Evans and Clarke talking seriously a while ago, their eyes drifting towards us, and I reckoned they were discussing you."

"Pretty big leap for a dog, Sirius," James said, slipping on purpose. He held up one hand to stop him from continuing. "I don't care. Like I said several times over, I'm finished with Evans. You're supposed to be my best friend. I am *so hurt* you don't believe me," he added, feigning indignation.

"But everything seemed to happen so fast. You and Regina were, in a flash, this tight," Sirius argued, bringing his middle and index fingers together.

Ah. His friends didn't know everything that had happened that night almost one week ago, and even now, James didn't want to tell them. "Is the idea really so difficult to entertain? Regina is quite a character, you know." His expression became gentler at his next words. "She's too special to be used like that."

Remus could not contain his shock any longer. The only instances he heard James talk like that was whenever he spoke of Lily. Sirius was right; everything was happening too fast.

Sirius maintained a look of utmost scepticism. "I suppose you're right," he agreed grudgingly. "It certainly does not make sense trying to spark Evans' jealousy over a very plain girl. She's not even beautiful, and I'm sure you could have chosen a better one."

She's not? Remus, despite his good nature, suddenly felt inclined to throw one hex at Sirius for his indiscretion. He glanced at the doors of the Great Hall to avert his annoyance and saw Hermione stride in. Even from a distance, he could not help but admire the quiet poise with which she moved.

James noticed Remus' line of sight and followed it, pleased where it ended. "Well then, Sirius, I guess I should be happy you don't find her attractive. Saves me some trouble, I daresay." He kept his eyes on her as she approached them from his side on the table. All his confidence, however, evaporated the moment she was standing beside him, looking all fresh and delectable in a light pink cardigan that matched the flush on her cheeks.

"Morning," she greeted with a smile, her eyes locked with his as though he was the only one she could see was worth addressing. He felt his heart race once more.

"Morning," he replied warmly, patting the space beside him in an invitation to sit.

Hermione took the offered spot and smiled at the rest of the Marauders. "Morning."

Remus' heart somewhat lifted at the attention, and he returned the greeting with the same enthusiasm.

James watched Hermione serve herself some food, enjoying the way her locks partially obscured her face and yet wanting to tuck them behind her ear. The storm of emotions that erupted in his chest stunned him. What was happening? Why was he feeling so much for her after only a short span of time? In the first place, what in the name of Merlin was he feeling anyway?

His brain easily supplied the answer. *I'm attracted to her.* He swallowed hard. Even the notion of being interested in a girl other than Lily Evans was foreign to him. *Maybe this is part of that getting over stage, a side effect of being rejected. Your attention latches on to the nearest member of the female population around.* The rationalisation sounded harsh and inadequate, even to his ears. He reached out and lightly brushed her slender wrist with the tips of his fingers.

Immediately, she turned to him. The movement caused her scented hair to tease the bridge of his nose. "Yes, James?"

He silently scolded himself for losing control and touching her, but why did she have to notice everything? He adjusted his glasses as he cast his mind around for something credible to say. "I...uh...what was that note about?"

She smiled much to James's astonishment. "Oh, you got that already? I wanted to be here when you opened it." Hermione pursed her lips before continuing. "That little message was the first thing I wrote using the quill you bought for me. I wanted to surprise you."

James definitely wasn't expecting that answer, much less the warmth that engulfed him afterwards. "Well, you did."

"Did you keep it?" Hermione normally wouldn't have dared to hope, but just in case he did, she knew that would mean something. It had to.

James gestured towards his pocket. "Of course. But tell me if you want it framed or anything, and I'll be glad to oblige."

Hermione laughed, thankful that he knew just how to inject some humour into their conversation to keep it from becoming too serious. "That's not necessary."

"I know," James answered earnestly. "Its memory is enough."

Lily stared glumly at the parchment in front of her, which was sparsely covered with her Charms notes. In the background, Professor Flitwick was busy rambling about some of the more imaginative spells invented, and while normally Lily would have been listening with rapt attention, she was definitely not in the mood today. Come to think of it, she had not been for several days now...four, to be exact...since she had had that conversation with Alice that Sunday morning.

"I saw James and that new girl yesterday at Hogsmeade," Alice had opened conversationally.

"Uh...huh," she had replied uninterestedly. "I saw them too. I was with you, remember?"

A dreamy expression had crossed Alice's features. "Don't they look so sweet together? I wish Frank was more like James."

"Be careful what you wish for," Lily had retorted, annoyed at where the discussion was going. "If Frank were like James, I don't think you'd want to marry him anymore."

"On the contrary, I would," Alice had corrected. "James seems so stable; he's the one you can run away with, the one who can take care of you for the rest of your life."

Lily could not believe what she was hearing. The level-headed Alice she knew would never get in way over her head, especially not over...ugh...James Potter. "Oh, so now you're one of those giggly girls who worship the ground he walks on?" she had snarled.

Alice had sighed. "You've got to admit, Lil. He is attractive. If he would ever ask me, I'd immediately say yes." She had paused for a heartbeat and added, after surveying her friend intently, "Are you completely sure you don't like him?"

"Of course I'm sure. In fact, I am so confident I would bet my life on it," Lily had snapped. "I've been sure since I was in third year, so why should things be any different now? He certainly is still that same vile, despicable git whose head is so swollen, I'm amazed he can still strut around."

Alice had shrugged, knowing it was pointless to argue with the strong-willed redhead. "Well, I suppose it's better that way especially since he seems to be getting interested in somebody else," she had concluded with obvious relish. She had glanced down at the Gryffindor table; it had been hard to miss James and Regina sitting a little too close to each other to be just friends.

A hot, unfamiliar flame had seared through Lily at her friend's words and at the sight of them together, and even now, it still had not abated. She would never admit it to anyone, but she wanted to hex that stupid Potter senseless for...well, for irritating her this much. And no, she wasn't jealous. Lily Evans would never be jealous of anybody. It was just that the idea that one of her more ardent admirers forgetting and giving up on her so easily bruised a large portion of her ego.

I guess I was right in my initial assessment of him. Lily thought bitterly. *I was a mere conquest for him until someone else...someone easier to charm...came along.* She scribbled angrily on her parchment. She usually loved being right, so why could she hardly contain her fury?

"Miss Evans, would you like the honour of defining and demonstrating the Protean Charm?" Professor Flitwick requested. His voice, however, sounded dim to her ears.

"Miss Evans?" The slight rise in intonation intruded on Lily's reverie. She looked up and blinked, her mind still in a haze.

"I'm sorry, Professor. Could you repeat that for me?"

"I asked you to define and demonstrate the Protean Charm, Miss Evans," Professor Flitwick reiterated, watching his best student expectantly.

Why in the world does he have to call on me today? Lily wondered irritably. She struggled through the cloudiness in her mind in an attempt to recall what she needed to cast that charm. Her cheeks burned in embarrassment; trust her brain to let her down at this crucial moment. "Uh...sorry, Professor. I...I don't remember."

Professor Flitwick's grey brows rose in surprise, and he paused for a moment before kindly saying, "It's fine, Miss Evans. I'm sure you'll look it up for next time, eh?"

Lily nodded, barely looking up in shame. She shifted slightly in her seat and looked back, wanting to shoot that arrogant Potter daggers. If only looks could kill.

She clenched her fists and gritted her teeth at the view that greeted her. Potter was busy showing that Regina something under his desk, his swollen head intimately bent towards her. It was obvious that he had not been paying attention for some time already and had probably not even noticed that something had happened to her.

Huffing testily, Lily turned to face the front once more, crossing her arms over her chest. Damn him; he didn't care. And neither would she.

"I didn't know you could write," James said teasingly as he slid into the couch beside Hermione, who was writing on a parchment, using her knees for support. It was almost nine in the evening, and he had just returned from his rounds. Most students considered Thursday to already be part of the weekend, but his fellow Marauders were still up, cramming the Potions assignment due the next day.

"Must be this new quill," Hermione answered back, melting from the warmth that emanated from him beside her.

"Doesn't look like Potions, huh?"

Hermione grinned at him. "That's only because I've finished mine, and it's there," she said, pointing at the other Marauders, "being copied by your friends."

James laughed, shaking his head in amazement.

"Hey, I'm only using it as a reference material," Sirius said defensively. "I would have done this on my own, had I not been too busy with Snape for the past hour."

James stopped smiling, and his forehead creased with worry. "What happened?"

"Oh, more of the same bull," Sirius answered nastily. "Got too cocky being in Slytherin despite being less than a pureblood and started taunting me about the same old thing. So I hung him upside-down and made him eat slugs, but turned out he was very good at nonverbal spells and managed to hit me with an Engorgement Charm."

"Where?" James asked, looking very concerned.

Sirius looked distinctly uncomfortable while Remus and Peter snickered. "Never mind that," he answered quickly. "My point is we have to exact revenge on that slimeball."

Peter nodded vigorously while Remus sighed. "Thank Merlin there's only one Snape in this world."

"Oh, come on," James said mockingly. "What would we do without Snivellus around?"

"What would we do indeed?" Sirius muttered as though in deep thought. He sat up straighter in an instant, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "Maybe we could make the world a better place."

"How?" Hermione asked interestedly, pleased that Sirius was finally growing up.

Sirius smirked. "Multiple Snapes!"

Peter frowned. "What?"

"Is that a could-you-repeat-what-you-just-said what or a..."

James snorted. He had lost count of the number of times this week that Sirius had made that wisecrack.

"It's a could-you-please-elaborate-what-you-said what," Peter answered, cutting his friend short before he'd had his fun.

Sirius spread his hands out like his previous statement was obvious. "Multiple Snapes," he repeated. "He's such a git; he probably believes himself to be unique. Besides, it'll be a laugh."

"And how will we do that?" Remus asked.

"Wait a minute. Is this another prank?" Hermione demanded. *To think I was so naïve to believe he had finally stopped stooping down to Snape's level.*

"I thought you said she was smart," Sirius told Remus.

Hermione bristled, but before she could give Sirius a piece of her mind, James put a restraining hand on her and warningly said, "Sirius, that's enough."

Sirius raised his eyebrows and snorted, but he didn't say anything else about it. It had always been like that between the two of them. James was the only one he would listen to whenever he told him to stop whatever he was doing, and in turn, it was the same with him. He returned to the topic at hand. "Polyjuice Potion," he drawled, savouring the words. "You see, quite coincidentally, I had managed to cut off a large chunk of Snivellus' hair in DADA today."

"Eew, yuck," Peter said with a shudder. "You actually touched his hair?"

Sirius glared at Peter. "I *am* a wizard," he emphasised. "I don't need to lay my hands on such filth to get what I want."

"What did you do it for anyway?" James asked. It wasn't like Sirius to carefully think over a prank before setting out to do it.

Sirius shrugged. "On impulse. Thought it might come in handy someday." He withdrew a medium-sized glass bottle from his robes and showed it to his friends. "Doesn't it reek of oil and potential? And don't we have quite enough of the potion left from last time, enough for an hour dosage for all Slytherins?"

Hermione could not help but shake her head in amusement as she stifled a smile. The boy was creative, that she could grant.

James let out a low whistle, allowing his mind to picture the scenario. "So how do we slip it into their drinks?"

"Well, I haven't figured it out that far yet," Sirius admitted. "But I was thinking we could go into the kitchen and slip it into the Slytherin table's punch bowl. We could always ask the house-elves to help us."

"That sounds doable," Peter agreed. "But I think Prongs should talk to the house-elves himself."

"Thanks for volunteering me," James replied sarcastically. "Why me all of a sudden?"

Peter shrugged. "The house-elves love you. They wouldn't say no to you."

Hermione laughed. "I didn't know your charm went that far," she ribbed.

James smiled, now feeling a little embarrassed. "Maybe you should come with us too. It never hurts to have a girl around."

"And here I thought you wanted to be with me!" Hermione reacted, faking outrage.

I do. The thought came unbidden to James, and he was so relieved he had not spoken it out loud. "There are male house-elves too, you know," he joked instead, making her laugh once more.

Sirius rolled his eyes impatiently. "Do I need to send for some champagne?" At James and Hermione's questioning looks, he harrumphed and said, "Never mind."

"When do we do this prank?" Remus asked.

Sirius looked around the common room first before answering, his voice a notch lower. "Why not tonight? Most of the students are asleep anyway. As for the staff...well, we can use the cloak and the map."

"Sounds fine with me," James said and then turned to Hermione. "Are you with us?"

"Literally, I am," she answered hesitantly. "But as for this trick..."

"We can get you some hot chocolate later downstairs to calm your nerves," James reassured.

Hermione still did not look convinced. "Do you think this is okay?"

Sirius hooted. "You're asking James? Of course it's freaking okay!"

James grinned boyishly and messed his hair up. "Sirius is right. It is perfectly fine with me."

"I guess I'll have to trust your judgment then," Hermione said. "I'm in."

"Terrific," James said, squeezing her hand.

Sirius instructed Peter to retrieve the bottles of Polyjuice Potion they'd stored in their dormitory with Remus offering to help him. Once they had lugged the containers downstairs, along with the cloak and map, the five of them set about splitting the hairs and adding them in correct proportions to the volume of the potion within each bottle. The entire process took them only half an hour, and at exactly ten o'clock, they were ready to go.

"I don't think we'll all fit under the cloak," Remus commented. The truth was that he didn't want any part in this plan, not because he didn't feel like playing the joke on Severus, but because he simply wasn't in the mood. Whether it was still due to James and Hermione's extant closeness or to some other reason, he didn't know. He was

pretty certain, however, that his resentfulness over the matter had somewhat faded. Time really had some power over such wounds.

"Yeah, that was what I was thinking too," Sirius said. "Well, obviously I have to go. James too, of course."

"And Regina as well," James added quickly, pretending not to notice his best friend's grimace.

"Fine," Sirius said dismissively. "There's room for another. Peter?"

"I'll go, if it's okay for Remus to be alone here." One swift nod from him confirmed his approval.

James unfolded the Invisibility Cloak and showed it to Hermione. "This is an Invisibility Cloak," he explained, unmindful of the fact that she already knew what it was. "It's been handed down in my family for generations." He reached for the map and unfurled it as well, having every intention of also disclosing its existence.

Hermione heard warning bells sound off in her brain, and her eyes widened in apprehension. Before she could protest, James had already tapped it with wand, muttering, "I solemnly swear..."

"Could I do that myself?" Hermione interrupted, hoping her voice did not betray her worry.

James blinked, startled. "Sure," he said, handing it to her. "Do you know what it is?"

"A map?"

All of the Marauders' eyes were as round as saucers. "How could you possibly know that!" Peter exclaimed.

Hermione shrugged. "Didn't Sirius say we were going to use the cloak and the map?" she repeated, relieved that he had earlier given away their secret. "I've seen the cloak; obviously this parchment's the map." She really was getting good at worming her way out of tight situations.

"Oh." Peter looked abashed at her explanation. "Right."

She smiled kindly at him, fished for the wand in her pocket and tapped the map. "What am I supposed to say?" Hermione remembered to ask.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," James said.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good!" Hermione exclaimed, touching the map with a practiced hand. As she had known it would, lines outlining the interior of Hogwarts formed, along with bubbles that contained each of its occupants' name. Her eyes sought out the Gryffindor common room, and she saw, much to her consternation, her name along with the Marauders'. *Hermione Granger*, she read inside her head. She felt as though it had been so long since she last used it, and she was almost afraid she had forgotten her real identity. *Hermione Granger*. Seeing it reminded her of whom she really was.

Realising that the four boys were awaiting her reaction, she hastily rearranged her features into that of awe. "Wow," she breathed. She traced her finger along the secret passages that were on the map and said, "How did you manage to discover all these?"

Peter was grinning from ear to ear. "Oh, we did a lot of exploring," he said. "I reckon nobody else knows Hogwarts as much as we do."

"We're wasting time," Sirius informed them. He took the cloak from James and motioned for the others to go under it. He was about to retrieve the map from Hermione as well, but she refused to give it to him.

"Could I just hold on to this?" she requested. "I promise I'll be on the lookout."

Sirius shrugged. "Okay. I'm sure you'll do an excellent job anyway." He had not exactly meant it as a compliment, but he hoped she saw it that way, or James would be on his case once more.

When the four of them were set, Peter looked one more time at Remus, who looked peculiarly forlorn. "Are you sure you're going to be fine?"

Remus nodded. "Go ahead. I'll be waiting here." With the faintest of smiles, he added, "I'll tell the Fat Lady to wait for you."

The four of them climbed out of the portrait hole and trudged their way down to the kitchens, stopping occasionally to allow Hermione to check if anybody was within the vicinity. As soon as they reached the door to the kitchens, James, being the tallest among them, tickled the pear that hung high above. The door opened, and the soft melody of chimes welcomed them as they stepped inside.

A multitude of wide, orb-like eyes were staring in their direction, some of them fearful. Sirius realised that they were still under the cloak and pulled it off them, causing the house-elves to gasp. Some had even scurried under the tables to hide. Sirius nudged James in the ribs.

James stepped forward, causing the house-elves to take one step backward. "Hello," he said uncertainly.

It took several moments before one of them spoke. "Mr. Potter!"

James smiled disarmingly at the female house-elf. "Hello, Tinky," he greeted, remembering her name in the nick of time. "How have you been?"

"Well enough, sir," Tinky answered in the same high-pitched voice. Her eyes shifted to his companions. "Ah! Where's gentle Mr. Lupin? And who is the girl?"

Hermione, who had always been fond of house-elves, approached Tinky and offered her hand. "Regina. My name's Regina."

Tinky's eyes widened even more, suddenly looking watery. "Mr. Potter's friends are as great as he is!"

James turned to her, admiring how easily she had gained Tinky's respect. He met her eyes and gave her a smile, which she returned.

The house-elf shook Hermione's hand, her own trembling, and then shifted her attention back to James. "What can we do for you, sir?"

He could have lied, but James didn't want to. As simply as possible, he explained their reason for going there so late in the night.

"Slytherin's punch bowl, eh? Where we prepare their morning pumpkin juice?" Tinky repeated with a knowing look. As a servant of Hogwarts, she shouldn't be taking any sides, but she had always had maternal affection for these Gryffindors. She discreetly pointed a bony finger towards one at the far end, hoping her fellow tattletale house-elves would not see. "There, there," she whispered. "See the one laced with green leaves?"

James smiled down gratefully at her. "Thanks a lot, Tinky." He glanced at Sirius and Peter and nodded his assent, and the two of them sauntered over to where the bowl was. Hermione remained by his side, staring at the clock that hung on the wall. She was wary of how long they were roaming the school out of hours.

"That is nothing, sir," Tinky said. "Is there anything else?"

"I'd like two cups of hot chocolate, if it isn't any trouble," James replied.

Tinky shook her bald head vehemently. "Oh, no, sir! No, not at all." At once, she scurried about preparing James's request. She had to make sure it was going to be the

best hot chocolate he had ever tasted!

While she was doing so, James was observing Peter and Sirius from afar as they emptied the bottles of potion into the prepared drink. From its original orange colour, it had turned into a garish shade of brown. He frowned, hoping Sirius would remember to perform a simple Concealing Charm on it. He was not disappointed.

"There you go, Mr. Potter," Tinky said, handing him two cups of hot chocolate on a silver tray just as Sirius and Peter walked towards them. James thanked her and tapped Hermione on the shoulder, who was still gazing at the clock.

She started, her face lighting up when she saw the drink he was offering. "Thanks." Hermione brought it to her nose and inhaled the sweet aroma; she could almost taste its strong flavour. "Thanks, Tinky. It looks delicious."

"Miss Regina is too kind," Tinky said, bowing.

"I am very grateful for your assistance tonight, Tinky," James said when Sirius and Peter reached them.

"Don't mention it, sir. I love having you and your friends down here especially since it has been awhile. Maybe Mr. Lupin could make it next time?" Tinky said hopefully, peering up at him.

"I'll tell him that; don't worry. Good night!" he said, glancing and waving at the other house-elves as well.

They sailed out the door, which automatically closed behind them, and fit themselves under the cloak. James took Hermione's cup from her so she could hold the map better. Their precautions served them well because they were able to manoeuvre their route so that they could avoid Filch lurking around a corridor.

"Password?" the Fat Lady asked listlessly when they had successfully woken her up.

"Canis Major," Sirius answered. The door swung open at once, and they all entered it, finding Remus with a book.

He looked up at them in surprise and then at the clock. "That was fast."

"We practically had no trouble with the house-elves," Peter explained.

"Yeah, James was as charming as usual," Sirius cracked, flopping down on the couch next to Remus.

"Shut up," James muttered, setting the two cups of hot chocolate down on the glass centre table. He took his seat on an armchair, and Hermione did on one opposite his.

Remus raised his eyebrows. "So you went ahead with the hot chocolate plan?" he enquired wryly.

James shrugged. "Kind of, but we told the house-elves the truth. By the way, Tinky asked for you."

"She misses you," Sirius said in a false, sweet voice, causing all of them to laugh.

Remus shook his head in amusement. "Well, it seems like my powers of attraction can only get as far," he joked, wondering if there wasn't any bitterness underlying his words. "I'm tired," he announced before anybody could react. "I'm going to bed."

"I am, too," Sirius said, yawning and stretching his arms over his head as he stood up. "Good night."

Peter jumped up as well, taking his friends' lead. On the foot of the stairs, however, he glanced back at James and Hermione, who had remained seated. "Aren't you going yet?"

"We'll just have a nightcap, Wormtail," James said. "Night."

Peter smiled meaningfully at James. "Have fun. Good night." His eyes flicked over to Regina. "Night, Regina."

James waited until the sound of Peter's footsteps had disappeared before turning to Hermione. His fingers were suddenly clammy at the realisation that they were alone again. "Well, I guess we should drink this before it gets really cold."

Hermione smiled. "I suppose we should." She stood up and sat on the long couch that had been previously occupied, the one that was nearer her cup of chocolate and well, the one also closer to James. She lifted her cup to her lips and tasted it, closing her eyes briefly at its satisfying taste. "Mmm. This is incredible." She put it down and looked at James. "You know, I was really impressed with what you did down there."

"With what exactly?" He grinned at her. "Come on, you can tell me. I've heard it all before."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him before laughing. "You arrogant jerk."

"Just last Sunday you told me I was sweet," James protested.

"Things change," Hermione said smugly.

James shrugged. "They should. The world would be in a sorry state if they did not." He took another sip of chocolate and said, "By the way, a lot of things have been happening that I've neglected asking you how you're finding Hogwarts so far." Hermione made a face, and he added, "I know, I know. It's kind of late, but well..."

"I've never felt more at home," Hermione answered truthfully. She couldn't very well say that he was the reason, so she explained, "The subjects are challenging, the people are warm..."

"Sirius is warm?"

Hermione laughed. "Not really, but you more than make up for it. Thanks for sticking up for me a while ago."

James self-consciously pushed his glasses up his nose. "It was no trouble. He does get out of hand sometimes." At her arched eyebrows, he grinned and amended, "Well, okay. Maybe most of the time. But he's a great guy, really."

"Most girls in this school think so anyway," Hermione said. She had noticed that in the weeks she had spent at Hogwarts. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the map, which was still open for anyone to read. "How do I turn this blank?"

"Just tap it and say *mischief managed*," James said, watching her as she followed his instructions and handed it back to him.

"You sure do have a lot of tricks up your sleeve," Hermione noted, thinking of the cloak and the map.

James smirked. "We have a lot more than that, you know," he said. "I'll reveal them to you in time."

"Oh, I am just dying of suspense," Hermione replied drolly. She gestured towards their drinks. "We've been neglecting Tinky's concoction."

"I'd rather talk to you," James responded instinctively, causing Hermione to stop in the middle of raising her cup for another gulp. "I mean...well...you are remarkably easy to talk to, Regina."

Hermione drained half of her cup before answering, her face slightly pink. "Thanks. I'd like to think you really mean that."

"I do," James confirmed, his voice lower than usual. She didn't say anything and started playing with her fingers. "Hey," he said.

She looked up at him, nervously awaiting his next words. "Yes, James?"

The breathy way she said his name distracted him from what he was supposed to say. Merlin, it stirred feelings of longing inside him. He licked his suddenly dry lips. "I like the way you say my name," he said instead, his voice tinged with wonder.

Hermione continued staring at him, her calm exterior belying the storm of emotions raging inside her. Her heart was pounding so fast she thought it might explode.

James bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. "I'm sorry," James apologised. "I am making you uncomfortable, am I not?"

She smiled faintly, not knowing how to answer. "I guess we should say goodnight then."

James swallowed hard. "Right." He drained the last from his cup and stood up. Hermione followed suit, and he accompanied her to the foot of the stairs to the girls' dormitory. They were standing too close to each other, and he could almost see the way each of her lashes curved, the gentle slope of her nose, her flushed cheeks... He was reminded of that moment between them last Sunday, and he wanted so badly to tenderly cup her face and kiss her. But he steeled himself against his impulse; he did not have any right to do what he desired. The words he'd spoken to Sirius came back. *She is too special.* And at that place and time, he vowed to himself that he was going to do everything right with her.

"Good night, Regina."

Even without them touching, Hermione could feel the electricity between them. She could see the passion in his eyes and couldn't believe it was finally directed at her.

"Good night, James." *I love you.*

James watched her climb up the stairs, committing everything about her to memory. Before she disappeared into her dormitory, she turned back and smiled at him, her curls billowing behind her. He smiled, and long after she had gone, he was still standing there, still smiling.

It was truly a wonderful world.

Author's Notes: Just wanted to say that in this chapter, Lily believes that it's James getting over her that makes her want to bite his head off. She doesn't want to acknowledge that she does like James, even just a little. I know a lot of you hate Lily now, but I assure you, you're going to hate everybody in this story at least once. Haha. After all, nobody is purely good or bad. In real life, that's what makes judging morality so difficult. :)

In My Dreams

Chapter 16 of 22

Good things happen in dreams, but the best happen to those who wake up to make them come true.

A

Friends in Love

Chapter 17 of 22

Whenever he needed someone, she had always been around, always been there to see him through. But now she was more than a friend, even more than a best friend, because he was in love with her... and he had to let her know.

A

Change of Heart

They think they're perfect for each other. The rest of the world believes otherwise.

A

Every Step to Forevermore

There are some things people just know they want, either for that instant or for the rest of their lives. Like what colour to wear, what coffee to have, what cake to eat. Like who to hate, to befriend, to love... And ultimately spend the rest of their lives with. Like James. He just knows. It just fits. Regina.

A

There is a War

It is 1979, and Hermione has stubbornly braved the odds to get to where she is: happy with James and ready to spend her life with him, should he ask. But as the war looms, it demands sacrifices—and even those who know their history won't be saved.

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Author's Notes: After a (very) long vacation, I present you Chapter 20. It's supposed to be longer, but I got several requests saying that they'd prefer shorter chapters if it meant I would update faster, so here it is. Kinda transitional, but I think it'll make the whole story work. :)

Chapter Summary: It is 1979, and Hermione has stubbornly braved the odds to get to where she is: happy with James and ready to spend her life with him, should he ask. But as the war looms, it demands sacrifices...and even those who know their history won't be saved.

Chapter 20: There is a War

May it be the evening star shines down upon you

May it be when darkness falls

Your heart will be true.

You walk a lonely road.

Oh, how far you are from home!

Darkness has come

Darkness has fallen

A promise lives within you now.

--- Enya (May It Be) ---

"Moony, can you please lend me your *Advanced Potion-Making*?" Peter said tentatively.

Remus lifted his blue eyes from the text on his lap, although with much difficulty. He normally did not tolerate any form of nuisance whenever he was engrossed in reading, but he made exceptions for his friends. "Why, whatever happened to your book?"

"I splattered it with bubotuber pus," Sirius answered flippantly, leaning back into the couch and crossing his legs elegantly. At Remus' raised brow, he added, "Accidentally, of course. And I didn't know the pages would shrivel up."

Snorting in amusement, Remus said, "Well, at least you've added something to your arsenal of knowledge. And Peter, my book's still with Regina." He nodded towards the couch by the fire.

Sirius groaned at the sight of the girl reading and looked around the common room. His fellow Gryffindors were hard at work as well, and he slumped in his seat in disgust. "Moony, tell me. Did you inspire this sudden bout of studying?"

"No. It's just that time of the year, Padfoot," Remus replied patiently, turning his book to the next page. "It comes around like flu during April, and you've always been rather naive to it. Even now, with our N.E.W.T.s fast approaching."

Peter waited for Sirius to have his say, but when the black-haired boy merely rolled his eyes, he jumped at the opportunity to speak. "Er...Remus, can I have it when she's finished?"

"Of course." Remus did not look up this time.

"You can get it right now if you want, you know," Sirius said dryly. "It looks like she's busy with something else."

Peter turned to look at Hermione, and even Remus paused from his reading to see what Sirius was talking about. The three watched as she held her palm up to her face and gazed at something apparently resting on it; she toyed with it for several more moments before taking her wand out and prodding whatever it was. Peter gave a little squeak of surprise when, in the blink of an eye, Hermione was grasping a parchment. Her lively brown eyes danced over the page, and she smiled; she tapped it with her wand once again, and the parchment vanished.

"That's good magic," Peter said appreciatively.

"It's not even remotely useful," Sirius grumbled, still smarting from Remus' earlier comments. "I mean, sure, if you need to conjure one to make airplanes and attack Snivellus with, yeah."

Remus smiled. "She didn't Conjure anything, Padfoot. She merely Transformed one object to another. I wonder what it is."

As if on cue, Hermione closed the book, stood up and walked over to them. She handed Remus the book with her left hand, her right in a fist. "Thanks for the book, Remus. If you don't mind, can I borrow your *Advanced Transfiguration* tomorrow night?"

"Only if you tell us what's that you're holding," Remus answered with a mischievous smile. "We saw you playing with it a while ago."

The stunned look on Hermione's face dissolved into a sheepish smile. "Oh, this?" She laid her palm open to three pairs of eyes; on it was a tiny doll that resembled her.

"That's you," Peter said, stricken. His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Don't tell me you're now learning dark magic?"

Really! Hermione pursed her lips in slight annoyance. "No, Peter," she said. "James made it and gave it to me at lunch." She retrieved her wand from her pocket once again and briskly tapped the doll. "It becomes a parchment, see."

Sirius grunted, reflecting once again on how silly his best friend had become over Regina. He might already be tolerant of this romantic relationship, but that didn't mean he could not make fun of it as much as he could. "I guess it doubles as a love letter?"

"No!" Hermione exclaimed immediately. She tapped it hurriedly; the parchment returned to being a doll, and she slipped it into her pocket. "Of course not."

"Of course not," Sirius repeated with a smirk, and Remus elbowed him to keep him quiet. "Perhaps it's the nightly schedule of books you need to borrow from Moony to ace the exams?"

Hermione stared in disbelief for several seconds before lowering her head in apparent embarrassment. "I'm turning in. Good night."

She turned on her heels and started to walk away, but Peter called, "So it's a letter?"

"A love letter, obviously." Sirius' tone left no doubt that it wasn't a question, and Hermione stopped in her tracks.

All three of them were grinning roguishly. Hermione didn't know whether to smile or snort, but the scales tipped to amusement, and she shook her head in resignation. That seemed to encourage Peter to make another wisecrack, for he said, "Aren't you going to wait up for James?"

The name alone brightened Hermione's smile. "I wanted to, but if you are going to give me a difficult time about it..."

"Right, we'll stop then," Sirius said, holding up both hands in surrender. "James won't forgive us if he hears we've failed to do as his lady wishes." He chuckled, gestured to the couch and added, "Go ahead. Be our guest."

Hermione laughed at Sirius' words. "When you put it that way..." She walked back to them and plopped down beside Remus, cautiously waiting for them to speak anew.

Remus turned to her and softly enquired, "So it was *actually* a love letter?"

"I can't believe it!" Hermione complained, slapping Remus playfully on the arm. "You, of all people, broke your promise not to ask me about it!"

"Sirius has this habit of making plans and promises for the rest of us," Remus reasoned out. "But without getting sidetracked, was it really a love letter?"

Hermione sighed and relaxed on the couch in confession. "Yeah." She briefly closed her eyes and, with a dreamy smile on her face, repeated, "Yeah."

"What does it say?" Peter asked eagerly.

"It says he loves her, of course," Sirius replied, striving to keep his sarcasm to a minimum.

"I knew that," Peter said in a huff. "But there's got to be something else, right?"

Remus glared pointedly at Peter. "Now *that's* none of our business." But his blue eyes kept darting little glances at Hermione, who seemed oblivious to them.

Sirius, meanwhile, was also occupied with watching Hermione, noting how she kept exhaling little breaths as though trying to contain her giddiness/ *wonder*... When his eyes locked with hers, and Sirius realised with startling clarity that the sparkle in those dark orbs were exactly like James's while they were standing in front of that dark mirror. A wry smile escaped Sirius. Could he already have told her?

"Frankly, I didn't expect James to be that creative," Remus was saying, and Sirius tuned back in. "The last time he made a doll, it was of Snape."

That made Hermione laugh again. "I actually made him one first, one that looked like him and could turn into a letter. I gave it to him on his birthday."

"So that was why he decided to make one himself," Peter concluded, the realisation dawning on him. "They must match then, like figures atop a wedding cake!"

Sirius dropped his legs from the table in surprise, and Hermione straightened in her seat.

"W-w-wedding?" Hermione sputtered.

"Wedding cake? James has told you he wants to marry Regina?" Sirius interjected, visibly rattled. "And you're already thinking about the reception!"

Peter gaped in shock as he attempted to understand Sirius' prattle. "James told me what?"

"What did James tell you?" Hermione demanded from Sirius, astonished.

Sirius scratched his head, dumbfounded; as his mind cleared, he felt increasingly more stupid. "So James has not told you anything yet?"

Peter simply continued staring at the black-haired Marauder in confusion.

"Wait," Remus intervened, looking slightly befuddled himself. "Let's start at the beginning, shall we?" He glanced at Peter. "You said something about a wedding cake..."

"Because of the dolls," Peter supplied helpfully.

Remus nodded. "And then everybody went berserk."

"I did not," Sirius denied, running a hand through his hair in a show of nonchalance.

Remus rolled his eyes. "Right. You just reacted too strongly then."

"Sirius," Hermione began earnestly.

He eyed her warily.

"Did James really say he wanted to marry me?"

Remus inwardly flinched at the expectant smile and at the soft, hopeful expression illuminating her face. He turned to Sirius. "Did he indeed?"

Sirius smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand and groaned. "This is not the way Prongs would have wanted you to find out."

Hermione chewed thoughtfully at her lower lip before saying, "So he did say that? Really did?"

"Yeah." *Now James is really going to kill me.*

"Oh." It was all she could say. Hermione laced her fingers together and leaned back on the couch, trying to hide a smile she could not. She kept her eyes on the carpet, suddenly feeling too shy to look at the Marauders.

"Wow," Peter breathed. "Wow."

Remus had to lick his lips several times before being able to speak. "How did you know, Padfoot?"

Sirius shrugged. "You don't need to know that," he answered glibly, eliciting a rare frown from Remus. "I don't have any intention of giving away anything else. But what I know, Regina..."

Hermione looked up in curiosity.

"...is that you make my best friend happy. Very happy, in fact, that he can see sharing his future with you."

Flushed and aware that they were waiting for her to say something, Hermione wondered how best to respond. It was too much to take in all at once. *James wants me as his...* She swallowed nervously. *Wife?* Why was she so surprised? This was what she had come back for, wasn't it? Yet four months ago, while making the Time-Turner, had she even entertained such wild imaginings? Walking down the aisle with him, clad in a splendid white dress, pledging to love him forever...

It was bliss, pure bliss, and Hermione knew she should feel as though she was soaring through the clouds, but something was weighing her down. Either that, or the clouds were grey. She tucked a lock of hair behind one ear as she thought hard.

"You're daydreaming," Peter teased, amused by the rapidly shifting emotions showing on her face.

Despite herself, Hermione smiled faintly at Peter's jibe. He might be a traitor in her day, but tonight he was just a boy, a true-to-mould Marauder when it came to humour.

"About me, of course," a voice that was distinctly James's inferred. Starting guiltily, the four turned to see him towering shortly over them before sliding beside Hermione, whose eyes were still lost in her own musings. James immediately reached for Hermione's left hand and held it in his, glancing around at his friends. "So what have you been up to?"

"Studying," Sirius answered promptly, grabbing one of the books on the table, flipping it open and pretending to read. If he could avoid talking to James tonight, he would be in the clear.

James sniggered. "It's upside-down, Padfoot." He nudged Hermione to get her attention and said, "Don't tell me you've been studying too?"

Hermione found it difficult to look into James's eyes...or to even breathe or speak with him beside her, for that matter. It was as though the awkwardness that could only be brought about by a new relationship had come over her again. "Until a few minutes ago, yes," she answered anyway, her words barely above a whisper.

Perhaps sensing her discomfort, James raised his other hand and lightly touched her cheek; he was surprised to find it warm. "You're blushing."

At these words, he felt her skin heat up. Puzzled, he asked, "Did something happen?"

She angled her head so that she wasn't looking at him, so that she could avoid those hazel eyes that were gazing at her with so much love and tenderness. "It's nothing, James."

"Hmm. You must be tired, having to wait up for me." He cupped her chin and turned her face back so he could see her better. "But you don't look tired," James commented, now tracing her jaw line with his index finger.

Hermione smiled faintly. "What then do I look like, James?"

"Beautiful, as always," James answered, punctuating his statement with a quick kiss, "but more so this time. Like a... like a bride or something." The words were out of his mouth before he had decided on their wisdom, and they recalled to mind the image he had seen in the mirror. *But to say it like that!* James scolded himself in panic.

Unbeknownst to them, the other Marauders had abandoned all pretence of reading and were listening more carefully to their conversation.

Never before had Hermione's heart pounded so loudly. So it was true then, what Sirius had said. Nonetheless, she pushed his glasses up his nose and grinned, deciding to make light of the situation. "A bride? I didn't think you could improve on your flattery, James, but that was the most lovely compliment you've given me."

"I meant it, Regina," James asserted. *Better to have her think I'm going too far than that I'm being dishonest.* He reached into his robes and pulled out a sprig of flowers, an

assortment of roses and chrysanthemums he'd obviously picked from the grounds. "Oh, this is for you."

"Thank you," Hermione automatically said, taking them and smiling coyly up at him. "But what are these for?"

James dusted a kiss on her nose. "Nothing, really. It's just that they're beautiful, and so are you."

Hermione stiffened, her breath catching; she had definitely heard those words before.

"Don't you like it?" James asked worriedly. "I picked them myself, if you want to know. I didn't Conjure them out of nowhere."

Hermione suddenly wrapped her arms tightly around him, realising once again how lucky she was and so very thankful for him. *So sweet and thoughtful. Is this why it had seemed so familiar then?* "I like it, James. I like it very much. Thank you." She brushed his lips with hers and then said, "Is it okay if I turn in now?"

"Of course, love. Whatever you want." James stood up with Hermione, their hands still clasped, and walked her to the bottom of the staircase leading to the girls' dormitory. He enfolded her in an embrace and kissed her good night several times before letting her go with murmurs of sweet nothings.

Upstairs, after what felt like hours of tossing in her bed and unable to coax her mind into sleeping, Hermione sat up and hugged her knees to herself. Whatever thoughts that had earlier been bothering her had been as usual swept aside by James. Inside her head, all she could now see, like some Muggle film playing over and over, were scenes of her and James living the rest of their lives together. There she was, rushing to meet James as he stepped out of the fireplace after work. He would sit at the table she had prepared, and though in reality she was not particularly adept in cooking, he would reward her efforts with an earth-shattering kiss and... Hermione blushed in the darkness. And Merlin, she could imagine children running around the house...two at least, maybe three. She sighed as contentment flowed through her, grabbing her pillow and holding it close to her chest. It would be a good life.

Is this what fate has in store for me?

Oh, please. Didn't you challenge fate, a second voice sneered, proclaiming yourself as master of your destiny?

I was right, wasn't I? Hermione retorted, however shiftily. *Would fate have allowed me this liberty if it wasn't meant to happen?*

Cold, cynical laughter filled her ears. *And what of the others' fates, intertwined with yours, that you've played with? What will happen to them?*

You mean Lily and... Hermione frowned. Strange how difficult it was to remember his name now *And Harry, of course. You mean them, don't you?* At this reminder of the guilt she should be bearing, Hermione's fingers at once went to her collarbone, caressing herself with widowed sensuality. It was warm without the cold glass nestled at its heart, and the warmth strengthened her resolve.

Perhaps you sold it on purpose? the voice mocked.

"I did not," Hermione said, breaking the silent argument. "I did it for James and also because I had no use of it anymore. There's no way I'm going back."

The phantom that had invaded her head had the nerve to cackle. *Where has your logic gone, Hermione Granger? Where has your conscience disappeared to? Or has Regina Weisz done away with both?*

Ignoring the disturbing questions, Hermione replaced her pillow and slid back under the covers, pulling them up to her chin and staring at the ceiling. *It's Potter, she corrected. Hermione Potter. And then, almost as an afterthought, That means I have to tell him sooner or later who I really am.*

Somehow, with the assurance of his love, the idea of finally being able to be honest with him didn't seem as frightening as it should have been. *He will understand. I know he will,* Hermione thought as she drifted off to sleep.

Several days passed. Hermione had yet to find an instance where she could talk to James...or rather, she had yet to muster enough courage to say the truth she shouldn't have hidden in the first place. It was more difficult in the bright of day, she found, and she felt her resolve weaken to the point that she had almost decided not to tell him anymore. What harm was there in remaining Regina Weisz forever?

There wasn't any, at least none very pressing. It wasn't difficult to imagine sailing through the rest of her life under a name that wasn't hers as long as she kept her identity safe. And that she did... somehow. She still studied as of old, laughed the way she used to, loved as much as she did. Deep within, she knew she was still Hermione Granger.

Minus the rational mind, perhaps, but never had she been happier.

After that night in the common room, during which Sirius had unwittingly revealed James's plans of marrying her, Hermione had noticed a marked increase in the Marauders' watchfulness over her. She had to fight the urge to giggle whenever she caught Remus or Sirius checking her hands for any sign of a ring, with Peter doing so less conspicuously.

"Stop staring, Peter," Hermione chided gently, making the boy squawk and turn red. "I haven't got any ring yet."

"I, well, I only thought... It's been a week, after all." Peter cast a significant look at Sirius, who merely shrugged.

"Hey, I didn't say Prongs planned on asking her anytime soon."

This time, it was Hermione whose cheeks flushed at the idea that she was indeed expecting a proposal from James. Why did the details of her relationship with James have to be out in the open? *I guess it really can't be helped. Having James as a boyfriend is almost like having three others.* She sighed.

"Don't sound so depressed," Sirius said.

Hermione glanced up in surprise, ready with a nasty comeback, but did a double take when she realised that Sirius' smile was actually meant to reassure her. "Er...thanks, but I'm not. Really," she added after being appraised for another moment.

Sirius tilted his head to the left, causing his hair to fall across his forehead in an attractive heap. "James has a lot on his mind right now, what with Quidditch practice and everything. I'm sure you understand."

Quidditch, Hermione thought wearily, briefly reminded of Ron and Harry. *It's all they think about.* "Of course I do. James wants the Quidditch Cup so badly, and what with our N.E.W.T.s around the corner, he's got his hands full."

"Not to mention preparing for a career after Hogwarts," Remus added agreeably, a book on his lap.

She considered that. "All of you have taken the required classes for Auror training, haven't you?" Hermione asked. "You've all decided then?"

"The best students in Hogwarts have taken them," Sirius answered, "and we're all applying for Auror training after a few weeks or so."

A wistful smile crossed Hermione's lips as she pictured James as an Auror, aware that he would be the best in the not-so-distant future.

"But James isn't sure he wants to be an Auror, at least not yet," Sirius continued. "He's received invitations from at least three international Quidditch teams, so he might choose to play professional instead."

"Oh," Hermione wondered why she didn't know that. "But I'm sure James would rather be an Auror," she said confidently.

Sirius raised his eyebrows in obvious doubt but said, "Well, if this war against Voldemort goes on, we'll probably need more Aurors than the Ministry can make them."

At these words, Remus stopped reading; the four of them stared into nothingness, suddenly lost in their own thoughts. Earlier that day, the *Daily Prophet* reported that two more senior Aurors had been killed in combat in a village near Lancashire. Being students, their consciousness of the war was inevitable, but its threat still seemed far to them, barely having come of age and having been protected within the walls of Hogwarts. Sometimes though, they pondered on the garish reality of war: what did it feel like to use magic to kill, to shed blood, to lose a loved one?

Hermione snapped out of her musings and studied the pensive faces of the three Marauders. *There is a war. I've forgotten that there was a war, and now I've landed right in the middle of it.* How strange that she had to witness...and maybe even live through...this, her knowledge of the future unable to allay her fears that in the end, everything would turn out for the better... but not before peaking to their worst.

"Maybe the Ministry is fighting Vol... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named..." Peter stuttered.

"Voldemort," Sirius and Remus corrected in unison, the former rather irritably.

"Maybe they are fighting him the wrong way," Peter finished in a weak voice, ignoring their rebuke. "Maybe there isn't supposed to be fighting in the first place."

"What do you mean?" Sirius glowered suspiciously at the smaller boy.

Hermione smiled sadly, watching them spar through words. Already Peter was looking for an easier way out.

History had begun.

Even so, Hermione marvelled at the normality with which life at Hogwarts proceeded. The Gryffindor common room was filled with people studying until one in the morning, their foreheads wrinkled with concentration as though nothing short of Voldemort could distract them. Even without the prospect of exams, James had his hands full. With less than a month before the Quidditch finale featuring Gryffindor and Slytherin, he had stretched their team's scheduled practices to the limit.

Hermione wondered at this as she watched the team zoom around in blurs of red and gold on Wednesday night, knowing that Gryffindor was two hundred points up and that the team was more inspired than ever with the Bullet in their midst.

Katherine clutched the Quaffle tightly under her arm as she sped towards the hoops, George flying in the same direction but staying several feet from her. They zigzagged towards their goal; Katherine hurled the Quaffle towards George, who accelerated as he faked left. Matthew Witte, the Gryffindor Keeper, fell for it, too far gone to save the ball that was sailing past him to the right hoop. Neil, however, aimed the Bludger at the Quaffle just in time to alter its course, and both Katherine and George yelled in frustration. Apparently, James had teamed up the three Chasers and had put the two Beaters and the Keeper together.

James blew the whistle that hung around his neck, startling even Hermione, who was admiring the athletic grace with which the players moved in the air.

"Excellent defence!" James called, signalling for them to halt play and calling for a short huddle in the air. After five minutes, they landed, their feet lightly touching the ground. Hermione waited as James, still riding his broom, sailed towards her while his teammates headed for the shower.

"Hi," James greeted, his face split in the goofy, confident grin that never failed to make Hermione smile.

"Hi. Here, have this." Hermione rummaged in her pocket for the handkerchief she had brought and reached out to dab James's sweaty face with it.

Surprised but rather pleased, he covered her hand with his and guided it from one cheek to another. "Thanks."

Hermione blushed. "That was a good play up there," she commented.

"I know," James said proudly. "Great offensive thrust, but better defence. We've been coming up with plays like that for days now."

"I can't see any reason why you would lose," Hermione said.

"Me too," James bragged, puffing his chest out, and she laughed. "By the way, what are you doing here?" he innocently asked.

Hermione swatted him on the arm. "You asked me to watch you play, you idiot. And you promised to take my flying after."

"Did I now?" James got off the broom and sat beside her. "I seem to have forgotten," he teased.

"Maybe whacking your head with the broomstick will jog your memory," she threatened, a glint in her eye.

James swiftly pulled her to him in an embrace, and Hermione at once rested her head on his chest. As she felt him ensnare his fingers in her hair, she tickled his waist. "Do you remember now?"

"A little," James said. "But maybe a kiss will completely do the trick."

Hermione looked up and edged away. "And you think you're going to get it that easily?"

"Won't I?" James inched closer, closing the gap between them. "All I have to do is this..." He cupped her face firmly in one hand. "This..." He lowered his head, and, just when he was about to claim her mouth, whispered, "And this." He felt her smile as he nibbled on her lower lip before completing his invasion, and Hermione flung her arms around his neck, clinging to him with her head tilted back as though she were drowning. When they paused for breath, James murmured, "Well? That was easy, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Hermione sighed, her eyelashes struggling to flutter open.

"So, do you still fancy that ride?"

"Well, you promised me." She had finally managed to open her eyes, gazing at the hazel ones above her. "But I guess this is just as good as flying. No...better. Incredible."

"What can I say? I always keep my promises." He kissed her again and again, touching her more intimately each time, and as they held each other, the settling darkness heightened each sensation.

It was already a little half past seven when Hermione remembered that both of them were supposed to be inside the castle for dinner.

James groaned against her earlobe. "How can you think about food at a time like this?"

"Believe me, I'd hate for the Head Boy to get into trouble just because he lost track of the time."

He uttered a low chuckle, sweeping brown locks from her forehead before kissing her there and settling her more comfortably on his lap.

"James," Hermione admonished, "we're supposed to be getting ready to leave, not getting more comfy."

He shushed her with his lips and carried her as he mounted the broom, both his legs swinging from one side. At her raised brows, he said, "I'd hate to see the one the Head Boy loves stumble around just because she's intoxicated with his kisses."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "How you can be both arrogant and sweet is still beyond me."

James urged the broom up with one hand even as the other pressed her middle to him. "But you find it charming, no doubt."

"Yes, very." Hermione leaned over and kissed him, but he quickly pulled away, shaking his head.

"Not now. You'll get *me* drunk, and we can't have that when we're flying."

Hermione giggled and put her arms around him instead as they made their way back to the castle, the broom hovering only several feet from the ground. The rest of the ride was comfortably silent, a light breeze matching the solemnity of night. James touched down at the doors to the castle and helped Hermione to her feet. They entered the castle hand in hand and immediately headed for the Great Hall, where they expected dinner to be in full swing.

But no laughter and noisy conversation greeted them; even the clink of silverware was muted, as though they were being handled with utmost care. It was evident that something was amiss. James scanned the rows of House tables, noting that the hall seemed to be significantly lacking in people. He clutched Hermione's hand more tightly, and she squeezed his in return.

Spotting the Marauders, they walked towards them and sat on the benches. The look of relief on Remus' face was in itself alarming. "We thought both of you had been called in as well," he said.

"Where are the other students?" James asked, setting the Bullet on the floor. "Have they gone missing?"

"Their Heads of Houses called them," Remus answered, worried. "Something must've happened, but Professor Dumbledore hasn't said anything yet." They glanced at the High Table and saw that the Headmaster's seat was empty.

"Have something to eat first," Peter offered, pushing a plate towards them. Hermione shook her head and touched James's shoulder; she had just seen Professor McGonagall emerge from a chamber behind the High Table. Her face was especially sombre as she approached the centre of the hall and raised a palm for attention.

The murmurs occupying the room first escalated before hushing, all faces turning towards the Deputy Headmistress in anticipation of the news.

"This afternoon," Professor McGonagall began, enunciating each word clearly, "Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade were simultaneously attacked by Death Eaters." Horrified gasps erupted from the students; she paused, as though the time would let some of the terror dissipate, and continued, "More than two hundred people died, and many more are wounded. Some of the victims are your schoolmates' relatives, and the Headmaster is currently arranging the students' travel home. At the same time, it is his express wish that I tell you this, not to frighten you..."

Sirius scowled at his younger brother, sitting at the Slytherin table with an expression of despicable contentment.

"...but to warn you and make you understand the necessity of more stringent security measures." Professor McGonagall's eyes swept the entire room. "No student will be allowed out of their common rooms after eight o'clock, and no student will be allowed wandering out of the castle after six in the evening."

Hermione half-expected James to complain about Quidditch, but his jaw was clenched, and he was listening with rapt attention.

"The Forbidden Forest is, by all means, out-of-bounds. Aside from our Head Boy and Girl, the Prefects and my colleagues will also patrol the school at night to ensure that nothing untowardly happens." She pressed her lips together and went on. "Are there any questions?"

Nobody spoke. Each one was deep in their own speculations of how terrible the day's ordeal had been. Almost every pair of eyes were filled with tears, the compassion for the afflicted almost tangible. The tragedy had struck home.

"If there aren't any, then please return to your dormitories immediately. Everyone..." Professor McGonagall announced, "except the Head Boy and Girl and the Prefects. The Headmaster requires a meeting with you."

James, who had not spoken since Professor McGonagall started, turned to give Hermione a quick peck on the cheek before standing up. "I'll see you later."

Hermione snatched three sandwiches from the platter just before it vanished. "Don't worry about dinner; I'll save two for you." He flashed her quick smile before striding away.

She and the rest of the Marauders climbed their way to the Gryffindor tower along with the other students, some of whom had now gotten over their initial shock...at least enough to air their concern that Hogwarts might be attacked soon.

Nobody in the common room was sleeping early that night, but nobody was studying either. Hermione heard a fifth-year wonder how just how many bombs were necessary to shatter Hogwarts' walls, and she crossed her arms in annoyance.

"Have any of you read *Hogwarts, A History*?"

Peter, Remus and Sirius all looked at her as though she had just informed them that Hogwarts had been attacked.

"It won't be in the N.E.W.T.s," Sirius said scornfully.

"I know it won't be," Hermione shot back, her nerves frayed. "Remus? Have you?"

"Er...yeah," Remus admitted, turning pink. "But why did you ask?"

"Because I was hoping that somebody besides me knew that the castle is protected by more than just walls," Hermione said, her voice a shade supercilious. "Many enchantments have been placed on it, and I imagine Professor Dumbledore will strengthen them even more. So I think that the last thing we need right now is panic. It makes people do stupid things."

Sirius countered, "How come you've read *Hogwarts, A History* before you came here?"

Hermione was surprised; his question came from nowhere. "I did some background check, that's all," she answered evasively.

"So Hogwarts isn't in danger?" Peter asked, wanting to be sure.

"Of course it is," Hermione said impatiently. "We're in the middle of a war." That severity of the situation, of the time she had come back to, hit her the moment news of the attacks did. "But we're not in any more danger than before."

"On the contrary," Remus volunteered quietly, "if Voldemort wants to spread terror by killing people, then wouldn't a massacre of students work for him? The slaughter of the innocents?" They mulled over that one, and Remus continued, "Besides, I think that we, of all people, know that there are chinks in Hogwarts' defensive armour." He smiled wryly. "So I guess Hogwarts isn't as tough as stronghold as it is the books."

Hermione immediately understood what he was implying. "Well, for everybody's safety, I guess you'll have to give up the map."

"That's crazy," Sirius objected at once. "We worked too hard to make that. Besides, I'm confident we're the only ones who know about the secret passageways. Not even Filch knows about them. And we can even use the map to watch out for intruders, so we're definitely not giving it up."

Hermione started to protest but thought better of it. "Never mind. It doesn't matter to me right now." She unwrapped one sandwich and started to eat; halfway through it, James arrived with a tray of steaming cups of hot chocolate.

"One for everyone," James announced, setting the tray on the table and sitting beside Hermione. She looked over her shoulder and saw that Lily and the Prefects had returned with James and had joined their own friends. She took out the remaining sandwiches and offered those to him, which he accepted gratefully.

"So what happened?" Sirius enquired, allowing James but one bite of his food.

James swallowed, gulped some of his drink and wiped his mouth. "Basically what Professor McGonagall said at dinner. Except that..." He frowned. "Dumbledore said something about the deaths being unintentional, that the Death Eaters were in actuality looking for something."

"Which is...?" Remus prompted, taking a sip from his own cup.

"He didn't say." James took another swig of the chocolate.

Horcrux. The answer came straight away to Hermione. She set her drink back on the table, her hand trembling. "Did they find it?"

"Nobody knows. Nobody's even sure Voldemort sent them to look for it anyway, whatever it is. But the Headmaster seems really convinced that Hogwarts will be attacked soon, and he's never struck me as a man prone to paranoia." James bit into his bread and chewed on it pensively.

"So you think Voldemort wants something that's hidden in Hogwarts," Remus concluded. "An object of power, obviously."

James didn't answer this time, and Hermione sensed he was holding something back. She cupped his elbow, and he turned to look into her eyes, his own distraught.

"Neil's mum worked in a shop in Diagon Alley," he murmured, his jaw tightening. "She's the only parent he's got, and she's dead now..." His voice slightly cracked, but James mastered his emotions. "And he's only fourteen. I can't imagine having to go through that myself. If it were me..." He swallowed a lump in his throat. "If it were me, I'd want to finish Voldemort off myself. I'd hunt him down and kill him."

They were all shocked at his vicious judgment, but James didn't say anything else. He hastily and savagely finished his dinner, seemingly to avoid any more talk of what had happened.

Later that night, James walked her to the stairs to her dormitory and embraced and kissed her with fierce intensity as though he never wanted to let her go, and Hermione intuitively knew that something had changed within him.

It was most ominous.

* * * * *

The eerie stillness persisted in Hogwarts over the next few days, the uneasy tranquillity preceding an impending disaster. Dumbledore had assured the students and the public that the wards protecting the castle had been strengthened, and true to their word, the professors vigilantly patrolled both the indoors and outdoors every night. Professor McGonagall visited the common room every night and randomly called out names as though she were merely checking attendance in class. Several adults in with the Ministry's emblem on their robes had also been spotted and excitedly identified as Aurors.

Meanwhile, students caught outside the permissible hours were severely punished with detention, amidst much grumbling and dark muttering.

"If you keep that up," Professor McGonagall warned a fifth-year who had been spotted wandering around the last two nights, "I doubt you're going to be here long enough for your O.W.L.s." The student merely scowled at her.

Hermione privately questioned whether nurturing a feeling of unrest within Hogwarts was wise despite the surrounding circumstances. She agreed with James; it wasn't like Dumbledore to display that he was troubled, but perhaps... Perhaps the Headmaster did have something to fear.

"Are you going to wait up for James?" Sirius asked, stretching his arms over his head and yawning. "It's almost ten o'clock, and I'm sleepy."

"Go to bed then," Hermione advised, trying to concentrate on the book Remus had lent her despite her turbulent thoughts, and now Sirius' question had made further studying impossible. "I can't sleep without knowing for sure that James is here, safe."

Weren't you the one who said we had nothing to worry about? Sirius groaned. "How am I going to bed with you making me out to be some insensitive lout."

Remus glanced up from his reading and tossed Sirius a book. "Here, have something to read."

"Thanks. That was thoughtful," Sirius remarked sarcastically. Even so, he opened it and flipped through its pages uninterestedly.

Hermione glanced at the clock above the fireplace. James and Lily were due to arrive from their second rounds any moment now, and at the sounds of approaching footsteps...loud and quick, as though whoever was making them was running...she angled her head expectantly towards the portrait hole.

It burst open, and Hermione stood up. Instead of James, a little boy with blond hair clambered in and almost fell over with haste. He wildly looked around.

"Hey, you!" Sirius snapped the book closed and threw it aside, grateful for a diversion. "What were you doing outside so late in the evening? It's detention for you!"

"Er...you can't give him detention, Sirius," Peter said.

But the little boy wasn't listening to their banter. He was breathing heavily, trying to speak but failing to get a word out.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked him, perceiving his distress. She approached him, put her hands on his shoulders and levelled herself with him so she could look him in the eye. "Tell me, what's wrong?"

He gulped some air and managed, "Death Eaters!" He swallowed again. "Death Eaters!" he repeated more forcefully. "I saw them! Death Eaters! Here! At Hogwarts!"

* * * * *

James exited a room on the first floor and started up the flight of stairs, knowing his eyelids were on the brink of closing. Completing his assigned rounds was taking its toll on him, even after less time on the pitch and especially after dinner. Since the attacks, the earliest he could return to the common room was ten o'clock.

That reminds me. I'm not allowed to turn in without Lily. He glanced at the watch on his wrist and laughed aloud. It was the watch that Regina had given him, and with it strapped to his wrist, he always forgot it wasn't there to tell the time. But his body's internal clock was telling him he should rest, so Lily must be on her way back to the Gryffindor tower as well...if she wasn't back already.

James snorted, knowing she wouldn't bother waiting for him and that she was the least bit worried about his safety. But he thought it was almost his obligation as a male to look out for her, so he decided to have a look around first. He stole another look at his watch and wondered aloud, "Right. So where should I check?"

The short hand that had been pointing to twelve moved counterclockwise to nine, and he grinned. "Left, eh? You have a point there." He turned left at the second floor landing, aware that this wasn't exactly Lily's area of responsibility but certain he could never underestimate the redhead's nosiness anyway.

He strolled along the long, carpeted hall, his footsteps muffled. As he passed by another flight of stairs, a sudden motion caught his eye; a second check told him it was nothing.

His instincts screamed differently.

James held his breath, his senses sharper. There it was: the hardly discernible sound of somebody else's footsteps, which stopped almost as soon as he had noticed it. And then there was a change in the air and then a rush of wind that he knew would strike his right ear, if he let it. He automatically sidestepped, whirling and whipping his wand out of his robes in one fluid motion.

Something crashed behind him, but he didn't look back...couldn't, transfixed with the sight of the enemy before him. An icy shudder passed through him. He knew that the next time he would be asked to describe death, he wouldn't have to think too hard.

The figure was clothed in black and hooded, its outstretched arm holding its wand aloft. That it had missed earlier seemed to mean nothing to it; it was cackling madly, as though the assault had been done in sport and that it had but flexed its fingers in anticipation of enjoyable...to James's mind, deadly...curses.

"Quick reflexes, wittle Potter," a high-pitched voice behind the hood taunted, carelessly tossing its cloak back. "I'm impressed...but you are of pure blood, of course."

James tensed, gripping his wand more firmly.

He was staring at Bellatrix Lestrange.

Author's Notes: So, what did you think? It has been so long since I've written something HP-related, I fear my skills are quite rusty. But I guess I have to keep on writing this May because I'm starting my medicine proper in June, and I'm sure things will be more busy. *sigh* Plus, I've grown quite attached to this manga (*Detective Conan*), haha, but I guess I'll put that aside for now.

And this is so not related to HP, but I've closely followed *American Idol* this season even if I don't live in the US, and I'm a fangirl of DAVID ARCHULETA! So please, if you live in the US, please vote for him like, two hundred times or more a night! :) I wouldn't mind if you won't review if you vote for him! Haha. :) So vote!

David Archuleta for the win!

Like Soft, Drifting Sand

Chapter 21 of 22

As the War hits home, friendships are questioned and strengthened, heroes emerge, and a prophecy begins to be fulfilled as fate asserts itself. But sometimes, the very thing that's supposed to keep people together can tear them apart.

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Author's Notes: First off, I apologise for the eternity it took to get this chapter out. This was very problematic for me to write, not only because of my tight schedule but also because it's just, well, difficult. Like the previous, it is transitional, but I hope you like it anyway. Happy new year to all! :)

Chapter Summary: As the War hits home, friendships are questioned and strengthened, heroes emerge, and a prophecy begins to be fulfilled as fate asserts itself. But sometimes, the very thing that's supposed to keep people together can tear them apart.

Chapter 21: Like Soft, Drifting Sand

The strength I simply never found I will find for you

What I believe our future holds, I will see it through

To be with you a lifetime is really all I ask.

--- Vittorio Grigolo (*You are my Miracle*) ---

His words came in an ill-timed lull. Heads snapped in his direction, mouths slightly open and eyes alert, all of them waiting for him to affirm what he had just said...or to deny it and tell them he had been joking.

Several heartbeats passed. Hermione lightly yet urgently shook the little boy's shoulders. "Death Eaters?" she repeated, her whisper magnified by the silence. "At Hogwarts?"

Faces blanched, and sharp intakes of breath were echoed throughout the room.

"But that can't be!" a female fifth year protested. "Dumbledore said we were safe!"

"Maybe those were just some Slytherins pulling your leg," another student volunteered, however tensely.

The boy visibly swallowed, his hands shaking. "I'm telling you, I saw them!" His voice cracked, and he stifled a sob. "I was pla-playing Exploding Snap on the fourth floor, and suddenly a door opened from the wall, and I saw them rush out! Four of them! Big and tall and wearing black cloaks, their faces covered with silver masks... So I ran away as fast as I could..."

Panicked buzzing filled the room, although nobody dared move from where they were. Hermione stood up and glanced at Sirius, whose face had gone white and had twisted in alarm.

So there is indeed a secret passage located on the fourth floor. The boy, who had now begun crying openly, was telling the truth.

And then, without having yet recovered from the terrible realisation, another hit her.

"James!" Hermione cried in fear.

A hush fell over the room.

And Lily...

Hermione couldn't breathe, could no longer stand a moment of inaction. She rushed to the door, all her senses now concentrated on finding James. She didn't know where he was, but she had to do something. Anything! Blindly, she clambered out, but a strong hand pulled her from behind.

"Wait, Regina," Sirius declared. "I'm going with you, but wait just a moment."

She gazed at him in desperate confusion, wanting to scream that there was no time at all to waste...why was he hesitating now?...but he had already turned from her and had started giving Remus and Peter instructions.

"Moony, take charge and keep everybody inside. Wormtail, you help Moony. Make sure that the portrait hole and all the windows are locked."

Remus briskly sprang to his feet, tugging a still petrified Peter up as well.

Sirius' grip on Hermione tightened. "We're going out to look for James and Evans and for the other students who might still be out. We'll try to go to Dumbledore and McGonagall as well." His jaw clenched. "If we're not back by midnight, Remus... You know what to do." With that, he helped Hermione out the portrait hole and followed suit, slamming it behind him.

He lengthened his stride to keep up with Hermione, who was walking down the hall rapidly and paying him no attention. They reached the top of the staircase, but the stairs to the larger part of the castle seemed to take forever to swing their way. If they could just jump down several flights of stairs without having to endure multiple injuries, Sirius knew both of them would have done so.

"If you hadn't stopped me from taking off back there, I might have caught the stairs," Hermione snapped without looking at him, clutching the banister.

"True, but the Death Eaters might have also been nearer," Sirius replied evenly, belying the fears cruelly tearing at his insides.

"That was the point, you know," Hermione said scornfully, willing the stairs to move faster towards them. "We don't want to chase them away; we want to get them."

"We want to get James and Lily," Sirius reminded her as they rushed down the first flight of stairs, and then the second. "I don't know where the hell they are right now. I don't even know if by wasting...at least according to you...a few seconds, we've sent the Death Eaters closer to them..." He paused for breath at the foot of the stairs to the third floor, his chest heaving with both emotion and adrenaline.

"But at least we've made sure we won't be letting them anywhere near the Gryffindor tower."

Hermione bit her lower lip in quiet consideration. "Fine," she conceded afterwards. "Let's have it your way, then. Divide and conquer." She looked up and met his eyes. "We can split up..."

Sirius gaped at her as though she was insane. "Split up?"

"...and I'll take the left wing on all floors while you take the right," Hermione continued, unperturbed. All traces of her irritation had vanished, her voice consumed by weary resignation. "Can we meet each other here in an hour? Hopefully we'll have found them by then."

And if we don't? But Sirius forcefully pushed the thought away. "I cannot let you go off on your own," Sirius objected, knowing James would never have allowed it. Not in a million years. Not even if he was in danger and she wanted to save him.

"It'll be faster!" Hermione insisted stubbornly, her annoyance peaking once again. "Will you just please stop wavering and agree? Please! This is no time to be chivalrous!"

Sirius' patience snapped. "Look," he snarled. "I don't care if you go and get yourself killed, but James will kill me for it if that happens, don't you see? And then he'll go and kill himself after." Without another word, he stalked off in the other direction.

"Where are you going, Black?" Hermione demanded.

"Time's better spent looking for my best friend," Sirius answered with his back to her. His hand slipped into his robes, and he drew his wand. "Just so you know, you're not the only one who loves him."

Hermione froze, watching his receding form. *Sirius...*

"Do both of us a favour and stay safe, alright?"

Hermione exhaled noisily, seething with indignation, but as Sirius disappeared around the corner, the fear she didn't want to acknowledge escalated. She was alone now, and the Death Eaters were at large. What would she ever do if she encountered them? She fumbled in her pocket for her wand but could find no reassurance from the piece of wood.

This is not the time to be afraid! Move!

She took several slow, deep breaths; her grip on her wand steadied, and even as she pressed her lips together in dread, she turned abruptly and started to walk towards the staircase at the end of the hall. Her movements were measured now, almost rigid, the stillness in the air no longer suffocating her. Instead, it sharpened her senses and dulled the realisation that her path could as well lead to her death.

Nothing can daunt a woman armed with love.

Hermione scanned the entirety of the left wing on the first floor before making her way down the hall, wary of anything that seemed unnatural. The bolts of the great doors to the castle were in place, but she wasn't surprised. The Death Eaters escaping that way would be just as effective as a thief ringing a doorbell before entering.

As she made her way back up, she wondered: if Voldemort wanted a terrorising display of his power, why didn't he send his followers during the day, when students and professors alike were freely milling around the castle? For all the morbid glamour he was known for, why did he decide to attack during the night, almost as though as he didn't want to be noticed?

At the top of the staircase to the second floor, Hermione once more peered down the hall to check if anything was amiss. She had decided to inspect the floors one at a time; satisfied and yet with her alarm rising, she gingerly took the stairs to the third floor, flattening herself against the wall afterwards as she strained her ears for noise.

She heard a derisive laugh, and recognising it as James's, she released the breath that she had been holding *He's safe!*

"If you ask me, joining Voldemort would be *tainting* my pure blood, not honouring it," Hermione heard him say in an almost conversation manner. Whoever he was talking with hissed in spite, but he continued, "So I hate to disappoint you, LeStrange, but I'm afraid you'll have to take no for an answer."

LeStrange. A chill ran through her. She had heard that name and the murders associated with it, and the earlier relief she had at hearing James's voice evaporated. He was in danger, but how could she best help him? She could make her presence known, but wouldn't that create more trouble...?

BAM!

Without another conscious thought, Hermione rushed from where she was hiding and saw James standing only a few feet from where a metal armour had exploded. He had his wand out in a stance fit for duels, his breathing ragged and an unexpected smirk on his face. Hermione watched in suspended terror as James's opponent, a dark-skinned woman whose face was disfigured with fierce fury, fired another curse. He stumbled as he dodged the light, landing on his knees.

"James!" she screamed.

Why didn't I think of bringing the map? Sirius berated himself angrily as he stomped up the stairs to the seventh floor. *It would've made finding James so much easier.* But he didn't have the time to return to Gryffindor tower to retrieve the map, in any case. Not after wasting three-quarters of an hour in searching the left wing of all the lower floors, the dungeons and the entrance to the Slytherin common room included.

"Fifteen minutes," Sirius gritted out as another clock came into view. Fifteen more minutes and he'd have to meet Regina back where he left her... that is, if nothing had happened to her yet. He groaned, reminded once more of the advantage the Marauder's Map would've given him. *Where are you, Prongs?*

He pushed open a slab of wall, which gave way to reveal a revolving staircase covering two more flights. Another door concealed by a wall and several feet to the right would be the entrance to the Ravenclaw common room, usually accessed through the fifth floor. Sirius had discovered this passage after many months of trying to get through to Marlene McKinnon.

"Crucio!"

Sirius' breathing hitched, and he stopped in his tracks.

And then again, *"Crucio!"*

The cold, forceful words reverberated even through the brick wall, and his heart clenched. He ran up the remaining steps and kicked through the wall just as a shrill pierced the air.

Lily was twisting in excruciating pain on the carpeted floor ten feet from him, just outside the door to the Ravenclaw common room. Reflexively, Sirius growled and shouted, *"Stupefy!"* The red light bounced ineffectively off the wall as he ran towards her, but it didn't matter; announcing his presence was enough to distract the enemy, and the curse torturing Lily was lifted.

However weak she was, she didn't waste a second before retaliating. *Petrificus Totalus!*

Sirius reached Lily's side just in time to see the Death Eater, robed in black and yet unmasked, be immobilised as the curse hit his left knee. His body staggered, about to fall on its side, and then:

"Stupefy!"

Another burst of light erupted from the end of Lily's wand, still angled from the floor, and this time it hit the Death Eater right in the chest. The force was enough to make him topple backwards and roll down the stairs. Sirius rushed to follow him and, to his horror, saw the staircases change just as the petrified body reached the last rung...and dropped vertically, landing several floors down with a thud.

Sirius' blood froze, transfixed at the sight of the mangled, almost indistinguishable form tens of feet below. His hands gripped the banister for support as a wave of nausea hit him. Then he felt Lily quietly approach his side, saw the realisation strike her as her green eyes widened in shock and her face paled into ash.

Lily's chin trembled and her shoulders shook, almost as though she wanted to cry. Pity overwhelmed him, and he laid a hand on her arm. She met his gaze fiercely, as though challenging him to blame her, but how could he?

"Are you hurt, Evans?" he asked instead.

"N...no," she answered, trying to control the shiver that ran through her. Sirius could sense how hard she was fighting for control, finally succeeding when she next spoke. "How did you find me? The Death Eater... I was on my rounds... We should get back, there might be others around..."

Sirius' entire body went numb. "Evans, where's James?"

Her sharp intake of breath was painfully audible. "He's not with me; we do our rounds separately..."

A low, anguished moan escaped Sirius as he took Lily by the wrist and led her with haste towards the secret passage from whence he had earlier emerged. *Regina*, he thought with newfound urgency. *Have you found him yet?*

"Where are we going?" Lily asked in confusion as they passed the turn to the revolving stairs leading to Dumbledore's office. "We should alert the Headmaster!"

Sirius didn't respond, except to tighten his hold on her as she tried to tug her arm away. Deaf to her protests, he practically dragged her down the stairs to where Regina had said she'd meet him after an hour.

She wasn't there.

Damn! Sirius cursed, rooted to the spot and eyes wild as he looked around. Twice, thrice, several times.

"Black," Lily muttered in a low voice. "What exactly..."

"Thank Merlin!" a voice exclaimed, and they both turned to see Professor McGonagall approach them, seemingly having come from Gryffindor Tower. "Mister Black, Miss Evans..."

"Professor, Death Eaters..."

"So Mister Lupin has told me," Professor McGonagall interrupted Lily. "And now I must request that the two of you return to your common room..."

"But James and Regina..." Sirius protested.

The older woman's nostrils flared, and she pointed in the direction of the Gryffindor Tower. "To the common room. Now."

Sirius stared at her disbelievingly. "Professor," he sharply said. "My friends are in danger, and you expect me to run and take cover?"

Professor McGonagall glared, but her voice was kinder when next she spoke. "Mister Black, I already had Argus alert the staff, and they are currently searching the castle. For the moment, kindly consider your safety as a priority and return to the common room."

Frustrated and yet unable to do anything else, Sirius whirled to leave, but Lily remained where she was, her inner turmoil reflected on her face.

"What is it, Miss Evans?"

"A Death Eater... a Death Eater's dead, Professor," Lily spoke quickly, her jaw tensed. "Fell down the stairs when I hit him with a curse..."

Professor McGonagall's mouth opened in astonishment, and her brow furrowed with sympathy. "To the common room, Miss Evans. We'll talk more of this tomorrow."

Lily stared at her for several more tormented seconds. As the Deputy Headmistress watched her walk away, her shoulders drooped, she worried at how much the young girl had aged in the past hour alone.

James eyed the dark, heavy-lidded woman in front of him, shifting his weight from one foot to another, trying to decide whether to fight or run. The stairs was just several feet down the hallway, and he could attempt making a flight for it; but then he would be running with his back turned to the enemy... *Certainly not a good idea.*

"Scared, Potter?" Bellatrix sneered, her dark eyes travelling to the fist curled within the pockets of his robes.

"Should I be?" James asked, raising his chin a notch and cautiously drawing his wand out, readying himself for another attack.

Bellatrix cackled. "Oh, look, the boy's got a wand! Pity we did not come tonight to kill." She took one step toward him, her gaze intent as a predator's. "Now if you'll just be a good boy and step aside..."

James's face darkened. He was definitely not running. "What makes you think I'd let a murderer like you pass?"

Without warning, he flashed a Stunning spell at her, but she didn't even flinch. Bellatrix merely deflected it with a wave of her hand and smiled nastily at him. "Such feeble attempts can never stop me, but if that's how ittle-bittle Potter wants to play..." She bared more teeth and then screamed, "*Crucio!*"

The curse hit James as he tried to duck, and he sank to his knees in pain. One shout, and he instantly regretted it. He would never give the Death Eater the satisfaction of knowing she had hurt him. He thrashed on the floor, gritting his teeth and trying to summon enough concentration to master his senses.

"*Tarantallegra!*" James fiercely growled, missing Bellatrix by a couple of inches but making her lose the handle on the Cruciatus. He snapped to his feet in an instant, his breathing laboured and his face livid with fury. A surge of adrenaline was coursing through him like he'd never known before, awakening a mode of survival that was fuelled by anger and the desire for vengeance. He knew now that he would either kill or be killed...but the thought that fighting might bring about his own death did not terrify him.

On the contrary, a noble, heroic death was almost welcome.

"You need not fight me, boy," Bellatrix wheezed, flicking her wand threateningly at him. "You carry a proud heritage that the Dark Lord favours, especially if you do as he bids. Help us, and he will reward you greatly."

"And all I have to do is kill Muggleborns for sport?" James laughed derisively, eyeing the Death Eater with contempt and bravely stepping forward. "If you ask me, joining Voldemort would be *tainting* my pure blood, not honouring it. So I hate to disappoint you, Lestrage, but I'm afraid you'll have to take no for an answer."

Bellatrix hissed. "Well, let us try again, shall we? *Crucio!*"

This time, James was quick enough to sidestep and avoid being hit; the curse pierced a metal sculpture of a soldier standing in the corner, and its armour shattered to pieces. Unmindful of the raining debris, he aimed his wand more steadily in the Death Eater's direction.

"*Crucio!*"

"*Protego!*"

James knew it was foolish; the Shield Charm would never be able to deflect the Unforgivables, but then again it might serve as a diversion. Heaven knows he needed one. He saw another light streaking towards him, and as he tried to avoid it, he stumbled to his knees.

"James!"

His head whirled at the sound of his name, and to his horror, he saw Hermione standing at the corner to the stairs, her eyes wide with fear. "Regina! What are you..." Another Cruciatus curse struck him in the chest and he roared to block off the sensation of the many knives jabbing at him. Dimly, he heard Hermione scream.

"*Stupefy!*" she shot at Bellatrix as she ran to him. The Death Eater's wand arm twitched, and the excruciating agony James was suffering eased. Hermione let out a sob of relief as she wrapped her arms around James, but he pushed her away.

"No," he gasped. "Leave now, Regina!"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth did he see Bellatrix direct another Cruciatus, this time at Hermione, and he yanked her to his other side for safety. "Do not involve her in this, Lestrage," James warned as he stood and pulled Hermione up to her feet. "This is between us. Let her go."

"Awww," Bellatrix cooed. "And here I thought you wanted to play. Bargaining now, aren't we?" She cast a malevolent look towards Hermione and added, "I might not recognise her, Potter, but the stench reeking from her blood is enough to sentence her to death."

James's fist tightened on Hermione's wrist. "You told me you didn't come tonight to kill."

Bellatrix' eyes flitted appraisingly between the two of them, and James felt his reflexes stretched to the limit. *Divide and conquer*, he thought urgently. He had to distract the

Death Eater so Regina could get away.

"As soon as I let go of your hand, run away," he whispered to Hermione from the corner of his mouth. In response, Hermione squeezed his hand.

"I am not going anywhere without you, James," Hermione muttered back stubbornly, causing James's eyes to narrow.

James glared at her before flicking his wand in Bellatrix' direction. *Reducto!* he bellowed inside his head; at the same time, he shouted, as he shoved Regina away, "Go now, damn it!"

But be that his execution of the nonverbal *Reductor* was excellent, it was a move obviously foreseen by Bellatrix, who had carelessly waved the spell away with a silent *Protego*. The red light rebounded towards James and Hermione, and this time it was the latter who yelled, "*Protego!*" The curse hit the wall, and the portraits erupted into smithereens.

Hermione covered her nose to keep from breathing in the debris, her eyes stinging. In the midst of the settling dust, James was aware of a figure, also robed in black, approach the female Death Eater from behind...and his heart sank. Things were getting bleaker.

"Bellatrix," a cold voice issued from behind its mask, its voice coloured with impatience. "What is with this delay? We are under orders to complete the plan in haste."

"I was tying up loose ends," Bellatrix replied, irritated that the other Death Eater would dare question her methods.

"Be quick then. You know the curse, I presume?" he replied with contemptible amusement.

"We have not been given orders to kill," Bellatrix reminded loftily.

"My dear, since when have we required them?" he sneered, and James just knew it was Lucius Malfoy under the mask. "Or tell me, Bella. Perhaps the sight of two underage wizards frighten you?"

Her nostrils flared. "How dare you!" Bellatrix seethed. "I pride myself on carrying out the Dark Lord's plans to the last detail, that he might be pleased. Besides, I cannot just kill a Pureblood!"

The other Death Eater tossed his cloak back, revealing long, white blond hair, and slowly lifted the silver mask from his face. A flame lit his normally cold eyes as he surveyed their two opponents. His upper lip curled mockingly.

"I see what you mean," he acceded. "What a charming little reunion this is. Potter, I believe?" He nodded towards James, who stared back defiantly at him. "I hear he's a rather gifted wizard, and such a fellow may someday be of use to the Dark Lord."

"I'd rather die," James declared valiantly, one arm still shielding Hermione from the Death Eaters.

"Brave too, I see," Lucius remarked idly. "But let me give you some advice, Potter...tonight, not even your Gryffindor courage will be enough to save yourself." His eyes glinted. "Let us pass. Now."

Several tense moments passed, during which not one muscle twitched. And then Lucius and Bellatrix each took a step forward, testing the waters, but James and Hermione stood their ground. Another step, and yet they didn't move. As soon as the Death Eaters had taken their third step, James and Hermione straightened their arms and firmly pointed their wands at them.

"No more," Hermione spoke for the first time since arguing with James, her voice ringing. "This is the farthest you will ever get."

James wouldn't have wanted her to draw attention to herself, and again he felt his anger mount, but now wasn't the time for it. He opened his mouth to speak and stall for more time, but it merely gaped at the realisation that perhaps they would be saved, after all.

Professors McGonagall and Slughorn had just turned around a corner down the hallway and were stealthily walking towards Lucius and Bellatrix. The Deputy Headmistress had, with a stern look, warned him to be silent, and James sensed from Regina's minute adjustment in posture that she had seen the aid forthcoming as well.

Lucius, completely unaware, was just surveying Hermione with the same intense dislike Bellatrix had shown earlier. "Appalling, Potter, the company you consort with," he drawled. "Let me assure you...the Dark Lord will hear of your insolence tonight, and *you will be sorry.*"

The gravity of that statement was not lost on James, but he wasn't given a second to think on it. Lucius turned the wand on them fast, but Professor McGonagall was faster. Blue light erupted from the end of her wand and grazed Bellatrix' right ear. In one fluid motion, the two Death Eaters turned, both of them immediately retaliating.

"*Crucio!*"

"*Stupefy!*"

Jets of light streaked all around them, and James did not have to think twice as the flurry of curses broke out. Still holding Hermione's hand, he pulled her away in a run and up the stairs to the third floor until they reached the staircase that would bring them back to Gryffindor tower.

"James, wait! I just remembered," Hermione said breathlessly, "I was supposed to meet Sirius down there..." Her voice faltered at the annoyance and pained anxiety that crossed his face.

"Both of you should have never left the tower in the first place," James harshly said. "We were lucky as hell to be out to have gotten out of that scrap." The idea of what might have happened downstairs, had Professor McGonagall not seen them, was too much to bear. Regina could've been hurt...or worse, *dead*. His throat constricted, and for one mad moment, he wanted to dash back downstairs and duel Malfoy and LeStrange to death.

"We were worried, James," Hermione reasoned as they briskly walked to the portrait of the Fat Lady. "A third-year had returned running to the common room, crying about Death Eaters, and you weren't there yet, so Sirius and I decided to look for you..."

"Then why weren't you with him when you found me?"

"We thought it would be better if we split up." James threw her an incredulous look, and Hermione laid a placating hand on his arm. "I know you think we put ourselves in danger, but wouldn't you have done the same for us? Sirius wasn't down where we'd agreed to meet, and it's been past the hour we've set.

James clenched his jaw. "I'm taking you back first to Gryffindor tower. If Sirius still isn't there..."

"Lily was also out in the castle..."

"I'll leave to look for them again. But I want you safe first." He met her eyes briefly, and Hermione realised that this time, he was not asking. "Flobberworms," he told the Fat Lady. The portrait swung open, and they clambered in.

"James!" Sirius exclaimed, barrelling towards his best friend and embracing him tightly. "Prongs, I thought..."

"I'm fine," James interrupted. "Have you been hurt?"

"No," Sirius answered, letting him go and turning to hug Hermione as well. "How did you find him?" he asked her.

Hermione smiled feebly. "Got lucky, I suppose."

The three of them approached the couch on which Peter and Remus were sprawled, almost boneless with relief. They both stood and greeted James and Hermione with weak hugs before settling once again. The common room was empty save for the five of them, Professor McGonagall having sent everyone to bed earlier.

"Thank Merlin you're both safe," Remus sighed. "I couldn't imagine what I'd do had something happened."

"By the way, is Lily..." Hermione started to ask.

"I found her," Sirius replied in a low voice. "She's already gone to her dormitory."

"She's all right, isn't she?" Hermione asked.

Sirius exhaled heavily. "Not exactly." He told them how he had found Lily battling the Death Eater and how she had accidentally killed him, eliciting gasps from his friends.

"Does anybody else know?" Peter squeaked.

"McGonagall," Sirius answered. "Lily and I ran into her on the way here. She said she already knew about the attack and had alerted the staff to search for you, Prongs."

"She found us, all right," James said tightly. "She and Slughorn must still be battling Malfoy and LeStrange."

Peter let out another squeak, Sirius swore, and a paler Remus enquired, "What exactly happened, James?"

His fellow Marauder simply frowned deeply, and Remus turned to Hermione. "Regina?"

Hermione risked a glance at James, saw the fire blaze in his eyes and knew that it was not her place to speak.

"Prongs?" Sirius prompted.

"I don't want to talk about it, Padfoot," James replied curtly. "Not now. Not when I'm so angry with you and Regina for rushing out like that just to look for me, I can barely think straight."

Sirius' brows rose in surprise. Hermione, her patience wearing thin, said, "I don't understand what you're so angry about, James. I told you, we were worried about you..."

"So both of you," James said, bristling at Sirius, "risked your lives for me?"

"Tell me, mate," Sirius coldly said, "what would you have done?"

The same, James answered immediately in his head. But he didn't say anything. Instead, he abruptly stood up and, towering over them, he declared, "Don't ever do anything dangerous like that again. *I'm not worth it.*"

Thousands of miles away, in a village called Little Hangleton, Voldemort was livid.

"My Lord, please punish me," Bellatrix cried, kneeling before him. She, Lucius, and Augustus Rookwood had just finished reporting on their unsuccessful mission at Hogwarts.

"I do not need you to remind me, Bella," Voldemort thundered. *Crucio.* Bellatrix screamed. He let a full minute pass before lifting the curse; the woman lay on the floor, breathing raggedly.

"I don't remember telling you to rest," he said coldly and turned his attention to the other two Death Eaters. He fingered his wand as he surveyed them with displeasure; yet again, the best of his Death Eaters had failed him.

"Remind me, Lucius," Voldemort silkily said, his red-tinged eyes boring down on him. "Why did I ask you to go to Hogwarts?"

Lucius fought to maintain eye contact and replied, careful not to let fear colour his voice, "To secure the current location of the Mirror of Erised, master."

"Precisely," Voldemort sneered. "The mission was arranged merely to verify the Mirror's safety. I did not ask you to take it out, nor did I instruct you to play with children!" His voice hardened. "I sent four of you...you come back one less, and with no information to appease me either. *Crucio! Crucio!*"

Lucius and Augustus writhed on the floor, and Voldemort vented his anger by throwing their bodies up and down. When he had tired of it, he jerked his wand and asked, still incensed, "The name of the one who killed Jugson. Do you have it?"

Augustus shook his head and was rewarded with another Cruciatius. Voldemort glared at Lucius, who held up a hand as though to stop the Dark Lord and gasped, "We shall find out, my Lord. But the one who stalled Bella and me...there were two of them..."

"It was a Potter, my lord," Bellatrix interrupted. "Potter of the Fourteen Families. James Potter."

Voldemort tilted his head to one side, thoughtfully considering this information in the midst of Rookwood's wails. "James Potter," he spat venomously. "Mark him, as well as the one who killed Jugson."

"My lord?" Lucius said, not fully understanding.

"They dared defy me this once; they will defy me again. Kill them," Voldemort commanded, his eyes burning now as he stared at the three kneeling before him. "Kill them, and then Hogwarts will see what happens to those resist me."

Hermione passed the common room the following morning to find the three Marauders waiting for her, their eyes bleary. The night before had been especially longer for them; half an hour after James's departure, Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore had arrived, wanting to question them on the incident. Hermione and Sirius told them all that they could, and the older wizards seemed satisfied with their accounts.

"Professor, I can go get James," Remus had offered, but the Headmaster had shaken his head.

"That's not necessary tonight, Remus," Dumbledore had replied. "I shall speak to him and Miss Evans tomorrow morning."

Now Hermione wondered where James was, but as soon as she opened her mouth to speak, Sirius snarled, "Don't know where he is myself, that arrogant git."

Her spirits dropped. She had hoped that things would look up in the morning, but they seemed to pick up right where they left off. Subdued, she followed Peter, Remus and

Sirius down to the Great Hall for breakfast. They settled at their usual seats before realising that James was sitting alone down at the far end, munching on toast and apparently in deep thought.

Sirius glowered at him. James must have felt some of the heat, for he turned to look in their direction, but his jaw merely clenched, and he went back to his toast.

Hermione was discomfited. Surely he still wasn't angry at them about last night?

"Wouldn't even talk to me," she heard Sirius mutter, still throwing daggers at his best friend and dragging his knife noisily on his plate.

Hermione exhaled noisily. Wanting to put an end to it, she stood up and marched to where James was.

"Hi," Hermione nervously greeted. The frantic thumping of her heart stilled when James shifted and looked straight into her eyes...his were cold, unfeeling. She shivered; he seemed to have completely shut himself off.

"Mind if I sit with you?" she asked anyway. James shrugged, and so she sat down, turning over phrases in her head.

"James," Hermione hesitantly began, his detachment making her feel like she was talking to a stranger. "We're...I'm...sorry about last night." She paused, but he said nothing, so he continued, "Maybe we had been reckless, but there was no time to think. You would...you would have done the same for us, we know it..."

"You don't understand," James said cuttingly.

Hermione struggled with herself, biting back a retort. "All right, James," she said, a touch of steel this time. "Tell me what's bothering you. Make me understand."

A shadow crossed James's features, and he averted his gaze towards the High Table. Dumbledore had risen from his seat and was on his way to descend the platform. The sinking feeling in his stomach told him he knew what the Headmaster was going to say, but if it was going to help him escape Regina's scrutiny...

"Looks like Dumbledore wants to say something, we'd better listen," he said offhandedly, turning his back to her.

The Headmaster waved his hands for attention, smiling slightly as the noise in the Hall died down. "I know what a pain it is to waive conversation in the midst of a hearty breakfast, and on such a fine morning as this..." He glanced at the ceiling, where the sun was on its way to its rise. "Nevertheless, I have some important announcements to make."

His voice turned sombre when next he spoke. "Last night, four Death Eaters entered Hogwarts." Nervous buzzing filled the room, and Dumbledore said, "Fortunately, nobody in the castle was hurt, and the staff was alerted immediately to attend to the situation. One of the Death Eaters was killed in combat."

Gasps punctuated this sentence.

"Three of the Death Eaters, however, had eluded capture and had escaped via which they had entered as well: a passageway on the fourth floor that was, before now, unbeknownst to us."

By this time, the murmurs had escalated into audible words.

"How come it wasn't guarded?"

"D'you reckon they'll come back again?"

"Lucky they came at night then, eh? When nobody was roaming the castle?"

Dumbledore had to raise his voice to make himself heard over all the concerns. "This passage has been sealed off, and protective charms have already been placed over it. I implore you then to immediately report to your Heads of Houses any conceivable means of entry that you might discover." His eyes wandered furtively to the Marauders, and his tone hardened.

"I do not have any reason to believe these Death Eaters can once again break into Hogwarts, but then again, I cannot emphasise strongly enough how dangerous the current situation is. Rules on your out-of-bed hours and tighter security measures will be enforced more stringently, and wrongdoers shall be punished more severely."

Then the Headmaster smiled, surprising his students. "On a lighter note, allow me to give credit to the students who showed exemplary courage when faced with last night's events. Ethan Amber," Dumbledore said, nodding at the small third-year, who looked terrified with the attention. "Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, Sirius Black, Regina Weisz," he enumerated, inclining his head towards each person he named. "And of course, our Head Girl and Boy, Lily Evans and James Potter."

Dumbledore then proceeded to award each of them fifty points to Gryffindor...nay, a hundred each to James and Lily...and the table of red-and-gold erupted in cheers, but Hermione wasn't listening. Amidst the suddenly cheerful mood, Lily's downcast expression was all the more noticeable, as was the gravity with which James hung his head.

"But I wonder how they escaped?" she softly asked.

"Smoke," James answered, his gaze resolutely on his plate. "Dumbledore called and told me this morning. The Death Eaters Conjured smoke, and by the time it had cleared, they were long gone." His hands balled into fists, and he added, "Professor Flitwick, who stood guard on the fourth floor, was found Stunned afterwards. It was all very poorly done, if you ask me."

Privately, Hermione had to agree, but she was so relieved at having James speak to her that she spontaneously reached out and touched his arm.

James shuddered, and Hermione drew back, hurt. For several moments, they stared into each other's eyes, but for the first time since they were together, she could not read his. She only recognised that they were intensely filled with... With what?

The bell rang, and he hurriedly stood up. "I've got Transfiguration," he murmured, almost apologetically, as he rushed by her.

Hermione could not find enough strength to stand. She had Transfiguration too.

* * * * *

Four days passed. Sirius was counting...*oh yes, he was*...the number of days he had had to endure James sitting next to him in class. Normally, he would have considered it a treat and would have wasted no time at all in conniving with his best friend to disrupt class, but now that James had retreated to silence...

Sirius sighed with boredom and scrutinised James, who was resting his left cheek on the palm of his hand. In his opinion, James rather looked like the time Lily had brutally rejected him; his hazel eyes were tired and rimmed with dark circles, and his complexion was sallow. Just now, he seemed ready to sink into a stupor. Even as Sirius wondered, for the gazillionth time, what was eating his best friend, he knew it was pointless to ask.

Infuriatingly, as though he was under the Unbreakable Vow, James just wouldn't tell them.

Sirius acted flippantly about it, as if he was plain relieved to have James with them again. Remus had been more vocal, and he echoed Sirius' concerns: it was understandable for their fellow Marauder to be down, but he was not getting up. Something was deeply troubling him...and that in itself was unsettling.

He smoothed back his long hair and rubbed his forehead tiredly. *What bothers me most, he brooded, is the way he treats her.* Sirius threw a backward glance at Hermione, who was now seated beside Remus. It made him uneasy, the haughtiness that carved her face, but he couldn't blame her. He had seen her attempts to talk to James, knew that she had possibly used up all the tricks in the book, only to be rewarded with cold, cutting aloofness.

Well, you should be happy now, a voice told Sirius. *They seem to be on the verge of breaking up.*

But he wasn't, not if it meant having a Kissed boy with glasses for his best friend.

As soon as Professor Flitwick had dismissed them, fifteen minutes earlier than the time, he swivelled in his seat to see Regina briskly walk to the door, head held high. Then he turned to his left and realised that he wasn't alone in watching her; James was staring at her, his features contorted with distress.

He loves her still, Sirius realised, and again James's stupidity annoyed him. He sat back and crossed his arms exasperatedly. "I thought you love her?" he asked bluntly.

James's face closed protectively. He swallowed twice before seriously answering, "I do."

"So why don't you talk to her? I remember a time not so long ago when you could hardly keep yourselves off each other," Sirius said. "What is this you're doing, a new funny way of showing you care?"

James sat up straighter, his eyes flashing. "I do care, Padfoot, enough to stay away from her. She can't be seen with me, or she'll be in danger."

Wow. That was the longest he had spoken in four days. Sirius looked around and saw, to his relief, that the room was empty save for Remus, Peter, and the two of them. He frowned at him. "Why, 'cause you might get yourself in trouble with Death Eaters and she'll come to save you?" He snorted. "Don't delude yourself, Prongs. Last time she risked her life for you, you ended up biting her...the two of us, for that matter. I doubt she wants to be on the receiving end of your tantrums again."

Furious, James stood up. "I didn't want her running around to save me, Black..."

Sirius stood up at this point, glaring at him.

"...not if she might die herself. And I certainly don't want her associated with me any longer, not after what Malfoy said that night."

"Yeah? What did he say?" Sirius demanded. At the corner of his eye, he saw Remus and Peter approach them warily.

"That I'd be sorry," James raged, days of pent-up worry and frustration pouring out. "It sounds trivial, doesn't it? *I'd be sorry.*" He laughed harshly. "Only they're Death Eaters, they're sure to bring news to Voldemort, and I'm a Potter..."

"I'm a Black, Potter," Sirius said, returning his courtesy, "and I ought to be in more danger than you, yet you don't see me being an absolute git about it."

James looked at him pityingly. "You really don't understand, do you?" he said quietly. "I do not fear for myself, Padfoot. I fear for her...for all those I care about, but most especially for her."

It seemed to Sirius that James had suddenly shrunk, and he felt embarrassed for being so shallow. "All right," he conceded. "I get you now. But you know, you really still should talk to her. The way you're acting, I'm sure she thinks you don't give a damn."

"She'll say I'm being stupid," James muttered.

"You don't have to worry then. She's already been saying that these past few days," Remus said lightly, teasing a weak smile out of James.

"You owe her an explanation, mate," Sirius said unrelentingly. "Even if she punches you in the face and breaks up with you on the spot..." The other three Marauders winced. "You owe her one."

James chuckled without humour. "That would really make your day, Sirius, wouldn't it? Us breaking up."

"How come I have somebody as thick as you for a best friend?" Sirius wondered. "Prongs, I'm for what makes you happy. I've always been. If she will pull you out of your self-inflicted misery, I'd rather you be with her."

"You make it sound easy," James said, smiling grimly. *And awfully tempting.* "But you haven't been listening to a word I was saying. I told you, I don't want her near..."

"And yet you're unhappy without her," Peter pointed out.

"I think," Remus intervened evenly before James could lash out again, "that you want her around, and yet you believe you aren't supposed to. Now I also think you're setting too much store by what Malfoy said..."

"And with good reason," James rejoined.

Remus held up a hand. "Regardless," he said, "don't you think she'll be safer if you keep her near so you can protect her?" James fell silent, and he thought it sound to press another point. "You need your friends, Prongs. You need us around. And don't ever say," he sharply said, "that you aren't worth risking our lives for. You... It was your idea to try and become Animagi for my sake, even if everything could have gone horribly wrong..."

"There are things worth dying for, James," Sirius said. "Friendship...brotherhood...is one of those."

James met their eyes squarely even if his insides were burning with shame. "I'm sorry," he spoke, running a hand through his hair. "You were right, Moony..."

"Just Moony?" Sirius interrupted, pretending to be insulted.

James grinned. "And Padfoot and Wormtail," he said, and then the smile disappeared again. "I've been a prat and... I'm sorry. I do need you, all of you, even if you annoy the hell out of me. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"If it even comes close to happening again," Remus said wryly, "we'll whack you on the head until you come to your senses."

The bell rang, chasing the last of the gloom away, and it was with lighter spirits that they began gathering their things for the next period. "You still have to talk to Regina, though," Sirius reminded James.

The very idea filled James with dread. "Yeah, it'll be a cinch," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "How will I tell her that I want her back, that I still love her, that the only reason I was acting like a..."

"A pile of rat droppings," Sirius supplied helpfully, and Peter and Remus snorted with laughter.

"Yeah," James agreed dryly. "How am I going to say that the only reason I was acting like that was because I was afraid Death Eaters would come after her because of me?"

Peter blinked. "You just did, James. You just did."

* * * * *

The first thing she saw was the white rose.

Hermione dropped her bag to the floor, slid into her seat and gingerly picked up the rose. Attached to its long stem was a white card. She flipped it open.

I'm sorry.

She stiffened, recognising the scrawl. "Are you really Remus?" she whispered fiercely to the sandy-haired boy next to her.

Remus turned to her in surprise. "Yes, why do you ask?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. You and James might've switched, using Polyjuice or something." It was evident, seeing the Marauders together again, that James had risen out of his funk and had explained himself...perhaps even apologised...to his friends. She threw an annoyed glance in James's direction and saw him watching her nervously, as though waiting for what she would do with the rose. She rolled her eyes.

"Does he really think one rose is enough?" she murmured, unimpressed.

"Well..."

"*Evanesco*," Hermione said, tapping the rose with her wand. It vanished. She glanced at James once again; he bit his lower lip in disappointment and turned away from her.

Then there were two white roses that appeared to the right of her plate during lunch. Each had their own card, one with *I'm sorry* and the other reading *I really am sorry*.

A smile tugged the corners of her lips, but she pulled them down. Another fleeting look at James told her he was keeping an eye on her, so again she pulled out her wand and Vanished the roses with the air of one unconcerned.

Let him stew over it for a while.

In the afternoon, three roses came during Potions, and four roses sprang atop her desk during Defence Against the Dark Arts.

I'm sorry. I really am sorry. And thank you for loving me enough to look for me that night.

The fourth card made her purse her lips in amusement. *I've been an unforgiveable prat, but please forgive me.* And then the fifth, which she received at dinner, melted the hurt he had caused her and made her want to throw her arms around him, hold him close and tell him she had forgiven him.

I love you still.

And yet Hermione refused to give in that easily.

"*Evanesco*."

It was while she was working on her assignments late that night at the common room that James finally came up to her, holding out six white roses. The flowers were, she realised, his way of softening her up before he could approach her.

"What is it?" she asked curtly, unwilling to risk a glance at his face lest she be swayed.

James gulped. "These are for you."

"Well, you can just place them here," Hermione said, patting the space next to the parchment she was writing on. "I'll read the cards later."

He did as he was told and tried to convince himself he should be heartened she hadn't decided to throw the flowers in the garbage bin. "Can I talk to you...er, right now?"

"Last time I heard, you weren't interested in talking. Besides," she gestured to the parchment, "I've got Transfiguration." She resumed writing, giving the appearance of one who did not have time to spare, and James slunked away defeated.

The flowers and messages persisted over the next couple of days, and so did his attempts to converse with her. But even though her anger had long dissipated, it was still with utmost nonchalance that she regarded his efforts.

"Are you still mad with him?" Remus asked tiredly Friday afternoon.

Hermione could barely conceal her smile as she Vanished the nineteen roses she had found beside her cauldron. "No, not anymore."

"How come you won't talk to him? Please, Regina. Give the poor bloke a break."

"I bet he asked you to tell me this," Hermione said, throwing a snide look in James's direction.

Remus sighed. "No, he did not. But believe me, you'd be doing us a favour by relenting to hear him out. He's moping, and he's grumpy, and he's wearing us all out."

Twenty roses appeared by her plate at dinnertime, and Hermione, half-annoyed and half-pleased with his persistence, left the table without bothering to read the twentieth card. She began making her way to the library instead of to the common room, but something strange happened the moment she stepped down the hallway.

A rose...this time, it was red...appeared in front of her. Hermione looked around but saw nobody, so she skipped over it and took another step. Another red rose appeared, and another, and another, marking her path to the doors of the library.

"Is somebody trying to trip me or what?" she muttered in irritation, aware that James had been following her, hidden under his cloak, determined to get her alone and talk to her.

She pushed open the doors, entered and chose a table at the corner. Hermione took out the Spellbook she had borrowed from Sirius and began reading, but she couldn't concentrate, knowing that James was just around.

Crack!

Startled, Hermione put down the book. What she saw made her inhale sharply. Dozens of roses, a mixture of red and white and pink, appeared on the wooden table out of thin air, a card dangling from each of them. She shook her head in amusement and made up her mind.

"James," she said, "I know you're here somewhere. Pull the cloak off, for Merlin's sake. If Madam Pince sees this..."

There was a sound of fabric whipping through the air, and then James was revealed standing two feet from her. He was grinning mischievously, as though he knew all along that his ploy would succeed. He came closer and pulled up the chair perpendicular to hers, folding the Invisibility Cloak afterwards and returning it to his bag.

"Can we talk now?" he asked hopefully.

Hermione kept her eyes averted. "Well, I suppose if we're going to break up, we should end it nicely."

That stunned James into momentary silence, after which he croaked, "You... you want to break up with me?"

She turned her eyes on him and immediately knew it was a mistake. She could never trust herself to look at him, much more look into his eyes... "Your recent actions have suggested nothing less, James."

"I know," he admitted guiltily. "But Regina," James added urgently, "I can explain things. I can make you understand why I've acted that way lately, if you'd just give me a chance and listen." He placed his hand over hers and was encouraged when she did not pull away. "But first, thank you for what you did that night..."

He saw her lovely brown eyes steadily fill with tears, and he cursed himself for bringing them forth.

"I was...I only didn't want to lose you, James."

His throat tightened. "It was the same for me. How do you think I'd feel if...if something happened to you, and it was because of me..." James gripped her hand. "I couldn't stand even the possibility of you getting hurt. I would die before they laid a finger on you. I... I love you that much." His words dropped to a whisper.

Hermione rewarded him with a watery smile. "James, I do not love you any less than that, you know."

A breath he did not realise he was holding escaped him, and he moved his chair closer to her. He cupped her cheek with his other hand. "Does this mean that you forgive me?"

She chuckled. "How can I not after all these roses?"

"I thought you didn't like them, since you just kept Vanishing them."

"I've been Vanishing them to my room," Hermione confessed shyly, making James audibly exhale, smile and pull her to him in an embrace. They fell quiet for several minutes, just holding each other and allowing their newfound tranquillity to wash over them.

"I'm the luckiest bloke in the world," James said after a while, breaking the silence.

"Why?" Hermione murmured against his shoulder.

"To hold you like this and have everything all right again. I've really missed you," James said, smoothing her hair from her forehead. "And there's more I have to tell you," he added, thinking about his anxiety over Malfoy's threat, although it seemed inconsequential just now, "but I'm supposed to do my rounds right now."

Hermione kissed him lightly and reluctantly disentangled herself from him. "Well, you better go now. We can talk later."

"I'll be back before ten," James promised, making a mental note to drop by the kitchens later for some hot chocolate. He kissed her before leaving.

Humming to herself, a contented smile playing on her lips, Hermione Vanished the roses once more, stuffed the book into her bag and practically skipped on her way to the common room.

"Somebody looks happy tonight," Sirius commented dryly when he saw her bouncing towards the stairs to her dormitory. Remus and Peter turned to look; Hermione simply beamed at them and was surprised when Sirius nodded approvingly, a small smile on his face.

"James talked to you then?"

"Yes," Hermione replied happily, "but he has his rounds, so we're going to talk more about it later." She then departed to the girls' dormitories to pass the time, counting the roses and reading and rereading the messages he had written for her, smiling and rubbing the soft petals between her fingers.

In the midst of it all, she wondered what else did James have to say. She felt peaceful now, lighthearted; even so, she sensed that War was subtly changing him...how, she did not know. Perhaps he was more purposeful, fiercely protective of those around him, and though it had been the root of their disagreement, she loved him all the more for it.

At quarter to ten, Hermione hopped from the bed, ran to a nearby mirror to check herself and was surprised to see her cheeks flushed with anticipation. A few brushes through curly hair and she was done, rushing to the common room and hoping she was in time to welcome James back.

Fifth and seventh years, studying for their respective exams, littered the floors and couches. Hermione scanned the room but found no sign of him. She walked over to the Marauders and plopped down next to Peter.

"Hasn't James returned yet?" she casually asked.

"Nuh-uh," Sirius replied, and Peter and Remus shook their heads as well. Hermione randomly snatched a book on the table and idly flicked over its pages, slowly becoming interested in the advanced defensive jinxes it contained.

The clock struck ten, but on and on she read, unmindful of the passing time until Peter had stood up, stretched his arms over his head and announced that he was going to bed. She looked up from the book, her eyes straying to clock, and she realised with a jolt that it was already half past ten.

Anxiety gnawed her insides; she replaced the book on the table and said, "Why haven't they come back yet? Did something happen?"

"Something must've held them up, yeah," Sirius said. He rummaged in his bag for something and held out a parchment to her. "Check the map."

Hermione took it, tapped it with her wand and muttered, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." She searched the hallways and corridors for either James's or Lily's names and, finding both within the Astronomy Tower, told Sirius and Remus about it.

"It's what they visit last," Remus mildly said. "It means they're on their way back."

Somewhat comforted, Hermione kept her eyes on the map, studiously looking at other places and yet always going back to the Astronomy Tower, where James and Lily were. The anxiety turned to uneasy jealousy; what was taking them so long up there?

Ten minutes passed, and still the bubbles remained. Hermione tapped the map once again, muttered, "Mischief managed," and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Sirius asked in surprise.

"Out," Hermione answered evasively. "May I bring the map?"

The knowing look in Sirius' grey eyes as he appraised her made her uncomfortable, but he merely shrugged in response. She mustered a quick thanks as she rushed to the portrait hole, climbed out and hurried to her destination, taking care to check the map every once in a while. Thankfully, the professors seemed to have finished their own inspection of the castle, and Peeves was busy with the Bloody Baron in the Slytherin dungeons, so it was with no complications that she reached the Astronomy

Tower.

Cautiously, she scaled the walls leading to the gate to the rooftop. She heard muffled voices, one distinctly male and the other female, and Hermione did not doubt they belonged to James and Lily. She could not discern the words, however, so she inched closer until she was near enough to peer around the brick wall.

Lily was standing near James, her eyes puffy as though she had been crying. James was saying something, his voice low. The conversation was obviously of a personal nature, and something inside Hermione kept her from announcing her presence.

And so she watched, fearful of what would unfold.

* * * * *

James followed Lily to the Astronomy Tower, knowing it would take only a quick look around to ensure that nobody was out of hours. They had met few students on their patrol tonight...perhaps only those who were foolhardy enough to wander even after the Death Eaters' excursion into Hogwarts.

Holding his lit wand aloft, he inspected the left expanse of the rooftop, taking care to check behind the statues, where snogging couples preferred to hide. Lily searched the right side; they did their rounds together now as per Dumbledore's instructions.

"Nothing here, Lily," James called as he walked towards her. "Everything all right there?"

"Yeah, I suppose so," Lily replied flatly, meeting him halfway. James's features came into view, illuminated by their wands, and she envied the serenity manifested therein. "How do you do that?" she grumpily asked.

James blinked in confusion. "Do what?"

Lily looked out over the grounds. "Stay happy," she answered. "Even after meeting them, fighting them... But I suppose it's different for you, isn't it?"

James tensed. How stupid he had been not to notice the melancholic air Lily had been carrying the past week. But then again, they rarely spoke to each other even when they were walking together, and James was particularly keen to avoid conversation with her. This week, though, he must have been too lost in his own desolate thoughts to pay her attention; he suddenly felt unreasonably guilty.

"I found it comforting, did you know," Lily continued, this time gazing at him, "that you seem troubled as I did." She scrunched up her face. "I tried talking to Alice, to my friends, but they... They didn't seem to understand. And then I thought you'd be the best one to understand."

"Well, I've had friends to talk to," James said, feeling incredibly awkward. "And I thought they wouldn't get me, but I was wrong."

Lily smiled faintly. "Like I said, it's different for you. Sirius was there too. And..." A dull pain socked her gut. "That girl, Regina."

What am I supposed to say next? What does she want me to say? James replied uncomfortably, "Well, if you want to talk, go ahead."

It seemed to James that her green eyes grew brighter, and he knew he should look away but found himself unable to do so. He stared as she retold him how she had duelled with the Death Eater and how she accidentally ended up killing him. Lily was crying now, and his hands stayed dumbly by his sides, unable to offer even a comforting pat.

"Er...what did Dumbledore say?"

Lily gave a small hiccup. "That it wasn't my fault, of course. Only... I see his face, frozen, not knowing he was falling to his death..." She shivered. "And I'm scared of what will happen if V...V...Vold...He-Who-Must...he finds out who did it, or if any of the Death Eaters do. What if they go after my friends, or my family? They're Muggles; they have almost no protection." She sniffed and dried her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"In a strange way, I do not regret what I did to defend myself. You know how Dumbledore keeps saying we need to be prepared for what's out there?" She laughed shortly. "I did not expect to have to do battle here in school. It's just like an examination, only... Only one curse separates you from life and death."

James couldn't keep his eyes off her now. Under the moonlight and speaking pensively the words that mirrored his own thoughts, Lily Evans had never looked more beautiful.

"Are you scared, Lily?"

"Not for myself." Lily gnawed at her bottom lip and then added, "I know that there is a war, that we're going to get caught up in it sooner or later... I had merely hoped it would be later, perhaps during Auror training. But not here. Not at Hogwarts. If it can happen here, nowhere is safe then."

"You'd be safe with me," James murmured fiercely. Lily's emerald eyes widened even more, and James wondered how in the world had she gotten that close, and he instantly regretted his words. "And your friends, you'd be safe with your friends," he mumbled to cover his embarrassment, but Lily wasn't listening.

She flung her arms around him, clinging to him tightly and dropping her wand in the process. James panicked and was about to step back from her, but she nestled her face on his shoulder. Hesitantly, he lifted a hand to stroke her back, hoping to comfort her, and then his other hand had found its way to her waist.

Lily lifted her head and gazed into his eyes as she allowed her hands to travel up and entwine at the back of his neck. Reflexively, James moved his hands up her back as well and encountered soft, wavy hair; he felt her shift as she stood on tiptoes, and she was closer than ever, the freckles dotting her cheeks now visible.

Mesmerised, James dipped his head, bending...slowly, excruciatingly slowly...until his lips were a mere fraction from hers...

* * * * *

Hermione felt dizzy, her head spinning after having held her breath the entire time. She attempted to gulp some air and instead emitted a hoarse, pained gasp; hastily, she stuffed her knuckles into her mouth, her entire body trembling.

She couldn't take it anymore. She took one step back, accidentally causing a twig to crack. Hermione barely heard it. Blinded by tears, her breathing ragged, she ran away as fast as she could. It was a miracle that she found her way back to her dormitory. She hurled herself onto the bed, hugged her pillow to herself and cried.

No matter how hard she tried to hold on, James was slipping away from her.

Destiny was putting up a damn good fight.

* * * * *

A light breeze swept past the couple atop the Astronomy Tower and blew the tendrils of Lily's hair across his face. Her lavender perfume drifted to his nose, and unbidden to his mind came the memory of the sensual vanilla he had once favoured.

James jerked his head back up just before his lips touched hers, and Lily's eyes flew open. As though burned, she disentangled herself from his arms and bent to retrieve her wand from the floor, her long hair concealing her blush.

"I...er...we'd best be getting back," James said uneasily.

"Yes, we should," Lily managed, determinedly not looking at him. The two of them walked back to Gryffindor tower in clumsy silence. James saw Remus and Sirius sitting on the couch as they emerged through the portrait hole, saw their identical expressions of shock and...perhaps it was just his conscience...reproach. Nevertheless, he welcomed with relief the light of the common room.

He was about to join his friends when Lily touched his arm in restraint. When he turned to her, she offered him a soft smile and said, gentler than what he would have liked, "Thanks for lending an ear, James."

James. James. His name rang in his ears. *Not Potter.* Since when had he hoped she would call him like this? Had this occurred sooner, he would have whooped with joy and prance around like a madman, but things were different now.

And he didn't regret it, did he?

"No problem," he replied, attempting a mix of detachment and warmth and certain he had just failed. "Good night."

"Good night," Lily echoed.

James did not watch her go, nor did he think he should have in the first place. To hide his discomfort, he joined his friends in front of the fire. He could feel their probing eyes on him, but he was not tolerant enough to answer any suspicious inquiries tonight. His mind was full of what had just happened...*oh no, nothing happened, Prongs, old boy.*

That reminder of vanilla... Thank Merlin he remembered Regina in time.

James sat up abruptly, his glasses sliding down his nose. "Regina," he said. He looked at his friends. "Have you...have you seen her?"

Remus rolled his eyes. "Now *he* remembers," he told Sirius, his words tinged with spite.

Befuddled, James sputtered, "I, yeah, well...it slipped my mind." He glanced at the clock and saw that it had barely passed eleven o'clock. "Well, I suppose I should be glad she didn't stay up to wait for me."

Sirius snorted and threw his best friend a dirty look. "She isn't an inconsiderate clod like you, Prongs."

"You mean she did wait?" James glanced around the common room. "Where is she then?"

"She got worried at ten-thirty and you weren't back yet, so she borrowed the map and checked," Remus said. "Regina said you were with Lily atop the Astronomy Tower, and I told her that meant you would be back soon, but she left soon after." His brow furrowed. "I assumed she went to find you..."

"I didn't see her at all," James replied, his blood running cold. If Regina had indeed gone to the Astronomy Tower... He could only imagine what she had seen.

"We assumed as much, since she returned without you. Distraught, I might add," Sirius said, his tone accusatory. "And of course I can see why," he added darkly.

James groaned, sinking back into the couch and feeling the beginnings of an intense headache. "She's got it wrong."

"Does she?" Sirius asked pointedly.

James frowned. "Of course she does. Nothing happened...it doesn't mean anything at all, doesn't change anything..." And then, aware that he was blabbering, firmly said, "I'll talk to her tomorrow."

"You'd better," Sirius warned him icily. "You have a lot of explaining to do, and it sure must be better than the crap you're talking about now."

"Just shut it, Padfoot," James snapped. It seemed that these past few days, Sirius had done nothing but point out every one of his missteps...and, he thought irritably, defend Regina. When he told him so, he simply looked dumbfounded, as though James had missed several steps on his way down.

"With the string of bad decisions you've been making lately, how can anybody not notice?" James glared at him, but Sirius merely shrugged. "As for Regina... Merlin's beard, Prongs. She loves you, *and* she treats you well...sometimes even better than you deserve, so why should I not be on her side?"

Shortly after, Sirius and Remus declared it a night and decided to go to bed. Exhausted as he was, James continued staring into the fire, immersed in his own troubled ponderings. The world must've gone crazy for him to have landed in this situation. Whatever his shortcomings were, however his arrogance, he had always considered himself to be loyal. *Stubbornly loyal, in fact,* he corrected himself, especially when it came to the Marauders.

So what was he doing messing around with two girls, especially hurting the one he said he loved, the one he said made him the happiest he had ever been?

James passed his hand over his face in frustration. Lily's green eyes, which had always captivated him, kept swimming before his vision long, and the shame that ensued from being dishonest to Regina was unbearable.

Please, forgive me.

When James next opened his eyes, the logs had long been reduced to ashes, the cold offset by the sun's first rays stealing through the curtains. He stood up and stretched, surprisingly feeling well-rested after a harrowing night. Sleep had also cleared his mind; he had finally decided what to do.

It was only a minute later, when he was more awake, that he noticed the blanket lying on the floor...a warm, fuzzy blanket that had most likely fallen when he rose from the couch and that was certainly not over him last night.

Author's Notes: Next chapter will finally reveal the answer to one of the frequently-asked questions, haha. I don't know when it will be up though; it will be almost as long as this chapter, maybe even longer, to incorporate all the necessary details. "prays nobody is getting bored with the pace" I'm going crazy trying to keep track of all of them, but hopefully I make it. :) Thanks to everybody who's been reading, especially those who have been reviewing and reminding me to update. Review responses are quite delayed though (see, I thought I had no right to answer them until I had posted a new chapter). :P

Bound by Destiny

Separate, they are light: the sun brightens the day and the moon illuminates the night; together, as in an eclipse, they shroud the world in darkness. The fate of the Wizarding world depends on two young lovers, though they know it not—and destiny, master of its craft, has one final ace to deal.

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Author's Notes: The opening lyrics come from the musical *Miss Saigon*, and funnily enough, they fit a scene I long have had in mind but have yet to write. By the way, I wonder if anybody noticed the silver necklace that was shown to be with Remus in the sixth chapter? I think somebody did and speculated that it was given to him by Hermione. Well, you'll find out in this chapter. :)

Chapter Summary: Separate, they are light: the sun brightens the day and the moon illuminates the night; together, as in an eclipse, they shroud the world in darkness. The fate of the Wizarding world depends on two young lovers, though they know it not...and destiny, master of its craft, has one final ace to deal.

Chapter 22: Bound by Destiny

You are sunlight and I moon

Joined by the gods of fortune

Midnight and high noon

Sharing the sky

We have been blessed

You and I.

Bright'ning the sky with

The flame of love.

--- Richard Maltey (Sun and Moon) ---

Struck by a sense of déjà vu, James lifted the blanket to his nose. There was no mistaking the scent of vanilla, and as he inhaled deeply, he felt his heart lift. Things were *definitely* always better in the morning. Smiling slightly, he lovingly folded the blanket and tucked it under his arm as he headed upstairs for a quick shower. He arrived at the Great Hall twenty minutes later in high spirits, almost skipping his way to where Hermione and the rest of the Marauders were seated.

"Morning," James greeted cheerfully as he slid beside Hermione. Nobody responded, and James saw Sirius' eyes dart towards Hermione. Dread stole over him, and he chanced a brave look at her; her face was hard, unwelcoming, the way it was a mere week ago.

He nervously took a sip of his pumpkin juice. "Er...hi," James ventured hopefully, but she showed no outward indication of having heard.

"Thanks for the blanket, I'll return it to you later."

Still she ignored him, and James shot his friends a pleading look. Sirius simply shrugged, Remus offered him a sympathetic frown and Peter seemed helpless. Annoyed, James studied Hermione's profile, and he thought he had never seen her so beautiful. Beautiful, yes, but cold. Cold and untouchable. He could not even bring himself to place a hand on her arm.

"Regina," James said, more quietly this time and abandoning pretence of cheerfulness, "about last night..."

"I know what I saw," Hermione gritted out, determinedly not looking at him. "Don't bother thinking up an excuse."

James swallowed visibly, tensing. "What exactly did you see?"

"Nothing I'd want to relive again, even in my mind, thank you very much," she snapped.

"Listen, Regina..."

"No, *you* listen, James Potter!" Hermione fiercely whispered, drawing curious glances in their direction. She turned in her seat to face him, eyes blazing and nose flaring, and James had to fight the impulse to scoot a few inches back. "Didn't you tell me you would explain everything last night? I understand now, all right? I understand *perfectly*." She threw her fork down her plate and stood.

"Hey!" James protested, standing up to follow her as she stomped out of the Great Hall.

Hermione looked back, whipped her wand from her robes and wordlessly shot the Jelly-Legs Jinx at him.

"Regina!" James called, staggering somewhat as the curse hit him. He took another step and stumbled on rubbery legs, earning snickers from his fellow students. "Damn," he muttered angrily, retrieving his own wand and lifting the curse off himself. Able to stand again, he attempted to run after her, but again was hit by another jet of light that slowed him down. He struggled against the effects of the hex, and by the time he was able to freely move again, she was gone. He was about to take another step when he felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Sirius.

"I think we can safely assume that she's angry, mate," Sirius said. "You better stay away from her for the meantime." He helped James as he gingerly stepped towards the bench and they both resumed their seats.

"Tell me," he demanded from his friends, unmindful of the attention that was still on him. "Does she really think I'd cheat on her?"

Sirius unconcernedly brushed locks of dark hair from his forehead. "Yes, she does," he answered. "She thinks you kissed Evans last night."

"I didn't..." James straightened from his slump. "Is that what she said?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "No, Prongs, the girl would never tell on you. But you know," he went on, eyeing him shrewdly, "you do look rather guilty. Don't tell me you were *indeed* kissing Evans last night."

James didn't answer, lost in his desolate thoughts. Remus, as though reading his mind, reasoned gently, "You must've done something to upset her, James. I mean, she

knows you do rounds with Lily every night, and it's never been an issue until now."

In the glaring light of day, everything that had happened...that he had *allowed* to happen...the night before seemed utterly foolish, and James wanted to bang his head on the table in self-rebuke. But he knew even that wouldn't take his mind away from the loud, painful thudding of his heart, hollow as though something essential had been lost.

But then again, he thought defensively, *tempted though I was, I didn't give in, did I?*

He had stopped himself kissing Lily just in time, and he had stopped because he remembered Regina.

Right, he affirmed defiantly to himself. *I didn't do anything wrong. There's nothing to worry about.* He looked up from his plate, his brow clearing.

"Prongs?" Peter timidly asked. "You okay?"

James smiled reassuringly. "I'm fine, Wormtail," he said. "Regina, well, she's probably just mad because I lost track of the time and forgot to meet her. She thinks I blew her off."

"You blew her off, Prongs," Sirius commented carelessly, wincing afterwards when Remus elbowed him sharply at his midsection. "What? I mean, Regina just doesn't think that. She *knows* she was blown off."

"I *know*, Padfoot, so sod off," James replied irritably. "It was my mistake, all right, and *know* I have to apologise to her and make up for it, big time. *You* can stop reminding me now." The squeaking inside his head told him he wasn't as certain as he sounded, but he silenced his doubts with the argument that the conclusion he had drawn from his musings was logical.

It's fine. I'm in the clear. I didn't do anything wrong.

To James's utter disbelief, she did not think the same way. This much he could conclude, for he sat with her throughout class and during meals, attempting to engage her in conversation every other minute...to get her to notice him, damn all things to hell...but she resolutely, frustratingly, refused to acknowledge his presence. Were it not for the minute clenching of her jaw whenever he demanded her attention, he would have believed she didn't care the slightest about him.

By Tuesday afternoon...Merlin, it had only been three days, and he didn't feel like he could endure any longer...James was ready to explode. He walked into Charms to see a male Ravenclaw seated beside Hermione, and his temper igniting, he flicked his wand upwards: *Levicorpus!*

His classmate yelped as he was suspended mercilessly by the ankles, and the rest of the class gasped at this disturbance. Lily, who was sitting in the front row, stood and flicked her wand as she cast the countercurse in her head and immediately added aloud, "*Impedimenta!*" The boy fell headfirst to the floor, slowly so that he wasn't hurt, and after getting on his feet drew his wand and pointed it at James.

"What was that all about, Potter?" Dirk Andrews demanded angrily, punctuated by an infuriated snort from Lily, who also had her wand directed at James. "You try that again and you...you'll get what you're looking for!"

Momentarily distracted by the renewed display of displeasure from Lily, James found himself at a loss for words.

"And here I thought you had traded your immaturity for something better, James," Lily said, ignoring the muted gasp around the room that resulted from her use of her archenemy's first name. It was, after all, common knowledge that she hated James Potter, and when she had become quite cordial towards him nobody could figure out. "You were lucky Flitwick wasn't around to witness that little stunt."

Reluctant to address Lily, James spoke instead to the Ravenclaw. "You took my seat," he told him calmly.

"I what?" Dirk rolled his eyes. "I've been sitting there since the start of term, Potter."

James glowered. How could the punk fail to miss such a crucial point? "Yes, well, my place is *always* right next to hers." He nodded toward Hermione. "Therefore..."

"Whatever, you can have it then," Dirk scoffed, grabbing his things on the chair. "As for you, don't ever sit beside me again," he snarled at Hermione.

Hermione didn't flinch at his words, but James advanced on him, his wand at the ready. "Apologise to her," he said threateningly. "Apologise!" When Dirk showed no signs of relenting, James shrugged and said, "Fine. Fifty points from Ravenclaw."

"James!" Lily exclaimed, appalled, her words echoed by growls from the other Ravenclaws. "You know you can't do this...Andrews, that's enough!" she scolded Dirk, who had his own wand at the ready again as well.

"Boys, boys! Is something the matter?" they heard a voice squeak, and after a moment, tiny Professor Flitwick had propped himself up on the stool behind the front desk so that he was visible. He warily eyed James, Dirk and Lily, but seeing none of them sporting any injuries, he said, "All right, wands away now; you know you shouldn't be behaving as such with your exams coming..."

Lily had by this time returned to her seat, Dirk had chosen to move an empty desk, and James had dumped his bag carefully on what was now his table before carefully settling himself in. A quick look at the board told him Professor Flitwick had started his lesson; not in the mood, James shifted slightly in his seat to study the girl beside him. He clenched his fists under the table in frustration; she seemed unperturbed by the recent disturbance. Her quill...the one he had given her...streaked across the parchment in tandem with the lecture.

James sighed; it took all of his self-control not to grab the quill from her and force her to talk to him. The minutes crawled by, the drumming of his fingers becoming more impatient, and the moment Professor Flitwick had dismissed them, he encircled Hermione's wrist with his fingers to keep her from leaving.

Hermione went rigid in her seat, not daring to look at him, or to even breathe, for that matter. She fixed her eyes on his hand around her wrist and waited.

"Regina, please," James murmured urgently. "I cannot stand this... this cold treatment any longer. I'd rather you yell yourself hoarse at me until all your anger's spent, but please, *please*, let me talk. Before or after you yell, I don't care, as long as you hear me out."

Hermione smiled without humour. "Well, if you really need to talk, why don't you go over to Lily?" His grip on her slackened, and she heartlessly ploughed on, "After all, the two of you seem to understand each other better...enough, in fact, to be in each other's arms." Her voice cracked. "I *don't* want to talk about it, James, do you understand? Not yet, and maybe not ever." She jerked her arm, stood and rapidly walked away.

"Damn." Not bothering to follow her this time, James groaned and cradled his head in his hands. *So she saw that, you stupid arse.* "Damn. Damn." He forcefully seized his bag and saw, when he turned around, his friends staring concernedly at him.

"Let's go," he told them, unwilling to discuss what had just happened. As they made their way to the dungeons for Potions, Sirius asked, rather conversationally, "She still doesn't want to talk to you?"

"Yeah," James muttered. "But at least I know now what she's really angry about." *Not that it tells me explicitly how to go about things, but still.*

"You'll just have to keep at it, won't you?" Remus said. "Try until either you or she concedes, whichever comes first."

James's expression darkened. "Giving up on her is the last thing on my mind, Moony."

"Funnily enough, that's the story of your life, isn't it," Sirius mused. "Blimey, you spend years on Lily, and then decide you're in love with another, and when you get her, you do a lousy job of keeping her and so must try to win her back again."

James smiled crookedly despite himself. "Thanks for that enlightening piece, Padfoot. But if you could channel your brain waves into helping me, I'd appreciate it more."

They walked in silence. As they descended the dimly-lit steps to the dungeons, Peter volunteered, "If it was me, I'd make her talk to me. I'd do anything to make her listen, make sure she had no other option." He blushed afterwards; he rarely spoke of his interest in girls, and it was a relief for him to hear nobody laugh at his words.

"Are you suggesting that James kidnap her and have her at wandpoint?" Sirius ribbed.

"No, of course not," Peter replied. "But I rather remember the time James locked Lily and himself in a broom cupboard just so he could confess his love and ask her out again..."

"Only Lily was just as good with a wand as James and so our boy here had to relent, lest he be jinxed beyond repair," Remus finished, laughing at the memory. "Operation Number, what was that? Two hundred and forty-two?" James had to be brought to the hospital wing to be sorted out after that *brilliant* plan.

"Nah, it was two hundred and sixty-three," Sirius answered. "But I've lost track, to be honest..."

James was no longer listening to them, the wheels of his mind starting to turn. "Wormtail," he suddenly said, "I think you're on to something." He turned sharply to face Sirius and asked, "Do you think you can lend her *that* thing?"

It only took a split second for Sirius to understand. He gaped at his best friend. "You're asking me to do what? You know how precious it is to me, *tas*, Prongs." He shook his hair out of his eyes. "No, no. I cannot do that. *No way.*"

"Come on," James cajoled, ignoring the other Marauders' confusion. "Just this once. You can have it back tomorrow. Or, you can lend me yours if you want to, and I'll give her mine. Whichever." They were at the door to their classroom now. When Sirius didn't answer, James prodded, "Come *on*, Sirius. I need your help."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "All right, all right," he agreed, finally caving in. "I'll lend *you* mine." He rummaged in his rucksack, his hand emerging with a package wrapped in paper. He gave it to James, who immediately slid it into his pocket.

"In your bag, Prongs, you might end up sitting on it," Sirius chided, and with an exasperated sigh, James did as he was told.

Remus, finally understanding, chuckled as he turned the handle on the door and pushed it open. "I certainly hope to Merlin neither of you lands detention tonight."

Hermione sat back on the couch and curled her legs under for comfort, letting out a huge sigh as she stared thoughtfully into the fire. A book on Herbology, which she had borrowed from the library, lay open on her lap but had gone unnoticed for the past half hour. Giving it up as a bad job, Hermione sighed again, closed the book and put it aside.

Exams are less than three weeks away, Hermione, a stern voice scolded her. Pick that right up again. This isn't how you work.

She ignored it. The voice had been spot on; this wasn't how she was, but then this wasn't where she was supposed to be anyway. This wasn't how she was supposed to feel... The dam of doubts that she had kept in place with her happiness washed over her in great waves, and she closed her eyes tight in the hope that it would lessen the impact.

I made considerable effort to be here, Professor. I could have failed, but I succeeded. That means I should do what I've come to do.

Would fate have allowed me this liberty if it wasn't meant to happen?

Her words came back in a nauseating rush, and she had to exhale loudly to release the tension. Looking back, she wondered now: if she had failed with the Time-Turner then, would she have stopped trying to return to the past?

I don't know. Does that matter? I succeeded anyway!

Deep down, Hermione knew she would have sought other means, extinguished them all one by one until no hope remained. But she had done it on her first attempt; surely, that meant destiny had a place for what she wanted?

But she had been warned against using it, just before she turned the hourglass three times. *Harry...* He seemed so far away now, and yet, that thought...that horrible thought she could not bear dwelling upon persisted.

You know that if you carry on with James, Harry will not exist.

She could have a son with him, yes, could even name him Harry, but Hermione wasn't stupid enough to fool herself her son would be the same as Harry, Lily's son. And she was forgetting herself, of course. What was to be done, what was going to happen to her own birth?

I don't know either.

Hermione passed her hand across her face in frustration at the things she didn't know and struggled to continue walking down her memory lane. She had arrived nineteen years back with nothing, absolutely nothing, but her wand, and she had expected to find herself in the arms of the man...no, *boy*...she had come back for... Only to find that, of course, he had been pitifully vying for Lily Evans' affection for years.

How she had wanted to go home then! But she had stayed, had *chosen* to do so, had befriended him and the other Marauders, in the hope that he would, in time, come to love her.

And he did. A small smile curved her lips. *I know he did. But perhaps he never stopped loving Lily.*

You're a fine one to be jealous, stealing another woman's husband. There it was again: that self-righteous, annoying know-it-all voice that seemed intent on pointing out every one of her mistakes. She didn't suppose it was her conscience, for surely, a conscience would not consider only the hard facts but also how she felt about these? And to use such crass words...*stealing another woman's husband, oh Merlin...* She shuddered. Crass or no, wasn't it in every sense true?

Shame pounded Hermione's being mercilessly, and she could not find it in her heart to argue that in this time, James wasn't Lily's *anybody's*...husband yet. Not that it mattered, for if destiny was to have its way, James would be with Lily.

Only if.

Realisation dawned on her face; all her ponderings had not been for naught. She saw now that always, every step of the way, she had been given a choice: to turn her back on what was happening or to persist. And always, she had persisted, had decided to go on, and thankfully she had been rewarded.

Now, in the midst of all her hurt and doubt, another choice had to be made.

Maybe I should give in and listen to him, she thought, mindlessly tossing a log into the fire. *It wouldn't hurt to hear what he has to say. Maybe there is an explanation, maybe he really is sorry... maybe it's really me he wants to be with.*

"Regina?"

Hermione started and looked up to see Sirius, Remus and Peter settling into the couch opposite hers.

"Are you all right?" Sirius asked, watching her closely. "We were watching you from there..."

"...And you kept making funny faces," Peter chimed in. "So we thought we'd see how you were doing."

Surprise must have been etched that clearly on her face, for Sirius said defensively, "What? Just because you and James aren't on speaking terms doesn't mean we can't talk to you, right?"

The Sirius Black charm, came a rueful thought. Hermione offered him a small grin in apology. "Yes, of course." She turned away from the fire to face them fully. "So what did you want to talk about?"

"Oh, nothing in particular, really," Remus assured her.

"Yeah, we wanted somebody to mess with, and we thought you were most qualified for the job," Sirius said, and they all snickered at that.

"Say," Remus began, leaning towards her, "we're sending our application to Auror Academy within the week. Have you any plans of applying?"

That's right. If she had intentions of staying, she had to prepare for her future. "I don't know," Hermione answered, reminded of how many times she had said that to herself earlier that night. "Perhaps, but I suppose I'll have to talk to Dumbledore first."

"Probably to fix your records and all, right?" Peter said knowingly. "Get you grades from your old school or something."

"Yeah," Hermione said, cringing inwardly. "I'll have to do that."

"I don't think you'll have any problems though," Remus told her kindly. Frowning, he added, "I think I'm going to have trouble with Potions. No grade lower than an *A* exceeds *Expectations*, mind you..."

Sirius snorted. "I expect an *Outstanding* in every required subject and an *E* in Potions, so what is there to worry about?"

Peter, by this point, was looking very much terrified. "What if I don't secure the minimum grade?"

"N.E.W.T.s aren't for more than a fortnight, Wormtail," Remus said consolingly. "We'll help review you, don't worry."

Talk about their prospective careers temporarily pushed James from her mind. Hermione leaned forward, engaging herself in conversation. "The route to Healing pretty much requires the same, doesn't it?" she asked, and at Remus' affirmative, added, "I thought I also fancied doing that."

Remus smiled. "I do as well," he said, "but Sirius here is attracted to the glamour of being an Auror."

"Course not, Moony," Sirius contradicted indignantly. "It's more about being in the thick of the action, leading the fight against Voldemort and his Death Eaters." His grey eyes were suddenly overbright, and he continued hastily and in a less passionate voice, "But there's three more months of additional training to qualify as an Auror."

"Well, that's better than a year or two of additional schooling, isn't it?" Peter chirped. "Three months doesn't sound so bad."

"It's two years worth of training squeezed into three months out of necessity, Peter," Remus said quietly, "which makes it a million times more difficult."

"Then they must be in dire need of Aurors," Hermione mused.

Silence fell momentarily, which Sirius broke by saying, "I haven't been getting the *Daily Prophet* since yesterday. Last time I read, some Wizarding village was burned down..."

"You read the news," Hermione commented mildly, impressed.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "So now you know I'm not the complete idiot you think I am."

"What're you thinking then, Sirius, that somebody's taken over the *Daily Prophet* now?" Remus enquired.

Sirius shrugged. "It's not a far-fetched possibility. Control the newspaper, and then the Ministry..." He lost his train of thought as the portrait hole opened and saw James climb in with Lily, both of whom were immersed in their own conversation.

Hermione craned her neck to check what had distracted Sirius, and her expression instantly turned wooden. She smiled tightly at Sirius, Peter and Remus, grabbed the Herbology book beside her and jumped up from the couch. "I'm turning in. Good night." She began walking to the stairs to her dormitory, not daring to look at James and Lily as she passed them.

"Regina?"

Hermione stopped in her tracks; recognising Sirius' voice, she deemed it safe to turn around. "What is it?"

"When you change from your school robes," Sirius said, "be careful, all right? I wouldn't want you to break something you weren't aware of." The three Marauders sitting on the couch broke into mischievous smiles.

"Right," Hermione replied with a confused frown, wanting to get away fast. From the corner of her eye she knew James was looking at her. She'd be damned if she was going to say anything to him. "Good night then."

It was only upstairs, after dropping her robes to the floor and hearing a muted thump, that she remembered Sirius' strange words. She dug into the right pocket of her robe and fished out a package messily wrapped in paper. Anybody could've slipped it in, she knew, but the pounding of her heart told her that only James, who sat by her side almost the entire day, could've done it.

She carefully removed the flaps of paper to reveal an oval, handheld mirror. Hermione reached for her wand, lit it and tapped the back of the mirror while muttering, "*Specialis Revelio!*" Blue light radiated from the glass; even so, she couldn't figure out the mirror's enchantment. She slowly turned it over and looked into it.

What a surprise, she thought in sarcasm as she saw her own reflection. Deciding there was nothing more to the mirror and that it had been surreptitiously placed to annoy her, she put it beside her pillow, pulled the curtains and sank into her bed. As was usual as of late, whenever she was alone, her mind strayed to James. She hugged her pillow tightly and sighed, allowing her desolate thoughts to wash over her without pity. After a while she laughed aloud at the irony of it all, murmuring, "Well, well. How many times in her life will Hermione Granger not know what to do?"

I thought you were Regina Weisz now.

"Shut up," she ordered the voice in her head. "Stop bothering me, I've got enough going on as it is."

"Regina."

Hermione stilled, wondering if she was hallucinating. She fixed her eyes on the ceiling and was startled to find a circle of light projected there.

"Regina."

There it was again, that firm voice somewhere to her right, more urgent this time. She swiped her hand blindly and hit nothing. Shifting on her side, she finally noticed that the light came from the mirror. She cautiously picked it up, feeling its warmth, and held it up to her face.

She dropped it with a gasp.

"Hey, it's me! It's nothing to worry about," the voice, now muffled, said.

Hermione hastily retrieved the mirror from her chest. "What is this mirror?" she hissed at the chiselled face with hazel eyes that stared back at her.

James had the nerve to grin, apparently pleased at catching her off guard. "Whatever happened to hello, how are you?"

She merely raised an eyebrow and said haughtily, "I haven't got time for pleasantries." His grin turned down a notch. "So what is this mirror?"

"A two-way one," James replied slyly. "Sirius and I have one each; we use it to talk to each other during separate detentions."

"Well thankfully, I am *not* in detention, James. So good night."

James's eyes flashed. "No, wait, please!"

Something in his voice, a ferocity that she had never heard before, made her look into the mirror again. His eyes, startlingly beautiful without his glasses, had darkened, and it was with determined calm when next he spoke.

"Look, Regina," he began. "I've been doing my best for days to talk to you. Surely I deserve some credit."

"Oh yes, it was absolutely brave and so very charming of you to jinx Andrews just so you can sit next to me," Hermione interrupted tartly.

Unrelenting, James pressed on. "The point is, I *tried*. All I want is for you to listen to what I have to say. After that, you can do whatever you want...hex me, break up with me..." His jaw clenched. "Never speak to me again. Your call."

When Hermione didn't answer, he said gently, "So, can we talk now?"

Hermione grumbled, "I suppose so. It doesn't seem like I have any choice."

James nodded slowly, as though in consideration, and then suddenly...

PLUNK!

Hermione jumped and gave a little half-scream, which she immediately silenced by clamping a hand to her mouth.

"I'm at the window," James said, a small smile twisting his lips. He had put his glasses back on. "Would you mind opening it?"

She stared disbelievingly at him, wondering if he was serious.

"I thought it would be better for us to talk in person."

Hermione felt that familiar warm, tingly feeling begin to spread, and she pursed her lips to conceal her amusement. *You don't believe in doing things halfway, do you?* "In a moment," she whispered. She stood, smoothed down her clothes, pulled the curtains and slid the window open.

The cold night wind blew past her, but she hardly noticed. Her undivided attention was on the young man on his broomstick, hovering outside her dormitory as though it was the most natural thing on earth. His hair stuck up in all directions, and his eyes gazed at her with such painful, honest intensity that she was suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. Oh Merlin, he had such power over her, it was dangerous!

James manoeuvred his Nimbus so that he closed the distance between them. "Hi," he greeted nervously. "Thanks for agreeing..."

"Get to the point, James," Hermione said curtly, his words jolting her into reality.

"Er, sure." James swallowed, his hand tensing around the wood. "So Regina, about what happened that night..." His eyes met hers. "I was with Lily, and we were doing our rounds. And then... Lily began to talk about Voldemort. She said things that, well...that sort of mirrored my heart, what I was going to say to you. What I thought about confiding in you. Remember I was supposed to be with you that night?"

Her expression became frighteningly stony, and he hurriedly went on, his gaze unwavering, "I won't deny it, the way she made me feel. It was as though she understood me perfectly, without me having to say a word, because we had gone through the same thing. She was crying, so yes, I held her, and yes, I got carried away, I almost kissed her..."

"Almost?" Hermione repeated bitterly. "I saw you leaning towards her... What, don't tell me you missed her lips? Or no, wait! Perhaps, finally, you remembered me and stopped just in time?"

A short, poignant pause, and then...

"Yes, that's exactly what happened," James admitted softly. "I remembered you."

Hermione crossed her arms and snorted derisively.

"I'm not making excuses, nor am I trying to defend what I did. I mean, regardless of whether or not I kissed her, it was my fault for letting things go that far. But please believe me when I say that I had only wanted to comfort her as a friend, nothing more crossed my mind..."

"Are you done yet?" Hermione snapped. "Because our deal was that once you've had your say, I can have mine."

He looked as though she had struck him, but he calmly held up a hand. "Just a few more things then," he said, his voice only slightly trembling. "First, I want to apologise. I never meant to hurt you."

Tears sprang into her eyes, turning them into liquid chocolate, but she did not speak. Oh, how he wanted to hold her!

"I know I made a mistake and screwed us up, and I don't suppose it's right for me expect you to forgive me now, but maybe someday..." His words trailed off, and unable to stand it any longer, he turned towards the inky black sky. He gazed at it for what seemed like hours, wanting her to speak and at the same time dreading it.

With a regretful sigh, James braved another look at her. "Well, that's all I really wanted to say," he lied, knowing full well there were three words he yet had to utter but felt were pointless. "Sorry for bothering you. Good night."

He had just whipped his broom in reverse when he heard her say sharply, "Now you're leaving without listening what I have to say? You're not good at keeping promises, are you, James?"

He instantly wheeled around, his heart thumping, his face wary and stricken. And then she spoke again, her voice so light he could have imagined it, bringing words he had been longing to hear.

"I'm not mad at you anymore."

James's hands slipped off the broom in shock, and he staggered. "You're not?"

A wobbly smile curved her lips. "No, not anymore," she said tiredly. "Anger is exhausting, you know."

Hoping against hope, James dared ask, "Does this mean... I get a second chance? I mean..." A shadow crossed her face, and he faltered. "Does this mean I have a chance to get a second chance?"

Hermione smiled sadly. After all her earlier ruminations on destiny and whether her foray into the past was enough a fight against fate, she had come to the realisation that always, she had had a choice.

Unfortunately for her, so did James.

"I think that maybe you should think things over first. No, listen to me, James," Hermione said firmly, for he showed signs of interrupting. "I know that you've fancied Lily for years, and that morning after you got drunk, when you acted like you were over her..." She gazed pensively into the distance. "I found that difficult to believe. And then you started paying attention to me." She turned to him now, her expression tortured. "You told me then that you weren't using me, not at all, and maybe you didn't intend to, but maybe... Maybe you didn't realise then that you were still in love with Lily."

Hermione dropped her eyes once again, scared of what she would read in his. Now it was her turn to wait for his response, but he maintained his silence. Her trepidation grew with each second that passed, tightly squeezing her heart, and just when she couldn't bear it any longer, he opened his mouth to speak.

"All right," James said seriously and with utter conviction. "I've thought it out, and I've decided." His eyes locked with and bore into hers.

"It's you I want."

Hermione thought she would faint with relief at those four words, didn't realise that she'd been holding her breath until then.

"It's you I love, you I need to be with," he solemnly continued, drawing closer to her. "I think the real question here is..." He hesitated for a moment. "If you'll still have me."

Without warning, he dipped his head and touched his lips to hers, waiting for her to push him away. When she didn't, James kissed her fully, the way he knew how, aching to convey his love, his longing, his desperation that she take him back. He felt her begin to respond, but then, to his chagrin, she pushed him away gently.

This is so unfair. As much as his kiss had moved her, had made her want to put her arms around him and kiss him back and never let him go, she could not. She just could not. There was a time when she needed only for him to look at her and the happiness that filled her would vanquish her doubts, but for some reason she had yet to fathom, that time was past.

An infinite, unexplainable sadness overwhelmed her, and despite the wary, pained hazel eyes staring at her, Hermione started sliding the window close. "Goodnight, James."

The next couple of days were, at the very least, quiet. Hermione was grateful for the peace this little truce afforded her; she and James had yet to argue, but then again they had yet to talk properly to each other. Even though he still sat next to her in class and during meals, their interactions had been dry as History of Magic.

"Excuse me, what did Slughorn say?" he had asked her politely in Potions class yesterday afternoon.

"To sprinkle powdered dragon claw instead," she had answered flatly. It was driving her crazy, blunting her affect on purpose when she was so damned conscious of every movement he made!

"Thank you," James had said blandly.

And again, her response had been just as mechanical. "You're welcome."

Whenever they were in the Great Hall, he would only ask her to pass the roast, the potatoes, could she please hand him a glass of pumpkin juice. She would comply, struggling to keep her face blank, because she knew what he was doing. She had seen him act quite as coldly towards Lily back then.

He was angry with her.

I suppose I asked for it, Hermione thought unhappily. She was sitting in the Gryffindor common room with Sirius, Peter and Remus, all of them supposedly studying for their N.E.W.T.s, which were a mere fortnight away. She glanced at the huge clock that hung over the fireplace and saw that it was half past nine; James and Lily were due any minute now.

Talking and laughing, as if they had been friends for years...

"I could use a cup of hot chocolate," Sirius said, momentarily stretching on the couch before curling up again. "All this studying's making me sleepy."

"I wonder what the rest of the world would say if they saw you like this, hitting the books," Remus mused, his voice startlingly hoarse. "Probably that it had gone crazy, huh?"

"Moony, Moony, Moony," Sirius said mockingly, shaking his head. "The rest of the world studies to pass; I study to *perfect*."

Hermione snorted at his arrogance.

Sirius glanced at her. "You can laugh, but I can tell you aren't having much progress there, are you." It was true, he noticed. She was sitting next to Remus, flicking idly for the past fifteen minutes through the pages of the book she'd borrowed.

A rueful smile curved her lips. "Yeah, I could use some hot chocolate as well. Might help me concentrate."

Peter, whose face was scrunched up in thought as he pored over a long parchment of Remus' notes, volunteered, "Well, it's almost ten. James will be back soon with five steaming cups of chocolate."

That's about as normal as he can act, Hermione reflected, thinking on the past nights, *because even then we wouldn't be speaking to each other. At least not directly. Or at all.*

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Yeah, and you know what? One of these days, Evans might actually join us for a nightcap." His voice was heavily infused with sarcasm.

Remus threw him a dirty look, but Sirius just shrugged. "What? You can't deny they're friends now. I never thought I'd live to see this day. Lily Evans actually talking to and seemingly having fun with James Potter." He jabbed a finger in the air. "Now that, Moony, is what you call the world going crazy."

Remus was looking worriedly at her, understandably waiting for her to react, but sadly, Hermione knew Sirius was right. Dead on as usual. This...she didn't know, spectacle...she had witnessed for herself. Seen them kidding around, Lily even punching James playfully on the shoulder. Wonder of wonders, Lily seemed to genuinely like the man she had not too long ago declared she hated.

She didn't know why it didn't surprise her that James wasn't shying away.

Concerned, Peter addressed her, "You and James have broken up?"

Hermione didn't know how to answer. "Well, I..."

"Because that's a shame," Peter continued, gnawing at his bottom lip. "You two were good together, and I rather liked having you around."

Hermione smiled wobbly at this, taken aback. "Thanks."

"Not that you can't hang out with us anymore, Regina," Remus reassured her.

"Wait, who said anything about breaking up?" Sirius demanded, eyeing her. "You can't be serious?"

"Well of course that would be you, mate," Remus interjected dryly, but Sirius was too busy with Hermione to even glare at his friend for stealing his joke.

"What really happened?"

All I wanted, Hermione explained in her head, *was for us to take some time off so he could think us through. So that if...when...we get back together, he's certain it's me he loves, not Lily.*

But he told you already! another voice shouted. *It's up to you, he said, and you didn't answer him!*

And then a third, snide voice. *After all you've been through to have him, you're pushing him away? You're insane!*

"All right, forget it," Sirius said, raising his hands in surrender. "It's not as if you're going to tell us. Sorry I asked." He stood and gathered his things. "I'm calling it a night. Have to put in some sleep before tomorrow."

Peter stood as well, glancing meaningfully at Remus. "You should get some rest too. Night, Moony."

"Night." Remus watched Sirius and Peter climb the stairs to their room before turning to Hermione, who was now studying him intently. He felt the blood drain from his face.

"You do look tired," she commented worriedly. She put down the book and moved closer to him to lay her palm on his forehead.

Remus flushed.

She withdrew her hand, frowning. "You don't have a fever, but you do look peaky."

Not knowing whether to be alarmed or embarrassed at the attention, Remus inched away. "I'm fine. Just quite stressed, you know, from studying."

But she wasn't buying it, Remus realised. In her large, beautiful eyes flashed a light of sudden recognition, as though she knew the truth about what was happening, and no, she could not be... She couldn't really know.

"I forgot," she breathed. "It's the full moon tomorrow."

Remus closed his eyes briefly and clenched his fists. *James had been telling the truth back then!* "Did James tell you?" he asked, his voice rigidly controlled.

Hermione was startled at this implied accusation. "No, no, I figured it out on my own." She reached out and covered Remus' right hand. "I've known since my first month here."

He looked at their hands and was aware of his heart beating too fast for its own good, too fast that it was simply *wrong*. Yet even so a rare lightheadedness stole over him, and he heard himself asking, "You don't mind? You aren't, I don't know, disgusted or ashamed that you're friends with me?"

Hermione looked like she wanted to cry; instead, she put her arms around him, and Remus, swallowing his gawk of surprise, awkwardly returned her hug. She disentangled herself from him after a few seconds and sat down.

"Remus, how could anybody think that way? You're so kind, so gentle," Hermione said, her voice vibrating with intensity. "You're a wonderful person, Remus Lupin. Don't ever believe otherwise."

And when she smiled at him...that smile, meant only for him, Remus swore he'd died and gone to heaven. All the emotions he had harboured for her yet kept hidden rose with a ferocity that stunned him.

He wanted to kiss her.

It would be fine, he reasoned. *She's practically over with James, isn't she...*

James.

Remus shook himself out of his fantasies and shyly returned her smile. "Thank you, Regina," he told her, deliberately so that she would feel how much her acceptance

meant to him. "Thank you."

Her smile grew even brighter. "You're welcome, Remus."

They sat in comfortable silence for the next few minutes, each one acutely aware that a significant moment had just passed. Hermione felt like she had rediscovered something that had been lost for a while, and perhaps that was warranted considering that Remus had been her first good friend in this time.

"I've missed talking to you, Remus," Hermione told him truthfully. "It's been quite some time."

"Yeah," Remus agreed softly. "It's been some time." An idea hit him, and he sat up, mouth suddenly dry. "Hey, listen. It's Hogsmeade weekend this Saturday. If you're going, would you like to go with me? With u-us, I mean," he stammered.

There. I've asked her out. Kind of. His heart was suddenly silent now, waiting in suspense.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "I suppose so," she answered hesitantly. "I mean...*If James still isn't speaking to me, that is. Fat chance he will anytime soon, though.*

Remus bit the inside of his cheek in self-reproach. "Of course, you might be going with James."

She stared at him for a long time before nodding slowly. "I would be, normally."*I should hope so. No, scratch that. I desperately wish it so.*"But it doesn't seem probable at a time like this."

Remus watched her as she resorted to staring at the crackling flames, her features cast in melancholy. "The War does strange things to people, doesn't it."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, her eyes still on the fire.

"Well, it brings some people together and pulls some apart, or at least attempts to."

Hermione's head snapped in his direction. What he had just said bothered her, though she couldn't quite put a finger on it. "Funny you should say that..."

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sudden bursting of the portrait hole; James and Lily had just entered.

"No way you're going to get an *O* on Potions, James," Lily said. The words were insulting but her tone was light; it was obvious they were in the midst of banter. "And if you don't get that, you know what that means. Your chances of being selected for Auror training significantly drops."

James actually laughed. "Well, better an *E* in Potions than in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Lily," he retorted jokingly. "I'm sure those stooges in the Academy will prefer..." He stopped short at the sight of Hermione and Remus on one of the couches.

"Hey," he greeted, forcibly casual. "How come you guys are still up?"

"Studying," Remus replied promptly. From the corner of his eye he could see Hermione determinedly staring at everywhere except at James and Lily standing together.

Lily sighed. "Right you are, I should be doing that too." She looked around with a smile and said, "Well, goodnight, everyone," before turning towards the girls' dormitory.

Remus' eyebrows knitted. Since when did Lily Evans wish anybody a cheerful goodnight?*Sirius is right, the world is going mad!* He glanced at James to say so, but the black-haired Marauder didn't even seem to notice. He was staring at Regina with an unfathomable expression on his face, and this time, she was staring back at him. Remus could feel the electricity charge between them, given the distance, and he could do nothing but watch. Watch and wait.

Hermione broke their connection, angling her head so that they wouldn't see the tears that threatened to fall. Without another word, she stood and left. Remus saw James reach out to touch her arm as she passed him, but he withdrew it at the last second. His eyes followed her every step, lingering on the threshold where she'd passed from his sight, standing immobile for so long it was as though he had been Petrified.

But then James turned to him and smiled feebly. "Catch some sleep, Moony. Tomorrow night's..."

Trust him to think about his friends at a time like this."I know. I'll just finish this chapter. You go ahead." And then, his voice softening, "You should get some rest; you look tired."

James ran a hand through his hair and exhaled noisily. "Right. I'll go ahead then, if you don't mind."

"I don't," Remus waved him off. Just as James started on the stairs, Remus remembered something he needed to ask.

"Are you going to Hogsmeade on Saturday?"

James frowned; the question seemed to come from nowhere. "I have Quidditch practice; the match is a week from Saturday. But I'll try to after practice. I'll be seeing you there?"

Remus nodded, waiting until he heard the footsteps disappear before relaxing on the couch, his eyes closed. There was no denying it this time.

He felt guilty.

The night had raced her by. It was probably only a couple of hours before sunrise, and yet here she was, sitting on the window sill with arms hugging her knees to herself. She couldn't get herself to sleep and, after endless tossing in bed, decided to simply get up. She had paced around the dorm, flopped back onto the bed, stood up and crouched by the window, and still the same words kept running through her mind.

The War does strange things to people, doesn't it. It brings some people together and pulls some apart, or at least attempts to.

Remus' words troubled her because they were in every sense correct...and they hit close to home, were frighteningly similar to her own fretful thoughts. Destiny was struggling to reassert the pattern it knew it should be, and it was using the War to bring Lily and James together.

But to what end? To a marriage everybody expected, to a beautiful son? Just because it made perfect sense that James be with the one he had wanted since everybody could remember? The golden boy, the golden girl...together the ideal couple? Was that all there was to it?

There has to be something else. Something...

The answer came to Hermione in a horrifying, dizzying rush, and she stuck her fist in her mouth to keep from crying out.

Of course! she choked silently. *The War! Voldemort! It all ends when James defeats him!*

Tears started streaming down her face, but the words kept tumbling out...words that, like destiny, she was and would be unable to defy.

And James was with Lily and Harry that night he defeated Voldemort, he was married to Lily and had Harry with her, and it's not as if Harry or Lily had anything directly to do with that triumph, they were just there, but that's exactly it! They were there, I wasn't, and it's not as if I had anything to do with him being saved, but he lived that night because things happened the way they did, the way were supposed to!

A sharp pain seared through her. James's handsome face, gazing at her lovingly, swam before her cloudy vision. She heard his voice, low and resolute*!ve decided. It's you I want. It's you I love, you I need to be with.*

Hermione sobbed unabashedly into her hands. *Oh Merlin, I love you too, James!* But she would not have the chance to say those words again. The crossroads before her were clear now, unmistakable through her tears. She didn't want to leave him, never wanted to do so, but if she didn't give in to what had long been and rightfully decreed by the heavens, she might never see him again.

He might die. Fear clenched her heart, strengthened her resolve. There was a chance, if she decided to do things differently, that he would not be attacked at all, that he would live peacefully. But how could he, when the peace of the world was his burden, though he knew it not yet? And who was to say he wouldn't be the one even if he didn't marry Lily, who knew what would happen after then?

She didn't know.

The window was closed, but she felt an icy chill course through her. Trembling, Hermione jumped down the sill and climbed into bed, pulling the covers to her chin. Everything she'd been through had been for naught. Destiny's way was painful, but it was best if James was to live.

And he would live, that she vowed. Never mind that she couldn't be with him. He would live even if it be the death of her. And it would be, for she had to watch over him to the end. She would make sure he'd get into Auror training, marry Lily, have Harry, defeat Voldemort. And she... She would have to get that Time-Turner back, return to her own time, after she had ensured James's safety.

Everything will be as it should be.

Hermione smiled sadly as she rolled to her side, sleep as elusive as ever, and she suspect it would still be many nights from now. She had been ruthlessly played. Destiny had stolen her own ace...her timeless, immeasurable love for James...and had used it to trump her.

Part it a little more to the left... There, and then maybe some on the forehead...

Remus smoothed down his hair and smiled slightly at his reflection. He appeared to be in better health. It was to his relief that this month's transformation wasn't as painful as he was used to, but he couldn't help but wonder if his anticipation of this particular trip to Hogsmeade had anything to do with it.

Just then, he felt a hand on his shoulder and saw, through the mirror, James beside him. He was already dressed in his Quidditch uniform.

"You seem to be spending an awful lot of your time styling your hair, Moony," James observed good-naturedly. "Meeting up with a girl today?"

Remus slightly coloured. "No...er, just me and Sirius and Peter." *And Regina.*

James raised his eyebrows in mild surprise but proceeded with messing up his hair until it was all spiky. "Is Regina going?" he asked nonchalantly.

"I think so, yes," Remus answered, also trying to be casual. "She'll be with us."

James adjusted his glasses, his mood brightening. He squared his shoulders and said, "Good. I'll meet up with you guys later." Clapping Remus on the back, he added seriously, "Take care of her. You know, times like these..."

Remus swallowed. "Sure."

A quick thanks and James was gone. Remus glanced at himself again in the mirror. Sighing, he ran a hand through his sandy brown hair. Once, twice, thrice, until it was quite mussed up.

It didn't stand up in all directions like James's, but it would do.

When he got to the Great Hall, Sirius, Peter and Hermione were already halfway through breakfast, James presumably already at the pitch.

"Moony, what happened to your hair?" Peter enquired, munching on a toast.

Remus couldn't meet his eyes, feeling the heat creep up his neck. "Nothing, I didn't do anything."

"You looked like you slept on it," Sirius commented, bored. "I mean, it's supposed to be sleek, like mine." As if to demonstrate his point, he blew a few wisps of hair away from his eyes.

Hermione groaned in disbelief. "Why in Merlin's name are you talking about hair that way?"

Sirius gave her the one-over. "Yeah, you wouldn't understand, with hair as unruly as that." He reached over and pulled a sprig from her ponytail, which bounced back like a spring. She looked at him with reproach.

I think her hair's just fine, Remus contradicted in his head. Without the curls framing her face, her eyes stood out even more.

"You'd go well with James, all right. He adores his messy hair," Sirius continued.

To which Hermione replied impishly, "I adore it too, you know."

Surprised, Sirius and Peter burst into appreciative laughter, and Remus forced out a chuckle. He had lost his appetite.

As they made their way to the village along with the other students, Sirius continued pestering Hermione about her relationship with James. Irritated, Remus decided to tune him out but couldn't help listen in vaguely.

"Come on, you can't tell me you don't like him anymore," Sirius prodded after Hermione refused to answer any of his questions. "I've seen you look at him! And all those nights you pretended to be studying, staying up late, it was only so you could wait for him!" He peered closely at her. "So why aren't you together anymore?"

Hermione felt her insides lurch, but she managed a small, wistful smile. "I can't tell you," she replied simply.

Sirius grimaced at her, but Peter jumped in before he could speak. "I've seen him look at you too!" he squeaked excitedly. "When you completed that potion yesterday, you should've seen James's face." He paused and stared thoughtfully into space, searching for the right words. "He looked really proud, as if your accomplishment was his."

An odd expression stole into her face. "Did he now?"

"And incidentally," Sirius said, a note of steel this time, "didn't you promise me, sometime before James's birthday, that you would never hurt him?"

The words slapped Hermione hard, but she stood her ground, masking her pain. "I did, and I would never." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I don't owe you any explanation, Sirius. And besides, you don't...you *wouldn't*...understand."

Sirius' icy eyes darkened. "Maybe," he concurred. "But it seems to me you and James are making things more difficult than they ought to be. It's no secret you..." He made an awkward hand gesture. "Well, you love each other, so what's stopping you?"

Hermione could not believe her ears. Not too long ago Sirius wouldn't give her the time of the day, and now he wanted her to be back with his best friend!

I wish it were that simple.

She opened her mouth, but Peter grabbed Sirius' arm and exclaimed, "Look, Padfoot! Zonko's having a sale!"

Their eyes flickered to a store whose displays were blocked with a crowd milling around it. Sirius touched her arm briefly and said, more gently, "Just think about it, okay? Because amazingly, Peter was right. You two *really* were good together."

His words only made her feel worse. Hermione watched morosely as Sirius and Peter bounded for the joke shop and then turned her attention to Remus, whom she realised only then had been silent throughout the entire exchange.

"Remus?" she prompted with a smile. "Is something the matter?"

It took some effort to clear the haze in his mind and focus his attention on her; Sirius had been chattering obnoxiously for quite a while, after all. "Where's Sirius and Peter?"

"Zonko's," Hermione said, pointing. "Wow, you did zone out."

"Yes, well..." Remus took a deep breath. "What would you like to do now?"

Hermione shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Walk around maybe?" She motioned to the path they were treading and started to walk, with Remus catching up.

"Do you know if James is going to Hogsmeade?" she asked him quietly.

Remus looked at her searchingly, after which he muttered sullenly, "Yes, after Quidditch practice."

They strolled in silence, Hermione humming a nameless tune under her breath and taking in the sights around her. Which actually didn't do much to lift her spirits. All around her, Ministry of Magic posters were tacked, and some of the shops have been boarded up. And then, up ahead...

"That's the Shrieking Shack," Remus suddenly spoke, pointing to a dilapidated house in the distance.

"I know," Hermione said. "James told me. It's the most haunted house in Britain."

Remus exhaled sharply. "It's where I go when I transform." He saw her gape in astonishment and further explained, matter-of-factly, "All the screams and howls that the villagers hear... They were made by me. Dumbledore encouraged the rumour that this was haunted to keep people away. In fact, the Whomping Willow was planted in Hogwarts to ensure nobody would stumble upon the tunnel to it."

"The Whomping Willow leads to the Shrieking Shack?" Hermione repeated, amazed by this new piece of information.

"Yeah." Remus smiled at the memory. "Dumbledore did it all for me, for my... condition. Said I could still attend Hogwarts if we took certain precautions. At first I kept it secret from my friends, but they worked it out in third year."

Hermione laughed quietly. "I'd imagine they were inquisitive."

"That they were," Remus agreed. "They've helped me a lot, James and Sirius and Peter."

"But why do they go out with you during the full moon?" Hermione wondered. "Isn't that dangerous, will it not cause more trouble?"

Remus grinned mischievously at her. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you that much," he said. "It isn't my secret to tell." She rolled her eyes at him, and she looked both annoyed and adorable at the same time he couldn't help laughing.

"Well, whatever it is you're doing, I'm sure it's not allowed," Hermione concluded haughtily, crossing her arms.

His eyes twinkling, Remus replied, "Your confidence in us is heartwarming."

It was on this lighter note that they made their way to The Three Broomsticks, where they each bought a butterbeer. Taking their drinks out of the pub, they resumed their walk around Hogsmeade, unmindful of where they were going.

"Hello, Remus, Regina!" a cheerful voice greeted them, and they both saw Alice walking towards them, waving. Lily was standing beside her, her red hair in a braid, smiling politely.

"Hello, Alice, Lily," Remus returned courteously, nodding at each girl as he said her name. Hermione echoed his greetings.

"Where are the others?" Alice asked, eyeing them interestedly.

"Well, we left Sirius and Peter at Zonko's, and James has Quidditch practice," Remus glibly answered. "You're looking for them?" At this, his eyes flickered to Lily, who looked away.

"Oh no, just wondering," Alice said. She tugged at Lily's arm and stepped past them. "See you!"

After a few steps forward, Hermione couldn't resist looking back and saw, to her grim satisfaction, Alice and Lily whispering to each other and also casting them backward glances. She pursed her lips in exasperation.

"Don't mind them," Remus advised, his eyes on the far road. "They're just *wondering* the same thing half of the school's thinking about...why you aren't seen with James anymore." He cast her an appraising, sidelong glance.

"Honestly!" Hermione exclaimed, irked. "Is he really that popular that the other students mind everything he does?"

Remus chuckled. "You bet, big Quidditch hero that he is. Good looks and cheek don't hurt his chances either." He rubbed at his ear and said, "Before you came along, most people had always assumed James would end up with Lily, no matter how many times she rejected him. They'd make a charmed couple. But you jumbled it all up, with your sudden arrival and how quickly you stole James's heart. And then just as quickly, you're not together. Don't you realise how fascinating all of this is?"

"To someone not involved, of course," Hermione muttered.

"Of course," Remus concurred. "But don't let it get to you." He tapped her bottle of butterbeer. "Here, take a swig."

Hermione took one large gulp of her drink and looked around, noting with mild surprise that they were on High Street, standing outside Dervish and Banges. She handed her bottle to Remus.

"Would you mind? I just want to check something inside."

Remus considered her. "I can accompany you..."

"There's no need to," Hermione interrupted. "I'll be quick." Without waiting for his response, she pushed the door to the store open and entered, glancing at the strangely-shaped objects surrounding her and carefully edging forward.

The small, stout witch she had met before was busy polishing with a rug a silver instrument that seemed to be a telescope; she spoke without looking at her. "Good morning, please have a look around. I'm certain you will find many things to your liking..."

"I'm not buying anything, Madam Allegria. Or selling anything either, for that matter."

At her name, the woman started; there was a flash of recognition in her eyes, and she put down her rug.

"Do you..." Hermione hesitated. "Do you remember me?"

Madam Allegria gave a small laugh. "My child, of course I remember you! How can I forget?" She wagged one stubby finger. "You sold me a precious thing, a Time-Turner. A very powerful Time-turner." She picked up her rug again and moved to clean another object. "Well, did the young man like the watch you gave him on his birthday?"

Disconcerted, as though it was so long ago, Hermione stammered, "Y-yes, yes he did." She looked around the shop. "Madam, the Time-turner... Have you got it safe?"

"Of course," the older lady answered calmly. "Will you be needing it back?"

"I might," Hermione answered slowly. "I don't know when though."

"Pardon my asking," Madam Allegria said, her tone still cordial, "but why did you make one in the first place? To go years back...it must be something of utmost significance."

"It is." Hermione left it at that, playing with her fingers, wondering if she must, or could, confide in her.

Understanding her caution, the storeowner smiled reassuringly. "I know it must be kept secret, my dear. What the Ministry would do if they found out..." She gave a small shudder. "I asked because I wanted to know what you aimed to achieve with this, going to such lengths."

"I wanted to be with the man I love," Hermione said plainly but softly.

"Couldn't you be with him in your time?" Madam Allegria asked. "Did he..." Her voice caught. "Did he die?"

Hermione shook her head. "He was..." She faltered, embarrassed. "He was married. To somebody else." There. It was out, and she waited for the woman to pronounce her judgment.

Madam Allegria dropped the cloth she was holding. She hastily picked it up and gathered her composure. "You love him that much?"

"Yes." Her throat constricted, but she spoke past it. "Yes," she repeated defiantly. "But it turns out I can't be with him after all."

"Is he in love with somebody else?" Madam Allegria asked sympathetically.

A look of anguish crossed Hermione's face. "No, he's in love with me."

"But..." Madam Allegria knew. There was a but in there somewhere, she was certain.

"But I can't be with him. Because I know his life. He would be involved in the War, and he would survive, but I wasn't originally a part of that." Hermione's fists were now clenched tightly. "So I have to stay away so everything will happen as it should be. So that he'll live."

Madam Allegria stared at her for a long time with mingled pity and sadness on her face. "I see. It's a paradox," she breathed.

"Excuse me?"

"Paradox," Madam Allegria repeated. "Time travel, especially into the past, entails all sorts of paradoxes, the kinds nature does not usually allow. But forget it." She sighed heavily. "I'm so sorry to hear all this, my dear." She glanced out the window. "Is he that young man there?"

Hermione followed her eyes and saw Remus watching them with a confused frown on his face. "No, he's a friend," she mumbled. The short conversation with Madam Allegria had drained her. "Well, I've troubled you enough," she said, taking her leave. "I'd better go. The Time-turner..."

"It'll be kept safe," Madam Allegria said.

Hermione responded with a quick, grateful smile and exited the shop, where she was met with mistrust in Remus' blue eyes.

"What took you long there? You know that woman?"

"Yes, I know her. I bought James's watch there. We just, you know, caught up on some stuff." Hermione took her butterbeer and emptied it. "Do you think we can go back to Hogwarts now? All of a sudden I don't feel too well."

Remus took her bottle and tossed it in a nearby garbage bin. His eyes were now warm and oddly protective as he took in her pale complexion. "Of course, Regina. Whatever you want."

"George, the Quaffle!" Katherine shouted at her teammate as she passed the red ball to him, both of them zigzagging through the air towards Matthew, who was hovering expectantly by the goalposts. Neil swung the Bludger in their direction but missed, and Matthew, distracted, flew to meet George. Unfortunately for Matthew, George returned the Quaffle to Katherine, who kicked it, aiming for the right hoop.

TING!

James grinned to himself as he continued tailing the Snitch. "Good one, Katherine!" he cheered, never taking his eyes off the golden ball. Many times he could have reached out and captured the Snitch, but he restrained himself. *This is good practice for the game on Saturday*, he thought. Slytherin was two hundred points down; they

would make sure, of course, that they wouldn't catch the Snitch until they were at least sixty points up. Or that *he* wouldn't.

Certainly, he could catch the Snitch and immediately end the game like he did in their previous. But where was the thrill in that?

What he really wanted to do was let Slytherin take the lead up to sixty points and then mercilessly catch the Snitch from under their pug Seeker's nose. Which made this routine necessary practise. James rubbed his hands in excitement. *I can hardly wait.*

"Potter, I know what you're doing!" Katherine yelled from the other side of the court, where the rest of the team was watching him. "Catch the Snitch so we can all go to Hogsmeade!"

James frowned at her. "I'm bloody Captain, Lyons!" But he urged his Nimbus forward and accelerated. *Almost there...* He leaned forward and, with an expert swipe, secured the ball in his left hand. The Snitch struggled, its wings flapping wildly, as he soared over to his team.

"Excellent practice!" he told them, beaming. "We'll be alternating with Slytherin for practice next week, so that'll be..." He thought a moment. "Monday and Wednesday, six to eight in the evening. There'll be none on Friday, we need our rest." He signalled for a huddle, and after piling their hands in the middle, they roared, "GRYFFINDOR!"

After some seconds of whooping, the team then sailed back to the ground, rushing to the showers. James went straight to the Gryffindor tower and was about to dash through the portrait hole when it opened.

"Hi!" James acknowledged spiritedly, still high with adrenalin from practice. Alice and Lily had just come out of the common room, bulky bags slung over their shoulders. "Where are you off to?"

Alice nudged Lily, who seemed to have been spellbound at the sight of James in his Quidditch robes. Although, Alice had to admit, he was quite a sight, with his unruly hair and sweat-soaked clothes...

Lily blinked and smiled shyly at him. "Library." She patted her bag. "It's about ready to explode with the books and parchment I've packed. And you?"

"Oh, Hogsmeade, to catch up with my friends," James answered. "I'll just be taking a quick shower."

"Yeah, we saw them," Alice chimed in. "Remus and Regina walking around. They said they left Sirius and Peter at Zonko's. But that was more than an hour ago."

James's forehead wrinkled slightly at her mention of Remus, but he wilfully eased it and flashed his trademark smile at Alice. "Thanks." His eyes flickered towards Lily again. "See you later." He pushed open the portrait and clambered in, sprinting up his dormitory. He was dressed in record time; without wasting a second longer, he slipped on his glasses and raced to the sixth floor of the castle.

It usually took an hour to travel through the secret passageway to Honeydukes, but he was in such a hurry that it took him fifteen minutes less to reach the trapdoor. Praying there were still enough students milling around to disguise his entry, he gingerly climbed up and tiptoed out of the storeroom.

Thank Merlin. James blended with the crowd, searching for friends, but he could not find any one of them. He had checked The Three Broomsticks, Scrivenshafts and, driven by the image of Remus and Regina together, even Madam Puddifoot's, but to no success.

Not that it bothered him the slightest. *In fact, this is probably what I've needed all along.* Already, walking alone had refreshed him, cheering him up even more than Quidditch practise did. And this time, he could freely think about everything that had happened in the past couple of weeks.

He sighed deeply, releasing all the tension he had kept within. He missed Regina...terribly. He didn't have the nerve to let it show though, nor did he want to. Looking back, he realised he had always made quite a fool of himself when it came to...well... Girls. First Lily and now Regina. While he knew men were expected to do the chasing, the courting, the works, his pride could only take so much.

James clenched his jaw. *Women.*

At least you do not have Sirius' reputation. He grinned at this and then more soberly thought that it was quite lucky he had enough to distract him. Quidditch and exams and career plans all on his plate required his concentration and drove away problems of his relationship with Regina for stretches of time, and for that he was thankful.

He had almost forgotten what it was like to be carefree, to live life the way he wanted, unencumbered by matters of the heart.

Not that he wouldn't do anything to have Regina back. *It's just that...* He heaved another sigh. *What more can I do? I already apologized, I already told her I loved her. It's all in her hands now.* He massaged his temples with his fingertips. *It's all in her hands now, so you should stop thinking about it* he scolded himself.

But he missed her...terribly.

I wonder if she misses me. He thought he saw her looking at him sometimes, and every time he caught her eye he fancied there was longing written over her face. But the moment would pass and when next he glanced at her she would be busy with something else, leaving him free to stare.

And stare to his fill he did, realising that there were so many things he did not yet know about her. That she had a habit of answering questions correctly, that her shoulders twitched the same way just before she was about to raise her hand. That she tucked her hair behind her ears whenever she was flustered. That she practised her spellwork whenever she was bored, her favourite conjuring birds out of thin air.

James chewed on his lower lip in fond reminiscence. They simply had had too little time shared with each other. *Come to think of it, we're only on our second month.* A lump formed in his throat.

Too short. Definitely too short. I want a lifetime.

When he was thinking like this, of the plans he had made about his future, he couldn't include Lily. He didn't know where she fit in, even now that they were friends. Or sort of friends. Oh, he had been surprised to discover that Lily could be wonderful to talk to when she wasn't screaming at him, had been amazed that she was actually more beautiful when she laughed. Not too long ago he would have been elated at this development, and only last week she had him both thrilled and confused, but after that night at the Astronomy Tower, she meant nothing to him. She meant nothing but the mistake he kept making in the past and almost made again.

Merlin, how he missed Regina.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, James saw that he was standing outside Dervish and Banges. *Bloody hell, might as well have a look if they're in there.*

The soft tinkling of the chimes announced his arrival. His eyes swept the room in renewed astonishment; he had been here before, certainly, but the disarray of bizarre magical instruments never failed to awe him.

"Take a look around, m'dear, you might find something to your liking," a kindly voice said, and James jumped as a stout witch appeared from behind a tower of boxes. She smiled kindly at him, and he recognized her as the storeowner. "Looking for anything?"

"No, er...I was looking for my friends," James replied. "But seeing as they aren't here... Well, I'll just leave." He raised his left hand in goodbye and turned to leave.

"Wait!" the witch exclaimed before he could reach the door.

James looked back questioningly. "Yes?"

"Could you please tell me the time?" she asked, gesturing towards the watch he wore on his right wrist. "I'm afraid I'm uncertain as to whether the clock in this store has been set properly."

James glanced down with some surprise. "Oh, this one doesn't tell the time." He smiled at her. "I just wear this because it was given to me by er...somebody special on my birthday."

The woman nodded as she considered him. "You've just come of age then?"

"Yes, last March." James made his way once again to the door, his forehead slightly wrinkled. *Strange. It's almost as if she knows.* He passed a display of jewellery, his sight zeroing in on a silver chain with a circular pendant laid on black velvet.

Eclipse, the propped card in front read.

His frown deepened.

"Interesting, isn't it?" the woman said, noticing where his attention was directed.

"Sure," James said politely, dragging his eyes away.

"It's in reality two necklaces combined," she continued, now approaching the case and taking out the piece of jewellery. She held the circular pendant with two hands, between the tips of her index fingers and thumb, and made a pulling motion.

James blinked as the circle disintegrated to indeed produce two intricate pendants, one of a sun and the other of a moon, each hanging on a silver chain. Was it his imagination, or did the sun and moon gleam more than the circle in which they were confined?

"They're brighter this way," he murmured, reaching out to touch the sun pendant. "Beautiful."

"Isn't that always the case?" the storeowner softly replied. "The sun and moon shine more brightly when they're separate than together, for when they do, they shroud the world in darkness."

James allowed the words to wash over him, still entranced with how the silver caught the light. "Eclipse," he said, comprehension now dawning.

"That's right," she said cheerfully, breaking through the mysterious atmosphere that had before then enveloped them. "But no matter the meaning, it would make a good gift to somebody special, I should suppose, as good a way as any of telling somebody they light up your life."

A light bulb switched on in James's head, and he smiled broadly. "I'll take that," he declared. "I know just who to give it to."

"The same person who gave you that watch?" she enquired shrewdly.

"No one else," James agreed.

The storeowner had a satisfied smile on her lips as she merged the pendants once again and replaced it in the velvet box, closing it with a snap. James reached in his robes for his bag of money while he followed her to the counter, where she rang up his purchase.

While waiting for James to count his money out, she added conversationally, "You know, legend has it that lovers who wear necklaces with unified pendants have their hearts and souls intertwined so that no matter what happens, they always find each other in the end."

Amused, James thought, *I bet that's just for sales.* He handed his money and took the bag in return. "Well, I'll do better than that, 'cause I swear I won't lose her in the first place. Ever."

Again, there was that piercing, knowing look from her, but before he could demand an explanation from that kindly old face, she smiled warmly at him, and he swallowed his indignation.

"Good luck, young man. I hope she likes it."

Whether she liked it or not, James hadn't had a chance to find out. It was Wednesday, four days after he had bought the necklaces, but an opportunity to get her to himself had yet to arise. They were both just too busy, he realised ruefully. He was preoccupied with Quidditch and rounds and N.E.W.T.s, and she was, according to his friends, keen on studying as well. She didn't return from the library until it was past eleven, and probably only because Madam Pince had kicked her out.

Her and Remus. James squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated instead on his shower. But she and Remus had been spending a little too much time together, and... He suppressed a growl. The very idea irked him.

Remus is your friend, a voice in his head reasoned, and at once he was shamed. How could he even entertain such disloyal thoughts? It was utmost betrayal!

James sighed and turned the knob to put out the water. He reached for his towel and winced as a sharp pain coursed through his nape and spread to his shoulders.

"Damn," he muttered, reaching to rub the spot and ease the pain. He had strained his neck earlier in practice, after having lost control of his broom...which was in itself strange. His Nimbus had always obeyed his command at his slightest touch, but now... James shrugged into his clothes, exited the stall and grabbed his broom, propped against the wall, and again there was that unpleasant tingle up his arm.

Something was wrong.

Probably just game jitters, Prongs, he imagined Sirius reassuring him. He tightened his grip on the broom, as though claiming ownership once again, and at the back of his mind nagged the doubt that it could have been tampered with. It would have been all too easy for somebody from Slytherin to sneak in the locker room and break the protective Charms on his Nimbus while he was in the shower...

James snorted, dismissing the possibility. As if any one of them had enough brains to do so!

It was to his satisfaction that he entered the Great Hall just in time for dinner. He walked over to where the Marauders and Regina were seated and had just started piling the food on his plate when she suddenly stood up.

Confused, and forgetting that they were not actually on speaking terms, James asked, "Where are you off to?"

Hermione met his eyes with a startled look. "Dumbledore. I have an appointment with him."

"Do you want me to go with you?" James offered, silently praying she would say yes.

But she only smiled and coloured slightly at the attention. "I'll be fine, James. It's just about N.E.W.T.s. Go eat your dinner, I bet you're famished after practice." With that, she turned her back on them and walked down the Hall.

James watched her until she was out of his sight, a smile creeping into his face, and began digging into his meal with much gusto.

"Merlin, Quidditch must've starved the heart out of you," Sirius dryly commented.

James merely beamed.

"Ah, Miss Weisz, I've been expecting you," Dumbledore greeted her the moment she entered the oak door of the Headmaster's office. He stood up from his desk, several rolls of parchment in front of him, and motioned for her to take a seat.

Hermione closed the door carefully behind her and gingerly took the chair Dumbledore had offered. "Good evening, Professor."

"I trust you had a good dinner?" Dumbledore courteously asked. At her nod, his blue eyes strayed to a nearby clock; it had just struck eight. "Just on time," he murmured.

"Well, Miss Weisz, I gather you're here to convince me to allow you to take the N.E.W.T.s."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Indeed, Professor. I think you will find my performance in all my classes to your satisfaction."

"I do not doubt your abilities," Dumbledore agreed. "In fact, all your professors have given testimony to your extraordinary aptitude, and if this was the basic and only premise ruling my permission for your final exams, I would have given it without further discussion."

The Headmaster's voice was kind, but her instincts were telling her he meant to say something else...a contradiction. "Thank you," Hermione nevertheless answered.

"But I cannot in good faith allow you to continue without knowing who you really are," Dumbledore declared firmly. He put his fingers together in a prayerful tent. "You see, Miss Weisz, with your refusal to disclose information when you first came to this school, I have made considerable effort to confirm your identity and from where you've come."

Hermione's face paled, her eyes wary, but she said nothing.

"Fortunately, existence has but two dimensions...space and time," he continued. "I have searched for records of you in every place and past imaginable and have failed." His blue eyes suddenly pierced her, and he smiled.

"I can only conclude then, Miss Weisz, that you've come from the future."

Hermione surveyed the Headmaster for several moments, her jaw tense. "Professor, I apologise for my insolence, but have you considered the high possibility that I have been using another name?"

"Indeed I have," Dumbledore said, nodding. "Yet your face is your identity, yes?"

"Professor..."

"I ask you now, Miss Weisz, the same question I asked you then," Dumbledore interrupted gravely. "What was your purpose in coming here? Surely there was something you wished to change; you went to this much trouble, after all..."

"My intentions have changed," Hermione sharply declared, not attempting to deny that she indeed came from another time. "I have decided to keep things the way they are, so further discussion is pointless."

"Even if you intend to do so, your mere existence is a difference," Dumbledore stated evenly. "You've realised that, I presume?"

She was trembling so badly now, she had to grip the edges of her seat to steady herself. "I assure you, Professor Dumbledore, that I'm doing all I can to ensure that everything will be as it should be, to the best of my knowledge. Believe me," she emphasized, almost pleadingly, "it might not be in my best interest, but I choose to do so lest I endanger..." Her voice trailed off, her heart thudding in fear. Had she said too much?

Now we're getting somewhere. The lines on the Headmaster's face became more sympathetic, and he kindly replied, "I see. Let's leave this thread of conversation for now." He saw her features sag with weary relief and said, his tone now brisk, "As for your N.E.W.T.s, you've been taking the classes required for Auror training or Healing. I am aware it is rather late for career counselling, but did you want to pursue those after school?"

"I...er...yes, those were my options," Hermione stammered, surprised at the change in topic and in the Headmaster's disposition.

Dumbledore peered at her. "You'd need top grades for both, I assume you know that?"

Hermione nodded. "I've been studying hard to earn those marks, Professor. I hope I can manage."

"Judging from the feedback I've been getting from your teachers, you'd do just fine," Dumbledore concurred. "It would be good to have something to do while you're here, wouldn't it? For you would not be able to participate in the War, if things were to remain the same..."

Hermione grimaced but nodded again, keen to leave the office. "If there isn't anything else, Professor...?"

"There is," Dumbledore said slowly, "one more thing. You never mentioned how long you planned to stay."

The cogs in her mind turned as she wondered how best to answer. And then she softly admitted, "As long as it's necessary, sir. As long as it takes to see him...people...through..." Hermione hesitated.

"Through the War?" Dumbledore finished astutely.

Hermione's throat knotted, so she nodded for a third time.

Dumbledore leaned back in his seat, satisfied for the moment with the answers she gave. He observed her through his spectacles with an expression akin to pity. "That's all for now. You may go, Miss..."

Brown eyes directly met his, resigned yet unwavering. "Granger, Professor. Hermione Granger." She mustered a smile and left without another word.

Author's Notes: This chapter was cut one scene short because apparently I went over the maximum word count. Though I've posted it elsewhere, the last scene will be included in the next chapter. There you have it, I sure hope you like this. Chapter 23 will be pivotal, so do watch out for that. Thank you so much for waiting and still reading! :)