

## **A Fate Worse than Death A Harry Potter Adventure**

Tears streaked Hermione Granger's features as she finished addressing the envelope in the quiet of her room.

With trembling fingers, she picked up the envelope and stood from her desk, hoping that Harry might someday find it in his heart to forgive her for what she was doing. With Dumbledore gone, she really had no choice.

Her original plan to wipe all knowledge of her existence from her parent's minds and send them away for their own safety had vanished when Harry had allowed her access to his family's records at the beginning of the summer. It had taken her three days to find the horrible truth, and another week to come to terms with it, fighting all the while against the subjugation of her will. After that week, there was no possible way for her to have sent her parents away, not after the support they had given her in the depths of her depression.

Everything had been changed by what she had found. There would be no Horcrux hunt. There would be no fighting Voldemort.

Leaving her house, Hermione made her way down the street. Somehow, the light seemed too bright, and the pavement too crowded. Everyone she passed appeared to be judging her... Judging her for the evil she was committing... or was that just her imagination and self-loathing?

She had arrived. Before this had always seemed such a happy place, a place one went to communicate with the world, like her pen pal in Haifa. How many times had she come to this very pillar-box with a different letter, somehow expecting adventure? No longer, this act would forever associate this once happy act in her mind with her betrayal of her best friend Harry.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," she whispered as she dropped the letter into the pillar-box's slot and felt the compulsion wash away, but not the guilt she felt.

"Hermione?" a woman's voice asked.

Hermione turned to face the speaker, finding Mrs. Swindon, the owner of a local bakery that she and her mother frequented for Mother/Daughter teas.

"Are you all right, dear?" the older woman asked.

Hermione said nothing, her expression of loss was all the older woman needed to see. Maggie Swindon stepped forward and pulled the distraught young woman into a hug. "What's wrong? Is it a young man? It will be all right."

Hermione's tears returned in full force. "Nothing will ever be all right again."

Hermione pulled free of the older woman's embrace and ran all the way home. She slammed the door behind her, sliding the deadbolt home before collapsing to the floor.

"Damn you, Lily Potter, you unspeakable bitch!" the girl gasped. "Damn you to Hell!"

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"You dare come into my presence?" Voldemort hissed. "Avada Kedavra!"

His target, a blonde woman in a tailored Muggle business suit raised a single sculpted eyebrow. "Was that green light supposed to do something?"

The Dark Lord alternated between staring at the woman and staring at his wand. The killing curse hadn't worked? Other than that one time with Potter, the killing curse always worked. He whipped his wand to his left. "Avada Kedavra!"

Severus Snape did not even have time to blink before he was dead.

"Cute," the Muggle woman said with a bored inflection to her voice. "Now answer my question. Are you, or are you not, the Dark Lord Voldemort?"

"I am," the perplexed wizard admitted.

"Excellent," the woman reached into her valise and produced a handful of neatly folded papers, which she presented to the Dark Lord. "This is pursuant to one Harry James Potter. You will not approach him, you will not attack him, and you will not hinder him in any way. Failure to follow these restrictions will result in some most unfortunate punishments. Do you understand?"

The woman's words left the Dark Lord consumed with rage. Perhaps the Muggle was immune, somehow, to the killing curse, but he had other tools. "Crucio!" he spat, forcing all of his intent into the spell.

The only indication that his cruciatius had done anything was the woman shuddering slightly. "If you were to try that after I had a martini you might get lucky," she said with a small smile, before looking the Dark Lord up and down. "You probably ought to make that three martinis. Now, do you understand?"

"Yes," Voldemort whispered.

"Good," the woman said with a nod. "Potter is ours. We do not share."

"Lucius," Voldemort spat as soon as the woman was out of the room, shoving the papers he had been given into the other man's hand. "Explain this."

"Injunction," Lucius muttered as he read the first page, "Cease and Desist, Order of Protection..." Lucius felt his blood run cold.

"What was she? No one ignores the killing curse, no one reacts like that to the cruciatus," Voldemort demanded. "No one human anyway. Was she a daemon? Does some daemon clan have a claim on Potter?"

"Not daemons, my lord. Worse than daemons. Much, much worse, and far more dangerous," Lucius said, fighting to keep from gibbering in terror.

"What is worse, more dangerous than daemons?" Voldemort wondered aloud.

"Lawyers."

"Lawyers?" Voldemort echoed, fear creeping into his voice.

That was when Lucius spotted the letterhead and felt his bowels loosening. "Lawyers," he gasped, "who are working for daemons."

Those words confirmed Voldemort's worst suspicions. It was time to retire. And he had been so close.

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The disappearance of the Dark Lord and The majority of his most ardent supporters had thrown the Wizengamot into chaos.

And now this... Muggle woman was standing before them, demanding an audience.

"Remove this filth!" an oddly toad-like woman spat from the benches.

A pair of Aurors responded to that order, each of them placing a hand on the woman's shoulders.

And both drew back charred stumps, and their screams filling the air.

"If it pleases the Wizengamot," the woman said with a slight smile dancing on her lips. "Or even if it doesn't, Charisma Downing representing Wolfram and Hart."

Muttering filled the air as the members of the Wizengamot wondered to their neighbors why that name sounded so familiar.

"NO!" Tiberius Ogden shouted as the chamber's elder member lunged to his feet. "You cannot be

here! The agreements specifically say..."

"The agreements specifically say that Wolfram and Hart cannot have dealings with the Magical World unless and until we are invited... Which we were on September 3rd of 1980."

"What?" Ogden sputtered. "Who invited your daemon spawn firm into our world?"

"Funny story that," the woman smiled. It seems that something over twenty years ago a witch born of the powerless finished up at the institution with the temerity to call itself 'the finest institution of magic instruction in the world.'"

"Hogwarts," the toad-like woman nodded.

"Quite," Charisma agreed. "Upon finishing school, the young woman found that despite finishing at the very top of her class, the fools who run things in this backwards puddle were not interested in her talents,"

"How dare you?" the toad woman was on her feet.

"With great ease, tubby," Charisma laughed. "Sit down and stop interrupting me before I put a cease and desist order out on you. Continuing with my story, what was an intelligent young woman to do when she finds herself stuck in a culture uninterested in her talents beyond the ability to bear children? She searched for challenging work that would allow her to use her magical education of course. Therefore, she found us. Lily Evans had quite possibly the most brilliant mind I've ever seen. She made up the deficiencies in what passes for an education among you in months, and took to the study of law like no one I've ever known. But all of that was wasted when your war with the Dark Wizards heated up and Lily and her family were specifically targeted."

The Muggle woman paused, giving her audience a chance to digest his words. "Lily wasn't sufficiently advanced in our calling to be able to protect herself or her husband, but she could protect her son."

Chaos reigned in the chambers of the Wizengamot for several moments until Ogden regained control. "You know what she did?"

"Of course I know," Downing laughed. "She made a deal, the deal that invited us back into this society. Think about that, Lily Evan-Potter made a deal with US that benefited her. That is the mind you wasted when you had her undivided attention and threw her away."

"While not strictly necessary, I am serving notice to this body that Harry James Potter belongs to us. Should any of you repeat any of the past actions that members of this body have taken against the young man, you will become the focus of our undivided attention,"

"It doesn't matter what you threaten," Ogden sputtered. "Even if you were invited by some Muggle born, you cannot practice in our courts. You would need to have magic."

"Are you under the impression that Wolfram and Hart doesn't have magic at its disposal?"

The Wizengamot chambers filled with her laughter.

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"Move it Potter," Alastor Moody barked. "We're on a schedule."

"What's happened?" Harry asked. Somehow this was not how he expected his 17th birthday to start. "I haven't seen a single one of the guards in a week. Has something happened with Voldemort?"

"You might say that," the old man said as he led the way to the car idling at the curb in front of #4. He paused at the vehicle and with his magical eye, looked in every direction. "Get in."

"What's going on?" Harry asked again. "Where are we going? I was supposed to be meeting Ron and Hermione."

"And that's where you're going," Moody snapped. "Now get in before I hex you and stuff you in the boot."

Harry climbed in the back, and was only moderately surprised to find that space expansion charms were in effect in the vehicle. "Professor McGonagall?"

"Sit down Potter," the Scots woman said.

"Are you going to tell me what is going on?" Harry asked.

"We're taking you to a place where everything will be explained," she said in her clipped tone.

There was something about her manner that put Harry on edge. "What's going on Professor?" he asked. "Why won't anyone tell me anything? Where are Ron and Hermione?"

"Miss Granger is waiting at our destination. Mr. Weasley is..." the woman paused as if searching for the words. "Mr. Weasley will not be there. There have been major changes since the end of the school year; the Dark Lord was unexpectedly dealt with."

"Was Ron hurt?" Harry asked suddenly terrified for his friend.

"No, no, nothing like that," McGonagall said. "I've been tasked by the Wizengamot to assist you in this transition."

"Transition?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I know that Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley and you all planned on foregoing your 7th year at Hogwarts, and that part of your plan is going to continue... Not that Miss Granger or Mr. Weasley will be joining you, but..."

"If Voldemort has been dealt with, why aren't I going to Hogwarts?"

"Potter..." the woman was clearly searching for her words. "Harry... Things have changed, you are... you are the nexus of that change. I don't know the details, but you are..."

McGonagall ran out of words, and could only look to the floor of the car in frustration. Harry could hardly stand it. Once again his life was being decided by someone else, and he was supposed to be an adult today.

The rest of the drive was conducted in silence.

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When the car came to a stop in front of a massive skyscraper in midtown London, Harry's anxiety started to climb. This was not right. Why were they stopping in Muggle London?

Moody and McGonagall ushered him into the building and up to the reception desk.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, you're right on time," the attractive young woman behind the desk said, giving him a look that left Harry feeling like he was being undressed. "Your meeting is in Conference Room 13, on the thirteenth floor. I'd like to take this opportunity to say that we are all looking forward to working with you."

Harry had absolutely no idea what to say to that, so he simply nodded and made his way to the elevator with Moody and McGonagall in tow. Inside the elevator, he pushed the button for the 13th floor. Harry had far too much experience with misfortune in his life to have any fear of the number 13, but this meeting was suggesting he might start changing his mind about triskaidekaphobia.

That thought made him pause and wonder. Where had that word come from? Not even Hermione would use a word like triskaidekaphobia. Not only did he know the word, somehow he knew the meaning as well.

That was... odd.

The elevator opened and Harry stepped out, with Moody and McGonagall still following. If no one was going to tell him anything, Harry decided, he was going to take control of the situation as best he could.

A young woman who appeared to be the twin of the receptionist was waiting for him. "This way Mr. Potter. We must get you to your meeting."

Harry nodded and followed the young woman as she led the way, trying not to pay too much attention to how her body seemed to be moving in every direction at once, yet doing it gracefully. What were the odds of a set of twins being employed in the same building wearing what appeared to be the same dress? Then he wondered if the girls at Hogwarts moved like that under their robes.

"Here we are Mr. Potter, Conference room thirteen," the woman said as she opened the door for him. "I'm so looking forward to working with you, personally."

If possible, Harry had even less of an idea as to how to respond to that, so he went with the safest answer as he entered the room. "Thank you,"

"Hello Harry," a familiar voice chirped.

Harry turned from his escort to face into the room.

"Luna?"

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"Sit down, Harry," Hermione said from her place next to Luna.

"Hermione is supposed to explain what's going on," Luna added helpfully. "I came along as moral support, and to do a little shopping. I've heard tales of the wonderful underwear that the Muggles have, and Hermione's friend Victoria has told her of her secret shop."

Harry sat in the chair Hermione indicated, across from his friends. He noted that Moody remained standing next to the door, on guard, while McGonagall circled the table to sit with the two girls.

"I'm not really sure about the economic model that would allow Victoria to keep her shop a secret," Luna continued, "but Hermione assures me that it's quite a nice establishment."

"The name of the shop is 'Victoria's Secret' Luna," Hermione sighed. It struck Harry that his friend wasn't looking at all well. "The existence of the shop isn't a secret."

"As if you would know," Luna sniffed.

"Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on?" Harry asked, wondering at Luna's sudden hostility toward Hermione.

"I can, Harry," Hermione said, refusing to make eye contact with him.

The girl paused for a moment before continuing. "You let me have access to your family's records after we left Hogwarts so that I could see what assets you had to help us while we were hunting horcruxes."

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "I know that Hermione. Did you find something? You look horrible, have you been over doing it again?"

"I found out what your mother did to protect you from Voldemort, Harry," she whispered. "I know why you survived the Killing Curse. The letter I found had a compulsion on it. I tried to fight it, really I did, but I just couldn't. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn't stop myself."

"Of course you couldn't Miss Granger," A woman in a blood red business suit said as she entered the conference room. "When Lily Potter created a document, she wasn't one to make simple errors." The woman stopped at Harry's chair and extended her hand. "Charisma Downing, Harry. We've met before, not that you'd remember since you were all of six months old. Your mother and I were associates together. I'm a very junior partner now, and I've been assigned as your mentor for your indoctrination period."

"Hello," Harry said shaking her hand and swallowing. "Hermione, you said that you knew how I survived the killing curse."

"When Lily Evans finished at Hogwarts, she found out that because of her heritage, she had no real opportunities beyond her value as brood mare," the woman that had identified herself as Charisma Downing said as she took her seat at the head of the table. "So she searched for an opportunity and found it with us."

"When your parents went into hiding with you," Hermione interrupted glaring at the Downing woman, "she had to leave her daily duties with Wolfram and Hart, but she maintained some responsibilities with the firm. Her diaries say that despite being under the fidelius she was terrified by the charm's weakness, namely the Secret Keeper."

"Lily lacked the position in the firm at the time to come under the Firm's protections," Downing said, picking up the narrative. "As talented as she was, she lacked the experience to use it. If only she had joined a few years earlier. She could, however, protect you."

"How?" Harry asked.

"The Killing Curse works by disrupting the victim's soul," Hermione explained. "The mechanics of the process is much like the Dementor kiss, but much more violent."

"So, how did I survive?"

"It's obvious Harry," Luna giggled. "Your soul was somewhere else."

Harry blinked. Twice. "My soul was somewhere else?"

"Lily entered into an agreement with the senior partners," Downing explained. "Which was highly unusual. Junior Associates with the firm almost never even see the Partners, much less the founders themselves. She offered them access to the Magical world, access that had been unavailable to us for most of a thousand years. Her price for this was a place for you at the firm. A provisional place to be sure, you are not obligated to anything, but you have a place among us."

"I... see," Harry said, clearly showing that he did not really understand. "And what has this got to do with my soul?"

"Your Mum enrolled you into their training program, setting you onto the path to becoming an Associate for this firm," Hermione said, tears starting to flow down her cheeks. "As part of your

enrollment, they stole your soul, that's why the killing curse has no effect on you."

"We did not 'steal' his soul," Downing sniffed derisively. "Childish accusations aside, Lily enrolled you in our Prospective Associates program. A bit younger than most, but you were enrolled. As a consequence of your enrolling, your soul was placed in escrow, where it remains to this day. The program Lily signed you up for starts today on your 17th birthday and runs for a year, and then you need to make your choice. If you decide to leave the program, your soul will be restored to you, no questions asked."

"And if I stay?" Harry asked.

"Then," Downing smiled, "you will join the study of the law. A soul has never been particularly necessary in that pursuit."

"The letter in your family records was intended to notify the firm you were ready to take your place in their program," Hermione whispered. "I tried to ignore it, but I couldn't."

"Your association with *these people*," McGonagall interjected, "precludes you ever returning to Hogwarts. Indeed there are those among the Wizengamot who are advocating your expulsion from our world."

"I see," Harry said, feeling his world crumble beneath his feet. "And my friends?"

"The Weasley's want nothing to do with you," McGonagall said. "The family suffered for their association with a cousin who became an accountant, they have no interest in suffering from being linked with a *lawyer*. The Longbottom clan has long counted various barristers and other pursuants of the law as members of their family, and profess confusion at the Wizengamot's reaction."

"Hermione?"

"Harry..." she whispered. "I... I... I can't. I just can't. You don't have a soul!"

"I am your friend Harry," Luna said reaching across the table to take his hand while glaring at Hermione. "And I always will be. I have no idea why you are even listening to this *thing*; you know very well that this isn't Hermione."

Harry's eyes fixed the young woman sitting next to Luna. This wasn't Hermione?

"Hermione is downstairs in stasis," Luna continued as 'Hermione' faded from view. "Our friend was so worried about you, *She*," Harry imagined he could hear the capitalization of the word, "was worried that Hermione would influence you to resist the agreement your mother made."

"Don't worry about your friend, Harry," Charisma Downing said. "She will be fine. You've outgrown that provincial society anyway. With us, you'll reach your potential."

"Given that I can't go back to Hogwarts, it doesn't look like I've got much of a choice," Harry

noted, more than a little angry that even with Dumbledore dead and Voldemort gone, someone else was trying to manipulate him. "However, I will be seeing and speaking with Hermione now. Ms. Downing, if you or anyone else at Wolfram and Hart, ever do such a thing to any of my friends again, there will be a fight. Am I understood?"

"Of course, Harry, just think of your provisional year with us as being a tribute to your mother, who gave up so much for you," Downing said, glancing at her wristwatch and standing. "Well, that's the time we had blocked for this conference room, it will be needed in ten minutes for another meeting. Harry, I'll take you down to see your friend and tonight I'll help you get settled in your new suite. As for the rest of you, I'm sure you can find your way out."

The Wand users rose from their seats and left the room their relief almost palpable. Luna however was still in her chair, happily spinning around. "Miss Downing?" the blonde asked.

"Yes?" Downing answered impatiently.

"When you make your reports to the Senior Partners, make sure you impress upon Uncle Ram how upset I will be if my friend Harry is mistreated or manipulated in any way."

The woman paled and slumped back down onto her chair. "Uncle R-Ram?"

"Oh, yes. Mummy's family is so much fun, sometimes I think they are the only ones who understand me. For example, Uncle Ram is pretty much the only one who knows what I might do if someone was to try to manipulate my friend Harry with another illusion," the girl giggled. "He's such a dear. Just make sure he knows how much I care for my friend Harry, would you?"

"Of course," the woman said, unable to take her eyes off the slight blonde.

"Excellent," Luna said bouncing to her feet. "Let's go get Hermione, Harry; I'm so excited to have a chance to learn Victoria's secrets."

Harry wondered if he might go along to learn those secrets himself.

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"Hermione?"

The young woman blinked, wondering how Harry had just appeared in front of her. One moment she had been entering the Wolfram and Hart building in central London and then suddenly Harry was standing in front of her, with a worried look on his face. She launched herself into his arms.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry," she cried.

Harry took the time to blow her hair away from his mouth before responding. "It's ok Hermione, you missed the meeting."

"I did?"

"It seems certain people were afraid of the influence you have over me," Harry explained, brushing her hair from his face, "so you were diverted here. I've just spent half an hour having the situation explained to me by an illusion. If not for Luna I would never have known."

"It wasn't a very good illusion Harry," Luna chimed in, "it clearly lacked Hermione's spark."

"They only know about you because of me," she sobbed into his chest.

"Hermione," Harry held his friend at arm's length, his hands on her shoulders. "They knew about me since the day my mother signed my soul over to them. I'm only contracted for their provisional program; only a year and I can, and will walk away, with Muggle educational credits and my soul intact. The important thing to come out of all of this is that you have so little to look forward to. Mum had no choice but to come here for her career after leaving Hogwarts, and as far as I can tell, nothing has changed."

"Very little has changed," Luna interjected sadly. "Daddy ran a series of articles about the plight of Muggle born after they leave Hogwarts two years ago. When you leave school, your future isn't all that positive," the younger girl brightened, "unless you are interested in working for the Quibbler as a freelance reporter. Daddy pays two and a half knuts a word."

"I'll keep that in mind Luna," Hermione said, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. "You're ok Harry?"

Harry smiled. "I'll be fine Hermione. My classes don't start until tomorrow, so I've got the rest of the day off. I understand that you are going to investigate your friend Victoria's secrets."

"You know very well the store is called Victoria's Secret," Hermione huffed.

"Mind if I tag along?"

"Oh, yes!" Luna cheered, clapping her hands together while jumping up and down. "We can model for Harry."

"This," Hermione said, pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, "is going to be a long day."

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"He has some very good friends," Charisma Downing noted as the monitor showed the trio leaving the building.

"He does," her friend agreed with a smile. "I told you that removing that girl wouldn't work."

"Is the little blonde really related to one of the founders?"

"Possibly, Selene Maiusculus was a very powerful, very quirky witch. Did she have daemon blood?" the woman shrugged. "Who knows? Her daughter was powerful enough to see through the illusion that was fueled by the Founder's magic, that's for certain."

"Harry thinks he going to just walk away at the end of his provisional year," Downing pointed out, wanting desperately to change the topic.

"He does, and he might well do it. He's much like his father in that, very strong willed, very willing to fight. In the end, Harry may well turn out to be smarter than his mother."

Downing raised an eyebrow, "That seems unlikely."

"Only time will tell," Lily Evans-Potter said with a smile. "We should move on to the Dewhurst contract, no rest for the damned after all."

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