

Graduation Day

by jmlane57

Latest in my series bridging the gap between Chapter 36 of DH and the Epilogue. Here, Harry and company graduate from the school--the last class to do so before it's renovated.

A Time for Joy, A Time for Tears

Chapter 1 of 1

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By hgseeker

A/N: This will be somewhat AU since I mention Hermione's hometown, and it was never mentioned by JKR. Please keep in mind that it is by no means official unless it comes from her.

Graduation Day

By Beach Boys

There's a time for joy

A time for tears

A time we'll treasure through the years

We'll remember always

Graduation day

At the senior prom

We danced 'til three

And there you gave your heart to me

We'll remember always

Graduation day

Though we leave in sorrow

All the joys we've known

We can face tomorrow

Knowing we'll never walk alone

When the ivy walks

Are far behind

No matter where our paths may wind

We'll remember always

Graduation day

The next year went by so fast that it seemed like a blur to the four who lived it most completely and fully. Between their schoolwork, helping with the rebuilding and/or revamping of not only buildings, but lives and organisations, Harry and company were hard-pressed to find time to breathe, much less grab any privacy for themselves, but knew they had well earned any that happened to be granted to them and thus had few, if any, qualms of conscience at either refusing or postponing certain things.

They knew the most about a lot of things, especially the Dark Arts and the defense against same, as well as the rampant corruption in the Ministry of Magic. But not even they could be everywhere and did what they could via owl post or Floo. But some things they had to do themselves, such as go to certain funerals, specifically, those of Fred Weasley and Colin Creevey. They had decided to cremate those of the Dark side who had perished, Voldemort in particular, and scatter the ashes to the four winds, in order that the remaining Death Eaters or sympathisers could not make the gravesites places of pilgrimage.

The vast majority of Death Eaters had been killed, but those who survived (roughly two dozen) had fled, and it hadn't taken long to catch them, especially when the Magical Law Enforcement team followed Harry and company's suggestions as to procedure. They were presently in holding cells, magically reinforced so as to make escape impossible (anti-Apparition wards, among other things) at the Ministry, awaiting trial. After their trials and the likely verdicts, they would be transferred to Azkaban. Harry also recalled that Azkaban had to have its share of rebuilding and refurbishing; the new laws he intended to help think up, then enact, would take care of the rest.

It hardly seemed possible that time had passed so quickly, but it was hard to deny, since it was now near the end of the interrupted seventh year for Harry, Ron and Hermione. McGonagall had already assured them of honours, even above and beyond the results of their NEWT tests and final exams ... but not just for the three of them. Neville, Luna and Ginny had also earned their share, and the Trio was very proud that they had done so...but most importantly, that they themselves had had something to do with it.

Naturally Hermione did the best in virtually everything, but Harry was a close second, mainly because he wanted to go into Auror training after getting out of school, and they only took the ones with the highest grades. Hermione had also been chosen valedictorian of the Graduating Class of 1999. Ordinarily it would have been 1998, but the extenuating circumstances...specifically, their year tracking down and destroying both the Horcruxes and Voldemort...had necessitated their being moved there instead. She was currently working on her speech to the graduating class and professors of the school. She was even given to understand that the current Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, was due to attend the graduation ceremonies.

One good thing about it, at least for Harry, was that he and Ginny would be able to make up for a lot of lost time since she was nearing the end of her actual seventh year and would graduate along with the Trio, having majored in all the classes necessary for her to get into Healer training after finishing school. Harry had also been offered the post of DADA teacher, but decided against it, at least for the time being. He would have enough exposure to the Dark Arts without that. Even if he didn't end up changing his mind about the DADA position, however, McGonagall had assured him that he had a standing invitation to come back and speak to the students on the subject whenever it could be fitted into his schedule.

Harry appreciated the value which had been placed on his unique abilities, but intended to do as he saw fit for once upon leaving Hogwarts, having no intention of being obligated to any one organisation or training school unless he chose to be...and at the moment, his organisation of choice was the Auror Academy. Ginny had even offered to do her Healing residency in the same general area, in southeastern Scotland, about a day's broom flight from Hogwarts, so they wouldn't have to be apart so much. Harry very much appreciated that, but it might not be possible, although he very much hoped otherwise.

Even at that, there were rumours that a new Headmaster would be chosen, and no one had any real idea as to who it might be. Who could possibly follow Dumbledore and McGonagall, two of the best Heads Hogwarts had ever had? Snape's tenure had been too short and controversial to be certain of its ultimate effect on the students and staff. It would take much longer than a year to find that out, although all concerned had every confidence that they eventually would.

But most importantly, they had heard that a Graduation Ball would be held in honour of the Graduating Class of 1999. Upon hearing about it, Harry wasted no time in asking Ginny, and Ron asked Hermione. It would be a bittersweet time for all of them, and not only because they were leaving school. Many of their friends had been killed in the War and thus would be missing from the crowd. Fortunately, Hermione's quick thinking had saved her parents. Only recently had she managed to bring them back from Australia and restore their memories (of course, she had not gone alone; Ron, Harry and Ginny had insisted on accompanying her) and they were once more living in their original home on the southwesternmost coast of England in Barnstaple, roughly halfway between Hogwarts and the Burrow.

Because of their abilities, Harry and Hermione could basically choose whatever they wished in the way of careers, as could Ginny, but Ron's situation was a bit more problematical. He had been an erratic student at best, and it had been mainly due to help from Harry and Hermione that he had managed both his OWLs and NEWTs, which both had aced, not to mention his final exams. It was likely that Ginny would ace her NEWTs as well, so there was little worry on her part as to winning a spot in the current Healers' training course.

For the moment, all four called the Burrow home, but only intended to stay there long enough to find their own homes elsewhere upon finding gainful employment. Harry and Ginny had also agreed to make their engagement official come graduation day, and he suspected that Ron was strongly leaning toward asking Hermione to marry him once established in a career. Just what that career was to be, he couldn't have said for sure at the moment, even though he wanted to go to the Auror Academy with Harry.

However, his final grades might not be sufficiently high, and he would thus have to find something else to do for a living. He didn't like the idea of having to have Hermione support him while he learned a new trade, but it might be necessary to do just that, and he had best get used to the idea at the earliest possible time. Naturally, wherever the friends ended up, all fully intended to keep in close touch, whatever they had to do to manage it.

They had also heard that Hogwarts was well on the way to being rebuilt and those doing it "had every intention of making it better than it ever was," claimed all the noted experts on rebuilding and revamping magical buildings, of which Hogwarts was one of the oldest and most illustrious. However, it would likely be closed for the duration of its renovation; the Class of 1999 would be the last class to graduate until after the renovation had been completed. The professors there would have input, of course, like McGonagall, but the final word would fall under the jurisdiction of the true experts.

The Trio and Ginny, not to mention Neville and Luna, among others, had also been doing all they could to revamp the Ministry of Magic into what it had always been meant to be, a body of people and laws who worked for the betterment of the Wizarding world and did not simply further their own ends with only a few actually doing the jobs they had been hired for, such as Arthur Weasley. Speaking of Arthur, he had been placed in the position as Head of Magical Law Enforcement after Amelia Bones's murder and immediately set to work cleaning things up in all departments, particularly the laws governing who could be incarcerated in Azkaban.

This time, only those with sufficient (and *reliable*) evidence against them would be placed there. They would also have fair trials, not those with verdicts determined by how much money changed hands or how pure-blooded the person might be. The best thing of all, though, was the fact that Dolores Umbridge would soon be put on trial for all her crimes both in Hogwarts and in the Ministry, and that all innocents she had terrorised or penalised had been either already released from prison or compensated for their pain and suffering, if not both. Harry frankly hoped Arthur left no stone unturned as to her punishment, and even a life sentence in Azkaban would be no more than that evil woman deserved.

Hermione had eventually decided that she wanted to take the Magical Law course at the Ministry, which would be taught by Griselda Marchbanks, a former Elder of the Wizengamot noted for her intelligence and firmness yet fairness ... which was the main thing which had attracted Hermione in the first place. Of course, it would take time to clean up the Ministry too, but they were confident it would be accomplished one day, and that they intended to be responsible for as much as they possibly could in the way of changes, both in laws and people.

Meanwhile, however, they had to finish their Hogwarts schooling and plan what they intended to do for not only the Graduation Ball but after it. Harry fully expected Hermione to have all her belongings cleared out by the time they left school for the last time, as he would himself, and even if he had to help Ron, he would see to it that he had all of his as well...not to mention Ginny, although he didn't think she would need as much help, since she was almost as conscientious as Hermione on that score. That trait was likely to serve her well in her Healing course, but first things first.

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The last two weeks of the seventh year for Ginny and the Trio seemed to be the busiest in many ways, especially for Hermione, Ginny and Luna (she was going to the Graduation Ball with Neville), having their heads together almost every time Harry, Ron and Neville saw them outside of class these days, discussing what kind of dresses they would wear, how their hair would be arranged, things like that. As for the guys, Harry intended to magically enlarge his dress robes from fourth year, although he was entirely capable of buying new ones if he so chose.

He didn't intend to wear formal clothing any more than absolutely necessary, having always preferred T-shirts, sweatshirt jackets and jeans. Probably the only time he would buy new robes would be for his marriage to Ginny. He had suggested to Fred and George that they buy Ron new dress robes, so that wasn't a worry. If nothing else, he could help his friend magically enlarge them.

Hagrid would also naturally assist in the decoration of the Great Hall; he had even been able to teach his half-brother Grawp to help out and thus would make a lot less work for the rest of them. Harry felt bad at the way he had had to pretend to be dead; his heart had gone out to Hagrid as he had been forced to carry him back to the castle on Voldemort's orders. Just the same, Harry found it hard to believe that Hagrid couldn't have felt him breathing or a heartbeat, much less the warmth of his body. He had apologised to Hagrid for causing him such pain; Hagrid had basically dismissed it.

"Wha' matters is that yer 'live, Harry," he had insisted. "Just ne'er do anythin' like tha' t' me again, please, 'cause I migh' think twice about forgivin' yeh an' then yeh'd be in a peck o' trouble."

But Harry had other things to occupy him, so he put this in the back of his mind for the present and concentrated on other, more important things ... such as the news that several new laws he had suggested had been enacted, recommended by Arthur and approved by Kingsley, the new Minister. They included the following:

Make it a crime to discriminate against werewolves

Make it a crime to call Muggle-borns 'Mudblood'

Declare the day of the Final Battle a Wizarding holiday

Never send anyone to Azkaban again without sufficient *reliable* evidence *and* a fair trial

There were still others pending in the Wizengamot, but Arthur had assured him that it was only a matter of time until they were enacted as well. But what mattered to Harry that these suggestions of his had now become Wizarding law. Too bad that Remus and Sirius weren't around to reap the benefits. In addition to the day of the Final Battle being declared a holiday, there would be a memorial plaque erected in a prominent place at Hogwarts once it reopened with all the names of those who sacrificed themselves in both the First and Second Wizarding Wars, including his parents, Sirius and Remus. What was more, the surviving families and friends of the victims--including himself--would be invited to a special ceremony in order to witness the dedication. A speech would also be made by Kingsley in remembrance of the dead.

But now that the most important business on his mind had been accomplished, it was time to find his fiancée and spend some alone time with her *Gin, where are you?* he called to her in his mind through his Legilimency.

In the Hospital Wing ... or more accurately, in Pomfrey's office, speaking with her. But come ahead, love, since I'm nearly done. I'll meet you at the door. Ginny thought back to him.

This was one time Harry really wished he could Apparate on the Hogwarts grounds in order to get to Ginny as quickly as possible, but the best he could do for now was run from where he currently was, in the Great Hall on the ground floor, to the Hospital Wing, which was on the third floor. Since the staircases moved, he couldn't go as fast as he would have liked, but he went as fast as he could. Upon reaching the third floor, he had slowed to a walking pace, continuing until he reached the corner just before the Hospital Wing...and true to her word, Ginny was waiting at the door when he arrived. Upon seeing each other, they began running, arms outstretched.

When he reached her, Harry picked Ginny up by the waist and spun her around as she laughed delightedly. A moment later, he lowered her to her feet, drew her close and kissed her, uncaring that someone might discover them. They hadn't been alone in some time and were thus entitled to whatever privacy they could manage to get. It was over a minute before the lovers reluctantly broke apart, having moved sensuously against each other and moaning softly as they kissed passionately.

"Gods, I've missed you, Gin," he declared.

"No more than I've missed you," she returned. "What are you so happy about...other than seeing me, that is?"

"Several of the suggestions I've introduced for new laws have become official, such as the ones to outlaw discrimination against werewolves and make sure everyone going to Azkaban only go there with sufficient reliable evidence and a fair trial." But as quickly as Harry's smile came, it had faded. "I only wish that Remus and Sirius were around to reap their benefits."

"I'm sure they're pleased. What matters is that both have become official Wizarding laws. And remember, even if the one can't help Remus, it'll likely be able to help any other werewolf in his position, not to mention Teddy, in the event he exhibits any werewolf characteristics later in life."

"Not to change the subject, but are you ready for the Ball? Remember, it's coming up very soon."

"Mione and I are as ready as we'll ever be," Ginny assured him. "I hope the same can be said for you and Ron."

"I believe it can," Harry returned with a smile. "In fact, we're even going to be getting ready together."

"That's good, but we girls are still going to come and check on you if you don't meet us on time," Ginny warned playfully, knowing that Harry probably wouldn't mind too much, but Ron would go spare at the girls walking in on them.

"I'll make sure to warn Ron. After all, I don't think he'll want Mione to walk in on him without warning."

"Of course, it'll be your own fault if neither of you remembers to put a Locking Charm on the door," Ginny pointed out.

A short time later, they reached the bottom of the stairs leading to the seventh-year girls' dorm, and Ginny gave Harry a provocative smile. "Like to come up? It'll be just the two of us, and I'll be sure to put a Locking and Silencing Charm on the door."

"So you know a way to get around the spells and such preventing boys from having access to the girls' dorms, do you?" Harry gave her a knowing smile back.

"Mione taught me. Besides, we don't get a lot of chances to be alone these days," she reminded him.

"You vixen," Harry threw back. "You've planned this all along, haven't you?"

"Damn bloody right," Ginny returned, unashamed, her brown eyes twinkling with a mixture of mischief and lust. "Now what do you say?"

"You need to ask?" he growled seductively.

And that was that. It was also the last time the lovers would be together before their graduation ... but what mattered was that once that was over, they would be finished with regular school once and for all. At least as regular as anything ever got in the Wizarding world, anyway.

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When they finally reluctantly separated, Harry knew one thing for sure...he would never want to sleep alone again. Ginny was everything he had ever wanted in a mate and more, and not just in the bedroom. He had even discussed the possibility with her while they had been together (one of the few times they had actually spoken in words) of her going with him to see his Muggle relatives, if only to see how they were getting along. Now that Dudley seemed to be growing up, maturing emotionally, maybe there was a chance he might actually consider *him* family, at least, even if Petunia and Vernon never changed. Perhaps they were too old to change, and that was too bad for all concerned.

But Harry knew it was more their loss than his own, and if that happened, he would have to accept it. Perhaps he and Dudley might eventually become friends, because from what Harry understood, his cousin had drifted away from his old gang and was slowly but surely becoming more responsible for himself and his own actions. Who knew, he might even have a girlfriend by the next time he saw him.

The only reason he might like to see Petunia was because of the way she had acted just before they had parted for what seemed to be the last time, like she'd wanted to say one last thing to him but hadn't had the nerve. With any luck, he could find out. Of course, he wasn't going to seek them out right away; he was thinking, perhaps when things settled down more in his renewed life and relationship with Ginny. Maybe after they were married or after she had become pregnant. He might even send them an invitation to the wedding. Even if only Petunia and Dudley came, that would be progress of a sort.

But for the time being, they had to get ready for the upcoming graduation and all the things it would encompass, not the least of which was the official announcement of his and Ginny's engagement.

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The final three days of their academic careers went almost as fast as the last year, but what mattered was that after the three days were over, they would be finished with school once and for all. Any further instruction they received after this would relate to their future professions. The Graduation Ball would take place an hour after the graduation ceremonies finished, so the girls decided to wear their dresses under their graduation robes so as to save time. Their hair would also be fixed for the Ball, but the boys would be unable to see it until the proper time because the girls had charmed it accordingly.

The Great Hall was packed when they arrived, although places had been left free for them. Hermione was due to give the valedictory speech so she wasn't with the others; in fact, Ginny happened to see her join McGonagall at the podium and prepare to speak, her wand held to her throat in order to amplify her voice. The speech was shorter than they had expected, only about fifteen minutes by Ginny's watch, but what mattered was the reaction to it...in fact, McGonagall had later said it was the best valedictory speech ever given by a graduate of Hogwarts. Ginny then noticed Hermione take her seat, and the graduation ceremonies began.

The graduating students who had been killed in the War were given posthumous honours as well as their regular diplomas, which would be sent to their families or other designated people close to them. The rest had their families and friends (that is, all who could make it) to proudly watch them graduate...the elder Weasleys and Hermione's parents among them. She not only graduated *magna cum laude*, with the highest academic honours the school could bestow, she was honoured for her participation in the downfall of Voldemort, getting an Order of Merlin, First Class.

Of course, other students were honoured, such as Neville Longbottom, who got an Order of Merlin, Second Class, for his assistance in bringing down Voldemort. He had even told them that he had been asked to be an Herbology professor in due time, an offer he fully intended to accept. At the moment, however, he was more concerned with Luna and whether or not she would accept his marriage proposal.

Then came Harry, and his eyes sought out his friends and Ginny, all of whom cheered and applauded him as he went up to retrieve his diploma and his own Order of Merlin, First Class, for having been the one to vanquish Voldemort once and for all. He even gave a short speech to thank all those who had helped him.

"Thank you. Thank you all. It is an honour to be here today, not only to receive my diploma, but the Order of Merlin, First Class. However, I could never have accomplished it without the help of all of you here. As far as I'm concerned, you all deserve this honour, but I'm not going to argue the point now. We all have too many other important things to concern ourselves with. As for me, I have a very important announcement to make. I will be giving up my bachelorhood in the not-too-distant future. Yes, the girl I have loved since sixth year...one Ginevra Molly Weasley--has agreed to marry me. Stand up, love."

The applause which eventually brought a blushing Ginny to her feet was deafening. She smiled at everyone and turned her head, even nodding a few times as she proudly showed off her ring from Harry to all and sundry. Only after the applause had died down did she sit down again; it took several minutes for her to stop blushing but at the same time, she couldn't be happier. Harry winked at her as he headed back to his seat, then smiled apologetically, fully expecting Ginny to lecture him later in private for embarrassing her in front of the whole school. Even at that, she couldn't be *too* upset with him. After all, it was what she had wanted, dreamed of and prayed for since she was ten years old.

Arthur and Molly gave both Harry and Ginny questioning looks, although Harry suspected that the older woman wasn't far from doing what she usually did in a situation like this...crying her eyes out. Harry fully intended to explain himself at a later date and in a more private setting; meanwhile, he had done all he could do in public. Hermione and Ron had looked just as stunned as the older couple upon hearing Harry's announcement, but once over the shock, weren't really surprised. For that matter, Ron had plans of his own, but he didn't intend to implement them until they were at the Ball in an appropriately private setting.

Twenty minutes later Ginny's own name was called ... "Ginevra Molly Weasley." She went up to get her own diploma and to her surprise, her own honour, the Order of Merlin, Third Class, for her own assistance during the Final Battle. Wait until she told Harry and the others! They didn't know, nor did her parents, since it was not announced. Only First and Second Class designations were announced publicly. A short time after this, Ron was called..."Ronald Bilius Weasley," and he went up to get his own diploma and the same honour as Harry and Hermione, the Order of Merlin, First Class, for his actions in bringing down Voldemort.

Considering how he had left Harry and Hermione in the midst of the Quest, Ron wasn't sure he deserved the First Class designation (Second, maybe), but intended to keep his reservations to himself because his friends would surely insist that he *did* deserve it and that they didn't hold it against him for leaving. What mattered was that he had come back...and not only that, had saved Harry's life.

Once the graduation ceremonies were over, McGonagall surprised everyone present by announcing, "We have one final honour to bestow. For her heroic actions, Mrs. Molly Weasley has earned the Order of Merlin, Second Class, for her assistance in bringing down one of Voldemort's most trusted associates. I'm sure she would say, with typical modesty, that she was doing it for the sake of her children, but that does not change the fact that she was instrumental in the ultimate downfall of Voldemort. Mrs. Weasley, please come forward."

The applause at this was every bit as deafening as when Harry had told Ginny to stand up, and he was sure that Molly was blushing every bit as much as her daughter had, even as she made her way up to the podium to accept the award from McGonagall. In fact, the two older women even embraced, and the Headmistress whispered, "Congratulations, Molly. You've more than earned this," before releasing her and allowing her to return to her seat.

Arthur hugged and kissed his wife in congratulations when she showed him her award, as the younger members of her family, not to mention Harry and Hermione, fully intended to do at the first opportunity. Of course, it was likely that Harry and company would join Hermione and her parents for more congratulations before they got ready for the upcoming Graduation Ball.

Just five minutes later McGonagall said some final words, wishing the graduates the best of luck in all their future endeavours, then dismissed them so they could ready themselves for the upcoming Ball. Hermione and her parents, Harry and Ginny, the elder Weasleys and Ron all gathered together after congratulations from other graduating friends, particularly those of the engaged couple.

The receipt of the award was what had driven Molly over the edge once and for all. She could scarcely stop crying, she was so happy, both for Harry and Ginny and for at least the majority of her children to have successfully graduated from Hogwarts as she and Arthur had done.

"James and Lily would be so very proud of you, Harry dear, just as Arthur and I are," she managed to say between tears before all but smothering him in her customary bone-crushing hug. "And every happiness to you and Ginny in your future life together."

Harry's own eyes filled as he returned the hug; all the same, he was glad when he was able to breathe again. Of course, the tearful Molly was replaced by an equally tearful Hermione, and he again lost his breath temporarily...both at this point and when Ron gave his friend a congratulatory bear hug.

"Congratulations, mate. Every happiness to you and Gin. Just make sure that you keep her that way or you'll answer to five ticked-off older brothers!"

Harry smiled and laughed as he returned his best mate's hug, then turned to Ginny after assuring Ron he would do everything he could to make her happy, still holding her unexpected honour. "I had no idea you were going to get an award as well, love."

"Neither was I," Ginny confessed. "McGonagall never told me, simply sprung it on me at the graduation ceremony."

"In which case, we have several reasons to celebrate tonight. And later on, let's all chip in to take your folks out to dinner to celebrate Molly's award. You with me?" He looked around at Ginny and his friends; they all smiled and agreed. After further hugs and congratulations from the Grangers, the new graduates excused themselves to prepare for the Ball, which was coming up within an hour. The girls kissed their paramours goodbye, playfully warning them to be ready on time or else. The guys assured them they would be, but in reality, could only hope it would actually happen.

To their surprise and delight, the boys managed to be ready before the girls showed up...but almost literally by the skin of their teeth. In fact, they even met them coming as they were going to where they had agreed to meet. The boys were even carrying corsages for their ladies, Harry a mixture of honeysuckle and pink roses and Ron simply a nosegay of pink roses.

"Wow, don't you two look brilliant," Ginny returned with a smile, her eyes lingering on Harry.

Both couldn't help blushing but replied, "So do you." With that, they handed their dates the corsages, and the girls placed them on their waist and right wrist respectively. "Ready to go?" asked Harry.

The girls simply nodded and smiled in their dates' directions, linking arms as they headed to the Great Hall, which had been decorated within an inch of its life for the Graduation Ball. Upon arrival, Harry knew he had never seen it ever look so beautiful in all his years at Hogwarts...and this was the last time he would ever see it, at least as a student, because this was the last night he and the others would spend at the school.

One large banner dominated one wall, no doubt stuck up there with several Sticking Charms, a banner which read *Congratulations and the best of luck to the Hogwarts Graduating Class of 1999*.

Of course, other friends sought them out almost as soon as they walked in, most especially Neville and Luna, the latter dressed in a gown similar to the one she had worn at Bill and Fleur's wedding. In fact, she had even charmed it so she literally shone like the sun, so no one could look at her for long. She also had some white roses at her waist and in her hair. Neville had a possessive arm around her, his hand resting right next to the nosegay of flowers. Harry was glad to see that Madam Pomfrey had managed to heal the worst of his wounds; the others he was likely to carry the rest of his life, just as Harry was.

There was even a line of portraits of the Trio, Ginny and Neville, not to mention Mrs. Weasley ... everyone who had gotten awards from the Ministry for their actions in the War. But they weren't here to chew the fat about the War; they were here to have the best possible time while they were still Hogwarts students...at least technically. Harry couldn't say he was surprised that the Weird Sisters had been chosen to play for the Ball, but it wasn't just them this time. He had once seen a picture of her at the Burrow and recognised Celestina Warbeck on stage with them right off.

He didn't mind her that much, but knew that Ron and Ginny had heard her so much that they were sick of her. Hopefully she wouldn't sing more than one or two songs, the Weird Sisters providing the accompaniment, then it would be mostly them. Harry frankly hoped that they would play and sing the Waltz from fourth year. He had not gotten the chance to dance with Ginny at the Yule Ball that year, for he had been too wrapped up in his crush on Cho Chang, but now he had the opportunity to make up for his oversight and fully intended to do so, given the chance. The dance at Bill and Fleur's wedding was memorable too, but for all the wrong reasons. He preferred to make some new and better memories...or more accurately, *continue* to make them.

"May I have this dance, my lady?" he asked Ginny gallantly; she rewarded him with a radiant smile.

"I'd love to." With that, he led her onto the dance floor; they were too engrossed in each other to notice for a long time, but later on both were pleased to see that Ron and Hermione were dancing just as they themselves were. He had obviously managed to ask her to dance and was holding her every bit as possessively as Harry held Ginny. Celestina then launched into one of her hits, "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love," backed by the Weird Sisters.

Harry was sure that Ginny would comment on it...but she never said a word, just simply snuggled as close as she could get to Harry, her eyes closed with a blissful look on her face. He smiled at the scent of her hair and perfume, savouring the warm closeness of her body as they danced...but knew he much preferred it when neither of them were clothed. Oh well, time for that after the Ball was over. Right now, it was his duty to make the night as memorable as he possibly could for himself as well as Ginny.

Over Ginny's shoulder he saw Ron and Hermione snogging publicly on the dance floor, which naturally prompted him to whisper to his own partner even as the music of the Waltz from fourth year reached its peak, having started after Celestina had finished her song. "Kiss you?"

Ginny looked up and smiled. "Need you ask?"

Harry nonetheless wasted no time once he had been given permission. He had never fully believed the old saying that when the one you loved kissed you, you often saw stars, pinwheels and flashing lights...at least not until he'd met Ginny and kissed her. No one had been able to see it, of course, but a mixture of that and tantalising visions of himself and Ginny together were interspersed in his mind during those long, blissful moments in the Gryffindor common room in sixth year ... just as they were now. The shouting of Ron and Hermione brought them rudely back to reality, and Harry couldn't help wondering what had happened to change their snogging to screaming. It also didn't help matters that the whole room could hear them, either...so it was up to him and Ginny to calm them down ... if they could.

They reluctantly released each other and hurried over to their friends standing by the refreshment table, drinks in their hands, Ron's face as red as his hair, this time with anger, and Hermione's hair coming out of its carefully charmed style. In addition, her face was white, as if it had been totally drained of colour, and she looked like she was ready to throw her drink in Ron's face.

"What's wrong? What's the problem?" Harry interjected in between their shouting.

"Ron's a pigheaded git, that's what's wrong," Hermione shot back. "I can't talk any sense into him."

"About what?" Ginny put in, her first contribution to the conversation.

"He wasn't around, so he has no idea what Harry said to me," she went on, not catching Ginny's question immediately. "As to your question, Harry had said that he didn't think Dumbledore had cared as much about him as he had believed because there was so much he hadn't told him, but I pointed out that when your Mum and Remus asked him what we intended to do, he was no more forthcoming, claiming that he couldn't tell them if Dumbledore hadn't, and nothing they said changed his mind.

"I didn't think Harry had the right to criticise Dumbledore when he's just as bad himself...but Ron disagreed, saying that Harry had a good reason for everything he did, including that. I pointed out that he himself had been just as doubtful as Harry was about our chances for success in the Quest; in fact, that was why he originally left ... but it didn't change his mind. And things just got worse from there."

Ron was all ready to start in again when Harry held up a hand to stop him. He didn't say anything, but couldn't believe that his friends were arguing over him. He thought all that had been settled a long time ago, but obviously it hadn't...and what was worse, Ginny had heard the whole thing. Who knew what she was thinking right now? Did she agree with Hermione, or did she side with her brother? He was almost afraid to look in her direction, certain that he would read the answer on her face.

"Come on, you two, make up already. We have better things to do than argue in public," Harry admonished them.

"Not until Ron apologises," Hermione snapped back.

"Me? You're the one who started it," Ron retorted, barely controlling his temper...and even then, only because the dangerous look in Harry's eyes stopped him.

"And if you don't bloody apologise, I'll finish it. I'll hex you into the next century," Hermione almost spat, so angry that Harry was hesitant to cross her, even given his own temper, inherited from his mother. At least for a little while.

"For Merlin's sake, 'Mione, this is no time to argue about something like that! If you two don't make up right now, we'll go straight home to the Burrow and not to the Three Broomsticks for a late-night drink to celebrate our graduation after the Ball!"

"Oh, I wouldn't know about that," Ginny spoke again. "In fact, I think I can understand why 'Mione got so upset. I would have too, in her place, especially if you complained about not knowing everything that Dumbledore himself knew, that you were sure he didn't care about you nearly as much as he did about his one-time friend Grindelwald because he told him more. Who are you to judge, anyway? And whose fault is it if you were idealistic enough to put him on a pedestal? As far as I know, he never claimed to be perfect, not even to you.

"It seemed that because you were the bloody Chosen One, you felt you were supposed to have special privileges or something, that Dumbledore was supposed to confide everything to you and no one else. As far as I can tell, he told you far more than he ever told anyone else, especially Snape, because I remember what you told me when you watched his memories in the Pensieve. He complained that Dumbledore didn't trust him as much as he did you because he told you more than he ever told him and he had risked his life for the Order for twenty years. As far as trust and caring goes, I think that says it all.

"Did you ever consider that he might have told you everything he possibly could, even his guesswork and speculations? Especially since whenever anyone tried to get anything out of you, you just kept saying you couldn't tell them because Dumbledore said it was just supposed to be between the three of you. Why did you have to take what he said so bloody literally? As if no one else was capable of understanding or helping! It didn't do a whole lot for *my* ego to be left out and behind, either, for that matter." This time Ginny was also giving Harry a hard look.

"Don't start that again, Gin." Harry tried to head her off. "You know why I wanted you to stay behind. I knew you were capable of understanding and helping; that was never the issue. I didn't want you to get hurt. Enough people have died already; I didn't want you to be one of them. I'd rather have you alive and angry at me than be mourning you as I do my folks, Sirius, Dumbledore, and now Remus and Tonks, not to mention Colin and the others. As it was, you nearly got hit with Bellatrix's Killing Curse. If it hadn't been for your mum, you probably would have died."

"I still think 'Mione is right," Ginny returned stubbornly, her brown eyes flashing sparks. "I also seem to remember him keeping his distance from you in order to protect you during your fifth year, as you ultimately did with me in your sixth year."

"Fine. But let's not talk about it here. This is something that should be discussed behind closed doors, not in mixed company. For all we know, somebody could contact Rita Skeeter, and she'd sensationalise it all out of proportion like she did her book about Dumbledore."

All three opened their mouths to speak again, then snapped them shut when they thought of what had happened in Harry's fourth year because of Rita. Harry nodded in a pleased fashion, then gave the other three looks which told them they had best keep their mouths closed until they were alone again, excusing themselves from the crowd and leaving the room. Not until they got back to the Gryffindor common room did they Floo back to the Burrow and change out of their formal clothing...then to the Three Broomsticks for a late-night drink.

Harry's eyes had shot green daggers at each of them as they'd headed for the common room, daring them to say a word about their earlier arguments or anything relating to them. In fact, he even started the conversation once they were at the Three Broomsticks and seated at a table, their drinks before them, relating how beautiful the Great Hall had looked. He supposed he understood why it had been done, to honour the last graduating class before the school's renovation and re-opening. Even at that, some of it could only have been done with magic.

Probably Hermione would eventually figure out how it had all been done, but right now they had better things to think about. What mattered was that school was now behind them, and they could get down to the really important work of rebuilding both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds. Even all they had already done was only a start; there was still much to do.

But tonight they were younger and freer than they likely would ever be again and had to make the most of it...because after tonight they would be out in the real world full-time and would have to make their own decisions as to the rest of their lives. And whatever decisions they made after this would count, either for or against them, now and for all time.