

Harry looked at Ginny, Ron and Hermione: Ron's face was screwed up as though the sunlight was blinding him. Hermione's face was glazed with tears, but Ginny was no longer crying. She met Harry's gaze with the same hard, blazing look that he had seen when she had hugged him after winning the Quidditch Cup in his absence, and he knew that at that moment that she knew his mind as well as he did. The monster in Harry's chest roared disapproval as Harry steeled himself to say what he had known he must say.

'Ginny, listen...' he said very quietly, as the buzz of conversation grew around them and people began rising to leave. 'I can't be with you anymore. We've got to stop seeing each other. We can't be together.'

She looked resolutely at the ground, as if looking at Harry would somehow validate what he said. Her lips trembled, some unseen battle raging just behind as she fought to retain her composure. 'No,' she said simply.

Harry's heart leapt into his throat as he fumbled through his mind for the words that would convince her that he was right. Words that would show her the danger he was facing, the danger she would be facing, the danger the whole world was facing, but they wouldn't come.

'We're stronger together,' she said, looking up from the ground into Harry's bewildered eyes. 'I never really gave up on you,' she said. 'Not really. I always hoped ... Hermione told me to get on with life, maybe go out with some other people, relax a bit around you, because I never used to be able to talk if you were in the room, remember? And she thought you might take a bit more notice if I was a bit more - myself.'

'Smart girl, that Hermione,' said Harry.

'Well, you've taken notice, and Voldemort and his Death Eaters won't drive us apart now.' Her voice was clear and resolute and Harry was suddenly especially glad to have met Ron Weasley so many years ago.

'But Voldemort uses people his enemies are close to,' said Harry. 'He's already used you as bait once, and that was just because you're my best friend's sister. Think how much danger you'll be in if we keep this up. He'll know, he'll find out. He'll try and get to me through you.'

'We're all his enemies, Harry. Dumbledore was his enemy, the Order is his enemy, and though you may be first in his mind, I won't have him be first in yours. Voldemort doesn't know anything but evil Harry. He doesn't understand courage and hope and love. He didn't understand them when he went that night to kill your parents, and he didn't understand them when he sent his Death Eaters to Hogwarts to kill Dumbledore. Don't you see Harry? The thing that stands against him isn't you, and it wasn't Dumbledore. It's us. You, me, Ron, Hermione, Mum, Dad, the Order...It's all of us, together. We stick together and we fight for each other. Your mom and dad fought for you, and you've fought for all of us. I won't let you steal away on some hero's quest for vengeance. We need you Harry. I...I need you.'

Harry's chest was bursting. His heart ached and his eyes swam. His mind flashed back to Dumbledore's office, it seemed like ages ago now. "Yes, Harry, you can love," said Dumbledore, "Which, given everything that has happened to you, is a great and remarkable thing. You are still too young to understand how unusual you are..."

He choked back a tear and looked squarely into Ginny's eyes. "You..." he began, a subtle smile crossing his mouth, "can not be related to Ron."

Ginny laughed a laugh that stole the last of Harry's heart. He reached out and pulled her into his arms, barely hearing Ron's confused voice asking Hermionie "What's that supposed to mean?" Even as they all mourned the loss of the greatest wizard the world had ever known, their spirits weren't faltering but were tempering. Voldemort had made a mistake today, and they could all feel it. He may have weakened their number, but he had strengthened their bond beyond his comprehension.

Their moment was broken by an impertinent "hrumph" from the row behind Harry. He turned and saw Rufus Scrimgeour, leaning on his walking stick.

'I've been hoping to have a word...do you mind walking with me a little way?'

He looked at Ginny, and then Ron and Hermionie. They knew this was quite unlikely to be good, and it showed in their faces. 'No,' said Harry reluctantly, and turned to follow Scrimgeour away from the funeral.

'Harry, this was a dreadful tragedy,' Scrimgeour said quietly, 'I cannot tell you how appalled I was to hear of it. Dumbledore was a very

great wizard. We had our disagreements, as you know, but no one knows better than I –‘

‘What do you want?’ asked Harry flatly.

Scrimgeour looked annoyed but, hastily transformed his expression to one of sorrowful understanding.

‘You are, of course, devastated,’ he said. ‘I know that you were very close to Dumbledore. I think you may have been his favourite ever pupil. The bond between the two of you –‘

‘What do you want?’ Harry repeated, stopping suddenly.

Scrimgeour stopped too, leaned on his stick and stared at Harry, his expression unabashedly shrewd now.

‘The word is that you were with him when he left the school the night that he died.’

‘Whose word?’ said Harry.

‘Somebody Stupefied a Death Eater on top of the Tower after Dumbledore died. There were also two broomsticks up there. The Ministry can add two and two, Harry.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ said Harry. ‘Well, where I went with Dumbledore and what we did is my business. He didn't want people to know.’

‘Such loyalty is admirable, of course,’ said Scrimgeour, who seemed to be restraining his irritation with difficulty, ‘but Dumbledore is gone, Harry. He's gone.’

‘He will only be gone from the school when none here are loyal to him,’ said Harry, smiling in spite of himself.

‘My dear boy ... even Dumbledore cannot return from the-‘

‘I am not saying he can. You wouldn't understand. But I've got nothing to tell you.’

Scrimgeour hesitated, then said, in what was evidently supposed to be a tone of delicacy, ‘The Ministry can offer you all sorts of protection, you know, Harry. I would be delighted to place a couple of my Aurors at your service –‘

Harry laughed.

'Voldemort wants to kill me himself and Aurors won't stop him. So thanks for the offer, but no thanks.'

'So,' said Scrimgeour, his voice cold now, 'the request I made of you at Christmas —'

'What request? Oh yeah ... the one where I tell the world what a great job you're doing in exchange for —'

'- for raising everyone's morale!' snapped Scrimgeour.

Harry considered him for a moment.

'Released Stan Shunpike yet?'

Scrimgeour turned a nasty purple colour highly reminiscent of Uncle Vernon.

'I see you are —'

'Dumbledore's man through and through,' said Harry. 'That's right.'

Scrimgeour glared at him for another moment, then turned and limped away without another word. Harry could see Percy and the rest of the Ministry delegation waiting for him, casting nervous glances at the sobbing Hagrid and Grawp, who were still in their seats. Harry saw Ginny, Ron and Hermione coming towards him, passing Scrimgeour going in the opposite direction; Harry waited for them in the shade of a beech tree under which they had sat in happier times.

'What did Scrimgeour want?' Hermione whispered.

'Same as he wanted at Christmas,' shrugged Harry. 'Wanted me to give him inside information on Dumbledore and be the Ministry's new poster boy.'

Ron seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, then he said loudly to Hermione, 'Look, let me go back and hit Percy!'

'You'll have to beat me to him!' said Ginny.

'No,' said Hermione firmly, grabbing each by their arm.

'We'll all feel better!' said Ron, feigning a valiant struggle.

Harry and Ginny laughed. Even Hermione grinned a little, though her smile faded as she looked up at the castle.

'I can't bear the idea that we might never come back,' she said softly. 'How can Hogwarts close?'

'Maybe it won't,' said Ron. 'We're not in any more danger here than we are at home, are we? Everywhere's the same now. I'd even say Hogwarts is safer, there are more wizards inside to defend the place. What d'you reckon, Harry?'

'I'm going back to the Dursleys' once more, because Dumbledore wanted me to,' said Harry. 'But it'll be a short visit, and then I'll be gone from there for good. I'm quite sure Uncle Vernon won't mind. Then we'll start the business of tracking down the rest of those Horcruxes. Dumbledore wanted me to do it, I'm sure of that now. If he was right, and I'm sure he was, there are still four of them out there, and they've got to be destroyed before I can go after the last bit of his soul, the bit that's still in his body.'

Ron gaped slightly, but Hermione gave a curt nod of approval.

'And if I meet Severus Snape along the way,' he added, 'so much the better for me, so much the worse for him.'

They all wore looks of grim determination as they silently sealed their pact.

'We're with you whatever happens,' said Ron. 'But, mate, you're going to have to come round my mum and dad's house before we do anything else.'

'Why?'

'Bill and Fleur's wedding, remember?'

Harry looked at him, startled; the idea that anything as normal as a wedding could still exist seemed incredible and yet wonderful.

'Yeah, we shouldn't miss that,' he said, smiling at the thought of poor Mrs. Weasley keeping up with a wedding-drunk Fleur.

His hand closed absent-mindedly around the fake Horcrux, but in spite of everything, in spite of the dark and twisting path he saw stretching ahead for himself, in spite of the final meeting with Voldemort he knew must come, whether in a month, in a year, or in ten, he felt his heart lift at the thought that there was still one last golden day of peace left to enjoy with his friends, with the only family he now had.

He pulled Ginny closer and said, his tone confidential, his volume, not so 'Fancy giving Ron a bit of his own medicine?'

She grinned, understanding perfectly. 'Oh, I think that's a fine idea.'
'What are you –' started Ron, lost for a moment, realization just beginning to dawn.

Harry kissed Ginny and felt the uncommon power Dumbledore had mentioned. In spite of everything, he knew now that he had the only weapon he needed to fight Voldemort's evil.

'Not sure that's entirely...'

'Oh, hush, Ron,' said Hermionie, grasping his hand and leaning heavily on his shoulder.