

The Last Straw

“To hell with this.”

Everyone in the common room looked at Harry in shock as he jammed his books into his book bag and made his statement. He rose from the chair where he'd been studying with Ron and Hermione, who were spending as much time nuzzling as they were reading their books.

Before anyone could react, he'd swept from the room and had flipped on his Invisibility Cloak, heading quickly for his favourite spot to be alone. He'd discovered more hidden passages in Hogwarts, and one of them led to a rather pleasantly decked out suite of rooms. He was, as far as he knew, the only student in the school who knew about this area.

Oh yes, we're a Trio, we are, he grumbled to himself. Except when we're somewhere that someone might see us. Then we're Ron and Hermione and its friend Harry. Of course, that means we can't go to Hogsmeade together, because people see me as tagging along on their date and not letting them be alone. We can't do anything in the common room, because someone might come down the stairs and see us. We can't sneak off together, because she and I are Head Boy and Girl, and it's one of the reasons that Ron wasn't made Head Boy – because the two of them are dating, and it was thought that they might try to abuse the position.

He stalked around the room for a while, kicking at the pillows that were scattered around the floor. He'd learned over time that this was a lesser form of Room of Requirement – it wouldn't change configuration, but things were always just the right way he needed for whatever mood he was in when he arrived. Right now, he was angry and hurt. *We can't sneak into Ron's dormitory, because people would wonder why we're both there. Ron gets sneaked into the suite Hermione and I share as Head Boy and Girl, but after three times in a row of something interrupting us when we were together as the three of us, Hermione won't let it get that far. Not superstitious my arse. And she'll only snog me when Ron is around. Wonder if she set up those three incidents?*

He stopped dead. *That's it. We talk about being a trio, but we're not. The fact that I can honestly conceive that she might do that shows that. She's willing to give Ron her virginity, but I'm there for extra hands when they're together. I'm still a virgin, for God's sake! Both of them can do well without me – they have since 'we' got together in sixth year. He sat down in one of the chairs he was near. Hell, we can't even be together as a threesome during the summer, because Ron and Hermione didn't want Molly to be disappointed in them.*

He looked at the book bag and pulled out the Marauder's Map. He'd learned not to leave it where either of them could get at it, because they'd taken to using it to find places to be together – again, the two of them, because if anyone saw three of them returning at an odd hour, the secret would be out. He scanned for a time before he located the two people he was looking for – and found himself unsurprised to see their icons finally making it to the Astronomy Tower. He watched for about five minutes, seeing their obvious search pattern change, and eventually the two dots merged into one and became pink.

Right. Well, since you can't end what never started, I won't even bother to tell them. We're near the end of the year and the end of our time at Hogwarts. We haven't even had the Spring Surprise yet. I'll deal with Voldemort, and if I'm still alive after that, I'll go elsewhere. Maybe America. That decision made, he sat down and finished studying his Potions text.

The remainder of April went by, seeing a marked improvement in Harry's grades, since he was no longer actively pining for either Ron or Hermione. He hurt, but he had decided to move on with his life. He usually studied alone.

Ginny pulled him aside at the end of the month. “Harry, can we talk?” she asked him in the common room.

With a grin he replied, “Sounds like we are right now. Happy?”

She laughed and slapped his arm lightly. “Prat. I'm serious, though. I need to talk to you about something.”

He became serious himself and replied, “Certainly. Shall we take a walk outside? It's nice weather out there, I hear. Not that I've noticed what with all the studying.”

They walked in silence out to the shore of the lake. Ginny finally turned to face Harry and said, “Don't take this wrong, but your grades are the best any of us have ever seen. And Hermione's *not* been helping you. What are you hiding? What happened that you've thrown yourself into your studies? What did that prat of a brother of mine do to drive you away?”

Harry couldn't help but chuckle. “Is that what this is all about? No worries there, Ginny. It was just that ... well, I finally got off my arse and did something about something that was bothering me. I finally realized that my feelings were never going to be returned, so I simply have convinced myself to stop pining for her. Of course, staying away from her as much as possible helps. I'm not avoiding her so much as I am going places I would normally have gone. I used to ... well, I used to follow them around, for all intents and purposes, hoping she'd notice me. I finally realized that it's simply not going to happen, so I changed my way of doing things. Simple as that, Ginny.”

You really ... she doesn't return your feelings? You know this for a fact?" Ginny looked really troubled for some reason.

Harry's chuckle became a full laugh. "She's dating Ron, Ginny! They've been intimate! I think that answers that question rather handily, wouldn't you say?"

"Are you still a virgin?" she asked.

"What does that have to do with anything?" he asked, puzzled as to why she would ask.

"Just answer me. Have you ever had sex?" He started to open his mouth, but before he could speak, she added, "I expect a simple yes or no answer, Harry. Those are the only two answers I will accept, and will pester you until you give me one of those two answers."

He scowled. "Fine. Yes, I am still a virgin. Now, might I ask just who this mythical girl was who I was supposed to be sleeping with? The one who seems to have you so worried?"

"Hermione," Ginny answered with a scowl on her face.

"She'd be cheating on Ron, you know that."

"No she wouldn't, Harry, because the three of you have been in a relationship since early last school year, or so I've been told." She looked at him as she stated what was obviously the simple truth to her.

He stared at her for a long time before answering. "I can honestly say that I've not been in a romantic relationship that has had any *real* possibility of sexual intimacy."

This had the opposite effect than what he had expected. She turned bright red and he began to wonder why smoke *wasn't* pouring from her ears. "What would make you say that, Harry?" she asked him through clenched teeth.

He scowled at her. "Why in hell are you getting angry at me, Miss Weasley, just because Ron and Hermione and I *aren't* in a threesome? Or am I just the nearest target for your anger?" This last was barked at her in quite clipped tones.

This shut down her building anger instantaneously. "Oh, I'm sorry Harry! It's not you I'm angry at, it's them! Especially Hermione! Here she was all summer telling me about how wonderful the both of you are, and how much she loves the both of you. You've broken up with them, haven't you, and they haven't even realized it yet!"

He was so stunned by what she had just said that he literally took a step back. "She told you almost a year ago?" His face suddenly darkened and he turned away from her, clenching his fists. "She told you, but specifically forbid me from telling anyone. Ron's the berk with the loose tongue, and I get forbidden to say anything!" He brought his fists up to his face for a moment and took a deep breath, slowly releasing it, along with as much of the anger as he could. He finally turned to face an obviously relieved Ginny. "I apologise, Ginny. I learned my lesson over a year ago – didn't want to unleash my anger at you when it wasn't deserved."

"This answers my question, though. They're ashamed of me. That's what it has to be. They don't want your parents to know, because they don't want to lose Molly's respect. They don't want the school to know, in order to keep from being ridiculed and keep it out of the papers. They go everywhere, snog 'openly', and I'm their little tag-along friend bothering them sometimes in Hogsmeade. They'll hold my hand for a short time under the table, but *they* kiss openly in the Three Broomsticks." He snorted. "I'll get over them. Think they'll figure out what happened before we leave Hogwarts and go our separate ways? They haven't realized yet that it's going to be that way. I've been making plans."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, assuming that the Seventh Annual Spring Surprise hasn't happened by then, I'll move into the apartment I found, and let them move into the house I'd found for the three of us. Give it to them as their wedding present."

"Are you sure that they won't acknowledge you?" she asked with a worried look.

"They haven't in over a year, Ginny. Do you think they're any more likely to when we're officially adults? We'll still be *Prophet* fodder. If they can't handle it now, they won't in a few months. I just came to the realization that the threesome was over before it ever really started. Hermione has worked very hard at keeping me at arms length for over a year now. I've seen her naked, and have even occasionally been allowed to use my fingers and tongue, but Ron's the one with the biblical knowledge of her. All I've ever been is a pleasant diversion. And it's obvious that a pleasant diversion is all I'll ever be."

He shook his head and laughed a bitter laugh. "I thought it was love – well, it is, at least as far as my feelings for the two of them are concerned. I love them both enough to walk away and make them happy not having to worry about how to explain me. Do they love me in return? I think a year and a half of being marginalised answers that question rather handily. I'll never phrase it this way to them, but if they really loved me, they'd have been willing to take the talk and the slurs. The way things are right now, Hermione has her lover, and her bed warmer. Well, she hasn't these last weeks, because I've been too busy studying. She hasn't missed me that I've been aware of – in fact, she's been happy to see me with my face in a book."

He turned and looked back out at the water of the lake for a short time before turning back to her. "Let's head back up to the castle. We've been out here long enough that people might start to talk about the two of us, and I don't want to do anything to jeopardise your relationship with Neville. If we can stop the talk before it starts, I'm happy."

They walked back to the castle in the same silent mode that they had been in on the walk down, this time with Ginny obviously lost in thought. They

were greeted warmly by Neville when they returned to the common room. "Good talk, you two?"

Harry grinned and clapped his friend on the back. "Yeah. Thanks for letting me borrow your girlfriend to bend her ear. I need to get a few things out." He noticed, as he turned, that Hermione frowned in annoyance. "Yes?" he asked her pointedly.

"May I talk to you privately?" Harry she asked in clipped tones.

"Certainly, Miss Granger. I'm certain that there are things you need to say to me that you'd much prefer to keep anyone from *ever* knowing." He walked toward the portrait installed in the common room that led to the Head Boy's and Girl's suites.

"What was that about?" she asked, anger evident when the portrait closed behind them. "Why couldn't you come to either Ron or me? We are your lovers, after all."

"Which one of you do I go to when I need to talk about you two? Besides, *that* conversation was started by the girl *you* told last summer. Remember, the girl you told right around the time I was rather pointedly informed that I needed to be careful what I said or did concerning us?"

Hermione blanched. "I'm sorry, Harry – I just needed a fellow girl to talk to about it."

"Did you tell her before or after you tore strips off me for no good reason?" he asked.

"Before," she said in a small voice. "I realised the danger inherent in my actions."

Harry shook his head. "So you told me off and snogged Ron." She hung her head in answer.

"Look, people will talk if we're in here too much longer. Let's head out into the common room and stop the wagging tongues." He led her to the portal and let her step out first. An evil glint entered his eyes, and he saw Ginny warn him with hers.

"Ron, come hold your girlfriend," Harry said with a smile. He turned to the rest of the group. "We'd had a disagreement, and I just pointed out my side of things a little more forcefully – verbally, people – than I should have, but then again, we all know from the *Prophet* what a crazy attention hound I am." He laughed amiably, and the Gryffindors watched calmed considerably, a few even laughing nervously at his self-deprecating comment. "As for some of the rumours I've heard floating around, I'd appreciate it if you would spread the word: while I admit to having a soft spot in my heart for one of my very first friends in the wizarding world, there is not *now*, nor has there *ever* been anything romantic about our dealings with each other. We are nothing more than friends, and that's *all* we've ever been to each other." He smiled at the rest of the Gryffindors, who relaxed. "Please, get the word around. I know Malfoy will keep up his tirades, but he's a moron anyway. Please stop these ridiculous rumours that Hermione and I are an item behind Ron's back. All you're doing is hurting *them*. Okay?" They nodded, and he went back into the Head Boy's suite to get his books.

As the door closed, Harry heard Ginny ask softly, "Why, Harry? They're both standing out there looking as if Hagrid just did a strip-tease before their eyes – stunned, and more than a little green."

"I've made their job easier. They deny me, so if I actively get involved in the denials, then that should make them happy. And if they feel hurt over so blatant a snub in public – well, maybe it's Slytherin of me, but it's nice to think that they might begin to understand how I feel. I'm expecting *that* conversation sometime tonight, unfortunately. They'll come in, all high and mighty about how hurt they were when I denied them in public, and not see that the reverse is true – being informed that I have to be the ignored one because Ron's a lousy actor. Not asked, mind you – informed." He ran his fingers through his hair. "She's fancied Ron since fourth year. Has she ever really fancied me?"

"Longer than she's fancied Ron, to be honest, from what she told me. I was so jealous of her at one time," Ginny said. "She was sweet on you, and she admitted it to me. I'm actually kind of surprised that we ended up friends."

"So because she's sweet on me, she decided I was strong enough to be the pariah." As Ginny started at the description, he shrugged. "That's what it feels like. I want to kiss her, and I can't, at least not in public. I can't go on patrol with her, since that might make people talk. Basically, she's so damned worried about my reputation that she forgot that I might want to have a say in things, and proceeded to make the decisions without my input. I think that's called a *fait accompli*. When was I going to be asked about this? So, since they want it to be secret, I'll simply not tell them the plans I've started making for after Hogwarts. Much to their surprise, it will not be The Trio sharing a house."

The door started to open, and Harry looked up to see Hermione and Ron walking in. They looked disturbed, and Ron was holding in some anger. After the portal had closed again, he exploded. "You mind telling us what that was about out there? You've never felt anything romantic for her? What's been going on, then – 'friends with benefits'?"

"Look," Harry said, raising his hands in a manner intended to calm them both, "you decided that it was best if my part in the relationship were secret, right?" At their nod, he continued. "Tongues were starting to wag, especially since we used to hang around a little too much, if you catch my meaning. I decided that it was best to deny that anything at all exists in order to squash those rumours as best I could. It will probably end with Parvati or Lavender either hitting on me or siccing someone on me, but at least no rumours of our illicit love affairs will be circulating. And that's the most important thing of all, right? No vile rumours to be printed in the *Daily Prophet*?" When they nodded, Harry smiled and grabbed his bag. "I need to go study. I'll see you guys a bit later." He left, leaving them smiling behind him.

Ginny looked at her brother and her friend. "You two are giving Crabbe and Goyle a run for their money as far as stupidity goes," she growled as she stalked out of the room.

Hermione followed her. "What do you mean by that?"

"How did you feel when Harry said what he did, Hermione?" she asked pointedly.

"It hurt, but I understand why he did it now." Her brow furrowed.

"And it won't bother you to see him on the Astronomy Tower with Parvati, or Padma, or Luna, or Susan Bones, or Hannah? Especially if they aren't there for Astronomy classes?"

"Well, yeah, it'll bother me, but again, he has his reasons."

"Great Merlin's Balls!" Ginny exploded. "I didn't think it possible that someone could be so unbelievably, so remarkably stupid!" With that final explosion out of the way, she stormed away from the Head Girl in a manner that made it quite obvious that following her would earn a rather impressive hexing.

Life continued normally, Hermione continuing to puzzle over Ginny's comments, and trying to hide her pain when she saw Harry and Susan Bones in a somewhat compromising position one night.

It was a week before N.E.W.T.s were to begin when it happened – what Harry had been jokingly calling the Seventh Annual Moldieshorts Parade, or the Spring Surprise.

People from the D.A. deployed as Harry had always taught them to – the youngest members of the group were to protect the Third Years and younger, while the others set up varying perimeters. Harry headed to where he could feel Voldemort.

"Potter!" said Voldemort, voice obviously enhanced magically. "It's time for you to meet your death, as the prophecy so clearly demands."

"Ah, but it says *one* of us must die, Tommie boy!" Harry called back after casting a *Sonorus* on his throat. "Personally, *I'm* voting for *you*. After all, you're getting old. You're what, sixty-something? I mean, that's ancient!" Professor McGonagall was near him, and he turned for a moment and winked at her, causing her to chuckle slightly.

"Ah, but you know what they say – old age and treachery will always beat youthful vigour. I note that your loved ones are all here, including the two who have been using you all this time. How does it feel, Harry, to know that the mudblood and her copper haired lover have only been using you all this time?"

"You don't know what you're talking about, Tom," Harry growled back at him.

"Oh, but I do. I've been there the nights that she would get you excited, and then go off with Weasley to sate her desires, leaving you alone to seethe. I know of the conversations where they asked you to fade into the background so that people wouldn't talk about them. I know of the anger you feel at the constant denial of your existence. I've basked in the pain of your continual rejection at their hands, and the utter hopelessness you've felt at their willingness to ever publicly accept you." The dark wizard cackled gleefully. "Even now, I can feel your defences falling as you realize the truth of my words. Granger and Weasley never loved you, Potter. If they had, they would have been willing to announce it to everyone. No, you were to them exactly what you've been to everyone in your life, Potter – nothing but a burden that they carried because they felt that they had to. Dumbledore dealt with you best by unloading you onto those Muggles – he certainly had no care for you, or else he would have actually bothered to check in on you at some point, and have seen the abuse you took. You were a burden to those Muggles all those years, and as soon as you became an adult, they did what they always wanted to – they got rid of you. And now these two. They took pity upon you, but quickly realised what would happen. Why do you think those conditions were placed upon you without consulting you first? Why do you think that they have been testing contraceptive spells and potions, while you remain a virgin? Neither one of them wanted to risk the possibility of me getting into their minds during sex, but that was too blunt and true for them to say to you, so they continued to string you along."

Harry simply stared at Voldemort, who had come from the forest. His wand was no longer pointing in Voldemort's direction, but more toward the ground. Voldemort continued to speak. "Potter – Harry," he said, a placating tone in his voice. "We are far more alike than anyone here has ever known. The Muggles raising us, the abuse, those who prove that love does not exist – all that exists is power. Join me. You have power that we could both enjoy. Join me. You are not my son by blood, but you are my heir by upbringing. Join me."

"If you're going to be immortal, then why do you need an heir?" Harry asked with a laugh. He didn't raise his hand, but his wand was now pointing at the Dark Lord, and he began walking toward the wizard. "Besides, Moldie, if you've been rummaging through my brain during the nights, you'll know that I realised that Ron and Hermione didn't love me back in April. I've lived my life anyway – yeah, I enjoyed hitting them below the belt the way they hurt me, by publicly denying my feelings for them repeatedly, but I love them, and that's all that's important. I love lots of people. And I'm willing to die to bring you down. I'm willing to die because I *can* do the one thing you *can't*. Love." With that, he leapt upon the insane Dark Lord and drove his wand into Voldemort's chest. Summoning every good memory he ever had, Harry yelled, "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

The gigantic stag that exploded from Voldemort's chest gave Harry a momentary dirty look as it shook off the gore, but quickly began to prance amongst the Death Eaters. It couldn't truly hurt them, since they were still human, which Voldemort had ceased being some time ago. It certainly scared them, however, since tatters of Voldemort and his robes still hung from his antlers. It scattered them handily, making it far easier for the Aurors to capture them.

Harry stood, exhausted, before the ruined body of the Dark Lord. He didn't have time to react as he heard Draco Malfoy's inarticulate cry, but he certainly had time to feel the intensely excruciating pain that the curse caused. It tore through him, and he could feel things tearing. He felt himself start to bleed, and he was quite certain that whatever Malfoy had done, it was most assuredly fatal. Before he fell to the ground, he heard a thunderous explosion, and was less than surprised when Draco Malfoy's head landed in the pile of meat that had been Tom Riddle, both wizards with looks of utter shock permanently etched in their dead faces.

He fell to the ground, bleeding. Darkness was threatening to claim him, but he could hear Ron and Hermione running toward him, so he forced himself to stay so that he could say goodbye.

“Harry!” Hermione sobbed as she landed on her knees beside him.

“Don’t waste time. Not long,” Harry gasped. “Just want to tell you both –”

“We love you, Harry,” Ron interrupted. “I don’t give a flying fuck who knows it. I love you.”

“Don’t die Harry,” Hermione wailed. “I haven’t ... I need ... I love you, damn it! Don’t you die on me!”

“No choice,” he gasped. “Love you both.” He coughed, and felt the darkness closing in fast. “I’d ... have married you both if I could –” He released a long, rattling sigh and his head rolled to the side. The battle was finally over.