Summary

All Hermione wants to do is get closer to Ron. This summer she gets her wish, but the closer they get, the harder it will become for her to share her secret with him. But share it she must. If love really is stronger than hate, as Hermione believes, their feelings for each other may actually be enough to save them all.

Notes

Note from Annie, the archivist: this story was originally archived at The Quidditch Pitch, which went offline in 2015 when the hosting expired, at a time I was not able to renew it. I contacted Open Doors, hoping to preserve the archive using an old backup, and began importing these works as an Open Doors-approved project in April 2017. Open Doors e-mailed all authors about the move and posted announcements, but may not have reached everyone. If you are (or know) this creator, please contact us using the e-mail address on The Quidditch Pitch collection profile.
As Hermione Granger pulled out a chair and sat down at one of the tables in front of Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor, she told herself for about the hundredth time that agreeing to this meeting was a mistake. She cringed as she thought about the unexpected letter she’d received from Viktor Krum two days ago. He was scheduled to play in a match against England at the end of the week, but informed her that he was flying in early just to see her. He seemed so excited about it. It would have been rude to turn down his invitation. At least that was how she had tried to justify it to herself, but her gut reaction had been to write back immediately and let him down with a... well, there was no other word for it, with a lie. She couldn’t very well tell him the real reason she didn’t want to be seen with him in Diagon Alley.

Look Viktor, we’ve been over this before. You know I have feelings for someone else and that’s why we can only be friends. I’ve explained it to you enough times. Well, this someone else just happens to have two nosy brothers who’ve turned eavesdropping into an art form. They’ve just opened up a shop about... oh, 50 feet away from where you want to meet, and I’d really rather not have them see me. You understand, don’t you?

Of course he wont understand. Why didn’t I just tell him that I was going on holiday with my parents and would be out of town? It would have been so much easier, Hermione reflected as she sat at her small table waiting for him to turn up. You know why, she answered herself. I’ve told him over and over that my heart belongs to someone else, but he just isn’t listening. I have to make him understand that it isn’t going to happen, and I have to do it in person. I owe him that much at least.

Unfortunately for Hermione, she was so caught up in her own private thoughts that she failed to notice her fellow students, Parvati and Padma Patil arrive and sit down in at the table next to her. Until they made their presence known, that is.

“Oh!” Hermione replied, caught off guard. “Hello. It’s a nice surprise seeing you both here. Are you buying your school things already?”

“No, just meeting some friends. You?” Padma inquired politely.

“The same,” Hermione answered.

“Oh, you’re meeting Harry then?” Parvati asked rather excitedly.

“Er...” Hermione began. “Not exactly. I’m meeting...”

“OOOoo, look!” Padma squealed, pointing over her sister’s shoulder. “It’s Viktor Krum.”

Sure enough, there he was, shuffling towards them, his brow furled, looking as sullen as ever. And not five steps behind him, Hermione noticed that the whispering teenage girls were starting to congregate.
Oh great, she thought with a sigh. *I have to do this in front of his fan club.*

As he opened the door and entered the steam filled bathroom, Ron Weasley got the shock of his life. Someone else was in the room with him. Someone that was much too short to be any of his brothers and although he couldn’t have explained how, he knew it wasn’t his sister either. But rather than leave, as he probably should have, Ron stood his ground and pondered this unexpected discovery while the water shut off. The next thing he knew, he heard the shower curtain draw back. Unfortunately the steam was so thick that he was unable to make out more than an outline of the individual stepping out of the tub, but he could definitely tell it was a woman.

Ron took a few tentative steps closer, but was disappointed to discover that she’d already wrapped a towel around her body by the time he got a clear view. Her back was to him now and she didn’t seem to realize that he was there yet, so he held his breath and watched. He watched as she bent over, letting her long wet hair fall in front of her face. He watched as she scooped a second towel up off the floor, quickly brought it up to her hair, and began rubbing it dry. And as she dried her hair, Ron allowed his eyes to roam up her legs, all the while silently willing the towel that was wrapped around her lithe body to hike up just a bit more so he could see her arse. Then without warning, the woman dropped the towel in her hands, stood upright, and flung her damp locks behind her back. *She’s going to turn around,* Ron thought a split second before she began to turn. *She’s going to see me.*

More important though was the fact he was about to discover who she was.

"Enjoying the view?" the petite brunette asked when she spun around and discovered him standing there.

Ron’s eyes instantly widened as she looked up at him and threw him a mischievous smile.

“Wh-what are you doing?” he stammered anxiously, watching as she took a step towards him and let the towel covering her body fall to the floor.

“It’s your dream, Ronald,” she replied, seductively licking her lips and reaching out for him. “I’ll do anything you want.”

“Blimey!” Ron cried out, as he felt her hand descend to the front of his trousers and she began unbuttoning them. “Hermione!”

“Hermione?”

She was gone. One minute she’d been there and now she was gone.

*What the hell?* he thought, as he was dragged back to consciousness against his will.

Somewhere in the back of his mind Ron felt himself being shaken, but he didn’t want to acknowledge it. He wanted to ignore it and resume his dream. Maybe if he just ignored it, it would go away.

*Hermione in the shower,* he thought frantically, trying to stay under. *Hermione in the shower.* But it was no use.

“Wake up!” an unwelcome male voice shouted down at him.
“Go away,” Ron muttered into his pillow, turning away from the voice.

“Get out of bed you lazy git,” Fred shouted, grabbing the covers and wrenching them all off the bed.

“HEY!” Ron cried, scooting his pillow down beside himself in a desperate attempt to hide his condition.

“Dreaming about her isn’t going to help,” Fred snickered, swiping a discarded pair of jeans and a t-shirt off his brother’s floor and throwing them at his head.

“What? I wasn’t,” Ron sputtered, his face turning red.

“You talk in your sleep little brother,” Fred laughed.

“I do not!” he protested indignantly.

“Blimey!...Oh Hermione... HERMIONE!” Fred mocked him in a lusty voice.

“SOD OFF!” Ron shouted back at his older brother. “I didn’t say that,” he insisted. *Not like that anyway.*

“Oh, but you did,” Fred guffawed. “And it isn’t the first time,” he insisted, his smile becoming even broader when his baby brother gaped at him, clearly horrified by the mere thought.

*Bloody hell!* Ron swore in his head as the full implications hit home. He’d been having those types of dreams for years now. If he really talked in his sleep that must means... *Everyone in my dorm must know!*

“It’s nearly noon. I can’t believe you’re still in bed. Get up and get dressed,” Fred demanded. “You have work to do.”

“I’m on holiday,” Ron protested. But even as he did, he pulled the navy blue t-shirt his brother had thrown at him over his head and then stood up to slip on the pair of jeans.

It was less than five minutes later when a very disgruntled Ron stomped his way downstairs and into the kitchen of his family home, followed closely by his older brother.

“Here,” Fred said, dropping a pair of trainers at Ron’s feet. “Put these on.”

“Leave me alone,” he barked back, kicking the shoes across the kitchen floor, before throwing himself into the closest chair and glowering down at the table as if it had wronged him in some way.

“I told you, I’m not going.”

“Going where?” Ginny questioned from the chair opposite her fuming brother.

“Diagon Alley,” Fred answered. “Hermione’s there with Krum.”

Ginny froze, the sandwich she was about to bite into hovered an inch from her open mouth for a split second and then she let it drop on the plate below. It took her a bit longer to close her mouth however. “Oh,” she finally managed to say, studying Ron closely.

“I can’t believe this,” Fred snapped. “You aren’t going to do anything? You’re just going to sit there and... brood?”

“I don’t brood,” Ron replied angrily.
“Oh please!” Ginny snorted under her breath, but not so quietly that her brother failed to hear her. His eyes immediately locked on hers and he proceeded to glare daggers at her.

“Fred’s right,” Ginny informed him, staring right back into his angry eyes, unwilling to flinch. “Go talk to her.”

“NO!”

“Why not?” Ginny pressed.

“Because he’s a bloody coward,” Fred answered. “And to think you have the nerve to call yourself a Gryffindo...”

“Oy, what’s taking so long?” a familiar voice asked from behind them. The three siblings spun around to find George’s head floating in the fireplace surrounded by green flames. “You better get moving little bro, or you’re going to lose your bird.”

“She’s not my...” Ron started to object.

“Then why do you moan her name in your sleep?” Fred snickered.

“Sod off!” Ron barked.

“Temper, temper,” George’s head shot back. “Better save some of that for Krum. Last time I checked, that Great Bulgarian git had his hands all over her,” he added, noting that his words had a visible effect on Ron.

What had been mere irritation moments earlier instantly turned into full on rage. His bright blue eyes burned as he clenched his fists tightly at his side, trying not to picture that hook nosed, duck footed, Bulgarian prat touching... kissing... his Hermione.

Ginny, who didn’t believe a word of it, started at her brother’s comment. Her mouth opened again in shock. “That’s a lie,” she stated confidently when she found her voice.

“Well okay, so he was just holding her hand,” George admitted, “but that’s how it starts you know?”

“If you don’t make a move you’re going to lose her,” Fred added.

“She’s made her choice,” Ron growled, stubborn to the end, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the others.

“How can she have made her choice?” Ginny questioned. “When she doesn’t even know how you feel?”

“She knows how I feel about Krum.”

“Not about Krum, you imbecile. How you feel about HER. You can’t expect her to choose you, if she doesn’t even know that you’re interested.”

“Who said I’m interested?”

All three of Ron’s siblings rolled their eyes at his denial.

“Oh for heaven sakes Ron, EVERYBODY knows!” Ginny retorted in an exasperated tone.
“Everybody EXCEPT Hermione, you mean,” George corrected her.

“Oh fine!” Fred sighed. “Be a stubborn arse then. If you aren’t going to put a stop to it, I will,” he stated, vanishing from the kitchen with a loud crack.

“That’s right,” George added in a mischievous voice. “No future sister-in-law of mine is going to cavort around with another man. Even if he is an International Quidditch Star. We’ll send her your love, Ron.”

“YOU BLOODY TOSERS BETTER NOT...” Ron roared as he jumped out of his chair. The rest of his sentence died on his lips however, when George’s head smiled wickedly, winked at him, and then vanished from the fire.

“MUM!” Ron shouted, running over to the corner to retrieve his shoes. “I need some floo powder.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Parvati asked, as she watched Krum shuffle away from the table with his scowl even more pronounced than usual.

“Excuse me?” Hermione replied, taken aback by the boldness of the question. “I don’t recall inviting you to eavesdrop on my private conversations, nor did I ask for your opinion.”

“But... that was Viktor Krum,” Padma came to her sister’s defense, gaping at Hermione in horror.

“I know who it was.”

“Who did you ditch him for?” Padma asked excitedly.

“It has to be Harry, doesn’t it?” Parvati answered her sister before Hermione had a chance to respond. “I mean who else could it be?” she added, missing the incredulous look on Hermione’s face and mistakenly interpreting the sudden redness as embarrassment rather than the anger it truly was.

“It certainly isn’t Ron,” Padma replied with a giggle.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hermione snapped in a shrill voice, narrowing her eyes at Padma.

“Nothing,” Parvati answered rather too quickly for Hermione’s liking. “He’s nice enough and all, but...” she lowered her voice as if she didn’t want anyone to overhear her and then continued, “Well, come on, you know he just isn’t in the same league as Viktor or Harry.”

“Not famous enough for you?” Hermione stated loudly. “Or maybe it’s the money you’re after.”

“Me?” Parvati shot back in disbelief. “I’m not the one dating International Quidditch players.”

“Well, neither am I. And I’ll thank you BOTH very kindly to keep your noses out of my business in the future.”

“Oh come on, Hermione. Don’t be like that. We’re only trying to help. You can tell us. Who did you dump Krum for?” Parvati asked again eagerly.

“I’d like to know the answer to that question myself,” a familiar voice stated behind Hermione’s back and although he couldn’t see it, her eyes went wide as first amazement and then fear.

Damn those two and their extendable ears, Hermione thought, as she slowly spun around and gazed
into her best friend’s piercing blue eyes.

“Ron. What...what are you doing here?”

“Did you break up with Vicky?” he asked, ignoring her question entirely.

“Don’t call h--” she started out of habit, then caught herself. “What are you doing here?” Hermione repeated.

“Did you break up with Krum?” he asked again coolly. A bit too coolly, Hermione noted.

“N..no,” she stammered. “Not technically.”

“You most certainly did!” Padma stated loudly. “We heard the whole thing.”

“He brought you those tickets,” Parvati added, pointing to the Quidditch tickets still lying on the table Hermione had been sitting at, “and you said you didn’t want them.”

“Wait a minute,” Ron interjected. “He offered to give you tickets to the match this week and... and... you turned them down?” he asked incredulously. “Are you mental?”

“That seems to be the general consensus,” Hermione replied coldly, glaring at Ron.

“And then you gave him some big story about how it wouldn’t be right for you to accept them because you didn’t feel ‘that way’ about him,” Padma continued.

“And he said he understood that you had feelings for someone else,” Parvati added, “but that didn’t mean his feeling for you had changed any and you could still come to his match, even if it was just as a friend.”

“Someone else?” Ron asked, now looking at the Patil twins, rather than Hermione. “Who?”

“Well, Harry, of course,” Parvati replied, looking at him as if she thought he were an idiot. “Honestly. He’s your best friend,” she added, but Ron dismissed her with a wave of his hand and turned back to Hermione.

“Who is it really?” he demanded.

“That’s what Krum thought anyway,” Padma insisted. “He even made a point of giving her an extra ticket so she could bring Harry with her.”

“Actually he gave me two extra tickets,” Hermione stated, snatching all three of them off the table and fanning them out for everyone to see. “One for Harry and one for Ron,” she said, making a point of emphasizing the latter name.

For a split second, Ron felt two conflicting desires fighting within him. He was elated by the thought of going to the match, but almost instantly a stronger, more primal emotion grabbed control and smashed that euphoric feeling to bits. His face contorted as an intense wave of jealousy overcame him and he was seized by an overwhelming need to keep Hermione as far away from Krum as possible. Not just Krum either. He wanted to keep her away from every other male on the planet.

Well, maybe she can see Harry, he decided, but just him. And who the hell is this git she fancies now? ARRGGHH! If only she’d give me those tickets and lock herself in her room for the rest of the summer. Not bloody likely, he thought to himself.

“I thought you said you refused the tickets?” Ron said in an accusatory fashion when he finally
found his voice again.

“I did,” Hermione stated matter-of-factly. “He left them in case I change my mind.”

“And have you?” he asked.

“Do you want to go to the game, Ron?”

“Huh?”

“Do you want the tickets?” Hermione asked. “Do you want to go to the game?”

Ron looked at her intently and narrowed his eyes, sensing a trap. And since he was unsure how to answer her question without springing it, he decided to play it safe instead.

“Are YOU going to go?” he ventured, not realizing it came out sounded more like an accusation than a question.

“No,” Hermione replied, glaring at him.

Stupid git, she thought, as she watched his face brighten. He’s been hassling me about Viktor since fourth year. All that talk about looking out for me and my best interests. What a load of rubbish. Insensitive wart. Now that he thinks he can get something out of it for himself it’s a bit different, isn’t it? It doesn’t matter if I fancy Viktor or not as long as I string him along and get Ron prime seats to all his matches. Oooooooh, he makes me want to scream, she thought, narrowing her eyes even further and waited for him to speak. Go on. Ask me for them. Just ask me. I dare you, Hermione said with her eyes.

But rather than comply, Ron just narrowed his own eyes and glared right back at her.

I’ll show him, Hermione thought, the corners of her mouth curled into a malicious smile. And to Ron’s absolute horror, she proceeded to tear the tickets to shreds right in front of him.

Parvati and Padma both gasped.

“What are you doing?” Ron barked, grabbing her wrists to stop her. “Do you have any idea how much those tickets cost?”

“YOU WANT THEM SO BAD!” Hermione shrieked. “HERE! TAKE THEM!” And with that she threw the torn up pieces at his chest.

Ron looked down at the shredded bits lying at his feet and then back up at the smoldering brown eyes in front of him.

“Go ahead,” Hermione said in a cold, calm voice that sent shivers up his spine. “If they mean more to you than I do, by all means, pick them up. I’m sure you can magic them back together once you get home.”

It was a dare and Ron knew it, but it was also a test. One he had no intention of failing.

So that’s her game is it? She wants to see which I care about more, her or Quidditch, Ron thought as he watched Hermione cross her arms in a huff and try and bore a hole in his body with her fiery eyes. She sure is pretty when she’s hacked off. STOP IT, WEASLEY! Now is not the time.

Unfortunately as he mentally berated himself, his body seemed to rebel and act of its own accord. Before Ron even realized he was doing it, he’d crouched down and started gathering the torn tickets
He was horrified when he heard the sharp intake of breath above him and realized exactly what he had done.

NO! NO! NO! he screamed in his head. I don’t even want the bloody tickets. WHAT AM I DOING?

“Well, there’s an answer to your question, Ron,” Hermione said in a strained voice. “I know exactly how much those tickets cost.”

He looked up and actually blanched when he saw tears spill from her eyes and roll down her cheeks. BLOODY HELL! Now look what you’ve done, he thought.

“They just cost me one of my best friends,” Hermione finished and before he even had time to comprehend what she’d said, she turned around and walked away.

Ron seemed rooted to the spot. He wanted to run after her, but again, his body seemed to have a mind of its own and it simply refused to budge. All he could do was stand there, still holding the shredded bits of parchment in his hand, and stare openmouthed at Parvati and Padma, who gaped right back at him.

“What’s wrong with you?” Parvati finally asked with a look of disgust on her face. Her sister just snorted. The question seemed to break the spell holding him in place however, and rather than respond, Ron dropped the tickets and bolted in the direction Hermione had fled.

“Hermione!” he shouted, “Hermione wait.”

He expected her to run when she discovered that he was following, but she didn’t. She just kept walking at an even speed towards the Leaky Cauldron. Fortunately his legs were longer than hers, so Ron managed to catch up to her and grab her arm before she got half way there.

“Get your hands off me,” Hermione hissed, wrenching her arm loose and walking away again. Rather than risk touching her a second time, Ron just positioned himself in front of her to block her path.

Hermione glared up at him through her tears and Ron couldn’t help but feel terrible, knowing that he was the cause of her pain. A wave of guilt washed over him. The worst part was, he knew that he’d done it on purpose, but for the life of him, he couldn’t fathom why.

“Hermione, please...” Ron began, but she would have none of it. She just turned around and marched off in a different direction.

“I didn’t mean to. I swear I didn’t.”

I’m such a prat. Why did I do it? WHY? What the hell IS the matter with me?

“I’m sorry,” Ron said sincerely, following her as she walked. “Please, Hermione. Talk to me. Yell at me. Hit me if that’s what it’ll take. But... don’t... leave me... don’t just walk away.”

She rounded on him so fast Ron actually took a step back, afraid she might really punch him.

“Leave me alone,” Hermione said quietly, her voice thick with pain.

“I can’t,” he replied, without even realizing it.
“Great, now I’ve lost control of my mouth.

“I...” he forced himself to stop speaking ...love you, he finished in his head. “I... I...”

“You what?” Hermione asked coldly. “You can’t... help being a prat? You can’t... help hurting me? Did you set out to make my life miserable, Ron, or is it just something that happened by accident?”

“I... I... I’m sorry. I...”

“It’s too late,” she said quietly, looking down at the ground.

“No it isn’t,” Ron protested.

“Yes it is. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t take it anymore. I’m done... fighting with you. I’m... I’m just through,” Hermione whispered, tears streaming down her face. “Please... if you ever cared about me at all, leave me alone.”

“NO!” Ron barked, surprising himself as much as he did her. Before he even knew what he was doing, he’d reached out, grabbed her face, and lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. But as he looked into her eyes, he suddenly seemed to forgot what it was he was going to say. “I... Uh--” he stammered, his gaze dropping to her lips. They seemed to have a gravitational pull all their own, one he couldn’t resist. He leaned in and...

SLAP!

...he felt her hand connect with the side of his face.

“You... you hit me?” he stated in disbelief, rubbing the stinging red mark on the side of his face.

“I told you to keep your hands off me, you... you...” Hermione stammered, at a loss for exactly what it was she wanted to call him. “INSENSITIVE BASTARD!” she shouted, hitting on it at last.

Ron just stood there gaping at her. She’d just cursed. First she’d hit him and then she’d cursed at him. This was really bad, but before he had a chance to recover enough to try and make things right, she turned around and actually did run away from him this time. He watched as she ducked around a crowd of people and ran right into...

BLOODY VIKTOR KRUM! What? Is that Bulgarian git stalking her now? Ron thought, as he watched Hermione try and backed away.

She only made it one step backwards when Krum’s hand shot down and latched onto her wrist. She tried to push him away, but rather than let go, Krum spun her around so she was facing away from him, twisting her arm behind her back in the process. His free hand instantly came down and clamped on her other wrist tightly to keep her from fighting him.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!” Ron bellowed, as he charged into the crowd of people separating him from Hermione and Krum. “LET GO OF HER!”

“There’s the other one,” Krum said when a short figure covered head to toe in black robes appeared beside him.

Two more Death Eaters apparated onto the narrow street behind them. Someone in the crowd noticed and let out a scream that caused a chain reaction. The crowd of people between Ron and Hermione instantly started shoving him backward in their haste to get out of the way.
“The one with ginger hair,” the shorter of the three cloaked figured shouted, pointing at Ron.

In an instant it was pure pandemonium. The crowd swelled, as those that were in the nearby shops abandoned their goods and made a run for it. It seemed like everyone in Diagon Alley was trying to push him away from Hermione. He tried to fight the flow of the hysterical crowd, but they succeeded in dragging him further and further away from her.

“HERMIONE!” Ron shouted as he pushed and shoved and tried to get to her.

“RUN!” she screamed back at him, but he didn’t hear her. Not that he would have run even if he had.

Two of the hooded men were now working their way into the crowd, cursing people out of the way as they went. His eyes still locked on Hermione, Ron didn’t even notice their steady progress.

Hermione did notice however. She watched with horror as the two Death Eaters worked their way further and further into the crowd of screaming people, hell bent on reaching their target. She looked up at Viktor and then at the Death Eater standing next to him. She gasped when she saw who it was.

“You... YOU... DESPICABLE TRAITOR! HOW COULD YOU?” Hermione bellowed, throwing herself at him. She managed to catch Krum by surprise and yank her wrist free and in that split second of freedom, she grabbed a hold of the object in Peter Pettigrew’s hand and they both vanished.

“HERMIONE!” Ron roared in anguish when he saw her disappear as the Portkey was activated.

The Death Eaters turned and noticed their comrade was gone, as was the girl they had taken prisoner. Krum remained behind, but he didn’t appear to realize he was now standing in the middle of the street alone. They looked at Ron one last time, one of them sneered, and then they both disapparated with a pop.

At nearly the same instant, someone grabbed Ron from behind and pulled him backwards. He started swinging on reflex and clocked his would be attacker in the face, knocking him to the ground. Only then did he realize it had been George. Fred was there instantly to help his twin brother to his feet. Ron turned his back on both of them and started straining against the crowd again, but the twins launched themselves at him a second time and together, they managed to pull him backward.

“GET OFF ME!” Ron shouted as he fought to break free.

“It’s too late,” Fred said, his voice full of pain and regret.

“I’m sorry Ron,” George added.

“LET GO, DAMN YOU!”

“She’s gone, Ron.”

“It’s too late.”

“I’M GOING TO KILL THAT FUCKING BASTARD!” Ron growled, ducking down and twisting at the same time. His actions must have caught his brother’s off guard, because he managed to break free and instantly launched himself into the crowd so he could get at Krum. But before he got more than three steps forward, Fred had his wand out and pointed at Ron’s back.

“STUPEFY!” he shouted, and then he watched as his younger brother fall to the ground in a
“Sorry, mate,” Fred apologized as he reached down and lifted Ron’s feet. George instantly dropped down and grabbed Ron’s shoulders so they could heave him down the street and into the relative safety of their shop.

“Did you know Ron was that strong?” Fred asked George, before locking the door and walking over to the fireplace.

“Bloody Hell! He nearly knocked me out cold with that punch,” George complained, grabbing a hand full of floo powder and throwing it into the hearth. “The Burrow,” George shouted, before he stepped back to help Fred push their unconscious brother into the flames.

“Mum’s going to kill us,” Fred said, just before he disapparated.

“Let’s hope so,” George replied, as he materialized beside his brother in the Weasley’s Kitchen. “I certainly don’t want to have to face Ron when he wakes up.”

Several hours later and half the Weasley family sat huddled together around the kitchen table. Ginny, the youngest, was crying quietly in her chair. Mrs. Weasley was standing behind her daughter, gently stroking her fiery red hair in that comforting way mothers do. Just her presence made Ginny feel slightly better. But slightly better wasn’t nearly enough. The shock of seeing Ron fall face first out of the fireplace and then just lie on the floor as if he were dead, followed by Fred and George’s news that Hermione had been taken prisoner by You-Know-Who’s followers had been horrible enough. But it was the look in Ron’s eyes when his mother revived him that haunted her the most. She’d seen Ron cry when they were both younger. She’d seen him hurt. She’d seen him angry. She’d seen him afraid. She’d even seen him grieve, but she had never seen all those things at the same time. Ginny had never seen that much anguish locked away inside one person before and the fact it was her brother broke her heart.

The youngest Weasley sniffed loudly, wiping the fresh tears off her cheeks as she did. Fred, who had been watching her, leaned across the table and handed her a napkin.

“Thanks,” Ginny muttered before using the napkin to blow her nose.

George was still looking out the window with a blank expression on his face. His eye was now a luminous shade of purple, tinged with yellow around the edges. Mrs. Weasley had offered to heal the bruises, but George had refused. Every so often, Ginny noted he would reach up and finger the marks, almost as if he was trying to use the physical pain to mask the emotional pain he was feeling inside.

*He’s not having any more luck than I am, though,* she thought to herself. But her musings were interrupted by a terrible crash, followed almost instantly by what was unmistakably the sound of glass breaking. Ginny jumped in response and then she felt her mother’s reassuring hand pat her shoulder. She looked over and saw that her mother was looking up at the ceiling, her face strained.

“He’s been at it for hours,” George said quietly to his twin brother. “I wouldn’t think there would be anything left to break in that room.”

“Maybe he’s moved on to our room,” Fred tried to joke.

“I wish we knew what’s going on,” Ginny said softly.
“Your father will let us know when there is any new information,” Mrs. Weasley assured her daughter.

“What do you think they’re going to do to Krum?” Ginny asked her brothers.

“Guess it depends on whether or not they believe his story,” George stated.

“Dad seems to believe him,” Ginny replied. “He said Krum is really upset about what happened.”

“Is he upset about what happened or is he just upset that he got caught?” Fred asked quietly. “It isn’t like it’s the first time he’s used the Imperius Curse as an excuse.”

“Yeah,” George agreed. “It worked for him once, why not use it again?”

“That’s not fair,” Ginny interjected. “He was telling the truth the first time. I heard Harry tell Ron that Crouch admitted that he used the Imperius Curse to control Krum during the last task of the tournament. You don’t really think he’d try and hurt Hermione on purpose, do you?”

Fred shrugged his shoulders.

“Probably not,” George finally admitted. “But I wouldn’t put it past those idiots at the Ministry to accuse him of it so they can send someone to Azkaban and make it look like they’re dealing with You-Know-Who.”

“Ron has gone quiet again,” Fred said, looking up at the ceiling momentarily before the streak of white that rocketed through the open kitchen window caught his attention.

“Hedwig!” Ginny cried as the bird landed with a thump on the table in front of her. She immediately reached out to stroke the owl’s soft feathers while she removed the letter attached to her leg. “It’s for Ron,” Ginny said as she looked up at her mother. “Why did she deliver it to us?”

“I guess we know what set him off again,” George thought out loud.

“You don’t think--” Mrs. Weasley began.

“That he tried to chuck her out the window?” Fred answered. “I think he’d chuck Ginny out the window if she went into that room.”

Ginny continued to stroke Hedwig’s feathers, finding it oddly comforting. “Try not to hold it against him,” she whispered to the bird, her eyes brimming with fresh tears. “He’s having a hard time of it.”

“Should we open it?” George asked their mother as he stared at the letter his sister was holding.

“It’s addressed to Ron,” Mrs. Weasley replied as if that settled the matter.

“What if it’s important?” Fred chimed in.

“What if he’s seen something?” George added.

“What if he left the Dursley’s house and is trying to get Ron to help him go after Hermione?” Ginny asked.

That apparently was a valid enough reason for Mrs. Weasley to read her son’s mail, because she grabbed the letter out of her daughter’s hand and tore it open. Her eyes scanned it quickly and then she let the parchment drop to the table as her own tears began to fall.
Fred grabbed the letter immediately and George quickly leaned in to read it with him. Closing his eyes with a painful expression, Fred set the letter face down on the table and Ginny immediately reached for it.

“No, Gin,” George said, covering the letter with his hand to prevent her from taking it. “Don’t.”

But rather than heed her brother’s warning, Ginny looked him right in the eye as she pushed his hand away and grasped the piece of parchment. She took a deep breath, steadied herself, and then flipped it over to read:

They're torturing her. She knows I'm watching. She looked right at me and said, "DON'T YOU DARE SET ONE FOOT OUTSIDE THAT HOUSE, HARRY!!!!" He didn't want her talking to me. I've lost the connection.

As long as I stay here, he'll keep her alive. Tell the others to hurry!

He's getting angry!! I don't know how much more she can take.

With a sob, Ginny let the letter fall and dropped to the table, burying her head in her arms.

“We can’t tell Ron,” Fred said quietly.

“No we can’t,” his mother agreed, knowing full well that he’d leave the safety of their house and become a target himself if they did. She looked up at the ceiling again, as if trying to decide if Ron was still in his room and realized it was more comforting when he was smashing the place to bits and she knew exactly what he was doing.

Crossing the kitchen in just a few steps, Mrs. Weasley opened the door and glanced at the grandfather clock in the sitting room. Her eyes quickly sought out the hand with her youngest son’s name engraved upon it. A sigh of relief passed her lips as she noted it was still pointing at ‘Home’ and hadn’t jumped to ‘Mortal Peril’.

It's too quiet up there, she decided, as she closed the door and walked back over to the table to stand by her twin sons.

“Should...should I write back?” Ginny asked her mother in a quivering voice. “Hedwig is still here. She must be waiting for a reply.”

“Yes dear, perhaps you should,” Mrs. Weasley replied, pointing her wand at a drawer next to the sink. The drawer immediately opened and a bottle of ink and a quill shot across the room and landed on the table in front of Ginny.

With no parchment of her own to use, Ginny flipped Harry’s letter over and was just about to scribble a message on the backside when a bundle of brown feathers landed with a loud thud on the table beside it. Hedwig jumped back with an indignant hoot, then spread her wings and hopped up to perch on the back of Ginny’s chair.

Mrs. Weasley immediately reached down and removed the letter from the owl’s leg. Once its burden had been removed, it hopped to the edge of the table and flew out the window.

“Is it from Dad?” Fred asked hopefully.

“No, it’s from... The Department of Magical Transportation,” Mrs. Weasley replied, somewhat
baffled. Then to her children’s surprise, she gasped and disapparated from the room.

Ginny dove for the unopened letter as it floated to the floor.

“What!” Fred and George yelled together, while Ginny snatched the sheet or parchment up and stared down at it with her mouth open.

“It’s...it’s addressed to Hermione,” Ginny whispered, handing the letter to them.

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Tap. Tap. Tap.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Ron heard the sound, but tried to ignore it.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He tried to tune it out, as he sat on the floor with his knees pressed against his chest tightly.

TAP. TAP. TAP.

Ron wiped his eyes as he looked up and saw the familiar snow-white owl perched on his windowsill. He jumped up in a fit of rage, grabbed his bed frame, the mattress having long since being discarded on the floor, and heaved it into an upright position.

Leave me alone, Harry! he thought, as he flipped the bed frame towards the window. This is all your fault!

With a thunderous bang, the bed slammed into the wall and one of the bedposts smashed its way through the glass panes of the window. With his headboard now blocking most of the opening, Ron knew the owl would not be able to get in. His mission accomplished, he sank back down on the floor, pulled his knees back up to his chest, and resumed hugging them.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a tiny voice told him he was being unfair. This isn’t Harry’s fault. If anyone is to blame it’s me. I was there. I should have protected her. If only I hadn’t fought with her. If only I hadn’t chased her right into Krum’s arms. This is all my fault. MY FAULT!

But before he had a chance to beat himself up any further, a loud cracking sound drew his attention.

Ron was roused from his dismal thoughts when he heard a loud crack.

“Get out!” he growled in a deep menacing voice as whomever it was that had apparated into his bedroom tripped and then fell amongst the debris littering his floor.

“R...Ron?” a faint voice asked, clearly uncertain as to where she was.

“Hermione?” Ron replied, crawling towards her voice. He found her within seconds, but it felt like it took a lifetime.

The instant he touched her, a great sob escaped her lips and Hermione threw her arms around him. If he hadn’t been so relieved to have her there with him, Ron might have hesitated before wrapping his own arms around her and hugging her back. But he didn’t hesitate. He needed to touch her. He needed to prove that she was real and not some sort of hallucination. Even when she began to weep, he didn’t let go. If anything, he tightened his grip when he felt her body begin to shake against his own.
“Not so hard,” Hermione urged, trying to stifle her groan. “You’re crushing me.”

“Sorry,” he replied, loosening his grip on her a bit, but refusing to let go entirely. Now that she was in his arms, he never wanted to let go of her again.

“Ron,” Hermione said, her voice thick with tears. “I’m...”

But rather than let her speak, Ron shushed her and pulled her close again, resting his cheek on the top of her head and closing his eyes while he said a silent prayer of thanks to whomever it was that brought her back to him in one piece.

Under different circumstances he’d have been uncomfortable holding a crying woman. Tears usually unnerved him. He never knew what to say. But suddenly it struck him that he didn’t have to say anything. He just had to be there. As long as he could feel her in his arms, everything would be fine. So he held her close and let her cry against his chest, gently stroking her back in a way that not only comforted her, but comforted himself as well. And all too quickly, her tears lessened and he felt her pull away.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered in the darkness. Being unable to see him made it easier to apologize.

“Don’t be,” Ron replied as he reached out for her face and brushed the tears off her cheeks. “I think a good cry was in order.”

“No,” Hermione said in a quivering voice. “For earlier... for calling you...”

“An insensitive bastard,” he finished for her. Merlin knows he’d replayed their last conversation over in his head enough times by now to see the truth in her words. “You were right. I am.”

“No. No you aren’t,” Hermione protested. “Well, okay, sometimes you are,” she corrected herself, “but really you’re not. And... and I’d hate for those to be the last words I ever said to you.”

He heard her voice crack and felt fresh tears spill down her face.

“Ron, when they took me--” she began, but was forced to stop when she felt his fingers on her lips. As he shushed her again, Hermoine closed her eyes and relished the feeling of those two fingers.

“Ron--”

“Don’t,” he replied, his own voice full of pain. I don’t think I can bear to hear it.

“I have to say this now, while I still have the courage,” Hermione replied, pulling his hand away from her lips and down to her lap, where she linked her fingers with his.

Ron didn’t protest any further, so she started again. “When they took me--” she said heavily, then stopped to recoup her nerve. “There are so many things I wanted to tell you. Things I should have told you ages ago, but I didn’t because I was afraid... afraid of losing you.”

“Hermione, you don’t have to--” Ron interrupted, his heart constricting in his chest.

“Yes I do,” she insisted. “Now shut up and let me talk.”

Ron smiled despite himself. After all she’s been through, she still just as spirited as ever.

Her feistiness was one of the things he loved most about her.

Love.
He loved her. He didn’t just fancy her, it was love. He knew that for certain now. She was brave. She was stubborn. She was determined. When she thought she was right, she’d stand her ground and refuse to back down no matter the consequences. Like him, she was proud. Unlike him, she had the strength of character to not care what other people thought. In fact, the only opinions that seems to matter to her was his, and Harry’s of course.

She is... indomitable. How many other girls would have been able to save us from Devil’s Snare in our first year? How many other girls would have the bollocks to kick the hell out of Sirius Black because she believed he was a homicidal maniac out to kill Harry? Well, Ginny probably would, but... How many other girls could be abducted by Death Eaters and escape on their own? Most of those girly girls at Hogwarts would have cowered in the corner. But not Hermione. I could search the rest of my life and I'll never find another girl that’s--

Ron felt her grip on his hand tighten and was pulled back to reality. He heard Hermione take a deep breath and he remembered that she was trying to tell him something important.

Pay attention, he told himself.

“Sometimes you really are an insensitive prat,” Hermione began.

Ron’s heart sank.

“You infuriate me to no end,” she continued.

She hates me, he groaned to himself miserably.

“And I think I’m... I’m... hopelessly in love with you,” she whispered.

Ron’s heart skipped a beat.

WHAT! his mind screamed. It took him a second to actually voice the question. He was so caught up in the two stinging comments she had made prior to her declaration, that he was afraid he might have misheard her.

“What?”

“I said I...I love you,” Hermione whispered again.

“But... But... Krum.”


How can that be?

There was an awkward silence as Ron tried to wrap his head around this new information and Hermione, true to form, tried to fill it.

“Viktor was just a friend,” she began to ramble. “He knew how I felt, I told him at the end of 4th year when he pulled me aside to say goodbye and asked me again to visit him over the summer.”

“Hermione?”

Did she just say 4th year?

“I told him then that we could only be friends because... well, because I had feelings for someone
else. I didn’t tell him who, but he guessed anyway. I mean it was obvious what with you trying to spy on us.”

Wait a minute, they saw me?

“Hermione?”

“All those letters I wrote to him in front of you... I did it on purpose. I was trying to make you jealous. And I know that’s an awful thing to do, but--”

“HERMIONE! Will you shut up long enough for me to say three words?”

His words were met with silence.

Oh great, he thought, now she listens to me. Okay, now the silence is getting awkward again,” Ron told himself as Hermione waited for him to speak. Spit it out, you coward, he scolded himself.

His heart was beating so loudly, he was sure she could hear it as he began to stammer. “I... I--” Then on impulse, he abandoned his attempt to speak, reached up, clasped her face with his free hand, and leaned in. He felt her pull back in surprise the instant his lips brushed hers, but as soon as she realized what it was, she relaxed and let him kiss her. Her arms found their way around his neck just as he pulled his mouth away to whisper, “I love you too.”

“That’s four words, Ron,” Hermione said as she smiled in the dark.

“I stand corrected,” he replied. Snickering just before he leaned in to kiss her again. He felt his stomach do a flip as their lips connected a second time. A warm tingling sensation quickly spread throughout his entire body as his breath quickened.

This time Hermione didn’t just let him kiss her, she kissed him back. Ron felt the soft curves of her body press up against him as she pulled him closer. She clung to him desperately, almost as if she were drowning and he was the only thing keeping her head above water. Ron felt her mouth open slightly and he took that as permission to deepened the kiss. When Hermione moaned softly into his mouth, it sent a new wave of pleasure coursing throughout his body.

Unfortunately, just as he was truly beginning to enjoy himself, Hermione’s lips pulled away from his and he stifled a groan of disappointment.

“How... how did you do that?” Hermione panted, her arms still locked around his neck.

“How did you make me feel like that?” she asked seriously. “It was like my heart stopped for a second and then it started to tingle and... and then my stomach flipped and I felt as if I had been struck by lightning. I was tingling all the way down to the tip of my toes,” she explained, as if she were giving a report and listing the results of some experiment. “And then it got REALLY hot, and I felt like I was suffocating, only it was a good thing. It was amazing actually. Do it again,” Hermione insisted, moving her hands up into his hair and pulling his face down toward hers. But before their lips met, they were interrupted by a loud popping sound that split the air beside them.

Hermione screamed as Ron pushed her backwards and instantly placed himself between her and the unwelcome intruder that had entered his room.
“Why is it so dark in here?” Mrs. Weasley’s voice questioned as she stumbled on something under her feet. “Lumos,” she muttered and her wand lit up the room.

Both Ron and Hermione squinted as they looked up at the light. Ron shielded his eyes with his hands just in time to see his mother launch herself at them both. She pushed him out of the way and pulled Hermione into a hug.

“You brilliant girl!” she cried, kneeling on the ground along side them both. “Absolutely brilliant. How you ever learned how to apparate at your age,” she went on, but she stopped short when Hermione cried out in pain.

“My ribs,” Hermione groaned, clutching at her side. “I think they might be broken.”

Mrs. Weasley immediately released her hold on the girl and looked at her anxiously, then she rounded on her son. “Don’t just sit there like an lump,” she snapped. “Help me get her downstairs so I can have a proper look at her.”

Ron immediately got to his feet and leaned down to help Hermione to hers.

“How did you know I was here?” Hermione asked as she took Ron’s hands and felt him pull her to her feet.

“What?” Mrs. Weasley muttered, dragging her thoughts back from some distant place. “Oh, a letter arrived addressed to you from The Department of Magical Transportation. I’m afraid you have a rather substantial fine waiting for you in the kitchen.”

“For what?” Ron asked in an outraged tone.

“For apparating without a license I would suspect,” Hermione replied calmly.

“They can’t fine you for that!” Ron shouted indignantly. “It was an emergency.

“I don’t care about the fine,” Hermione stated. “Just as long as I don’t get expelled.”

“There is no way they’d expel you,” Ron assured her.

“Don’t worry dear, Arthur will take care of it.” Mrs. Weasley said confidently. “This isn’t like what happened to Harry. You were taken in broad daylight. There were plenty of witnesses and all of them are talking. The Ministry can’t look the other way anymore. Kingsley has half his Aurors out looking for you, not to mention half the Order. Under the circumstances, I’m sure they will overlook the fine. Now, can you walk?” Mrs. Weasley asked, stepping closer to Hermione to offer her support.

“Yes,” Hermione replied, taking a few tentative steps towards the door.

They both saw her grimace, even though she tried hard not to.

“I’ll carry her,” Ron said to his mother, quickly coming up behind Hermione.

“You most certainly will not!” Hermione retorted as if the very thought was insulting.

“Just down the stairs,” Ron replied, sweeping her up into his arms so quickly it caught her by surprise. “I’m not going to watch you fall,” he said in a commanding way that let her know he meant business.
“Just to the bottom of the stairs,” she agreed. “If you take me one step further then that, I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” Ron scoffed, feeling ridiculously happy as he descended his second flight of stairs with Hermione safely in his arms.

“I’ll...” she thought about it for a minute. “Oh, I don’t know what I’ll do. But I’ll come up with something. And it will be suitably nasty,” Hermione added as an afterthought.

Ron chortled quietly, as he reached the bottom of the staircase and set her down. “You know it’s almost worth it just to see what you’d do,” he teased. But he let her walk the rest of the way to the kitchen on her own. He did stick close to her however, just in case her will turned out to be stronger than her body was.

“GET OUT OF THE WAY!” Molly barked at her startled children as she rushed ahead of Ron and Hermione and threw open the kitchen door. All three of Ron’s siblings instantly jumped up and backed away from the table. But the surprise they experienced at their mother’s odd demand was nothing compared to the shock of watching Hermione enter the kitchen, followed closely by Ron. As soon as they saw her, the trio of Weasleys backing away from the table stopped dead in their tracks. Ginny gasped and Fred’s mouth literally fell open as Molly hurried forward and pulled a chair out for Hermione to sit in.

“I must look worse than I feel,” Hermione said quietly to Ron, who was now standing behind her with his hands on her shoulders.


“UN-BE-LIEVABLE!” George shouted. “Half the bloody Order’s out looking for you and...”

“...you escape by yourself,” Fred finished.

“How... how did you do it?” Ginny inquired.

“What happened to your face?” Hermione asked George, staring at the bruise around his eye.

“He did,” George replied, pointing at his little brother.

“RON!” Hermione gasped.

“He was trying to keep me from helping you,” Ron said defensively.

“Actually, we were trying to HELP you save her,” Fred corrected. “As we’ve already tried to explain.”

“Three of us. Three of them. Seemed like pretty good odds at the time,” his twin agreed.

“Hermione?” George continued, turning to look at her again. “You saw us coming. Why did you grab that Portkey?”

“Yes, I saw you,” she admitted, dropping her gaze to the ground, “but you were too far away. I knew they would reach Ron before you did.”

“You have a letter from Harry,” Ginny said, holding the sheet of parchment up for Ron to take.

“You opened it?” he asked as he reached out and took the letter out of his sister’s hand.
“We thought it might be important,” Ginny replied, the guilt evident in her voice. “I was just about to write back to him when...”

“Give me that,” Hermione demanded, tearing the letter out of Ron’s hand and grabbing the quill Ginny had abandoned on the table.

**Don’t you dare leave that house, Harry!!!** she scribbled in big, bold letters. **Not for any reason. I don’t care what he shows you. It’s all lies. I’m fine. We all are. You stay there and--**

Ron wrenched the quill out of her hand.

“HEY! I wasn’t finished,” Hermione barked as Ron spun the piece of parchment around to face himself.

Hermione escaped on her own, he wrote. She apparated into my bedroom about 5 minutes ago. She’s in a right temper too, as you can probably tell. Better do as she says, mate. If she can take down D.E.s by herself, I shudder to think what she’d do to you if you left.

Finished, Ron folded the parchment up, strolled over to Hedwig, who was now sitting on the windowsill, and attached the letter to her leg.

“RON!” Hermione shouted as she watched Hedwig soar out the window to make her delivery. “I wasn’t finished with that.”

“Yes you were,” Ron replied. Fred raised an eyebrow. George would have as well, except it hurt too badly. “He got the point,” Ron continued. “There was no reason to go on about it.”

“Maybe I wanted to tell him something else.”

“Maybe now is not the right time.”

“You don’t want him to know?”

“I didn’t say that,” Ron said, dropping to his knees in front of her. “Right now it’s more important to make sure you’re ok. That’s all.”

“I’m fine,” Hermione protested.

“Ok, so let Mum check you out and when she says your fine, you can write Harry as long of a letter as you like and Pig will take it to him. Just keep in mind, Pig is absolute rubbish and probably can’t carry one of those book sized letters you are so fond of writing.”

“Fine,” Hermione agreed, but she looked none too happy about it.

“Mum,” Ron said, turning around to discover his mother with her head stuck in the fireplace.

“Yes, dear?” Mrs.Weasley asked, pulling it back out of the green flames and standing up to dust herself off as the air beside her split with a loud pop.

Hermione, who was still a little jumpy, shrieked and would have fallen out of her chair if Ron hadn’t been kneeling beside her and reached up to prevent it. Ginny jumped back as well and collided with Fred and George.

“Hermione, are you all right?” Remus Lupin asked as he approached her, his voice full of concern.

“Y…yes,” she stammered back, trying to slow her racing heart.
“Moody’s in position, Molly,” Lupin said, turning to face Mrs. Weasley, who was still standing by the fireplace. “We’re ready anytime you are.”

“Ready for what?” George asked.

“Fred, George,” Mrs. Weasley said. “Look after your sister. And see if you can sort out Ron’s room.”

“WHAT?” Fred shouted indignantly.

“I’m not a baby. I can look after myself,” Ginny objected.

“Where are the rest of you going?” George asked his mother.

“We’re going to take Hermione to St. Mungo’s.”

“OH NO!” Hermione started to object.

“Hermione, we have to make sure you didn’t splinch yourself,” Mrs. Weasley said in a mothering tone.

“You apparated away from them?” Fred asked, the awe evident in his voice.

“So simple and yet so brilliant,” George added. “I bet those gits never expected that. Who ever heard of a fifth year that could apparate?”

“Whose wand did you use?” Lupin asked as he looked down at Hermione.

“That stinking rat, Peter Pettigrew’s,” Hermione hissed, pulling it out of the back pocket of her shorts and offering it up to Lupin. He reached down and took it from her hand, but held it at arms length as if it were tainted.

“Come on, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said, trying to get Hermione up out of her chair.

“NO!” she objected, turning away from Mrs. Weasley and looking to Ron for moral support. “You remember what happened to Broderick Bode don’t you?” she asked him pointedly.

Ron’s face hardened immediately. He rose to his feet and stepped between his mother and Hermione. “Absolutely not!” he stated, crossing his arms and staring down at his mother defiantly.

“Alastor is already there. Nothing will happen to--”

“NO!” Hermione and Ron said in unison.

“What happened to Broderick Bode?” Ginny asked George.

“Voldemort wanted to shut him up so he sent Bode some Devil’s Snare for Christmas and it strangled him in his sleep,” Ron said irritably. Everyone gaped at him, even Hermione.

“Ron, you... you said his name,” Hermione finally stammered.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been cursing him all night. I guess it just slipped out.”

“Hermione,” Lupin began calmly, “Nothing is going to happen to you. We just want to have them look you over to make sure there isn’t anything wrong internally. Apparating is tricky. There are a million things that can go wrong. Especially if you are untrained.”
“Oh please,” she shot back. “If they can do it,” Hermione said, motioning towards Fred and George, “it can’t be all *that* hard.”

“HEY!” the twins objected together.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Fred asked, sounding rather insulted.

“It means I’ve studied the theory and know more of less how it’s supposed to work. I didn’t splinch myself and I’m NOT going to St. Mungo’s.”

CRACK

“What’s taking so bloody long?” Bill demanded, the instant he materialized into the kitchen. “Moody is barking at everyone that gets near that corridor. They’re going to toss him out on his ear if the patient he is supposed to be *protecting* doesn’t show up pretty soon.”

“She refuses to go,” Mrs. Weasley said, letting her hands drop to her sides, clearly exasperated.

“Hermione,” Bill said, turning to face her so he could plead his case. “Your parents are waiting for...”

“What!” Hermione shrieked, jumping out of her chair in alarm. “You ... you... didn’t take them *there*?”

“Dad and I were with them when we got word that you’d escaped. He thought—”

“GET THEM OUT OF THERE! GET THEM OUT RIGHT NOW!” Hermione bellowed.

Bill took a step backward and looked at his mother. Then to his horror, Hermione’s resolve crumpled, her eyes glassed over, and tears started to roll down her cheeks. Then without warning, she fell into her chair, threw her arms up on the table, and buried her face as she let out a huge sob.

Mrs. Weasley nodded to Bill and he vanished from the room.

“It’s all right, dear. Don’t worry about your parents. We’ll keep them safe. You three,” Mrs. Weasley said, looking over at Fred, George, and Ginny. “OUT!”

“What?”

“Why?”

“I said out! NOW!” she barked again.

“But...” Ginny protested, shuffling towards the door. “Oh, all right fine,,” she spat, glaring at her mother as she stormed out of the kitchen, followed closely by Fred and George.

Once she was sure that they had really gone, Mrs. Weasley and Lupin moved off to a corner to converse quietly and left Ron standing beside Hermione. He immediately pulled a chair up beside her and sat down in it, placing his arm around her back.

“They’ll be ok,” Ron leaned forward and whispered. “Dad and Bill will look out for them until Dumbledore finds them a secret keeper. I’ll do it myself if I have to.”

“Oh Ron,” Hermione moaned, before throwing herself on him.

For a moment, Ron didn’t know what to do. Obviously he was rubbish at this comfort business,
because Hermione was crying even harder now. Then he remembered that not saying anything had worked in his bedroom so he patted Hermione back gently and hoped that would do the trick.

“What do you think?” Lupin asked Molly in a hushed voice, as the two of them conversed in the corner.

“The poor girl has been through enough. She’s afraid.”

“Small wonder. They’re right about Bode,” Remus admitted. “How did they know about that, anyway?”

“How do they know half the things they do?” Molly asked in an exasperated tone.

“You could have a healer come to the house,” Lupin suggested.

“I’d feel better if she went to St. Mungo’s.”

“Molly, she isn’t going to go willingly. Not tonight. Maybe it’s better this way. Dumbledore is going to want to question her when he gets things sorted out with her parents. It’s probably better if he does that here. Maybe you ought to just heal her ribs and put her to bed until...”

“What if she splinched herself?”

“Not a chance. She’s far too clever for her own good. Frankly, the things that girl can do when she sets her mind to it are... well, they’re amazing. Did you know,” he chuckled quietly, “she figured out Rita Skeeter is an unregistered Animagus, then she trapped her in a jar and held her prisoner to keep her from printing any more lies about Harry?”

“No!” Molly gasped.

“Oh yes,” Lupin chuckled quietly. “Harry let it slip to Sirius, who of course was quite impressed. Who would ever think sweet, little Hermione could be so... ruthless?”

“But... surely she doesn’t still have Rita trapped in a jar?” Mrs. Weasley asked, horrified by the very idea.

“Oh no, she let her out as soon as their courses were over. But not before she blackmailed her into... well, you saw that story Skeeter wrote about Harry a few months ago in the Quibbler. To quote Sirius, she’s ‘Hermione’s mouthpiece’ now.”

Any further conversation between the two adults was interrupted however, when Mad-Eye Moody unexpectedly apparated into the kitchen and pointed his wand straight at Hermione.

“Why did you refuse to go to the hospital?” Moody barked the moment he materialized.

Ron and Hermione both looked up at Mad-Eye, their mouths open in shock, but neither of them answered him.

“How did you escape?” Moody demanded.

“Get that thing outta her face,” Ron said, rising up out of his chair and coming around to stand in front of Hermione.

“I... I apparated,” Hermione replied shakily.
“HO!” Moody shouted as if he’d just caught her in a lie. “15 year-old Witches can’t apparate.”

“15 year-old Wizards can’t produce a Corporeal Patronus either,” Hermione replied, her eyes getting back some of their fire.

Ron was just about to mention that Hermione was actually sixteen when he saw one side of Moody’s mouth curled up. It was either a smile or a sneer, he was unsure which and he decided it might be wise to just keep the comment to himself.

“Alastor, that’s enough,” Mrs. Weasley scolded as she crossed the kitchen.

“She could be a Polyjuiced imposter,” Moody growled at Mrs. Weasley, although his eyes never left Hermione.

“Oh, that’s rich,” Ron retorted, “coming from a man who spent the better part of a year stuffed in his own bloody trunk. Hermione isn’t--”

“RON!” Mrs. Weasley snapped.

“Then why did she refuse to be examined?” Moody demanded.

“Ron,” Mrs. Weasley said again, ignoring Mad-Eye’s question. “Why don’t you take Hermione up to Percy’s room and let her lie down.”


“Do what?” she replied, narrowing her eyes at him as if he were trying to lead her into a trap.

“How did you apparate?”

“I read how in--”

“I don’t want to know how you learned to do it. I want you to explain how you did it.”

“Oh, well... I closed my eyes and concentrated on who I wanted to--”

“Who?” Moody questioned eagerly.

“Ron,” Hermione stated, thinking he was asking her who she had thought about.

“You concentrated on Ron?” Lupin asked, clearly taken aback. “Not... the Burrow or Ron’s bedroom?”

“Yes,” Hermione replied uncertainly.

“What?” Ron asked, looking at all the tense faces around him.

“Apparation doesn’t usually work like that,” Lupin explained to Ron. “Usually you concentrate on where you want to go. You envision a place.”

“I didn’t know where he was,” Hermione said defensively. “So I just thought of him instead.”

“And that worked, did it?” Moody snarled, studying her closely with his magical eye.

“Well, obviously,” Hermione replied tersely. “I’m here, aren’t I?”
“This is ridiculous!” Ron snorted. “Come on,” he said, offering Hermione his hand so he could help her up. “You don’t have to put up with this rubbish.”

“She isn’t going anywhere,” Moody said.

“I’m not a Death Eater,” Hermione stated flatly as she stared up at Mad-Eye Moody’s gnarled face. “But since you don’t believe me, you are more than welcome to pull up a chair a continue to glower at me for the next hour.”

“Oh, I was planning on it, missy,” Moody replied.

“Don’t be absurd,” Lupin chimed in. “There are easier ways to prove who she is. Hermione,” he said, kneeling down in front of her. “How did Sirius escape from Hogwarts?”

Hermione’s eyes went wide with shock. She looked at Ron, uncertain for a moment and then her gaze went to Mrs. Weasley. “Um--” She bit her lip nervously.

“She doesn’t know,” Moody croaked triumphantly.

“Oh, yes I do,” Hermione said, her gaze falling on Mrs. Weasley again. She didn’t really want to admit this in front of Ron’s mother, but there didn’t appear to be any other choice. With a sigh, she let her eyes search out Lupin’s once more. “Harry and I used my time turner to go back in time and rescue him.” Her whole face flushed as she answered the question and she made a concerted effort to avoid Mrs. Weasley’s stare.

“And how did you get him out of Professor Trelawney’s office?” Lupin prodded further.

“We... we snatched Buckbeak out from under the nose of the Minister just before his execution, hid in the Forbidden Forest, waited for ourselves to emerge from the Shrieking Shack with you and the others, and then we flew Buckbeak up to the window of Professor Flitwick’s office and...”

“Satisfied?” Lupin asked Moody, cutting her off.

“Are you?” he replied.

“That’s exactly how it happened,” Remus said.

To the surprise of everyone, Moody started to laugh. “A time turner?” he cackled. “How does a...” he did the math quickly in his head, “13 year-old Witch manage to get her hands on one of those?” he asked, as he continued to study Hermione.

“She got it from McGonagall,” Ron stated as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“McGonagall?” Moody hooted loudly.

Ron screwed up his face as he caught Hermione’s eyes. It was almost as if she could read the words as they formed in his mind.

He’s mental.

“McGonagall? Contributing to the ...” Mad-Eye continued to laugh, “...to the delinquency of a minor. No, three minors,” he amended, “because when one of them breaks the law, the other two--”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Ron objected, venturing a glance over at his mother who still hadn’t said a word. “I didn’t do anything. I was in the hospital wing... and... it was Dumbledore’s idea.”
“HAAAA-HAAAAAA!” Moody doubled over and grabbed his side. “Stop... stop.... Dumbledore’s idea.”

“It was a hasty plan,” Albus Dumbledore admitted, as he walked through the back door and into the kitchen, followed closely by Arthur Weasley and his eldest son, Bill. “But effective nonetheless. Now, assuming that you are finished interrogating Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said, looking pointedly at Mad-Eye Moody, “perhaps you would allow Molly to take her somewhere a bit more private do she may attend to her wounds?”

“Professor Dumbledore,” Hermione began, “my parents?”

“Are quite safe,” he assured her. “They are worried about you of course, but they trust the Weasleys to care for you. I must say, I was surprised by how little they seem to know about... recent events.”

Unable to look Dumbledore in the eyes, Hermione let her gaze drop to the floor. “They’re Muggles,” she said quietly. “They wouldn’t really understand and I didn’t want to worry them.”

“I’ve explained the situation to them as best I could,” Mr. Weasley said. “While they are worried, and with good reason, they’ve agreed that it is probably best for you to spend the rest of the summer with us.”

“Molly,” Dumbledore said, “if you wouldn’t mind healing Miss Granger’s injuries?”

“Yes, yes of course,” Ms. Weasley replied as she walked over to Hermione and helped her rise from her chair.

Not wanting to let Hermione out of his sight, but unsure of whether or not he would be allowed to follow, Ron looked at his mother.

“Ron, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said, motioning for him to follow them out of the kitchen. “Go find Ginny for me and tell her I need her help. Ask her to run a hot bath and find something for Hermione to wear,” his mother instructed as she led Hermione out the door and into the narrow hallway leading to the staircase.

“O-ok,” Ron replied, just before he turned and ran ahead of them.

“Ron?” his mother added, after he had started to sprint up the rickety staircase.

“Yeah?” he asked, leaning over the banister on the first floor landing and looking down at them.

“After you’ve done that, come back down. I’m going to need you to help me get her to the bathroom.”

“I can do it by myself,” Hermione said, grabbing the rail on the ground floor landing for support and pulling herself up the first two steps. Before she reached the fourth, Ron was standing in front of her, blocking her ascent.

“Stop being so pig-headed,” he said in a forceful tone.

Hermione arched her eyebrows at him. “Get out of my way,” she snapped back.

Ok, confrontation didn’t work, Ron thought. Time to try out a new tactic. “Hermione,” he said, his voice softening as he reached out to touch her arm. “I know you can climb the stairs by yourself. Accepting a little help doesn’t make you weak. Please,” he said, his face full of genuine concern. “Let me help you.”
The defiant fire in her eyes was extinguished almost instantly. *I did it,* he thought as he watched her body relax.

“Ok,” Hermione sighed, “I’ll wait.”

Ron couldn’t help but smile at her. *It actually worked. I got her to do what I wanted without a fight.*

“But,” Hermione added with a smirk as he turned to carry out his mother’s instructions, “you better remember what you just said to me, because the next time you get yourself in trouble, I’m going to throw it right back in your face.”

*How is it, she always manages to stay one step ahead of me?* Ron wondered, as he tore up the stairs to his sister’s bedroom.
The Great Escape

Chapter 2 : The Great Escape

When Ron reached the third floor landing and started shouting his sister’s name, there was no answer. He banged loudly on her bedroom door and got no response. He didn’t barge normally into her room uninvited, but nothing about this night had been normal so he threw the door open, only to fine the room dark and empty.

“GINNY!” Ron shouted as he mounted the crooked stairs leading up to the fourth floor, hoping to find her with Fred and George in their room. “HEY, GINNY!”

“What?” his sister asked, her long red hair falling forward to cover her face as she leaned over the railing on the fifth floor.

Not bothering to stop, Ron proceeded to climb to the fifth floor, where Ginny was waiting. “Mum needs you to...help her with Hermione,” he panted, slightly out of breath from his rapid climb.

Looking over her shoulder, Ron noticed that his bedroom door was ajar and there was a light shining through the crack. As he had smashed his lamp to smithereens, along with everything else that room, hours ago, he found this rather puzzling. Without thinking, he pushed past Ginny and entered his room to find Fred and George standing in the middle of the wreckage with their wands out.

“...far worse than any of our explosions,” Ron heard Fred mutter to George.

“I doubt we can fix all of this,” George replied.

“What are you doing in here?” Ron demanded. The twins, who had not realized their brother was there, spun around to face him.

“Sorting out your room, you ingrate,” George said.

“Unless you’d rather sleep in the middle of all this rubbish,” Fred added.

“Well, to be honest, most of it was rubbish before he smashed it,” George whispered to Fred just
loud enough that he could be sure Ron would hear him.

“Leave him alone,” Ginny said as she entered the bedroom. “I’ve seen the sty you two call a bedroom.”

Ignoring all three of them, Ron reached down and grabbed a faded t-shirt up off the ground and thrust it at Ginny. “Take this down to the bathroom. Mum wants you to run a hot bath and wait for her and Hermione there.”

Taking the shirt out of her brother’s outstretched hand, Ginny turned and left the room and Ron could hear her quickly descending the crooked staircase. His eyes lingered on Fred and George for a moment longer and then he turned to follow his sister.

“Hey!” he heard George shout. “This is your mess. The least you could do is help us clean it up.”

“Just leave it,” Ron called back, as he disappeared from view.

Ron felt a bit foolish just sitting there with his back against the wall, staring at the bathroom door. It had been at least 30 minutes since he left Fred and George in his room and they still hadn’t come out. Part of him felt like he should be helping them, but he had no intentions of leaving his spot on the floor. It was irrational and Ron knew it, but he just needed to be near her.

“She’s perfectly safe in there with Mum and Ginny, he reasoned. Yet here you sit, like a great worrying git, waiting for her to get out of the bath. What are you going to do when Mum puts her to bed? Sleep in the hall outside her room? Actually... Ron decided, that might not be such a bad idea. That way I can make sure that--

But any further thought of where he was going to sleep, left his mind as the door he had been staring at opened and Ginny exited, Hermione right on her heels. The pair of girls stopped abruptly when they saw him.

“What were you doing?” Ginny asked, looking down at her brother with an odd expression. “You weren’t trying to see through the--”
“No!” Ron proclaimed loudly as he rose to his feet.

He could feel Hermione studying him and knew he’d have to meet her gaze. The last thing he wanted was for her to think he was some kind of pervert that had been caught peeping through the keyhole and was now too ashamed to look at her. Fortunately when Ron’s blue eyes darted away from Ginny’s face and locked onto Hermione’s, she didn’t look irritated or suspicious. Quite the opposite actually. She looked pleased to see him and unless he was mistaken, he caught a ghost of a smile.

While small, that smile had an amazing effect on him. Without even realizing it, he let out the breath he had been holding and felt his whole body relax. He hadn’t realized he’d been so tense until he felt the weight lift from his shoulders.

_She smiled. That means she’s all right_, he thought and he allowed his eyes to roam, in an attempt to read her body language. At least that had been the general idea.

The first thing he noticed was that her hair was still damp and as a result, her usual bushy locks had been transformed into curls that were now cascading down her shoulders. Ron watched as Hermione pulled the curly tresses away from her face and gathered them up into a sloppy ponytail. With her hair now secured behind her back, he was able to make out the double C’s and the speeding cannonball that made up the Chudley Cannon’s Logo, sprawled across the front of the tatty t-shirt she was wearing. _His_ tatty t-shirt.

It was old. It was worn. The violent orange coloring had long since faded. The cotton was thinning, but that only made it more comfortable, which is why it was his favorite shirt. Until now, that is.

Hermione was wearing his favorite shirt and that was _all_ she was wearing. What’s more, it fit her far differently than it did him. For one thing, the double C logo on her chest was actually stretched out and curved in a way he hadn’t expected.

_She looks good_, Ron thought as his eyes dropped to the exposed skin of her thighs.

It wasn’t as if it was the first time he’d seen her legs. His shirt was so long on her that it fell to roughly the same spot her Hogwarts skirt did, but somehow it was different.

_And it isn’t because those horrid socks are missing either_, Ron thought. _I’ve seen her without those_
It was because the only thing she was wearing happened to be his. The thin fabric now hugging her skin, had once hugged his. It was almost as if that connected them in some odd way. It was almost as if part of him was covering her now.

*I am a perv,* Ron reflected as he realized where his mind was going and how inappropriate the thoughts were. *STOP IT!* he scolded himself, forcing his eyes up to Hermione’s face again. *Now is definitely not the time to be thinking things like that.*

“Come to carry me down the stairs again?” Hermione asked when Ron’s eyes met hers.

“No,” Ron replied as he felt his face flush. *Think of something else to say, you idiot.* “I reckon you can do it on your own now,” he added just as his mother appeared in the doorway behind the girls with Ginny’s dressing gown in her hand. She held it out to Hermione, who took it and quickly slipped it on. “How do you feel?” Ron asked, watching her tie the robe closed.

“Like I’ve been run over by the Knights Bus,” Hermione replied. “About 5 separate times.”

“I’m afraid it will be worse in the morning,” Mrs. Weasley said, giving Hermione a reassuring pat on the back.

“Can’t you--” Ron began to ask his mother, but stopped short when he noticed she was already shaking her head.

“There’s no charm to alleviate the effects of the Cruciatus Curse. That’s one of the reasons it’s so popular with the--” Mrs. Weasley faltered as she realized Ginny was still there.

Fred and George had joined the order almost as soon as they left Hogwarts, despite their mother’s protests. Ron, was still too young to join *officially,* but Mrs. Weasley knew that didn’t matter. He’d already seen and experienced far too much. No, she couldn’t protect Ron from the cruel realities of war. She had seen that first hand this afternoon when she revived him and he realized Hermione was really gone. But Ginny? Ginny she could still protect. Ginny she could still shelter.

If she was honest with herself, Molly had to admit that Ginny was no longer innocent or naive. She too, had seen and experienced too much. That whole terrible ordeal with Riddle’s diary during her
first year. And just a few weeks ago, she had ended up in the Department of Mysteries with Harry, Ron and Hermione. Molly shuddered to think of her little girl facing fighting, You-Know-Who’s most ardent followers. How they ever made it out of there alive is beyond me, Mrs. Weasley contemplated. She shuddered again, just thinking about it. No, Ginny is still to young to hear any of this.

“Ginny, dear, why don’t you go find Fred and George and see if they need any help with Ron’s room.”

Ginny immediately glared up at her mother. “In other words, get lost!” she spat back.

Hermione noticed Mrs. Weasley’s mouth narrow as her warm eyes caught fire almost immediately. It was a look she knew very well. She’d seen that same expression cross Ron’s face nearly every time she picked a fight with him. It was his warning look. When Ron glared at her like that, she knew what it meant as clearly as if he had spoken the words, don’t mess with me, Hermione. I’m not in the mood, out loud.

It was rather amusing to see first hand where Ron had learned it. Only, Mrs. Weasley was obviously better at ‘the look’ than Ron was, because Ginny held her tongue and backed down. Hermione rarely did. More often than not, when Ron gave her that look she felt challenged rather than intimidated.

Hermione brought her hand up to her mouth and attempted to cover her grin as she watched Ginny stomp away, cursing her mother under her breath. Then her eyes darted over to Ron to see how he’d react when ‘the look’ was bestowed upon him. Somehow she didn’t think he’d back down so easy.

This ought to be interesting, she thought as she watched Mrs. Weasley turn to face her son.

As she expected, Ron stood his ground. He flinched, however. It was barely perceptible. If she hadn’t known him so well, Hermione probably would have missed it entirely. But he stood his ground and steadied himself for the battle he knew was coming.

“Well?” Mrs. Weasley said, her scowl softening. “Come on, then.” She motioned for the two teenagers to follow her down the hall. “The others are waiting.”

“What?” Ron asked in disbelief, eyeing his mother suspiciously. “That’s it? No arguments? What’s the catch?”
Ignoring her son, Mrs. Weasley placed a hand on Hermione’s back and started to guide her towards the staircase. As they began to descend, Hermione glanced over her shoulder and saw that Ron was following close behind, still studying his mother warily.

The closer they got to the others, the heavier Hermione’s feet felt. By the time they entered the hall leading to the kitchen door, she had stopped walking altogether. As she stood there looking at the door nervously, Hermione felt Ron come up behind her. She closed her eyes as she felt the reassuring warmth of his body and leaned back into him. Almost instantly, his hand was on her shoulder, offering her strength and letting her know she wasn’t alone.

“What... can I have a few minutes with Ron before... before--” Hermione sputtered.

“Of course,” Mrs. Weasley agreed, looking at Hermione sadly for a moment before proceeding towards the kitchen door alone. “We’ll be just inside,” she added. “Whenever you are ready.”

Ron could feel Hermione shaking. As soon as the door closed and they were alone, she spun around and buried her face in his chest and without even thinking, he wrapped his arms around her protectively. He closed his eyes and held her close.

It made his heart ache to see her this way. Afraid. Vulnerable. He’d have given almost anything to be able to take her pain away, but as much as he wanted to, that wasn’t something he could do for her. He could stand beside her and let her know that she wasn’t alone, but he couldn’t ease her pain. Damn those bastards for doing this to her, he thought as he felt the wetness of her tears soak into his shirt. No one made Hermione cry and got away with it. No one except him, that is.

But even as Ron contemplated this, a funny thing happened. As the anger flared up inside of him, he noticed that it seemed to drown out some of the sorrow he was experiencing.

_The anger is better_, he realized. _It’s easier to cope with, but... this isn’t about what’s easier for me. It’s about what Hermione needs. So get a hold of yourself, Weasley, because the last thing she needs is for you to fly off the handle._

“It’ll be ok,” Ron whispered to Hermione as he began to stroke her back lightly.

Hermione sighed deeply and Ron felt her pull away from him. Opening his eyes, he looked down to see her surveying him.
“Ron, I know what this did to you,” Hermione began. She paused for a split second when she noticed his eyes dart down to the floor and then continued. “None of this was your fault,” she reassured him.

Unable to meet her gaze, Ron continued to look at the floor as the guilt ate away at him.

“You do know that, right?” Hermione asked.

But her question was met with silence.

“Ron?”

He felt her hands slip from his back. She took a step backwards, forcing him to release his hold on her as well. Then to his surprise, Ron felt her take both his hands in her own.

“Ron, please look at me,” Hermione pleaded.

Reluctantly, he brought his eyes up and met her penetrating stare.

“None of this was your fault,” she stated again. “It was mine.”

“If I hadn’t picked a fight…” Ron began.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Hermione interrupted.

“…you wouldn’t have run off,” Ron continued.

“It didn’t have anything to do with my running off,” Hermione stated. “It was those blasted Quidditch tickets. They were a trap. They were trying to lure Harry away from the Dursley’s. They meant to take all three of us at the game, but when I tore the tickets up they had to modify the plan. They went after both of us on Diagon Alley instead and it was my fault. There wasn’t anything you
could have done to prevent what happened.”

“I should have protected you,” Ron replied, the guilt still evident in his voice.

“That’s what I was doing.” Hermione declared. “Why do you think I grabbed that Portkey? I did it to protect you. It was too late for me. I was already caught. You couldn’t save me, Ron. But I could still save you. It was my choice. I knew what was going to happen to me, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that you were safe. I did it willingly. And I’d do it again.”

“No, Hermione!” Ron said vehemently.

“It’s ok for you to protect me, but I’m not allowed to protect you?” she asked.

“NO!” he stated loudly.

“A bit of a double standard there, don’t you think?”

“I don’t care,” Ron replied stubbornly. But on some level he must have realized he was being unreasonable, because even in the darkened hallway she saw his face flush just before his eyes dropped to the floor again.

“Well, I do,” Hermione stated irritably.

Not meaning for it to come out so harsh, she reached up and touched Ron’s face tenderly.

The instant he brought his eyes up and locked them on hers, he saw his own pain mirrored back at him.

“I couldn’t stand it if anything happened to you,” she said grimly. “I will not sit back and watch you get yourself killed. Not if I can prevent it. I care about you too much. Don’t ask me to do that, because I won’t. I can’t. I know you understand what I’m saying. You might not like it,” she added, “but you do understand it.”
“That doesn’t mean--”

But before Ron had a chance to finish, the kitchen door swung open and he heard his father clear his throat loudly.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Mr. Weasley said, sounding genuinely apologetic. “But--”

“Just one more minute,” Ron said, looking away from Hermione just long enough to watch his father nod his head in understanding and duck back into the kitchen. When Ron’s gaze settled back on Hermione, he noticed her eyes were now closed. He watched as she took a few deep breaths.

*She’s terrified,* he thought, wrapping his arms around her again and pulled into a hug.

“It wasn’t pretty, Ron... maybe you... ought to wait.”

“You already had to face it alone, once,” he stated. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you do it again.”

*Is it any wonder I love him so much,* she thought, smiling despite herself as she pulled back and looked up into his resolute blue eyes. “Are you ready?” she asked in a shaky voice.

“Are you?” Ron replied, reaching down and taking her hand in his.

“I guess I have to be, don’t I?” she replied, pulling him to the kitchen door. “Let’s get this over with.”

As she reached the door separating herself from the people waiting in the kitchen, Hermione froze. Ron felt her hand slip out of his and he watched as she placed it over the doorknob. He waited, patiently, as he watched her take a steadying breath, but she didn't turn the knob. His eyes darted down to her hand again, and he realized it was shaking. Without even thinking, he reached down and covered her hand with his own.

"It will be all right," Ron leaned forward and whispered in her ear. His hand still clasped on top of hers, he turned the knob and held the door open for her.
Hermione took a few tentative steps forward and blinked several times in an effort to become accustomed to the bright light of the kitchen. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the Weasleys, who were sitting together at the kitchen table. Molly looked as if she might have been crying. Her eyes were bloodshot. Hermione noticed Arthur was seated beside his wife, one arm draped over her shoulder, his free hand rested on top of his wife’s in much the same way Ron's hand had rested on hers just moments ago. Bill was seated on the other side of his mother. He looked tired. And... there was something else. Something in his eyes when he looked up at her. Something she had never had directed at her before, but which she had seen directed at Harry on many occasions.

_Pity, _Hermione thought, wrinkling her nose up in disgust. _I don't want you feeling sorry for me. It will just make it worse._

Unable to bear the pain in their eyes any longer, Hermione looked away from the Weasleys and let her gaze fall on Mad-Eye Moody and Remus Lupin, who were sitting directly across from them. _Not you too_, Hermione thought, as she saw the same pained expression plastered across Lupin's face. Her eyes immediately flicked to Moody, and she was relieved to see that he at least stared back without flinching. His face was set, as if it were carved out of stone. His expression revealed nothing about what he was thinking and she preferred it that way.

_How does Harry put up with this? _Hermione wondered. Then it suddenly hit her. She was guilty of this heinous offense. She had looked at Harry _this_ way. She had felt badly for him. She had wanted to be there for him. She had wanted to comfort him after Sirius was killed. She had wanted to make him talk about it, thinking that it would make him feel better, only... Ron had stopped her. _He knew_, Hermione thought. _I didn't understand, but Ron did. He knew it would just make Harry feel worse. I didn't scold him for it, did I? _She took a moment to think back. _OH NO! _she silently groaned. _I hate it when he's right. Now I'm going to have to apologize._

Hermione was dragged out of her silent musing, by the sound of something clunking down on the table in front of her. She looked up and realized Professor Dumbledore was standing in front of her. Where he had come from, she wasn't sure. She hadn't realized he was still in the room until now.

"Please sit, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said as he pulled out a chair and motioned for her to come forward.

Her eyes shifted to the chair, but Hermione didn't move towards it. It wasn't a conscious decision to ignore him, so much as the fact she couldn't seem to remember how to walk.

She didn't realize her hands were shaking until she felt someone grab a hold of one of them and still it. Caught off guard, she was just about to twist around and see who it was when the answer came to
her. *It's Ron, of course,* she told herself. *He always knows what I need. Even before I know it myself.* Feeling comforted by his closeness, Hermione looked back up and met Dumbledore's gaze.

"I regret that this is necessary," Dumbledore said compassionately. "I know you'd like nothing more than to put the past few hours out of your mind, but I'm afraid I really do need to know exactly what happened to you today."

Still unable to speak, Hermione just nodded her head. There was a patient air about him. She knew he'd let her take things at her own pace. She looked at the chair again, but she didn't want to sit down. She felt as if she'd have more control if she was standing. Dumbledore seemed to understand this, and he didn't press the matter any further. Then something on the table caught Hermione’s attention. Something... shiny. She immediately searched for the source, and her eyes widened as they fell on the shallow stone basin.

"Am I correct in assuming that you know what this is?" Dumbledore asked, prodding the silvery contents in the bowl with his wand and causing them to swirl.

"Y-yes," Hermione replied. "It's... a Pensieve."

"And you know how it works?" he pressed on.

"Yes," she replied quietly.

"Wicked," Ron said from behind her as he stepped forward to get a better look at the shimmering contents churning in the bowl on the table. "Are those your thoughts, Professor?" he asked Dumbledore.

"Memories, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore corrected Ron with a smile. "And yes, they are." Dumbledore piercing eyes studied Ron for a moment and then he beckoned him forward with the wave of his hand. "Come, I'll show you."

Ron looked down at Hermione for an instant and then his curiosity got the better of him. Not bothering to let go of her hand, Ron approached the table, dragging her along behind him. They watched together as Dumbledore placed the tip of his wand to his temple and then pulled it back, withdrawing a shimmering substance as he did so. The silver strand thinned the further Dumbledore's wand got from his temple and then it broke away completely and fell into the Pensieve.

"That doesn't hurt, does it?" Ron asked, as he let go of Hermione's hand and unconsciously reached
up to touch the recently acquired scars on his arm. Although healed, and slowly fading, he obviously hadn't forgotten how he obtained them.


Ron looked down into the stone bowl and was surprised to see that the silvery contents had vanished and had been replaced by an image. Leaning down for a better look, Ron realized he was looking into some sort of room. A room full of wizards, all of them wearing identical plum-colored robes. There was a chair in the center of the room. The armrests were covered with chains. There was someone sitting in that chair. Sitting on the very edge, as if he were trying not to sit in it at all. The room was lit only by the dim light of some torches, which made it hard to make out the features of the person in the chair.

"That's the Wizengamot," Ron said, studying the wizards seated on the benches that rose up before the man in the wooden chair. "Is this one of the trials Harry saw when he--" Ron began. "BLOODY HELL!" He leaned in closer. "Look, Hermione. That's Fudge there in the center and look who's sitting next to him, it's--"

"Umbridge," she finished in a disgusted tone. "Ron," Hermione said, as she wrinkled her face up in revulsion. "Look at the front row, there at the end, isn't that--"

"Percy!" Ron spat his name out as if the very word were poison.

"This... this is Harry's trial," Hermione said, staring down in disbelief.

"Would you like to view it from inside?" Dumbledore asked.

"No," Hermione said, pulling her gaze off the Pensive and standing upright. "I think we've seen enough."

Ron looked at the Pensive eagerly for just a split second longer and then straightened up as well.

"Mr. Weasley, would you like to have a closer look?" Dumbledore asked with a twinkle in his eyes. Apparently the fact Hermione had answered for both of them hadn't gone unnoticed.

Ron glanced at Hermione quickly before answering. "No... er... thanks, but I reckon I already know how it turns out."
"Very well," Dumbledore said, reaching out to touch the image with the tip of his wand. The moment he did the room dissolved back into the silvery-white substance and once again, started to churn about in the basin.

"You're going to do that to me, aren't you?" Hermione asked, as she met Dumbledore's penetrating gaze.

"Yes," he replied, his voice calm and surprisingly comforting.

"Will I remember any of what happened after you take the memory from me?" she questioned.

"Yes and no," Dumbledore replied. "You will remember that you were taken. You will recall any strong emotions you had, such as fear. But you will no longer remember the details of what happened."

"Like a dream?" Ron asked.

"Yes, that is precisely what it is like," Dumbledore explained. "It is as if you have woken from a dream. You can vaguely recall what happened and how it made you feel, but within moments, the details are lost to you and soon you forget about them altogether."

"I don't want to forget," Hermione stated, catching nearly everyone gathered in the kitchen off guard. Everyone, except Dumbledore, that is. He studied her carefully. His intense azure eyes seem to bore into her soul, making her shift uncomfortably, but she didn't look away. It was Dumbledore that broke the connection, with a smile.

"I suspected you might feel that way," Dumbledore admitted. "If that is what you truly desire, I will return the memory when we are finished," he assured her.

Hermione seemed to find that acceptable. She nodded silently.

"Miss Granger?" Professor Dumbledore asked, "You haven't by chance, had any Occlumency lessons from Mr. Potter, have you?"
"No, sir," Hermione replied, clearly not expecting that particular question. "Why?"

"I was just curious. You were aware of my presence just now, were you not?"

"You mean could I _feel_ you?" Hermione asked. "No, not exactly."

"And yet you partitioned your mind," Dumbledore said, looking at her appraisingly.

"Come again?" Ron said. "She did what?"

"She divided her thoughts," Dumbledore explained. "In essence, it means that rather than trying to expel me from her mind, she simply threw up a barrier around the thoughts and memories she didn't want to share. It is the equivalent of a mental brick wall. Only in this case, the wall is reinforced by sheer willpower. You are a very... headstrong young woman," Dumbledore said as his gaze fell on Hermione once more.

"You have no idea," Ron chuckled.

"It would have taken considerable effort to break through those barriers," Dumbledore continued. "I'm curious. Did you do that on purpose, or was it instinctual?"

"Both," Hermione replied. "I knew you were in my head, even though I couldn't really feel you. And I didn't want you seeing certain things, so I just... well, I don't know how to explain it really. I just sort of pushed them to the side and blocked them out. I figured if I couldn't see them, then you wouldn't be able to either."

"Have you ever done this before?"

"Sure, I do it all the time with--" Catching herself midway though her sentence, Hermione froze. "Er... that is--"

"With whom?" Dumbledore pushed.
"Well... with... Professor Snape," she admitted.

"Bloody git." Hermione heard Ron muttered under his breath.

"Quite understandable," Dumbledore chuckled. "He must find that... vexing. What I meant to say was, did you do it today, when the Death Eaters questioned you?"

"Y-yes, I think so," Hermione said, thinking back. "Yes, there were definitely things I didn't want them to see."

"Did they manage to break through your barriers?"

"I... I don't know. I'm not sure any of them were even in my mind trying."

"You would have been able to tell," Dumbledore assured her. "If they had attempted to push past your barriers, that is. As I said, you are very... determined. Even though you are untrained, I suspect it would take a great deal of mental effort to see something you were purposely trying to shield from them. It would have been... painful."

"No, they didn't do that then. They did use a few Unforgivables though."

"The Cruciatus Curse?" Dumbledore asked sadly.

"Y-yes," Hermione said, trying hard not to look at the strained faces of the adults seated around the table.

"You had already partitioned your mind, by that point?" Dumbledore questioned.

"I guess so."

"What does that matter?" Ron asked, as his face drained of color. "Bloody bastards!"

"RON!" Hermione said, jabbing him in the side with her elbow.
"They weren't trying to break through any barriers, they just wanted to hurt you," Ron fumed.

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed. "But the Cruciaturs Curse is meant to do more than simply inflict pain. It is also meant to break the spirit of its victim. Even to shatter their mind in extreme cases." Dumbledore explained to Ron.

Like what happened to Neville's parents, Ron thought. The mental image of Hermione locked up in St. Mungo's with Lockhart and the Longbottoms was almost more than he could bear to think about, so he quickly forced the image out of his head.

"Partitioning your mind is an effective means of withstanding such torture. If one can separate their core self, and lock it away, it makes it easier to endure the degradation of being tortured. It also makes it possible to deceive your attackers. If done properly, they mistakenly believe they have broken you and crushed your will to fight them. They think you are defeated, when in reality, you are simply biding your time, waiting for the right opportunity to resist them." Dumbledore explained.

"You did all that?" Ron asked Hermione, gaping at her in admiration.

"No," she replied, blushing under his intense scrutiny.

"But you did partition your mind?" Mad-Eye Moody asked.

Hermione jumped at the sound of his gruff voice, having nearly forgotten the others were still there.

"Let us see, shall we?" Dumbledore said, holding his wand up in front of him and looking at Hermione. "If you're ready, Miss Granger, I will extract the memory from you."

"Wait," Hermione cried, taking a step backwards and colliding with Ron who had been standing behind her. "Exactly how much of it are you going to take?" she questioned. "I... I... don't want you... um, well I...I said some things earlier today that I'm not exactly proud of, and they are... rather private, and I don't really want everyone," she felt her face flush as she glanced over at the group of adults seated around the table, "hearing them."

"Are you referring to your quarrel with Mr. Weasley this afternoon?" Dumbledore inquired.
"Yes," Hermione admitted, looking down at her feet, clearly embarrassed by the whole conversation.

"No need to go back all that far," Dumbledore assured her. "We'll just pick it up after that, shall we? Think about the moment you touched the Portkey," Dumbledore said. "The moment you touched it and everything that happened immediately afterward. Pull that memory to the front of your mind. See it. Hear it. Feel it. Concentrate on that memory," Dumbledore instructed. "Can you see it in your mind?" he asked. "Can you feel it?"

As he watched her, Ron noticed Hermione had closed her eyes and had started to shake. He was just about to reach out to her, when Dumbledore stopped him by silently shaking his head. Looking at her apprehensively, Ron took a step back and waited.

"Can you see it, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes," she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

"Where are you?" Dumbledore asked, as he silently approached her, and pointed his wand at her head.

"In... in a... a... cell," Hermione replied. "A cell... in a dark room. It's in a cellar or a dungeon. I'm not sure which. The only way out is a rickety old staircase. There's a door at the top, but I can't see what's beyond. It's cold and drafty, and it smells of mold... and something else. Something I can't place."

"Very good," Dumbledore said, placing the tip of his wand against Hermione's temple and extracting a gossamer strand of memory from her mind. As the strand broke loose and fell into the Pensieve, the contents swirled about madly and then an image began to form.

Hermione opened her eyes and gazed down into the bowl. She found the entire experience slightly disconcerting. At first, she didn't recognize the dark stone room. But then, as she studied it, she began to feel a strange sense of déja vù. It was almost as if the images were forming in her mind a second or two before she saw them in the Pensieve.

A single torch, that put off a dim sputtering light. She saw it in her mind an instant before it sprung to life in the image before her. The large cage in the middle of the room. That too was somehow vaguely familiar.
Prying her eyes off the iron bars of the cell, Hermione looked up at Dumbledore. "What now?" she asked.

"We watch," Dumbledore replied.

"All of you?" Hermione asked.

"If you prefer, I will watch it alone," Dumbledore said, leaning forward and preparing to plunge his head into the Pensieve.

"No, they should see it," Hermione said, looking at the group of people gathered around the table. "Ron too," she said, looking up into Dumbledore's eyes. "I want him to see it. He needs to see it."

Mrs. Weasley started to object, and then stopped herself. It was no use trying to shield Ron from this. Hermione would just tell him about it later. Better to have him watch first hand. With any luck, it might even drive out some of the reckless impulses that nearly got him killed every other summer.

Dumbledore looked over at the Weasleys. When Molly nodded her consent, he turned back to the Pensieve and plunged his head inside.

"There's no way we can all stick our heads in that thing," Ron said as he watched the others rise from their seats and close in on the stone basin.

"All you have to do is touch him while he's looking in it," Hermione whispered, rolling her eyes at him. "Honestly Ron, didn't you listen to Harry when he explained how it worked?"

"Of course I listened. But he never said that."

"Yes, he did."

"No, he didn't."

"Yes, he did," she insisted. "He told us that Professor Dumbledore and Snape both entered the memory by touching his arm."
"No, they pulled him out by touching his arm," Ron argued.

"But they entered it before they pulled him out, didn't they?"

"You two are worse than Mum and Dad," Bill snickered as he reached out to touch Dumbledore. "You must drive poor Harry mad."

"We do not," Ron protested.

"Actually he did say that--"

"Hermione! Now is not the time," Ron interjected.

"Ok, you're right," she admitted. "Come on, everyone else is already watching. Just touch him," she said as she reached out for Dumbledore's shoulder.

The minute Ron reached out and touched Dumbledore, the kitchen seemed to lurch. Without warning, he felt as if he was tipped forward and then suddenly he was falling. Just as suddenly, he found himself standing in the middle of the dimly lit room he had seen in the Pensieve. The others were all standing there as well, looking down at Hermione who was lying on the floor with a man crouched over her.

With a look of utmost disgust, Ron glared at Wormtail. This is all my fault, he thought. If I had just let Sirius kill him--

His eyes smoldered with anger as he watched Pettigrew pick Hermione up off the floor, and literally toss her into the cage in the center of the room. He then slammed the door shut and locked it with his wand.

"Colloportus."

"How could you?" Ron heard Hermione ask as she pulled herself to her feet. She was clearly
frightened. Everyone watching the memory could see her shaking as tears streamed down her cheeks. "He loved you. How could you sic those Death Eaters on him like that?"

Ignoring her question, they watched as Wormtail thrust his arm between the bars of the cage and held his hand out, his palm facing upward. "Your wand," he demanded.

"I... I don't have it," Hermione whispered in a shaky voice.

Wormtail shot her an incredulous look, and then pointed his own wand at her chest.

They all watched silently as Hermione took a step back and collided with the iron bars of the cage. "Your wand," Wormtail insisted.

"It's summer holiday," they heard Hermione reply, "and I'm underage. I can't use it. Why would I have it?"

"Last chance," Wormtail warned, jabbing his wand at her menacingly.

"BLOODY BASTARD!" Ron shouted, unable to keep his anger in check. He was just considering whether or not it was possible to attack a memory, when he heard his mother hiss his name. His eyes still locked on Pettigrew, Ron didn't see her advance on him until it was too late.

Everyone else watched as Wormtail shrugged his shoulders and uttered a spell. "Accio Wand."

Nothing happened.

"That will be quite enough," Mrs. Weasley snarled, grabbing Ron by the collar and yanking him away from the group. "This is hard for all of us to watch," she whispered, some of the anger leaving her voice, "but it's important for Dumbledore to see and hear everything. It's going to get a lot worse, before it's over, so unless you can watch quietly, like the rest of us, you can go back to the kitchen right now.

"Sorry, Mum," Ron said, looking down at his feet.
"Honestly Ron, it's no good shouting at a memory. It isn't as if he can hear you," she said, turning around and returning to the group.

"ACCIO WAND!" Wormtail shouted again.

Still nothing happened.

"I told you," they heard Hermione say.

"How did you get to Diagon Alley?" Wormtail demanded.

"Floo powder."

"From where?"

"GO TO HELL YOU RAT BASTARD!" Hermione shouted.

Ron raised an eyebrow and looked at the real Hermione, who was now standing next to him watching the scene unfold with everyone else. Even though she refused to meet his gaze, he noticed the rosy hue that quickly covered her cheeks. Apparently, being caught swearing, by him of all people, was more than a little embarrassing.

"I see the charming Mr. Weasley has had a rather negative influence on you," Wormtail cackled.

The sound of his own name being uttered immediately drew Ron's attention away from Hermione and back to the memory.

"YOU LEAVE HIM OUT OF THIS!" Ron watched Hermione scream.

A malicious smile spread across Wormtail's pointed face. "You care what happens to him?" he sneered.

"Of course I care," Hermione replied. "He's my friend."

"Would it make a difference if I told you the Dark Lord is not interested in him?" Wormtail inquired. "Or you either for that matter? You are both just a means to an end."
"What if I promised you that no harm would come to him if..."

"Like Voldemort promised you he'd spare Lily?" Hermione replied coldly, scowling at the little man in front of her as if he were some disgusting pile of filth she had just stepped in.

Ron involuntarily smiled as he watched Wormtail cringe and take a step away from the cage. "What? You dare... to speak his--"

Lupin looked at Hermione appraisingly for a moment, and then advanced on Pettigrew. He walked right up to his old friend and studied his reaction closely as the memory continued.

"That is what he promised you, isn't it?" they heard Hermione ask. "Why else would he have offered to let her go? She was Muggle born. A prime target. He should have killed her without a second thought, but he didn't. Why is that?"

Lupin narrowed his eyes as he watched Wormtail glare at Hermione silently.

"I think it is because you were in love with her," they heard Hermione declare. "You wormed your way into being the Potter's secret keeper as part of some...some sick plan to make her your own. You tried to buy her from Voldemort with the blood of her husband and son and you let Sirius take the blame so you could be the one to comfort her. YOU MAKE ME SICK!! IF YOU THINK I'D SELL OUT HARRY TO SAVE RON OR MYSELF--"

Wormtail recoiled at the sound of Voldemort's name being uttered for a second time, but he seemed to find his tongue. "You'll change your mind," he said viciously as he turned around, grabbed the single torch lighting the room, and proceeded to ascend the staircase with it. "The Dark Lord can be VERY persuasive."

"He's going to kill you, you know?" Hermione said.

Wormtail froze in front of the door. He spun around and sneered down at the cell. "You are the one that ruined his plan," he replied. It was meant to scare her, Ron realized that, but it sounded as if he were really trying to convince himself that Hermione would take the blame for their botched plan rather than him.

"Not Voldemort," Hermione stated. "Ron."

Wormtail snorted down at her. "Yes, he is the 'Sirius' of your little trio isn't he? Just as
temperamental. Just as blind. He is so fiercely loyal, he'll never forgive you a single slight. Yes," he paused to consider it. "Weasley is definitely the type to hold a grudge and plot revenge." They all watched as Wormtail shrugged his shoulders, evidently unconcerned. "I guess I'll just have to get him first, won't I?" he said as he spun around and walked out of the room, leaving Hermione alone in the dark.

As soon as the door closed, they heard Hermione break down in her cell. Unable to see her, now that the torch was missing, they were forced to stand there in the dark and listen to her sob.

"All right, Hermione?" Ron whispered as he reached out to the real Hermione who was standing next to him.

"Yeah," she whispered back, leaning against him when she felt his arm wrap around her shoulder. "This is just...odd," she said, listening to herself weep in the darkness.

"Do you remember any of it?" Ron asked softly.

"Bits and pieces," she replied. "They left me down here for hours," she said quietly. "They probably thought it would help break me.... being locked up alone, in the dark, with nothing to do but imagine how I was going to die."

Hermione felt Ron's grip on her tightened as he pulled her into a hug.

"They were wrong though," Hermione said "Dying is the easy part. It's those that are left behind to deal with the aftermath that have the hard part. It was you and Harry I was thinking about. What my death would do to both of you and my parents."

Even though he couldn't see her, Ron knew she was crying.

"It's ok," he said, as much to reassure himself as her. "You got away."

"Yeah," Hermione sniffed. "I guess I did."

"Can't you speed this thing up?" Moody asked Dumbledore impatiently. "I got better things to do than stand around in a pitch-black memory for the rest of the night."
"Miss Granger?" Hermione heard Dumbledore ask.

"Yes, sir?" she replied.

"Would you care to speed this memory along?"

"Um... I'm sorry, Professor. I don't know how. I can't even really remember what happened after this," Hermione admitted.

"Just picture the door at the top of the stairs," Dumbledore instructed her. "See it in your mind and then picture it opening."

"I'll... I'll try, sir," Hermione replied, closing her eyes and envisioning the door. But the clearer it became, the more certain she was that she didn't want it to open. Her heart started to pound, and suddenly she was breathing heavily. Even though Ron still had his arms wrapped around her, she felt herself begin to tremble.

NO, I don't want that door to open, she thought.

"Hermione, it's all right," Ron whispered. "It's just a memory. It already happened. They can't hurt you now."

Leaning against Ron's chest, Hermione took a deep breath and then released it. "Thanks," she muttered as she closed her eyes and pictured the door again, this time willing it to open.

They heard the door creak open before they saw the light at the top of the staircase. As they looked up, they could just make out the outline of the figure in the doorway as he started to descend the stairs. Lit from behind, it was impossible to tell who it was until he reached the cell and pointed his wand at the locked door.

"Alohomora," Wormtail cried, throwing the door open and stepping inside the cage.

Without so much as another word, he reached down, grabbed Hermione, who was seated on the floor, and hauled her to her feet. They watched in silence as Wormtail pushed Hermione roughly out
of the cell and towards the staircase. Not expecting it, she lost her balance and fell to the ground with a cry. She barely managed to break her fall with her hands, before Wormtail grabbed the back of her shirt and jerked her upright again. They watched as he pressed the tip of his wand into her back and pushed her up the staircase.

Ron glared at Pettigrew through narrowed eyes as Professor Dumbledore mounted the stairs and followed closely behind the pair exiting through the door. Knowing he'd have to wait his turn, as the staircase was too narrow to allow them all to ascend at once, Ron crossed his arms in front of his chest and waited for the adults to go first.

When he finally did reach the top of the stairs, Ron stepped out of the basement and into a narrow hallway, where he was startled to discover two hooded men standing guard on either side of the doorway they’d just passed through. Mad-Eye Moody was standing in front of one of the men, glowering at him.

_Must be trying to figure out who they are_, Ron thought as he pushed past the Death Eaters and followed the rest of the group down the corridor.

Moody caught up with them, just as Wormtail pulled Hermione to a stop in front of a large wooden door. They all watched as he reached around her, pushed it open and then shoved her roughly inside.

Ron heard the real Hermione gasp beside him, and when he reached out for her, he could feel her shaking. The instant his eyes flicked away from her and to the Hermione sprawled out on the floor, he understood why. She was frozen in place, her eyes wide with terror, as she stared up the massive snake in front of her.

_**BLOODY HELL**, _Ron thought as he stared down at the immense serpent, coiled around itself and poised to strike.

Hermione wasn't the only one that had a strong reaction to react to the memory. Mrs. Weasley gasped as well.

"Is that--" Molly began to ask in a shaky voice.

"Yes," her husband replied before she even had a chance to finish, an involuntary shudder rocking his body. He had clearly not been expecting to come face to face with the very snake that had nearly killed him the previous winter.
"He... he was... in the snake," the real Hermione started to stammer as she grabbed a hold of Ron's arm, spun around, and hid her face him his chest. "He was watching through the snake. He was watching me through the snake."

Unable to pry his eyes off the scene in front of him, Ron started down and watched the snake's tongue flicked out to taste the fear in the air surrounding Hermione. As he stared, transfixed by the snake, Ron saw Dumbledore stooped down and placed his own face inches from the serpents, so he could look into its evil eyes.

"Yes, he is here," Ron heard Dumbledore mutter just before he stood upright again.

Slowly the snake began to uncoil, and as if that were some kind of cue, Wormtail strode forward, grabbed Hermione roughly by the collar, pulled her upright, and pushed her towards a chair in the middle of the room.

"Sit," he demanded.

Latching onto the chair to break her fall, Hermione quickly did as she was told. She all but threw herself into the chair, her anxious eyes never leaving Nagini. Ron watched as she reached down and grasped a hold of the seat, in an attempt to stop her hands from shaking. She was so preoccupied with the snake, that she failed to realize the door had opened and a hooded figure had entered the room.

It wasn't until she was standing right beside Hermione, lowering her hood, that she realized someone was there. Breathing heavily, Hermione turned and stared up at...

"Bellatrix Lestrange!" Mrs. Weasley cried out in horror, gaping at the mad woman standing before Hermione.

Ron's eyes widened as the full ramifications of the situation struck home. This wasn't just any Death Eater. This was one of You-Know-Who's most fanatical supporters. She had been sent to Azkaban for torturing Neville's parents. She had tortured them into insanity and now... she was going to torture Hermione.

She's going to torture her, and I have to watch, Ron's mind screamed. No, he reminded himself, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, She's already done it. That BLOODY BITCH, has already done it. It isn't happening now. It's over. She got away. She's all right. Just stay calm. You have to
stay calm for Hermione.

"Where is the Headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix located?" Ron heard Lestrange's cold voice demand. Standing behind Hermione, his arms now draped over her shoulders, holding her to him protectively, Ron opened his eyes and forced himself to watch.

Shaking like mad, they watched the memory of Hermione turn and glance at the snake. She didn't even see the curse coming.

"Crucio!" they heard Lestrange shout. Her face contorted into a sinister grin as she watched Hermione fall out of the chair and writhe around on the floor in agony. Her screams filled the room for a full minute before the curse was finally lifted.

"That is just a taste of what I can do to you," Lestrange taunted, as Hermione lay on the ground trying to catch her breath. "You will answer my questions," she said viciously, kicking Hermione in the side as she did so. "Where is it located?"

"I... I... don't know," Hermione panted, clutching her side. "I'm... I'm not the Secret Keeper."

"Who is?" Lestrange demanded.

"D-dumbledore," Hermione moaned as she tried to rise up off the floor.

"Crucio."

They watched Hermione crumple to the floor for a second time as waves of pain, the likes of which she had never known, ripped through her body. As Hermione's cries echoed off the walls of the small room, Lestrange closed her eyes, and savored the screams as if they were a favorite song.

When she finally lifted the curse, Hermione lay sobbing on the floor.

"My master is most displeased with you," Lestrange sneered down at her. "Weeks of planning ruined because of you. How did you know it was a trap?" she asks, her cruel eyes gleaming with genuinely curious.
"What?" Hermione asked as she looked up at Lestrange in fear.

"How did you know the tickets were a trap?" Lestrange shouted as she brutally kicked Hermione in the ribs for a second time.

"I... I didn't," Hermione cried out, doubling over in pain.

"Then why did you refuse to take them?" Lestrange asked, her cold voice, oddly calm.

"I just didn't want to go," Hermione replied.

"You expect me to believe that you turned down Viktor Krum, simply because you didn't want to go to his match?" Lestrange asked as she pointed her wand down at Hermione for a third time. "Crucio."

Ron watched with disgust, his eyes burning with hatred, as Lestrange walked over and sat down in the chair Hermione had occupied only moments ago. She waited a few seconds longer, and then lifted the curse.

"Answer my question truthfully," she spat down at Hermione. "Why did you turn down the tickets?"

"I...I didn't... want to... lead him on," Hermione panted.

"You didn't want to lead him on?" Lestrange's maniacal laughter filled the room. "That is disgustingly noble of you. I hope Potter appreciates it."

"He... won't come... after me," Hermione said, as she turned and looked at the snake on the floor beside her.

"Oh yes, he will," Lestrange laughed.

"DON'T YOU DARE SET ONE FOOT OUTSIDE OF THAT HOUSE, HARRY!!" Hermione bellowed at the snake.
"CRUCIO!" Lestrange cried angrily. "That was very stupid," she taunted as Hermione thrashed about on the floor. "And here I thought you were supposed to be the smartest of the three."

Lestrange lifted the curse with a cruel laugh. "Oh, he'll come," she said confidently. "He came running when he thought his godfather was in danger." Hermione glared up at Bellatrix as she said this, clearly remembering that this was the woman that had murdered Sirius. "He's too noble to throw his girlfriend to the wolves."

"I'm... not his girlfriend," they heard Hermione say.

Lestrange's evil cackle fills the room again. "Your sordid little love triangle with Potter and Krum is common knowledge."

"You ought to know you can't believe anything you read in the papers," Hermione stated. "The whole thing was a pack of lies."

"Krum told us you refused him, because you had feelings for someone else. Obviously that is Potter."

"You're wrong," Hermione replied smugly and got another shot of the Cuciatus Curse for her cheek. As her screams echoed off the walls of the room, Lestrange turned to Wormtail and looked at him sharply. "If it isn't Potter, then who is it?" she asked Hermione, after she had lifted the curse.

"Go... to... hell," Hermione said as she gasped for air.

"Crucio."

"FUCKING BITCH!" Ron shouted angrily at the memory of Lestrange. His mother immediately silenced him with a heated look of her own.

"Who is it?" they heard Lestrange demand.

"Fuck... off... bitch," Hermione panted as she lay there on the floor.
"It hurt so badly," the real Hermione admitted quietly to Ron, who stood fuming behind her. "I was afraid I wouldn't be able to take much more."

"You were trying to goad her into killing you?" Ron asked quietly.

"Yes," she admitted. "But he stopped her," she went on, pointing down at the snake.

When Ron's gaze returned to the memory, he realized that Lestrange's face was contorted with rage. Her wand was pointed down at Hermione and her intent was clear. But before she could utter the words to the killing curse, the snake sprang forward and coiled itself around Hermione's body. Ron watched as the Hermione on the floor shuddered violently. Her eyes went wide with terror. Clearly she wanted nothing more than to throw the huge serpent off her body, but she was unable to move.

Slowly Lestrange lowered her wand, but her hate-filled eyes never left Hermione. "You'll pay for that, you filthy little Mudblood worm," she hissed. "I promise you. You'll be begging me to finish you off by the time I'm through. But the Dark Lord must have his questions answered first. Now, if it isn't Potter, who is it?"

Hermione remained silent. She couldn't have answered even if she had wanted to. She was so traumatized by the feel of the snake's clammy skin against her own, that she couldn't focus on anything else.

"Imperio," Lestrange cried, pointing her wand at Hermione's chest as the snake uncoiled itself and slithered away to watch.

"What are you to Potter?" Lestrange asked.

"His friend," Hermione replied, her voice so calm it was almost serene.

"Are you two romantically involved?" Lestrange asked.

"No," Hermione answered lifelessly.

"Have you ever been romantically involved with Potter?"
"No," Hermione replied. "Harry fancies--"

"THERE!" Mad-Eye shouted excitedly. "You can see it in her eyes," he continued, "She's trying to fight it."

"Whom does he fancy?" Lestrange asked eagerly.

"...Ch...Cho Chang," they heard Hermione reply.

"Is he dating Cho Chang?" Lestrange asked.

"Nnnnn...ooo," Hermione answered. "Not ...not anymore." The flicker of life in her eyes vanished and they clouded over again. To Moody's disappointment, Hermione appeared to readily answer the question. "They split up last year. She's dating someone else now."

To everyone's surprise, Dumbledore smiled knowingly. "You chose to give her that information," he said to Hermione.

"Yes," she admitted. "It was as if I were inside my own head listening to myself speak. I felt as if she was controlling part of me, but not all of me. I answered the question because I didn't want her to have a reason to go after Cho."

"The partitions," Dumbledore informed her. "You purposely allowed her access to information you thought was unimportant, to keep her from realizing you were not fully under her control."

"Does Potter still have feelings for this Cho Chang?" Lestrange persisted.

"No," they heard Hermione reply calmly.

"Does Potter have feelings for any other girls?"

"I don't know."
"Then he could have feelings for you?"

"No. He wouldn't do that to--" But Hermione never finished the statement.

"He wouldn't do that to whom?" Lestrange demanded.

"SOD OFF YOU WRETCHED COW!" Hermione shrieked as she threw the Imperius Curse off entirely. She felt the pain of the old curse hit her moments before she was brought down by a fresh wave of agony.

"CRUCIO!" Lestrange shouted, clearly incensed. "YOU WILL TELL ME!" she yelled, as she stood over Hermione's writhing form and kicked her savagely in the back.

After a moment that felt like eternity to Ron, Lestrange lifted the curse and waited for Hermione screams to die down to whimpers.

"He wouldn't do that to whom?" she demanded.

"Ron Weasley."

Hermione gasped and everyone spun around and stared at Wormtail who was standing beside the door, for it was he that had answered the question.

"The Best Friend?" Lestrange asked, her lip curling as she spun around to stare at him.

"If he fancied her," they heard Wormtail reply, the disgust evident as he motioned down at Hermione, who gaping at him from the floor, "and Potter knew about it," Wormtail continued. "He's too honorable to go after her himself. Even if he did have feelings for her, he'd never act on them."

A wicked smile covered Lestrange's face. "Is it the best friend?" she asked with and sinister laugh. "Are you protecting Potter's little sidekick?"

Hermione took a deep breath, knowing what was going to happen, but remained silent.
"Crucio!" Lestrange shouted, but she lifted the curse almost immediately.

"Did you spurn Krum because you have feelings for Weasley?" she questioned.

"She wouldn't choose him over Potter or Krum," they heard Wormtail say.

"And you know this, how?" Lestrange asked, turning to study Pettigrew.

"I watched them interact for three years. She was much closer with Potter then she was with Weasley. They couldn't be in the same room for longer then 5 minutes without an argument breaking out. In fact, they were fighting just before we grabbed her."

"And yet he still tried to save her," Lestrange said, turning her attention back to Hermione, who was glaring at the pair of Death Eaters hovering over her.

"He would do that for anyone," they heard Wormtail say from where he stood, behind Lestrange. "He's just as bad as Potter in that respect."

"I don't think so," Lestrange said, her sinister eyes dancing. "Why did you grab the Portkey?" she asked Hermione.

"To ruin your plans," Hermione replied quickly. It was only half of the truth, and Lestrange seemed to sense this. She looked directly into Hermione's eyes, as if she were searching for answers there.

Ron watched as Lestrange narrowed her eyes and glowered at Hermione.

"Why did you grab that Portkey?" she asked again.

"I told you," Hermione replied angrily. "To ruin your plans."

"You did it to save him," they heard Lestrange say.
"That's right," Hermione admitted, glaring up at her defiantly. "No Portkey, no way to get Ron out of Diagon Alley. At least not a way that would be quick enough to serve your needs."

"So you sacrificed yourself?" Lestrange asked.

"It wasn't a sacrifice," Hermione stated, meeting the Death Eaters hateful gaze. "I was already caught. I'd have done the same thing for anyone."

Lestrange studied Hermione intently for a moment, as if trying to determine if what she said was true. "He might have rescued you if he had gotten through the crowd," she said, trying to discern the answer to something that was eluding her. "He was in a right rage, or so I have been told." Lestrange glanced at Wormtail, who nodded his head in agreement.

Lestrange let out a sigh and pointed to a glass of water on a table behind Pettigrew. He snatched it off the table without a word and handed it to her.

"Drink this," she said, holding the glass out for Hermione to take.

"You first," they heard Hermione reply.

It was clearly not the response Lestrange had been expecting, as evident by her raised eyebrow.

"It could be poisoned," Hermione clarified.

"Why would I poison you?" Lestrange asked, her voice full of mock innocence.

"Because you are a cold-hearted bitch that would like nothing more then to see me twitch on the floor," Hermione replied.

"You're right," Lestrange cried, "but I have other ways of accomplishing that. NOW DRINK!"

They watched as Hermione reached out and took the glass of water from the Death Eater with a trembling hand. Slowly she brought it up to her lips and just as she was about to take a sip, she let
go. The glass fell to the floor and shattered. "Oops," Hermione managed to say, an instant before she was incapacitated by the pain that shot through her body.

"CRUCIO!" Lestrange shouted, and they watched Hermione fall to the floor yet again. Only this time something unexpected happened. As she twisted on the floor in agony, something fell out of her pocket and the group watched, Wormtail bent down and picked up what appeared to be a small black box.

"What is that?" Lestrange and Mad-Eye Moody asked in unison.

"I don't know," Wormtail replied, "Some sort of Muggle device."

Moody turned to the real Hermione, for an answer.

"Just watch," she said.

Obviously unnerved by the unknown device, Lestrange lifted her curse, and watched warily as Hermione gasped for air while the pain subsided.

"What is that?" she demanded, pointing at Wormtail who was standing directly above Hermione, studying the small black object in his hand. Hermione looked up, but before she could answer, Wormtail pressed a button on the gadget, there was a loud buzzing sound, and he collapsed right on top of her.

When she threw him off, Hermione had Pettigrew's wand in her hand. She pointed it right at Lestrange and bellowed "STUPEFY!"

Caught right in the middle of her own curse, "Expellia--" Lestrange crashed to the floor.

Now all that was left was the snake. It struck quickly, but not quickly enough. There was a loud crack and Hermione vanished from the room an instant before the razor sharp teeth could reach her.

Ron unexpectedly felt as if he had been yanked backwards. He seemed to turn head over heels and then he felt his feet connect with the floor. It took him a few seconds to register the fact he was back in the kitchen at the Burrow, and no longer in the memory.

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL WAS THAT THING?" Mad-Eye Moody shouted at Hermione.
"A taser," she replied. She might as well have made the word up, for all the good it did.

"It's a Muggle device used to stun people," Dumbledore replied, as he looked at Hermione appraisingly.

"How?" Lupin asked, obviously at as much of a loss and Moody was. "It releases a high volt charge of electricity into the body, overloading it," Hermione explained.

"You can do that with ekeltricity?" Arthur Weasley asked, his eyes wide with excitement. "Do you think I could get a look at one of--" he started to ask.

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" Mrs. Weasley roared. "I will not have you stunning yourself with some stupid Muggle device."

"Hermione," Bill said in surprise. "What were you doing with that thing?"

"Just because I can't use my wand, doesn't mean I'm not going to protect myself," she stated.

"What else do you have?" Ron asked, unable to keep from smiling.

Hermione looked up at him, her expression a mixture of amusement at his excitement and guilt.

"What makes you think I have anything else?" Hermione asked him.

"Come on," Ron said. "What else do you have?"

Hermione bit her lip as she looked into his mischievous blue eyes and then let out a sigh. "Mace," she said. "It's a liquid you spray at people to blind them," she explained when she saw the confused faces around her.

"You... you have a potion that can blind people?" Bill asked, his eyes wide with shock.

"Only temporarily," Hermione said quickly. She found the expressions of astonishment on
everyone's face a bit unnerving. "It's rather hard to curse someone if you can't see where they are," she said defensively.

"What kind of dodgy place sells something like that to a teenage girl?" Bill asked.

"I bought them off the Internet," Hermione said. She may as well have been speaking a foreign language, judging by all the confused faces around her. "Off my computer?" she tried again.

"Oh, that box thing you told me about," Ron said. "The one you watch Muggle plays on?"

"No, it's a different 'box thing' that you can shop on. Just think of it as a Muggle version of Knockturn Alley."

"You shouldn't be going to a place like that," Mrs. Weasley scolded her. "I'm sure your parents wouldn't approve."

"I didn't go anywhere," Hermione said, wishing the entire conversation would end. There was just no possible way she could explain computers or the Internet to a group of wizards in one evening. "I never left my house. They mailed it directly to me there."

"But," Ron began, "you just said that--"

"Oh never mind," Hermione said as she sat down in a chair and stifled a yawn.

"Albus?" Mrs. Weasley asked, looking down at Hermione and then up at Dumbledore, who nodded. "It's been a long day," she said, placing her hand on Ron's shoulder. "Why don't you take Hermione up to Percy's room so she can get some sleep."

"Ok," Ron replied, feeling more then a little tired himself.

Not bothering to suppress her yawn this time, Hermione rose to her feet and started to follow Ron out of the kitchen.
"Wait," she said, turning around to face the adults again. "I want my memory back."

Dumbledore smiled patiently at the young woman and beckoned her forward with a wave of his hand.
Chapter 3: Getting Closer

Professor Dumbledore had just finished giving Hermione back her memory, when a loud shout drew everyone's attention.

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING?" Mrs. Weasley roared, glaring in Ron's direction.

Despite the fact he hadn't done a thing, Ron immediately jumped backwards. It wasn't until he realized everyone was looking past him, that he spun around and saw his father frozen a few inches from the door leading out of the kitchen.

"No where, Molly," Mr. Weasley sputtered in protest. "No where."

"You were going to look for that RUDDY MUGGLE POTION!" Molly bellowed as she advanced on her husband in a fit of rage. "OH, FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE! That's all we need right now. You to sneak off and blind yourself with some dubious Muggle concoction."

"No... no, I wasn't," Mr. Weasley insisted as he shrank away from his wife. And yet even as he denied it, the guilty expression plastered across his face made it fairly evident that had been exactly what he was about to do.

"You most certainly were," Molly argued.

Hermione couldn't help herself. She started to laugh.

"You won't think it's so funny when she turns on you," Ron whispered at her side. "We better get out of here. Quick," he said, pulling her past his father and towards the door. "And... I reckon you better hide that stuff from Dad, because she’s right. Chances are, he really will blind himself with it."

“Stop,” Hermione cried out, clutching her side and doubling over in a fit of laughter as he dragged her into the hallway. “Oh, it hurts,” she complained, and yet she continued to laugh until tears were rolling down her cheeks. “Make it stop.”
"You've gone a bit loopy there, Hermione," Ron chuckled when he realized it was the laughter she was complaining about and not something more serious. "I think Mum's right. You need to get some sleep," he said, reaching for her again and trying to steer her towards the staircase. "It really isn't that funny," Ron told her as she continued to giggle.

"Yes it is," Hermione sniggered. "Did you see him hunker down and try to lie to her?" she asked, her eyes dancing with amusement. "It was completely pathetic. I just suddenly saw it."

"Saw what?" Ron asked as he held Hermione's arm and helped her climb the stairs to the second floor.

"What Bill meant."

"What are you talking about?" Ron questioned, fixing Hermione with the expression he usually reserved for Mad-Eye Moody. "What Bill meant about what?"

"Us."

"US? Hermione, you aren't making any sense," he said, opening the door to Percy's room and dragging her inside. "C'mon," he added, motioning for her to follow him over to the bed. "You need to get some rest."

*Why would she ask Dumbledore for that memory back? Why would she possibly want to remember all the horrible things that happened?* Ron wondered as he reached out, grabbed the sheets, and pulled them down so Hermione could climb into bed. *She was terrified of that snake, even without the memory.*

*No, it wasn't the snake she was afraid of,* Ron amended. *Not entirely. It was... Him. It was...* He mentally forced himself to say the unspeakable name in his head...*Voldemort. She was afraid of him. Why does she want to remember that? I'd jump at the chance to forget about it if it had been me.*

But even as he thought this, Ron realized that it wasn’t true. As much as he’d hated watching what Hermione had to go through, there was part of him that was glad he’d watched her memory. He was never going to forget what those sick sods did to her. NEVER! And he didn’t want to forget what she’d done for him either.
She refused to tell that twisted bitch anything about me, even though she knew they'd use the Cruciatus Curse to get the information. How many times did she take that bloody curse for me? I lost count after...

"Ron?" Hermione asked, pulling him out of his thoughts. He looked up to see her standing right beside him, all traces of her earlier amusement gone. "Are you all right?" she asked, her somber brown eyes searching his own.

"Me?" he replied, startled by her question. Why would she be worried about me?

"The color drained out of your face," she said, studying him closely. "What were you thinking about?"

"Nothing important," Ron replied, dropping his gaze to the floor as he stepped away from the bed and towards the door.

"Don't go," Hermione said quickly, untying the sash around her waist and slipping Ginny's dressing gown off over her shoulders. "Please," she added as she draped the dressing gown over the chair next to Percy's old wooden desk.

What am I doing? Ron thought, willing himself not to look down and ogle her bare legs. It took every ounce of strength he had to keep his eyes focused on hers, but somehow he managed to do it. Unfortunately, Hermione seemed to realize his struggle, and rather than climb into bed and cover herself up, as she should have, she took a step towards him.

"Why don't you lock the door?" she said.

"Wha...why?" he stammered.

Hermione smiled up at him. "Just like your father," she chuckled, her eyes dancing with suppressed laughter. "If you cower, I swear, I won't be able to stop myself from--"

"I don't cower!" Ron shouted indignantly.
"Then why are you backing away from me?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not," Ron protested, but even as the words left his mouth, he realized his back was practically against the closed door.

*Damn it!* he thought and forced himself to close the distance he had created between them. Coming to a halt right in front of her, Ron continued to look into her eyes.

*You're too bloody close*, his mind screamed. *She's right there, wearing nothing but your shirt. All you have to do is reach out and touch her and...* His eyes shifted. *Bugger!* he swore as he realized his gaze had wandered down her chest and was now locked on her exposed thighs. He immediately flicked them back up to her face, but the damage had been done.

*Bloody hell*, he thought when she smiled knowingly at him.

"All right, Ron?" Hermione asked innocently. "You're looking a bit... flushed. Maybe you ought to... sit down," she said, grabbing his hand and pulling him towards Percy's bed.

*Not too obvious there, Hermione*, she thought, trying hard not to blush. *What am I doing? What's wrong with me? When did I start channeling Lavender Brown? Oh, dear God! I'm flirting with him. I'm going to make a complete fool out of myself. Then again, this is Ron we're talking about, she reminded herself. He probably won't even notice, unless I make it so obvious even he can't miss it.*

Before Ron even had time to realize what was happening, Hermione sat down on the edge of the bed and tugged on his hand until he plopped down beside her. The next thing he knew, the hand she's been holding was pressed against something else. Something smooth and soft and completely off limits.

*Bloody hell!* his mind screamed as he realized where he was touching her. *She placed my hand right where I was looking. Right on her bloody thigh.* Unable to stop himself, his eyes flicked down to look at his hand and where it met with her exposed flesh.

*You can't do this*, the sensible side of his brain warned. *Not like this. She's vulnerable. You can't take advantage of her. She'll regret it. You'll regret it.*

*No, I Bloody Well Won't*, another part of his mind protested loudly. *Kiss her. KISS HER NOW!!!* it demanded, urging him to act before he had a chance to start thinking rationally again.
Unsure what to do, Ron looked into Hermione's eyes. He almost wished he hadn't when he saw the desire there. His pulse quickened as watched her dart her tongue out and unconsciously wet her lips.

*She's going to kiss me,* he thought a split second before he realized he had already leaned down and was about to kiss her first. But when he realized what he was about to do, he froze, his lips mere inches from hers. "Hermione?" he whispered.

"Yes?" she asked, her eyes now closed.

"I don't want to take advantage of you."

The last thing Ron expected was for her to giggle.

*Hermione DOESN'T giggle,* he thought, pulling away in embarrassment. *Well, that's not entirely true. She giggles with Ginny sometimes, but only about girly things. She never giggles with me or Har--*

Somehow, while he was busy thinking, Hermione had breached the distance he'd created between them and all conscious thought left Ron’s mind as he felt her press her lips to his and kiss him tenderly. It wasn't like the two heated kisses they had shared earlier. It wasn't full of passion or desperation. This kiss was soft, and gentle, and so full of love that it made his heart ache nearly as much as other parts of him did.

"I know you'd never take advantage of me," Hermione whispered, just before she kissed him again lightly. "I don't want to take advantage of you either. I don't want you to think that's what this is," she said softly, pulling away from him again. She hovered there, her mouth mere inches from his, waiting.

Ron felt each breath that passed though her intoxicating lips as it swept gently across his own and even though he was too close to her to see her lips, especially given the fact his eyes were still closed, they were clearly visible in his mind. All he wanted to do was kiss them; taste them; taste her. He hesitated a moment longer, then gave in to the temptation, leaned in, and covered her mouth with his own.

He kissed her lovingly, ruminating on just how soft her lips really were; how soft her entire body was as she brushed up against him. Then Hermione intensified the kiss. Ron's stomach fluttered with
desire as she opened her mouth just a bit and he felt her tongue run lightly across his lower lip. Moaning softly, Ron opened his own mouth to taste her back, and was pleasantly surprised when he felt her tongue push inside and hesitantly brush against his. It lasted only a moment, but it was enough to unleash something within him. Nearly two years of pent up frustration and suppressed desires came surging forward as her kiss obliterated the barricade he had constructed to hold it all back.

As their kiss became more heated, Ron slowly ran one hand up Hermione's back and unclasp the clip that was keeping her hair bound in place. Dropping it to the floor, he buried his hand in her still damp hair as it spilled down across her shoulders. Driven by his own need to taste her, Ron used his other hand, which was still resting on her lower back, to crush Hermione's body against his just before he hesitantly pushed his tongue into her mouth.

For a moment or two, Hermione seemed uncertain how to react to this. She just sat there, her body pressed firmly against his and let him stoke her tongue with his. Then inspiration stuck and she acted on the impulse, sucking hard on his tongue and catching Ron totally off guard. He moaned loudly into her mouth and pulled away to look at her.

As Hermione's warm brown eyes fluttered open and slowly came back into focus, Ron recognized the emotion he saw within them. It was the same emotion he was feeling; the same burning desire. His body instantly responded to her need, and his already tight jeans became immensely tighter.

Breathing heavily, Ron closed his eyes and willed himself to be strong, but his body was starting to fight him. All he wanted to do was pull her close and kiss her again, but rather than give into to the impulse, Ron stood up and took a step away from her.

"Don't do it," the sensible part of his mind shouted over his insistent libido. If you kiss her again, you won't be able to stop.

"You... you should get some sleep," he said, finally trusting himself enough to open his eyes and look at her.

"I don't need sleep, Ron," Hermione replied, her eyes dark and sultry.

Oh fuck, he groaned, closing his eyes again and forcing himself to remain strong despite the way her statement sounded. Unfortunately he was waging a losing battle. It didn’t matter that deep down he knew that what she wanted, what she needed, probably wasn’t sexual. That’s how his raging libido had interpreted her statement and that part of him was all too happy to satisfy her needs, provided she do the same for him in return.
Unable to stop himself, Ron opened his eyes and they immediately fell on her chest. He watched, as if mesmerized, as her chest rose and fell with each breath she took.

Bloody Hell, he groaned internally. That's not what she meant, he reminded himself again.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, sensing his hesitation and interpreting it as something it wasn’t. "The last thing I wanted to do was make you uncomfortable," she continued as she rose up off the bed. "I guess I'm just... not myself right now. I'm having a hard time focusing on anything but... You and… how right this feels,” she said, quickly closing the distance between them, leaning in, and kissing him again softly. "I'm sure I'll be properly mortified in the morning,” she admitted, “but right now... I just... we've already wasted so much time and... I don't want to waste anymore. But if you don't want to--"

"I do want to," Ron practically shouted. "There's nothing in this world I want more."

"But?" she asked uneasily.

"I don't want you to regret it," he replied honestly.

"There are a lot of things I regret, Ron. But this," Hermione said, kissing him again sweetly, "could never be one of them."

And yet despite her word, she had tears in her eyes when she pulled away from him which unnerved Ron a bit.

"Hermione..." he stammered. "I didn't mean to... I'm sorry. I... please don't cry," he said, as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I don't ever want to hurt you. I... I... love you," he whispered.

"That's why I'm crying," she whispered back. "You've been unbelievably sweet," she said, reaching up to touch his face. "Ron, I want you to know that you've taken what could have easily been the worst day of my life, and turned it into the best. When I look back on today I'm not going to remember it as the day the Death Eaters grabbed me. I will always remember it as the night you told me how you really felt."

“Thank You,” she said softly, as she reached up and wiped the tears from her eyes. “You’ve really
been amazing,” she added, leaning forward and resting her head against Ron's shoulder as she hugged him. "You haven't left my side all night. I want you to know how much I appreciate that. How much I appreciate you. I don't tell you that nearly enough, and I really should."

Ron was glad she wasn't looking at him, and couldn't see just how deeply he blushed at her words. It was unusual for Hermione to compliment him and he didn’t really know how to take it. Then again, she didn’t normally kiss him either. At least she hadn’t until tonight, and maybe the kissing and the complimenting went hand in hand. If so, Ron decided he could definitely get used to both.

"You've always been there for me," Hermione continued. "You look out for me. You take care of me. And I … I love you for that. I don't know what I'd ever do if I lost you."

"I'm not going anywhere," Ron replied, his ears still red with embarrassment.

"Will you stay with me?" Hermione asked, pulling back to look at him. "Please, Ron. I won't do anything to make you uncomfortable. I promise. I just… I need to be with you. To be near you," she amended, her cheeks flushing a bit. “You make me feel safe and… Please. Just stay with me and… hold me,” she said, clearly embarrassed now. “Just until I fall asleep.”

How could he possible say no to her when she so rarely asked him for help? Even if he hadn’t wanted to stay for his own reasons, he would have. So rather than reply with words, Ron kicked his shoes off and climbed onto his brother’s bed. He immediately scooted to the far side, making room for Hermione, and settled down.

When she didn’t immediately join him, he shot her one of his lopsided grins and patted the spot on the bed beside himself, motioning for her to lie down. Without saying a word, Hermione sat on the edge of the bed, pulled her feet up, and snuggled up against him. She placed her head on his chest, and almost as soon as she did, she felt his hand weave into her hair.

"Your heart is beating so fast," she said, as she pulled her head up off him and turned so she could look into his eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he replied.

“Are you sure?” she asked, blushing significantly. "I know I promised I'd be good, but... if you..." she paused for a moment and bit her lip, deliberating whether or not she should finish the thought. "If you’re uncomfortable, I might be able to... um... help.”
How can she look so innocent and sound so alluring at the same time? Ron thought, groaning softly and shifting away from her a bit so she wouldn’t realize the exact nature of his problem.

“No, really,” he insisted. “I’m good.”

“Then why are you sweating? And why did you grimace when you moved? I’m not that naïve, you know?” she said, when Ron failed to answer her questions. “I have a fairly good idea what the problem is and… I could help. Only…you’ll have to show me what to do,” she admitted, her blush becoming even more pronounced.

“Hermione!” Ron cried out in astonishment. He couldn’t possibly take her up on her offer. Could he?

No, definitely not, he affirmed as his face flushed and quickly became a share of red brilliant enough to rival Hermione’s.

"What are you embarrassed for?” she asked, diverting her eyes to the patchwork quilt they were lying on. "If anyone should be, it's me. I'm the one that just admitted that I wanted to… molest you… Oh, God! “…touch you. Does that make me... a …a Scarlet Woman?"

"No," Ron chuckled, noting that her face was indeed scarlet when she asked him the question.

“Are you sure?” she asked in mortification.

“Absolutely not.”

If Hermione were a Scarlet Woman she wouldn’t need him to tell her what to do. And she definitely wouldn’t be this embarrassed about the whole thing. She probably wouldn’t have even bothered asking, because no 16 year old blokes is going to object to anything a Scarlet Woman wants to do. No, Hermione definitely wasn’t a Scarlet Woman. He couldn’t just pounce on her. Nor did he want her to think that he expected her to pounce on him. He was glad that she didn’t know what to do, because that meant that she was still innocent. And yet at the same time, there was part of him that was eager to corrupt her.

It’s not like you asked her, a little voice insisted. She offered. She said she wanted to.
“All right,” she replied, flopping down and quickly turning her back to him.

Wait. What?

"You do realize when I said no, I only meant that you weren't a scarlet woman, right?" Ron questioned.

"Um hum," she replied without turning around to look at him.

"Oh. Ok then." Ron let his head drop down to the pillow, uncertain as to what he ought to do.

He couldn’t very well suggest that they fool around now. Could he? And if he did, would she still be interested? Maybe she did just want him to lie there and hold her until she fell asleep. But how the hell could she just turn over and go to sleep now? She said that she wanted to but… could she really change her mind that quickly?

"Hermione?"

"Yes?" she asked. Her back was still to him so she knew he wouldn’t see her bite her lip to hold her smile back.

Just a yes? How the hell am I supposed to figure anything out from that?

"Do you mind if…” BLOODY HELL! Why is this so difficult? he wondered. Is it supposed to be this difficult? Just talk to her, you idiot. She’s still just Hermione. "Would it bother you if I ...um... took my trousers off?"

“Oh,” Hermione said, a bit surprised, as she raised up on her elbow and twisted around to look into Ron’s red face. “Not at all,” she added quickly, recognizing his mortification and looking away quickly. “I’ll look away,” she said, turning over again and facing the door so he’d have some privacy. “You can cover up with the quilt,” she told him when she felt him stand up. "I'll just use the sheet."
"Ok," Ron readily agreed.

A few moments later, Hermione felt the bed give as he sat back down and she turned over to face him again. "Better?" she asked as she bore under the covers and pulled the sheet up over her legs.

"Yeah," Ron replied, lying on his back so she could rest her head against his chest. As soon as she did, he draped his arm around her back, prepared to hold her that way, even though he knew his arm would likely fall asleep within a few minutes.

_Maybe the buzzing sensation will distract me_, he thought.

"Are you comfortable now?" Hermione asked, restlessly.

"Yeah, I'm good," he lied.

"Well, goodnight then."

"Night," he replied, not even bothering to close his eyes.

Ron lay there in the moonlit room, looking up at the ceiling for a good 10 or 15 minutes, judging by the way his arm had gone cold and started to stings. It was getting rather painful actually, but he didn't want to disturb Hermione if she was actually asleep.

Which of course, she wasn't. Hermione was just as restless as he was. She had lain there for the past 15 minutes listening to his heart rate slow, and his breathing become steady, but she couldn't fall asleep.

"Mione?" she heard Ron whisper. "Are you asleep?"

But rather than answer him, Hermione closed her eyes and pretend that she was, just in case he leaned over to check.

"You can stop pretending," he said quietly as he gently pulled his arm out from under her and rolled
on his side. "I know you aren't."

"How?" she questioned, rolling over and rising up on her elbow to look at him.

"You weren't breathing deep enough," Ron stated.

"Then why did you ask?" she questioned.

"Why didn't you answer me?" he shot back.

"I didn't want you to feel like you had to stay," she replied.

Feeling far more comfortable now that they'd gone back to discussing things the way they normally did, Ron said the first thing that popped into his head. "I don't want to go," he admitted. "Do you mind if I stay here all night?"

“All night?”

“Unless you don’t want me to,” he said, mentally kicking himself. There is was, they were both feeling awkward again. “I’ll just go back up to my room then,” he said. But before he could sit up, Hermione put her hand on his shoulder to keep him in place.

“No,” she said, a little too urgently. “I’d rather you stay,” she admitted. “If you want to.”

"All right. Hermione?" Ron asked after she snuggled up against him and fell silent again.

"Humm?"

"You must be knackered. Why aren't you asleep?"

"I don't know. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that…” I can't stop thinking about you. “…that…you keep asking me questions."

"Oh, sorry 'bout that. I'll shut up now."
Hermione closed her eyes and waited, knowing it would come.

"Hermione?" Ron asked quietly after a few moments of silence.

"Yes?" she replied.

"I can't sleep."

There it was. She giggled again. Ron found it most unsettling. Most un-Hermione like.

"You could start your Transfiguration essay," she replied with a smirk.

THAT, however, was very Hermione like.

"I'm sure that will put you to sleep," she teased.

Ron sighed loudly. "I tore my books up," he admitted. He had destroyed practically everything in his room after all.

"Oh, well, you can borrow mine later."

"Really?" he asked, unable to hide how delighted he was by her response.

"My books, Ron," Hermione clarified. "Not my essay."

“Oh,” he said, disappointedly. “Not even a peek?” he asked dejectedly.

"No!"

"Mione?"
"What?"

"I don't want to do homework," Ron whined.

"What do you want to do?" she asked, trying not to let on that she was amused rather than exasperated.

"Can we... Can I... kiss you again?" he asked timidly.

The question certainly caught her attention. Ron felt her pull away from him as her eyes flew open and she looked up into his face. She tried to suppress her smile when she saw the yearning in his eyes and the embarrassment on his face, but was unable to do it for very long.

“I was starting to think you were never going to pluck up the courage to ask,” she replied giving in and beaming up at him.

The next twenty minutes were a blur to Hermione. What started out as tender and gentle quickly erupted into a frenzy of more passionate kisses, that literally left her feeling weak and breathless. It was as if his mere touch, his very presence, was somehow... magical.

Yes, Magical. It was the only word she could come up with to explain how Ron made her feel. Somehow, he had bewitched her, and whether it was intentional or not, Hermione was startled to discover that Ron had the ability to drive all rational thought from her mind when he set himself to the task. And yet at the same time, she knew he was just as lost in it all as she was.

The world could have come crashing down around them at that very moment and neither of them wouldn't have cared or even noticed. It didn't matter. Nothing else mattered. She had everything she'd ever need right here. As long as she could feel his firm body pressed against hers; as long as she continued to feel his strong hands running over her; as long as he continued to drive all reason from her mind with his fervent kisses, nothing else mattered.

At some point during it all, Hermione realized she was sprawled out on top of Ron, which was odd,
considering she couldn't recall how she had gotten there, nor how long they had been like that. It was the feel of his hand sliding up the back of her leg and grasping her bum that finally pulled her mind back from the abyss.

She just had time to register the fact that the only thing separating them was the thin fabric of her knickers, when she felt her world shift. Unexpectedly, Hermione found herself lying on her back, held firmly to the mattress by the weight of Ron's body as he pressed himself on top of her and kissed her with every ounce of strength he had. She could feel the passion and need behind each kiss. His body was literally shaking with it.

Unable to restrain herself, she moaned softly into his mouth and Ron responded almost immediately. Hermione felt him run his tongue along her bottom lip one last time and then he pulled away and surfaced for some much needed air.

Breathing hard, her heart pounding in her chest as if she'd spent the past half hour sprinting through the Forbidden Forest, rather than lying in a bed, Hermione forced herself to open her eyes. As the room and the attractive redhead still lying on top of her came into focus, she reflexively wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

"Was that... all right?" Ron asked anxiously after he witnessed her reaction to his kisses. Up until that moment, he had been blissfully happy, but now he was trying desperately not to interpret what he'd just seen her do as a sign of disgust.

"Yeah, it was... nice," Hermione assured him with a very warm, sincere smile. "Just a little... wetter then I expected," she giggled.

NICE? Ron moaned inwardly. It was only... nice? I thought it was bloody fantastic, and she only thought it was nice? At least I didn't repulse her. I suppose that's something anyway.

"MMMmmn," Hermione moaned softly, dropping her head to her pillow. "Actually," she amended, staring off into space as she tried, and failed, to suppress a grin, "it was better then nice. It was--" She faltered, still unable to come up with a word to accurately explain how Ron had made her feel. "You take my breath away," she admitted as her bright eyes alighted on his and sparkled with reflected moonlight. "Shall we give it another go?" Hermione asked, grabbing a hold of Ron's shirt and using it to pull his face down towards hers.

Ron couldn't help but smile inwardly at her eagerness, and the enthusiasm with which she kissed him instantly healed his recently bruised ego. This time it was Hermione who deepened the kiss first. She was a quick study, which shouldn't have come as any surprise to Ron, had he been capable of
thinking clearly. But as he wasn’t, he was slightly taken aback when she pushed her tongue into his mouth and brushed it against his own for the briefest of moments, before pulling away to tease him. And it totally worked, because he instantly wanted more. More of Hermione, more mind numbing kisses, more of her body rubbing against his; just more of everything.

_This is bloody brilliant_, he thought, never wanting their snogging session to end.

As they continued to kissed each other, Hermione slipped a hand under the back of Ron's shirt and began to lightly run her fingers up his spine. She found the sensation of the muscles in his back tensing as she touched them highly arousing. Just the knowledge that Ron had muscles was arousing, but to feel them; to feel the how hard they were; how different his body was from her own, was intoxicating. Without knowing why, she lightly raked her fingernails over his skin.

Ron gasped loudly and his entire body shudder at the unexpected sensation. It was unbelievable just how sensitive he was to her touch. _If I react that strongly to a light caress on the back_, he silently wondered, _how much pleasure would I feel if she touched other parts of me? How good would it feel if we... took this to the ultimate level?_

How he longed to feel her skin against his; to feel her heat; to feel her body encase his as they became one and found release together.

_But... that can't happen_, he reminded himself for what felt like the hundredth time. He wanted to. Desperately. But he knew it was too soon. It was all happening too fast. Somehow things were spiraling out of control and Ron knew he'd have to drag himself back.

_This is Hermione_, he reminded himself, even as he continued to kiss her again. _This isn't some dream where I can act like a randy bugger and do whatever I want without there being any consequences. It's real._ And in the real world, Ron was going to put Hermione's needs before his own, even if it killed him. _She deserves better than this_, he told himself. _Not that she's objecting... just make sure you don't give her a reason to._

_It's just a snog_, he argued with himself, attempting to justify the fact he hadn't ended the kiss yet. _We aren't doing anything wrong_, he insisted, gently running his hands up and down both sides of her body. He could feel her breasts swell out to the side as the weight of his own chest pressed down on them from above and as he lightly ran hands back and forth over thin fabric of her shirt, he had to fight the urge to reach up under it and feel her soft curves with his fingertips.

_You have to stop_, the rational side of himself shouted before he could give in to the impulse. _STOP NOW!_ it insisted. And reluctantly, Ron tried to force himself to comply.
He had to put Hermione first, not matter how difficult it was for him. And it became very difficult to stop when he heard her groan softly in disappointment after he unexpectedly pried his lips away from hers. So difficult in fact, that he immediately kissed her on the cheek and then proceeded to kiss his way to her neck. When he reached the spot right under her ear lobe, Hermione gasped loudly and he felt her body jump beneath his.

"MMMmmmn, that feels wonderful," Hermione moaned in a sensual way that made his bloody boil.

Ron quickly made a mental note to remember that spot, so he could come back to it once he had finished his explorations. But right now he just wanted to continue the voyage to discover his mouth and hands were taking. He wanted to memorize every inch of Hermione, Every inch she’d let him get to that is. He couldn't wait to discover what other areas of sensitivity lay waiting to be claimed by his lips or how many other erotic sounds he could inspire her to produce. With one last kiss, Ron pulled away from her neck and slipped the shirt she was wearing down to bear a portion of her shoulder. He was just about to lavish it with the same tender kisses when Hermione, quite unexpectedly, shouted out a name and Ron was horrified to discover that it wasn't his.

"HARRY!"

"WHAT!" Ron cried out as he sat bolt upright and pulled away from her so fast he nearly fell right off the edge of the small bed.

"I ... I... totally forgot about Harry," Hermione stammered, her eyes wide with shock. "I can't believe I forgot to write Harry. He must be going out of his mind, shut up in that awful place with no idea what's been going on.”

"Oh... that?" Ron said, his angry glower softening a bit, but obviously still extremely irritated.

“Yes, that,” she retorted, failing to understand why Ron looked so put upon. He wasn’t the one that had been left in the dark. Plus he knew how Harry was; how much he hated it when people kept things from him. If he didn’t get some satisfactory answers in a timely manner, he was liable to do something incredibly stupid. “Oh, Ron,” she moaned. “How could you let this happen? Why didn’t you remind me to write him? And why are you looking at me like that?” she demanded.

"It usually only means one thing when you shout out another bloke's name," Ron declared crossly.
"You can’t be serious,” Hermione cried out in disbelief. She’d always known that Ron was the jealous type, but honestly. Jealous of Harry?

"You've never shouted out my name before," he said miserably.

"Yes, I have," Hermione stated without thinking. "You've just never heard me do it."

It took her a moment to resister the fact she had spoken the words out loud. It only dawned on her when she watched the angry resentment vanish from his eyes, only to be replaced by a myriad of other emotions, all of them fighting for control. First, shock, as his eyes widened. Followed by delight, which he quickly tried to hide. For a moment he wavered on embarrassment, and then his eyes darkened to a smoky cobalt blue.

Hermione felt her face flush as she watched his eyes smolder and catch fire and she knew that this time it had nothing to do with anger. What she saw there was pure unadulterated lust and it was focused completely on her. The heat from her face was so intense now that she knew it must be as red as Ron's hair.

**OH NO!** she groaned, mortified by what she'd just admitted. *I can't believe I just said that out loud.*

**BLOODY HELL,** Ron swore, as he realized he was dangerously close to pouncing on his best friend like some voracious beast and ravaging her until he heard her shout his name out first hand. But it wouldn't stop there. Hearing her gasp and call out his name would only spur him on. He wouldn't be able to stop himself until he found a way to satiate the hunger burning throughout his entire body; he wouldn't stop until he found release and cried out her name as well.

No longer trusting himself, Ron pulled further away with a guttural groan. He glanced down quickly to make sure he was still wrapped up in the patchwork quilt so Hermione wouldn't see the effect her words had on his body. He was rather mortified when he discovered that even the quilt wasn't enough to hide how aroused he was in his current, seated, position. He tried to stifle a groan as he lay down at the foot of the bed and quickly repositioned the quilt so it was gathered in front of himself.

"I already wrote to him," Ron said, trying to act as normal as possible. "Harry I mean."

“You did? When?”
“While you were in the bath.”

*BLOODY HELL,* he thought, as images of her naked body in a tub full of warm water flooded his mind. *This is not the time to be thinking things like that. You need to get rid of it, before she notices. And she's going to notice, because you can't fucking move without groaning. Think of something disgusting. Snape... Snape snogging McGonagall. Not disturbing enough. Snape snogging Hagrid... ew, that's pretty repulsive actually.*

"Ron? Did you hear me?" Hermione asked loudly.

"What? Oh... Sorry, my mind wandered there for a minute. What were you saying?" he replied.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him you were fine," he informed her. "That Mum was healing you--"

*That's doing the trick,* he realized, as images of torture he’d witnessed in Dumbledore’s the Pensive flooded him mind.

"That... er... that Dumbledore was going to talk to you right after. And that you'd write him tomorrow."

"What did you tell him about us?"

"Us?" he asked in a high pitched voice.

*Did she just narrow her eyes at me? Uh oh, I think I'm in trouble. Do SOMETHING! QUICK! Before you ruin everything.*

"Well…” Ron stammered, “That is... please don't go getting the wrong idea, Hermione," he said, sitting upright again so she wouldn't be towering over him when she started shouting. "I... I didn't tell him anything, but it isn't what you think."

"And what do I think?" Hermione demanded to know.
"That it doesn’t mean anything to me or that I’m too ashamed to mention it to him, or any of the other irrational conclusions women jump to."

"I'm irrational, am I?" she asked calmly.

"NO!" Ron cried out. "That's not what I meant at all." BUGGER! "I've really botched things up, haven't I?"

"No, you haven't," Hermione replied, reaching out and grabbing his hand.

Is this some sort of trick? he wondered, completely taken off guard when she smiled at him.

"Why don't you just tell me why you didn't tell him, so I won't have to jump to any 'irrational conclusions.'"

"I just don't think it's the right time, that's all," Ron said, watching her warily and waiting for her to bristle.

"Um hum, and?" she pressed.

"And what?"

"When is the right time? Is there one? Honestly, Ron," Hermione said, staring into his eyes, "do you ever plan on telling him?"

"Er... sure." Someday.

"Ron?" Hermione said his name again. "You aren't... afraid Harry will take it badly, are you? I mean, you aren't worried he'd react like... like you would to... Ginny dating... well, anyone?"

"Er... yeah, that's part of it," he admitted.
"You don't think Harry will be happy for us?"

"Probably once he's cooled off a bit."

"Harry's not like that. He's not going to..."

"Oh yes, he will," Ron stated definitively. "He won't react as strongly as I would if I found out you were seeing someone, but he'll have a reaction. Believe me."

"So far, you've taken it amazingly well," Hermione teased.

"You know what I mean," Ron grumbled.

"So you think Harry is going to be angry?"

"I don't think it. I know it," Ron stated. "You remember how angry he was with us last summer. This year it will be much worse. He's just..."

"...concerned about me?" Hermione finished for him.

"Yeah, that's part of it," Ron admitted.

"Worried about your intentions?" she asked.

"No, Harry knows I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you." *Plus he’s known that I fancy you for a while now.* “That's not it.”

"Surely you don't think…" she asked, studying Ron’s face, “that Harry will be... jealous?"

*OH MY GOD!* Hermione thought when she saw him grimace. *He does.*
"Actually... he **IS** going to be jealous," Ron replied. "Not the same way I'd be, mind you. Just jealous in general. You know, that we're... together. Not together as in at the same place, but **REALLY** together. Jealous that we have someone... special and he doesn't. Jealous that we're happy when he's so miserable and..."

"...alone," Hermione finished the thought for him.

"Exactly. He's just not in a good place right now. What with Sirius's death and being locked up with those horrible Muggles for the rest of the summer. He might as well be in Azkaban. He's going to take what happened to you hard, Hermione. You know he is. He's going to blame himself."

"And you think he's going to push us away even further?" she questioned. "I'll admit I'm more than a little worried about that myself. We just won't let him get away with it."

"But, if he knows about us... about this... it will give him the perfect excuse," Ron argued. "He'll pretend it's because he feels like a third wheel. He'll pull away and blame it on our rela-- on this. And he'll wind up resenting us both for it."

"Ok," Hermione said, flopping down on her back with a sigh.

"Wait a minute. You're not going to argue with me? You're not going to tell me that he'll get over it? Or that he'll resent us even more for hiding it from him? Or he'll--"

"No," Hermione stated, ignoring the fact that Ron was staring down at her as if he were completely mystified by her response. "I came to a decision this evening in the kitchen," she explained. "I realized I need to listen to you more."

Ron wasn't sure he heard her right. "Did you hit your head or something?" he asked, goggling at her in disbelief.

"Especially when it concerns Harry," Hermione continued, ignoring his comment. "You were right about Sirius. You knew what Harry needed and I didn't. You stopped me from forcing him to talk about it when he wasn't ready. You knew it would only make him feel worse. I'm sure you're right about this too. If you don't think we should tell him, then we won't."

"Seriously?" Ron asked, still not quite able to believe she wasn't shining him on.
"Seriously," Hermione assured him. "Although... I don't see how we can hide it from him, for very long. Once he leaves the Muggles and comes here, we'll have to tell him. Fred and George aren't going to stop teasing us, just because Harry’s here. If anything, they're going to get worse."

"Bloody gits."

"And I'm sure Ginny will figure it out rather quickly, if she hasn't already. Someone's bound to tell him."

"You talk to Ginny. I'll talk to Fred and George," he suggested. "They'll give me a hard time, but once they understand it's in Harry's best interests... I'm sure they will keep quiet. And if that doesn't work, I'll take a leaf out of your book and blackmail them."

"With what?"

"Oh, you know, the usual. I'll threaten to tell Mum about the new products they are developing and how now that they don't have any first years to experiment on, they're trying to slip the stuff to Ginny."

"That isn't true, is it?"

"Well, they did ask Ginny if she'd help them, but she's not daft."

"Do you think that will work?"

"I reckon. They definitely don't want Mum to know they tested all their Snackbox products on ickle first years. She'd go mental and probably end up chasing them around the joke shop," Ron laughed.

"What about your parents? Or Bill? Or Professor Lupin? Even Mad-Eye Moody could accidentally let it slip. They all know. I all but admitted how I felt in that memory. This could all blow up in our faces."

"It won't," Ron assured her. "They won't say anything. But just in case, I'll talk to Bill and you can take Lupin and Moody."
"Why do I get Moody?"

"Because I had to take the twins. Besides,” Ron chuckled, “Moody likes you. I could tell earlier, when he tried to intimidate you and you got cheeky with him. I think he respected you for it. Mad as a hatter, that one.”

"Oh, shut up," Hermione snapped. "I don't want to think about this anymore," she said, covering her face with both hands and then running them up through her tousled hair.

"I can think of a few ways to distract you," Ron said with a smirk, scooting up the bed until he was lying directly beside her. “If your interested.”

"I might be," she replied coyly, turning on her side to face him. “It depends.”

"On?"

"You said we were.... 'seeing' each other."

"Er… yeah, I did say that, didn't I?" he admitted.

"Did you mean exclusively," Hermione asked, “or are we just messing around so neither one of us has to think about Death Eaters or what happened this afternoon?"

"What do you think?" Ron asked incredulously.

"I think you're too chicken to ask me out properly," Hermione replied.

"Chicken? I've only told you that I …love you... three bloody times now."

"Don't swear when you tell me that you love me," Hermione scolded, but she couldn't help but grin as she did it. "And I love you too, so I'll do it. Ron, will you..."

"DON'T YOU DARE!" Ron growled, pouncing on her and silencing her with a kiss. "You told me
how you felt about me first. I get to do this. But... I'm not doing it now, after you've prompted me to. I'll do it in my own way, so you know that I mean it when I ask."

"You're never going to ask me, are you?" Hermione giggled just before Ron kissed her again.
Chapter 4: The Symposium

It was well past 3 A.M. when Molly Weasley tiptoed up the stairs to the second floor landing. Arthur had tried to convince her to come to bed as soon as the meeting with Dumbledore had ended, but she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep until she reassured herself that Hermione was ok.

She had learned quite a bit about her son's other best friend this evening. Things that both astounded her and reassured her. She had known, of course, that Hermione was brilliant, even before Remus Lupin admitted to her that Hermione was by far the cleverest witch of her age he'd ever encountered. She had known that Hermione was obstinate and that it was her strong will that prevented Ron and Harry from bullying her. In fact, Molly had more than a sinking suspicion that if anyone did any bullying, it was Hermione. Not that she disapproved by any means.

Someone has to keep those boys in line, she told herself as she reached out and silently opened the door to Percy's bedroom.

Molly had always known that Hermione was brave. She was a Gryffindor after all. But this was the first time she had actually witnessed that bravery first hand.

She had learned some startling things about Ron and his two best friends during the conversation that took place after they all viewed the memory in the Pensieve. The things Remus shared with the group afterwards had been particularly insightful. Polyjuice Potions; a Time Turner; everything that occurred in the Shrieking Shack; helping Sirius escape from the Ministry and all those Dementors; capturing and then blackmailing Rita Skeeter. And that was only the things he knew about.

Dumbledore had dropped a nice little bombshell of his own when he revealed exactly what had happened to Dolores Umbridge on her last day as Headmistress and High Inquisitor. Clearly Hermione was much more resourceful than she'd ever imagined. She had concocted a story to protect Harry from the woman that sent the Dementors after him; she had lied so convincingly that Umbridge followed her right into the Forbidden Forest. She had led Umbridge into a trap, knowing full well that it could possibly cost the woman her life. With that action, Hermione had proven that if pushed to it, she was willing to kill to protect her friends. And today she had shown that she was just as willing to die for them.

Molly now realized that she had been trying to shelter Ron and his friends from a war all three of them had been fighting for years. That knowledge angered her. It wasn't right that their innocence had been stolen. It wasn't right that this responsibility had been thrust upon Harry at such a young age.

But then, she reminded herself, he hadn't faced it alone. Ron and Hermione had willingly shared Harry's burden. Not only had they shared it, but they made it their own. All three of them have been fighting... him since they were 11 years old. But they almost always faced the threat together. This was the first time Hermione had to face it on her own, she told herself as she pushed the door open and peered into the darkened room.

Her eyes immediately went wide as she took in the scene before her.

Molly had known for a long time that Ron's feelings for this particular 'friend' were not strictly platonic. She had monitored the interaction between the two of them very closely the previous summer searching for signs of how Hermione felt. Of course they had bickered incessantly, over the
smallest thing. Not that she found that abnormal. Ron and Hermione had a volatile relationship from the start. Ron had always been a bit of a hot head and Hermione wasn't the only one he fought with. She just seemed especially adept at pushing his buttons. On the flip side, she seemed just as skilled at calming him, when she chose to. Before last summer, Molly had never really thought much about their arguing. They were obviously close enough to know how to annoy one another and seemed to take pleasure in doing so, but they never took it to heart. At least she hadn't thought they did.

But as time went by, things seemed to change. Ron came home at the end of his fourth year in the foulest mood she had ever seen. He was irritable and short-tempered with everyone. He spent the first week of his holiday shut up in his room or pacing about the house like a caged lion ready to bite the head off anyone that crossed paths with him. At first she thought it must have something to do with You-Know-Who's return. It wasn't until she caught the twins teasing him about Viktor Krum that she realized what the problem really was. So when Hermione arrived at the Order of the Phoenix headquarters a few days later, Molly had watched them closely. She hadn't missed all the looks that passed between them. Neither of them had admitted their feelings that summer, but she had known it was only a matter of time. This evening she had become fairly certain it had finally happened. Even so, she wasn't prepared for this; she hadn't expected to find the two of them in bed together.

Her first impulse upon discovering her son with his arm draped over a sleeping girl was to march over to the bed and drag him out of it. But something stopped her. Perhaps it was the fact that Hermione looked so peaceful.

It's a wonder she can sleep at all after what she's been through, Molly reminded herself as she approached the bed.

When she got closer to the sleeping couple, she realized that things were not as they had appeared. Ron was actually sleeping on top of the sheet, not under it. He had wrapped himself up in the bedspread and had thrown a portion of it over Hermione, but they had purposely left a barrier between them and somehow that made her feel better. They had obviously realized that sleeping in the same bed was not entirely appropriate and had taken steps to assure that it remained somewhat innocent.

Still, I really should wake him, she told herself as she reached down and picked his discarded jeans up off the floor. He shouldn't be in here, she thought, scanning the as her floor for any other discarded articles of clothing. Surely if anything had happened there would be more of it lying about. Finding nothing, her gaze jumped back to the two teenagers huddled together on the bed.

There is just no way I can wake him up without waking Hermione, she reflected. And the poor dear needs her sleep. She's been through a terrible ordeal. I suppose it would makes sense that she didn't want to be alone. It's only natural for her to be afraid. I should have realized that and asked Ginny to stay with her. Too late for that now. We'll move her to Ginny's room tomorrow, Molly decided as she folded up Ron's jeans and set them on the chair next to Hermione's dressing gown.

I suppose I can make an exception, just for tonight, she decided as she walked towards the door. But Arthur is going to have to talk with Ron in the morning. Things are obviously different now. They can't be sleeping in the same room together, she reflected from where she stood in the hallway.

She was just about to close the door behind her when she changed her mind.

And no more closed doors, she decided, as she pushed the door back against the wall making sure it was wide open before she went to bed herself.
George Weasley got an unexpected gift as he wandered down the hallway of the second floor on his way to the loo a few short hours later. Still groggy, he had been rubbing his eyes in an effort to wake up when he walked past the open doorway. He only made it two steps past Percy's room however, before he stopped short and backtracked for a second look.

For a moment, he just stood there, open mouthed, and started at his brother and Hermione, who were nestled together on the bed. Then he realized what it meant and he smiled mischievously.

*This just makes it too damned easy*, he thought, dematerialized with a crack.

Ron woke with a start. Something was wrong, he just didn't know what it was yet. His first clue was the fact that he wasn't blinded by a luminous orange glow the minute he opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. That could only mean one thing.

*I'm not in my room.*

And yet, even as that realization penetrated his fatigued mind, a second one struck home.

*I'm not alone.*

Somebody else was sleeping right beside him. Right beside him and practically on top of him if the truth be known. Somehow he had ended up with the only pillow on the bed and rather than fight him for it, whoever was beside him had apparently opted to use him as a pillow instead.

It only took him a moment to realize who it was, however, as memories of the previous night came flooding back to him.

*It's Hermione. She was captured by Death Eaters, but she escaped. She told me that she loves me,* Ron thought, grinning up at the ceiling happily. *She asked me to stay here with her and... we snogged. I snogged one of my best friends... and it was Bloody Brilliant!*

Ron would have been content to lie there and play the events of the night over in his mind until he drifted off to sleep again, had it not been for that little voice whispering that something was still wrong. But what could it be?

*Hermione is all right. She's sleeping right here beside me. Things couldn't be more perfect,* he told himself.

*So... why am I awake then?* he wondered.

*Because... something woke me up. I heard something and it woke me up. But what?* Ron asked himself, his heart thumping loudly as he slid out from under Hermione to look around the room, and spotted the open door.

*That door was closed,* he thought uneasily. *I'm sure of it. Hermione even made a point of telling me to lock it,* he reminded himself, rising off the bed as gently as he could so he wouldn't wake her. *Somebody opened it,* he told himself, striding towards the threshold and peering out into the hall as if he expected to find the culprit standing there.
Of course the hall was empty. Ron looked in both directions and saw nothing, but that didn't set his mind at ease. Just because he didn't see anyone; just because he didn't hear any sounds of movement when he stepped into the hallway, that didn't mean anything. Someone had obviously been there at some point in time, because someone had opened the door. Chances were that someone had been his mother, but that was beside the point. What mattered was that she'd gotten that close without him realizing it. He was supposed to take care of Hermione, and he'd been asleep.

*Not just asleep,* he amended. *Dead to the world. If it had been Death Eaters?*

But he didn't really want to think about that. Besides, it wouldn't have mattered if he'd been awake or not if Death Eaters had snuck into the Burrow and somehow managed to make it into Percy's room unseen. He didn't even have his wand with him. He'd left it in his bedroom, buried somewhere beneath the rubble. Some protector he turned out to be.

For a brief moment Ron considered going up to his room and searching for his wand, but he nixed that idea almost immediately. It would take too long and he didn't want to leave Hermione alone.

*I'm just being paranoid,* he told himself as he stepped back into the bedroom and quietly shut the door behind himself. *It was just Mum checking on us,* he muttered, climbing back into bed and settling back down beside Hermione. *Or maybe Hermione went to the loo and she forgot to close the door when she came back. Yeah, that's probably it.*

Still tired, but no longer able to sleep, Ron propped himself up on his elbow and stared at the door suspiciously. Only the sleeping form beside him held much more interest. For a minute or two he attempted to divide his attention between them, staring at one and then the other in turn. But watching a closed door was thoroughly boring and soon he convinced himself that he really was being paranoid and the door was all but forgotten.

*This is a rare opportunity, after all,* Ron thought, resting his head on his arm, so he could watch Hermione sleep in a comfortable position. *One I probably shouldn't squander.*

Gazing at Hermione was one of his favorite pastimes, well after Quidditch anyway. But it was a secret pleasure and not something Ron got to do that often. Sure, he could study her in class when she was busy taking notes, but even if she was too preoccupied to notice him staring, there was always a chance someone else might, so he had to be careful.

He knew for a fact that Harry had caught him on more than one occasion. Harry usually responded by rolling his eyes and remaining silent, but that was only because he was Ron's best mate. If someone like Parvati or Seamus caught him, Ron was certain they wouldn't remain silent. So he was never able to watch Hermione as often as he would have liked.

The quick looks and fleeting glances had become more frequent over the years, but they still weren't enough to satisfy him. The more he glimpsed, the more he needed to see. He wanted to memorize every detail. Commit every line and curve to memory so he could close his eyes and see her face perfectly in his mind. Her warm brown eyes; the rosy hue of her cheeks; those supple lips; that glorious mane of untamed hair. How many times had he been forced to restrain himself from touching her hair?

*Nothing stopping me now,* Ron thought as he reached out and brushed a curly lock off Hermione's cheek.

"What are you doing?" she yawned, her brown eyes fluttering open and locking on his.

"Watching you," Ron replied with a smile.
"Why?" Hermione questioned, furrowing her brow. *Was I drooling or something?* she wondered self-consciously.

"Because I enjoy looking at you," he admitted, his ears flushing ever so slightly.

"Well stop it," Hermione said uncomfortably, snatching the pillow up and covering her face with it. "I look frightful in the morning," he heard her muffled voice declare. "My eyes are all puffy and my hair is everywhere and..."

"You look fine," Ron retorted, grabbing the pillow, tugging it away from her, and throwing it on the floor so she wouldn't be able to snatch it back. "I happen to like your hair and--?"

"Then you're an idiot," Hermione snapped.

"Someone's grumpy this morning," Ron chuckled. She wasn't going to ruin his good mood. Not today.

"You'd be grumpy too if you woke up feeling as if a herd of Hippogriffs had trampled you in your sleep."

So that's it, is it? Ron thought.

Over the years he'd had plenty of experience dealing with Hermione when she was cranky. This was nothing he couldn't handle. He knew she had a tendency to try and bait him when she was in a foul mood, but he wasn't going to rise to the occasion. Not this time.

"A nice long soak in the bath might help," he suggested. "Did wonders for me after some of those grueling Quidditch practices. I'll go run it for you if you like," he offered.

"No, I don't want to move," Hermione replied, but she managed a weak smile.

That's a good sign, Ron thought. *Her mood must be improving.*

"You can't just lie in bed all day," he informed her. "That will only make it worse. You have to get up and move about."

"I don't want to move," she whined. "It hurts."

"Where does it hurt?" Ron asked, more than willing to kiss every inch of her body in an effort to make her feel better.

"Everywhere," Hermione moaned.

"Roll on your stomach," Ron demanded as he pulled himself into a sitting position beside her.

"Why?" Hermione asked, looking at him suspiciously.

"Can't you just this once do something I tell you without arguing with me about it?" he asked, forcing himself to sound irritated. He knew she was eager to snap back at him, but she couldn't very well do it now. Not without appearing to be argumentative.

Check, Ron thought, amused by the knowledge that he had only left her with two choices. Either she could give in and do as he asked, or she could start a row and prove that he was right, but either way, he won. He never really doubted which choice she'd make.

"Fine," Hermione sighed, flopping over and staring at the headboard. "Can I have my pillow back
now?" she asked curtly.

"No," Ron informed her as he rose up on his knees and straddled her body.

"RON! What are you doing?" Hermione cried out, attempting to turn beneath him. But before she could twist around to see what he was doing, Ron sat down on her lower back and pinned her to the bed. "Get off me," Hermione demanded.

"Shush," he said, coming up on his knees again and pulling his weight off her. Still straddling her, Ron leaned forward and pushed her hair to one side, before placed his hands on her shoulders. "I'm just trying to make you feel better. Now relax," he instructed as he started to rub the muscles around her neck.

He felt the tension in her body yield and give way under his hands as he kneaded her upper back. It only took a few moments before he heard a soft moan escape her lips.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" Ron asked, even though he was fairly certain she was enjoying it.

"MMmmm. No. That feels really good actually," Hermione admitted. "Can you do it a bit lower and over to the left?"

Ron instantly let his hands drop to the center of her back.

"OOOOoo! Right there," Hermione cried when his strong fingers started massaging the spot where Lestrange had kicked her. "God Ron, that feels soooo good," she moaned. "MMmmm. Can you do it harder? OOoo. Yes. Yes, just like that."

He complied with the request and applied more pressure, but even as he did so, Ron realized that this whole massage thing might not have been such a good idea. He hadn't intended it to be... sexual, and yet his body was responding to the sounds she was making as if it were. But it wasn't just her moans that excited him, her words had the strongest effect on him. While completely innocent, they were just so... arousing. He couldn't help but wonder if she'd say similar things to him if he made love to her. Realizing that he had to stop now, before his body could betray his thoughts, Ron pulled his hands off Hermione's back and lay down on his stomach beside her.

"That felt wonderful," Hermione sighed, rolling on her side to face him. "Why did you stop?"

"My fingers were getting tired," he lied. "Did it help?"

"You know, I think it did," Hermione said, giving him a genuine smile this time. But it quickly faded. "Where did you learn to use your hands like that?" she asked, looking at him apprehensively.

"What?" Ron asked, not expecting the question. "Oh... uh, from Charlie."

"Charlie taught you how to give a girl a massage?"

"Um... yeah," Ron answered, his face flushing. "He was always complaining about his shoulders or his arms hurting from Quidditch. Sometimes Mum would rub them a bit for him. Sometimes when she was busy she'd have me or Ginny do it."

"Oh," Hermione said, still looking at him as if she were slightly suspicious. "That was nice of you."

"Well, it?is not like I had much of a choice," he said. "When Mum tells you to do something, you do it. I never did it like that before," Ron added, sounding slightly embarrassed. "Lying down, I mean. Charlie always sat in a chair and...well... it just wasn't ever like that."
"Well, thank you," Hermione said. "It was really sweet of you to do that for me."

"It wasn't a big deal," Ron replied as he felt his face flush again. "But you can always return the favor once we're back at school and I start having Quidditch practice again."

Ron watched Hermione smile for a few seconds and then saw her face become more somber.

"Hermione, is something else bothering you? Besides being sore I mean. Did I do something? If I did I'm-- "

"No," she replied, sounding slightly alarmed. "You didn't do anything. You've been great."

"Then what is it?" Ron asked, now certain that something wasn't right. She was trying to hide it, but he could see that she was unhappy. He just couldn't figure out why. "You can tell me, you know," he persisted. "You don't have to be... uncomfortable around me."

"I'm not," Hermione insisted.

"Then what is it?"

"Do you--" she began, then stopped and looked at him sadly. "You don't think we've made a huge mistake, do you?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"You think last night was a mistake?" Ron asked, his face falling. The elation he'd experienced upon discovering the woman he fancied snuggled up against him when he woke up immediately vanished and for an instant he found it difficult to breathe. He felt as if he had just taken a bludger to the gut. If he had been on his broom, he probably would have let go and plummeted to the ground just to end his misery. But he wasn't on his broom and there was no way of escaping the desolation he felt.

"NO!" Hermione cried loudly, when she saw the hurt expression on Ron's face. "That isn't what I meant at all," she assured him, pulling herself into a sitting position and reaching for his hand. "It's just... well...aren't you afraid?"

"Of having my heart ripped from my chest and stomped on?" he moaned to himself. "No, because it just bloody happened."

"Of messing things up," Hermione answered. "What if we ruin our friendship? What if we wind up hating each other and--"

"You worry too much," Ron replied with a forced laugh.

*Ok, it isn't as bad as you thought, he told himself. This isn't anything you haven't asked yourself a thousand times. She's just scared. Just reassure her that won't ever happen.*

"You're my best friend, Ron. I don't know what I'd do if I ever lost that. I mean... Harry is really great and all, and I know he'd always be there for me, even if we weren't... you know... but you're the one I depend on and--"

"Really?" Ron asked, more than a little surprised to hear her say this. "You always seemed more comfortable with Harry."

"Well...," Hermione said, her cheeks turning pink. "I guess in some respects."
Ron immediately felt his brow knotted together as he tried to stomp down the surge of jealousy that washed over him. He hadn't actually expected her to admit that he was right.

"I mean--" Hermione continued, her blush becoming even more prominent. "Well... it's a lot easier with Harry. I don't have to--"

"You don't have to what?" Ron interrupted, his voice a bit higher than normal and rather defensive now.

"I don't have to... suppress the urge to snog him senseless every time he walks into the room," Hermione replied.

This time it was Ron's turn to blush. "Indeed?" he snickered, as he gave her one of his 'oh so charming' lopsided grins. Not waiting for her to answer him, Ron reached over and pulled Hermione down on top of him. "Nothing stopping you now, is there?" he asked playfully.

"Just the fact I'm trying to have a serious conversation," Hermione replied irritably, but Ron wasn't fooled. If she had really been annoyed, he knew she would have pulled away from him and she didn't.

He considered kissing her for a moment and then decided it would probably go better for him if he let her say whatever it was she wanted to say first, because if she really wanted to talk and he tried to distract her, chances are that would be no morning snog. So rather that reach up and brush the hair out of her face as he'd wanted to, Ron wrapped his arm around Hermione's back and rolled until they were both on their side facing one another. Then he waited for her to speak. Only she didn't say anything. She just lay there beside him and stared back at him, looking rather disheartened.

"Did it feel wrong to you?" Ron asked with a sigh.

"What?" Hermione asked, looking at him confused.

"Stop thinking," Ron said, reaching forward and tapping her gently on the forehead, "and tell me how you felt here," he instructed, placing her hand on his chest just above his heart.

"I? I don't think I can," she replied after thinking it over for a few moments.

"Oh please," Ron scoffed, rolling his eyes at her. "If McGonagall slipped the same question to you on her next exam, you'd write a bloody essay.?

"Fine," Hermione said as she pulled away from him and sat up. "What do you know about Greek Mythology?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ron replied in surprise. "Greek Mythology? What does that have to do with us?"

Unless you're about to tell me that you think I'm a God, he thought, fighting to suppress a smirk.

"You asked me to explain how I felt. I'm trying to tell you."

"I don't see what Zeus or Mount Olympus or any of that other rubbish has to do with anything."

"It isn't all rubbish. Some of it is quite interesting,? Hermione argued. ?I assume you've heard of Plato?"

"Of course I have." Ron replied. He'd heard the name, sure, but he didn't know anything about him.
Just that he was some old Greek codger that spent a lot of time thinking and writing about really boring things, so of course, he'd be right up Hermione's ally.

"Well, a long time ago, he wrote an essay called the Symposium."

This can't be happening, Ron thought, unable to keep his mouth from falling open. She's giving me a bloody history lesson. Now?

?In this essay, Plato retells an ancient Greek myth that explains the creation of humans. According to this myth, Hermione stated, ?there was a time when all of mankind existed as pairs; two people that were joined together at the back. They shared everything. One heart; one body; one soul. You've heard that old saying about two heads being better than one, right?"

Ron nodded. He was trying to listen to Hermione, but he still couldn't figure out what this had to do with how she felt about him and his interest was quickly waning.

"Well, these people thought they were pretty smart," Hermione continued, "and they decided they were tired of serving the Gods, so they started a war to win their freedom. Of course they lost spectacularly and after the war ended, the Gods decided that the people needed to be punished for their arrogance. So Zeus came down to Earth and threw his thunderbolts at all of the people, splitting them in half. Where there had once been one complete person, there were now two. Two hearts; two bodies; but they still shared one soul.?

?The people were devastated. They had never felt so empty and alone. They didn't know what to do or how to feel connected again. They didn't eat. They didn't sleep. When they found their other half, they just held each other and cried and mourned the loss of something beautiful. Eventually they started dying off from lack of food and the Gods realized that if they didn't do something, soon there would be no people left. So Zeus came back down to Earth and he turned one of the pair into a man and the other one into a woman. He gave them different bodies so that they could come together again for brief periods of time and experience that closeness that they had once shared all of the time. And he made it possible for them to have children, so that the human race would never die. But those children are born incomplete. They're destined to walk the world searching for that part of themselves that they lost even before they were born. Their other half; their soul-mate.?

"That's what I felt," Hermione said in a shaky voice after she finished her speech. "You're my other half. I think I must have known it the moment I saw you on the train. There was just something that drew me to you. I couldn't explain it and I certainly didn't understand it. Not then, anyway. Last night... I felt like... like I was... losing myself. Like I was losing myself and finding myself at the same time, if that makes any sense. And I wanted it to happen. I didn't want to eat. I didn't want to sleep. I just wanted to be with you. I wanted to get so close that I no longer knew where I ended and you began. Nothing mattered except--"

"--being together," Ron finished.

"Yes," she agreed.

"Does that sound like a mistake to you?"

"You're not afraid?"


"I don't know," Hermione replied, glancing down at the sheets. "I guess... I just thought you... didn't
feel the same way I did."

"I felt frustrated," Ron admitted.


"I was angry with myself for being such a coward," Ron confessed. "But I was afraid you wouldn't ever feel the same way and I didn't want to ruin things between us. I sort of hoped if I did nothing, it would go away, but..."

"...the harder you fought it, the more you wanted it?" Hermione asked.

Ron nodded his head in agreement.

"What happens if it doesn't work out?" she asked quietly.

"We both want the same thing, right? So why wouldn't it work out?"

"Ron, we fight all the time," Hermione reminded him.

"Yeah but... that's because I was so bloody frustrated," Ron said.

"Don't curse," she scolded, rolling her eyes.

"No, I'm serious, Hermione,? he said, ignoring the reprimand. ?I picked most of those fights on purpose. I don't even remember what most of them were about."

"I know," she admitted with a sigh,

"You knew?"

"No. I mean... I understand. I did it too. You were just so... infuriating. One minute you'd be hostile and rude and then you'd turn around and do something so sweet it would melt my heart and I just couldn't stay mad at you. And that would just infuriate me more. I would get angry with myself because of how I was feeling about you and then I'd be angry with you for being so damn irresistible, so I'd pick a fight with you to get even. And even that would backfire because... you'd rise to the occasion every time. Do you have any idea how sexy you are when you're angry?"

"You... you think I'm sexy?" Ron asked, completely astounded by her choice of words.

"Sexy," he repeated it in his mind, his face and ears turning crimson. It certainly wasn't a term he'd ever apply to himself.

?I guess,? Hermione answered uncomfortably, blushing just as deeply as Ron. "All that passion you have locked up inside of yourself," she explained. "The only time I ever get to see it is when you're angry. But I know it's there, like a smoldering fire waiting to be ignited. I just can't seem to stop myself. I want to unleash it. The instant I see that spark in your eyes, I throw fuel on the fire and force it to burn out of control. I'm horrible, but... I love pushing you over the edge and making you lose your cool. I don't think I can stop myself," Hermione confessed guiltily.

"There are other ways to push me over the edge," Ron admitted, wrapping his arms around her again and leaning in to kiss her gently. "I think you may be rather good at it too."

"Oh you do, do you?" Hermione asked with a smirk.

"Surprisingly so. I swear, sometimes all you have to do is look at me."
"You're a 16 year-old male," Hermione scoffed. "That's not me. That's your out of control hormones."

"Hormones," Ron chuckled. *Well maybe a little,* he admitted to himself, but he wasn?t about to admit that to Hermione. "How did you know Harry fancied Cho?" he asked instead, managing to take her by surprise.

"I saw the way he looked at her," she replied.

"The way a 15 year-old, hormone crazed male would?"

"Um hum." *He practically drooled every time she walked by,* Hermione thought with disgust.

"How many girls have you seen me look at that way?" Ron asked.

Hermione's face immediately pinched up in a scowl. "There was Fle--"

"She doesn't count," Ron exclaimed before Hermione could finish her sentence. "She's part Veela and she was using her powers. I was bewitched."

"What about Madam Rosmerta? I've seen you leer at her plenty of time. So unless you expect me to believe she's been spiking your Butterbeer with a Love Potion or something then--?"

"That doesn't count."

"It most certainly does," Hermione insisted, at which point Ron coughed out the name ?Lockhart."

"Oh, shut up!? she hissed, her cheeks glowing with embarrassment. "Just because you don't like my answer, doesn't mean you get to throw that in my--?"

"You're the one that fancied him," Ron chuckled. "But I'm not talking about the kind of crushes kids have on adults that don't even know they're alive. How many normal girls our age have you seen me leer at?? he asked.

"Other than Fleur??"

"Normal girls, Hermione."

"None I suppose," she mumbled after taking a few moments to think it over. "But that doesn't mean anything," she added, her voice gaining more confidence. "That's just because you're not thick enough to do it in front of me anymore."

"We both know I am thick enough," Ron said, smiling despite the fact Hermione looked far from pleased by his response. "Look, what I'm trying to say is..." he continued uncomfortably, "...that well... I went to the Yule Ball with one of the prettiest girls in school, but... I didn't even really notice her. I couldn't tell you what color her dress robes were or how she wore her--"

"They were turquoise," Hermione interrupted, looking as if she had been forced to suck on an extremely bitter lemon, "and you looked horrid together."

"You're missing my point."

"Which is?" she replied irritably.

"Your robes were a perfect shade of periwinkle blue and they made your skin glow like fine porcelain. And your hair was up, in some sort of fancy knot that accentuated your neck and drove
me mad," Ron said. ?I wanted to reach out and touch you,? he said, pushing the hair away from her neck before brushing her skin lightly with his fingertips. ?Just like this, but I couldn?t,? he said, smiling ever so slightly when Hermione shivered. "You were the most beautiful girl I?d ever seen," he confessed without the slightest trace of embarrassment. "I couldn't take my eyes off you then and I haven't taken them off you since."

?Oh, Ron,? Hermione moaned, tears streaming down her cheeks.

He would have been concerned, had it not been for the fact she was smiling at him.

I'll never understand women, Ron thought, before he forced himself to continue.

"That's the reason you've never seen me gawking at any other girls," he whispered, reaching out to brush the tears off her cheek. "That and the fact you?re right, I?ve been careful to only stare at you like a hormone-crazed teenager when you wouldn't catch me doing it. While you studied for the O.W.L.s, I studied you. If you had pulled you head out of your books for 10 seconds,? he joked, ?you probably would have caught me at it."

Hermione didn't know what to say. She had actually been rendered speechless. She never would have expected Ron to say something so romantic. It was hard to believe that this was the same Ron Weasley she had once scathingly accused of having the emotional range of a teaspoon. Without even thinking about it, she threw herself on top of him and kissed him forcefully.

It took Ron a moment to realize what was happening. One minute Hermione had been looking down at him with tears in her eyes. The next, she had launched herself at him and now she was kissing him; they were kissing each other, passionately. He was still trying to figure out exactly what he had done to inspire such a reaction when he felt her lips pull away.

Not wanting the kiss to end so soon, Ron reached up, intent on dragging Hermione back down. Unfortunately she was quicker than he was and managed to sit upright before he even made a move. The next thing Ron knew, she was straddling his stomach staring down at him with an expression he had never seen. But before he had time to decipher it, Hermione reached down, pulled the tattered old t-shirt she had been sleeping in over her head, and dropped it on the floor.

BLOODY HELL! Ron thought as his eyes snapped upward and zeroed in on her chest.

If her goal was to catch him leering at her, she got her wish, because he was too stunned to do anything else. Not only did he openly gawk, he actually groaned out loud as he stared at the thin layer of white cotton that hugged her breasts.

He?d imagined her like this, of course. He?d fantasized about what she looked like under her clothes, but the Hermione in his fantasies usually wore some variation of the brightly colored bits of lace he?d seen women wearing in Wanton Witch magazine. The fact that she wasn?t; the fact that she was wearing something modest and sensible, rather than deliberately sexy, was so much better. It was just?. so Hermione.

Bloody Hell! She looks amazing, Ron thought as he stared up at her, mesmerized by the shape of her body.

Ok, you can do this, Hermione told herself, blushing deeply as she leaned back and studied Ron, who continued to stare at her. There is no reason to be uncomfortable. It?s just like wearing a two-piece bathing costume.

Only you?re not, the less rational side of herself protested. You're in your knickers.
But I'm still completely covered, she reminded herself. He isn't seeing anything he wouldn't see if I were in a two-piece bathing suit, so it shouldn't matter. Besides, he has to be able to see what he's doing. I won't be able to teach him the proper technique if he can't see.

"You... you--" Ron stammered, struggling to find his voice and fill the strained silence. "You're... you're better than I ever imagined," he finally whispered, causing Hermione's red face to flush even darker.

"I bet Harry never looked at Cho like THAT," she giggled as she scrutinized Ron's face.

His eyes were wide. His mouth was slightly open. For a moment there, he looked as if he had forgotten how to breathe. She recognized the look. She hadn't seen him look at anything in this particular way since their third year, but she remembered it all the same. She'd never forget the way Ron had looked at Harry's Firebolt. Nor the way he had glared at her when McGonagall took it away. He certainly wasn't glaring at her now. His face was frozen in an expression of reverence. She saw the same longing; the same awe; the same veneration he had directed at Harry's broom. Ron had looked at that broom as if it were the most perfect thing in the universe.

So perfect in fact, he had been reluctant to touch it at first, Hermione reflected.

And as he had not yet attempted to touch her, she came to the conclusion that the only way it was going to happen was if she did it herself.

Although she hadn't originally intended for things to proceed in this direction, Hermione leaned forward and grasped one of Ron's hands in her own, then lifted it up and pressed it firmly against her right breast. He groaned again softly, but it was the only reaction she got. He must have been holding his breath, Hermione thought as she saw him exhale and suck in another deep breath. His chest was now rising and falling rapidly and she was almost sure his heart was beating as fast as her own.

When she felt his fingers move, Hermione released her hold on his palm. Part of her expected his hand to fall away with her own, but he kept it in place, cupping her gently as he stared at her.

So soft, Ron thought as he felt the silky smooth skin above the cotton fabric with his fingertip. So perfect.

He had always thought that his hands had been abnormally large, but now-- Now they seemed to be perfect.

No, she's perfect, Ron thought as he began to move his thumb back and forth over her supple flesh. She fits perfectly in my hand.

This isn't why you took your shirt off, the analytical voice in the back of Hermione's head protested. You can't allow yourself to become distracted now. You need to tell him.

Easier said than done, Hermione thought, biting her lip as she looked down at Ron and contemplated how she was going to go about doing it. She knew that she had to tell him her secret. She wasn't finished with her research yet, but she was almost certain that her plan would work. But in order for it to work, she had to tell Ron. She couldn't do it without him.

The problem was, she wasn't ready for the row that conversation would cause. The last thing she wanted to do was fight with him. Especially now. Ron had been so supportive and he was happy. She didn't want to be the one to ruin it. How could she take that happiness away from him so soon?
It wouldn't be fair.

None of what's happened is fair, she thought cynically. Not to Harry, not to Ron, or me either for that matter. I've had enough of death and despair to last me a lifetime. I don't want to think about it anymore. It will wait, she decided, wanting nothing more than to push the plan she'd concocted out of her mind and pretend it wasn't necessary, even if only for a little while. I'll finish the research and I'll tell him after that. That way if I'm wrong, I won't upset him for nothing.

For a moment she considered teaching him the Muggle technique as she'd originally planned, and then decided that it could wait as well. There was just no way she could teach him how to start a heart again without it leading to questions of why her heart might stop beating in the first place.

No the entire thing will have to wait, she decided. She'd spent the previous day convinced she was about to die. Today she was going to enjoy being alive.

"Mr. Weasley, I do believe I see a spark in your eyes," Hermione teased. "And I told you what happens when I see that spark," she warned him with a playful smile. "I'm tempted to push you until it becomes a full-fledged inferno."

"Oh God!" Ron moaned beneath her. "You are going to kill me if you keep talking like that"

Talking wasn't what I had in mind, she admitted with a soft laugh as she lay down on top of him and places a light kiss on his neck, just under his ear.

"Mione," Ron groaned in warning, not wanting her to stop, but afraid he might embarrass himself if she pushed him much further. He had just started to contemplate how she'd react if he stopped fighting himself and responded, when his sister ruined everything.

"OH MY GOD!!!" Ginny screamed at the top of her lungs from the now open doorway.

Before he even had time to register the fact they'd been interrupted, Hermione had rolled off him and covered herself with the bedspread, pulling it completely off Ron in the process. Luckily he was still dressed. Unfortunately in his current state, his boxers didn't hide all that much. Mortified, Hermione hid her face behind Ron's back, as he sat upright and gaped at his startled sister.

"OH MY GOD! You and Ron... Ron and ... OH FOR HEAVEN SAKE!" Ginny shrieked, as she covered her eyes with both her hands. "WILL YOU COVER YOURSELF UP!" she shouted at her brother, her face as vividly red and her hair. "Eeeeeeeewwwwww! I can't believe I just saw you two... you were... and OH MY GOD, HERMIONE! You're practically starkers. Why didn't you lock the bloody door?"

"Why didn't you knock?" Ron demanded as he grabbed a portion of the bedspread and pulled it over his lap.

"I did," Ginny replied. "OH MY GOD!"

"Stop saying that," Ron barked, hoping he could drown out his embarrassment with a little rage.
"What the hell do you want?"

"A bloody Time Turner would be nice," Ginny moaned loudly. "Or a strong memory charm."

"GINNY?" Ron shouted.

"Mum told me to come up and... OH MY GOD!!!" Ginny shouted again as she put the pieces together in her mind. "She knew. She knew you two were... in here... together. That's why she asked
me to tell you both that... because she knew you were?"

"Nothing happened," Hermione stated from behind Ron's back.

"...together," Ginny finished.

"Mum wanted you to tell us both what?" Ron asked.

"Huh?" Ginny replied, her mind obviously elsewhere.

"What did Mum say? Ginny! What did Mum want?" he asked again when she didn't reply straight away.

"She told me to come up and tell you both that breakfast was almost ready."

"That's it?" Ron asked, clearly expecting more.

Her message delivered, Ginny turned around and started to leave, but she seemed to change her mind in mid-stride. She stopped abruptly and spun around to face them once more. "You two better watch out," she warned.

"Did she seem... upset?" Ron asked, his voice full of trepidation.

"Mum?" Ginny asked. You would think so, wouldn't you? She obviously knew they were in here... together. Why wasn't she angry? Ginny wondered. "No, she was rather chipper actually. I'm talking about Fred and George," she explained. "They've had their heads together all morning. They're up to something and whatever it is, you can bet it'll be awful."

"Ginny?" Ron shouted as his sister started to leave again. "Wait."

"What?" she asked, stepping back into the doorway.

"Hermione needs some clothes," Ron replied.

"Really? I hadn't noticed," she shot back sarcastically.

"I'm serious," Ron said impatiently. "I know you're smaller than she is, but surely you must have something that will fit her."

"I'm sure I can find something," Ginny said with a sigh, "but you two better not be snogging when I come back," she warned.

"Don't worry," Ron said. "I won't be here. Mum would have a fit if she knew I was in the same room with you while you were changing," he explained to Hermione when it looked like she was about to protest. Ginny snorted loudly, but Ron ignored her and continued. "Ginny will help you. I'm going to grab a quick shower and I'll see you down in the kitchen," Ron said, jumping out of bed. He waited for Hermione to nod her head at him, then pushed past his sister and disappeared down the hall.

"He isn't ONLY going to take a shower you know?" Ginny scoffed.

"GINNY!" Hermione cried out in shock.

"Well, he's not."

"I know," Hermione admitted with a guilty smile.
"I hope you're pleased with yourself," Ginny sniggered. "There won't be any hot water left by the time he's through."

"I am rather pleased, now that you mention it," Hermione replied beaming at her like an idiot.

"This conversation is going to be disturbing enough," Ginny said with a smile of her own. "I don't want to have it while you're in your knickers. Hold that thought and I'll be right back with some clothes," she said, leaving the room and closing the door behind her.

?So,? Ginny said as she came back in the room and dropped a pile of clothing on the bed next to Hermione, "you and Ron finally...saw the light?"

"Is that a subtle way of asking if we--"

Hermione let the unfinished sentence speak for itself as she picked up a green shirt and studied it. It wasn't exactly something she'd choose. The wispy flowing material that the sleeves were made out of was a bit too feminine for her tastes.

"Did you?" Ginny asked with a grin.

"Of course not," Hermione replied as she felt her face heat up. "We just kissed a bit, that's all."

"Looked like it was a bit more than that to me," Ginny teased. "Or are you forgetting you were topless when I walked in?"

?I wasn?'t topless,? Hermione argued. ?All the important bits were covered.?

?Yeah, by Ron.?

?It wasn?'t like that,? Hermione insisted. ?At least it didn?'t start out like that,? she muttered to herself when Ginny arched an eyebrow and smirked.

?I'm almost afraid to ask,? the young redhead chuckled. ?If only we weren?'t talking about my brother. But,? she sighed, her curiosity overcoming the ick-factor. ?Do tell. What exactly was it like then? Because it looked just like two partially dressed people snogging in a bed to me. But if I?'m wrong, please, enlighten me.? But rather than respond, as Ginny expected, Hermione bit her lower lip and cocked her head to one side as if she were contemplating how to respond. Which, of course, is exactly what she was doing. Hermione knew that it was going to be easier to tell Ginny about her plan. She knew that Ginny would understand and she?'d certainly be able to help her deal with Ron?'s reaction. The problem was, Hermione also knew that if her planned worked, Ginny would want to do it too, and that created an entirely different set of problems. Ron?'s over protective tendencies where his sister was concerned being one.

And Harry, she reminded herself. He?'ll definitely cause problems. He?'ll flat out refuse to let Ginny do something so drastic and when she insists, it?'ll cause a huge row. Even Ron and Harry together will have a hard time dissuading her.

Of course when it came down to it, Hermione didn't really want to get Ginny involved either. Yet at the same time, she realized there was no way they were going to keep her out of it. She was a Weasley and too stubborn for her own good. Like it or not, Ginny was going to make sure that she got involved.
But not yet, Hermione told herself.

"I was going to teach him something, but I changed my mind," Hermione finally answered.

Actually I'm going to teach you too, she thought as she spread the pile of clothing out, hoping to find her own shirt amongst the ones Ginny brought for her to chose from. You just don't know it yet.

"I don't even want to know," Ginny scoffed as she watched Hermione search through the shirts. "Mum tossed all your clothes in the bin," she added, when she realized what Hermione was looking for. "You'd think they were all contaminated or something. She wouldn't even let Dad touch them."

"Everything?" Hermione questioned.

"Except your trainers," Ginny informed her. "And that Muggle money you had in your pockets."

"Oh well," Hermione sighed, slipping the green shirt on over her head. "This is a bit tight, Gin," she said, grabbing the front of the shirt and pulling on it in an attempt to stretch it out.

"Mum can enlarge it for you when we get downstairs," Ginny replied. "Probably ought to have her do it before Ron sees you, or he'll run off and take another shower."

"You shouldn't tease him."

"Me? You're the one that 'teased' him into the shower," Ginny chuckled. "Besides, you better get used to it, because Fred and George are going to be merciless."

"I'll show those two merciless," Hermione muttered as she slipped on a pair of white cotton shorts and stared off into space as if contemplating exactly how she was going to go about doing it. When she looked back at Ginny, she couldn't help but notice her amused expression. "Listen Gin,? she said, ?I have to ask you a favor."

"OK...er... Wait a minute," Ginny replied. "This isn't going to end with Ron sneaking into my room in the middle of the night is it?"

"No," Hermione said, rolling her eyes dramatically. "Honestly, I think we can control ourselves."

"You have met my brother, Ron, right?" Ginny asked sarcastically. "Tall bloke. Ginger hair. Never stops to think before he speaks or acts. Oh yeah, I'm sure he can control himself. For all of 5 seconds," she laughed. "So anyway, about this favor?"

"Don't tell Harry that Ron and I are... you know...together."

"Why not?" Ginny asked, clearly surprised by the request. "He's been waiting long enough for you two to come to your senses."

"It's just not the best time right now. He's having a hard time of it, and he's all alone, and well... Ron thinks it would be better if we waited until he was a bit happier himself. You know, once he's away from those awful Muggles. I'd just prefer to tell him myself, if you don't mind."

Ginny considered what Hermione said for a few moments before she replied. "OK, I guess that makes sense. He won't hear it from me."

"Thanks Gin," Hermione said, grabbing the dressing gown off the chair and slipping it on over her clothes. "That doesn't mean you can't write and talk to him about... other things though," she added with a knowing smile.
"I wouldn't know what to say."

"Well you could start by telling him that I really am all right, because he'll believe it coming from you as opposed to Ron or myself," Hermione suggested. "You could tell him how your summer has been so far. You could simply tell him that you were thinking about him and thought you'd write to say hi. Or... you can tell him how I've been reduced to wearing your clothes, which just happen to be 'as green as a fresh pickled toad'," Hermione chuckled.

"OH SHUT UP!" Ginny said defensively. "I don't fancy Harry anymore."

"If you say so," Hermione replied, smiling to herself as she walked out into the hallway. It was amazing really, how similar Ron and Ginny really were sometimes.

"I don't," Ginny protested as she followed Hermione towards the stairs.

When the girls enter the kitchen, they were surprised to discover that Ron had beaten them downstairs. He hadn't been kidding when he said his shower was going to be quick. He'd obviously taken one, because his hair was still damp. But how he managed to take a shower, get dressed, and beat them to the kitchen, Ginny couldn't begin to understand. Ron was notoriously slow in the morning. In fact, his mother usually had to shout at him two or three times before he'd actually show up for breakfast. Yet there he sat, his arms crossed in front of his chest, glaring at Fred and George.

Well, that explains it, Ginny thought, noting the gleeful expression on the twins faces as they entered the room. Suddenly Ron's presence, and his glower, made perfect sense. He'd rushed so he could get downstairs defend Hermione. And apparently she's going to need it, Ginny thought, rolling her eyes when she saw Fred elbow George and then grin wickedly as the two of them watched Hermione slowly cross the kitchen and ease herself into an empty chair next to Ron.

"Morning, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, too busy with her cooking to look up. "I hope you slept well," she added. Ginny watched Fred and George smirk at each other as she took her own seat at the table.

"You must be starving,? her mother said to Hermione. "There's toast on the table,"

"A bit tender this morning, are you?" George asked Hermione before she had a chance to reply to his mother. He wasn't about to let the two of them start a conversation. It would completely ruin the plan.

"You'd expect that though," his twin brother snickered. "It's normal to feel that way after... OUGH!" Fred cried when Ron's foot collided with his shin under the table. "Bloody Hell. That hurt."

"Sorry," Ron mumbled when his mother turned away from the stove to glowered at him in warning briefly, before returning to her cooking. But even as he apologized, Ron made a point of smirking at Fred so he'd know he didn't mean it.

I told you to leave her alone, Ron thought as he reached out and grabbed a piece of toast off the plate in the center of the table. He ventured a quick look over at Hermione to judge her reaction, then locked his eyes on his brothers again. This isn't good, he told himself after he noted Hermione's expressionless face.

Ron knew her well enough to know that she dealt with teasing one of two ways. Occasionally she would get flustered and try and flee, but more often then not, she'd simply put up a brave front and pretend that it didn't bother her. She assumed that if she didn't react, people would get bored and find someone else to bother.
"That might work with most people," Ron told himself. But Fred and George will NEVER give up. If she doesn't react, they'll just kick it up a notch or two and go after her until they see her resolve crack.

"How would you like your eggs, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked Hermione.

"Scrambled. If you don't mind."

"Not at all," Molly said, reaching for a basket of eggs on the counter.

"A bit of a grouch this morning, are we?" George asked Ron. "What's the matter? Didn't you get any sleep?"

"You'd think he'd be a bit more relaxed," Fred chuckled, scooting his chair away from the table just enough to ensure he was out of the range of Ron's feet. "Considering what you saw this morning," he continued, arching his eyebrows suggestively at George.

His curiosity getting the better of him, George ventured a quick look in Hermione's direction to gauge her reaction. He was disappointed, however, when he noticed that she looked rather bored. Ron, on the other hand was clearly incensed and George couldn't help but smile as he watched his younger brother struggle to keep his anger in check while he jabbed his knife into the jar of jam and plopped a huge glob of it onto his toast.

"Here you go, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, dumping a large pile of bacon onto Hermione's plate. When she was sure Hermione had enough, she divided the rest between Ron and Ginny, then she turned around to finish cooking the eggs.

Ron lifted his toast up to his mouth, his eyes still on his brothers, and took a bite. As he did, a large portion of the jam slid down the bread and came to rest on his wrist. He immediately dropped his toast on his plate and was just about to reach for his napkin to clean it off when he felt Hermione surprise him by grasping his hand and turn it towards herself. Ron turned to question her, but found himself unable to speak when she leaned forward, darted her tongue out, and licked the jam off him.

George gawked at her in absolute disbelief. Whereas Fred, who has unfortunately chosen that exact moment to take a drink of his pumpkin juice, was forced to spit it across the table to stop himself from choking.

"What's the matter with you?" Mrs. Weasley asked irritably, spinning around to glare at Fred. "Honestly. You'd think that you were raised by a pack of wolves the way you behave at the table."

"S... sorry... Mum," Fred coughed, still goggling at Hermione, who was now eating her bacon as if nothing had happened. "I guess it just went down the wrong way."

"Honestly," Mrs. Weasley said again, shaking her head and doling the eggs out between Ron, Ginny, and Hermione.

Looking across the table at the expressions of astonishment plastered across the twin's faces, Ginny started to giggle. When she looked over at Ron, and realized he was just as gobsmacked as they were, she laughed even louder.

"George," Mrs. Weasley said, oblivious to what had just happened. "Clean this mess up now that you're done with your breakfast," she instructed, pointing to the pans she'd placed in the sink. "And for Merlin's sake, wipe off that table," she said to Fred.

"What do we look like?" George cried
"Bloody House-Elves?" Fred finished.

"It won't hurt you two to do a little housework every now and then. It isn't like I asked you to clean your room."

"No, you asked us to clean Ron's," George grumbled under his breath.

"I'll be gone most of the morning." Mrs. Weasley informed them as she grabbed her cloak off a hook by the fireplace. "If you need anything," she said, ignoring the twins and looking at her two youngest children, "you can ask your father. He's taken the day off work." That said, she vanished from the kitchen with a pop.

The instant she was gone, Fred and George began to grin like two identical Cheshire cats.

"Oh no," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "Here we go."

"SO--" Fred said, looking as if Christmas had just come early.

"Did you two...sleep well?" George asked with a smirk.

*Ok, so maybe it really isn't bothering her*, Ron reflected, after he glanced at Hermione and saw her roll her eyes as well.

"You looked pretty cozy this morning," George laughed.

"I would have thought you'd be smart enough to close the door," Fred added.

"Hell, I would have locked it and Shielded the room," George continued. "But then... you two aren't old enough to do *THAT* yet, are you?"

"Shut up!" Ginny said, as she watched Ron glare murderously at their brothers.

"Maybe they'll make an exception now that Ickle Ronniekins is a *man,*" Fred said, and both twins erupted in a fit of laughter.

"THAT'S IT!" Ron shouted as he pushed his chair away from the table and stood up, obviously prepared to launch himself right over the table to get at his brothers if they opened their mouths again. But before he could make another move, Hermione reached up, grabbed his hand, and then shook her head when he looked down at her.

Fred and George exchanged a look when Ron flopped back down in his chair in a huff, crossed his arms, and settled for scowling at them instead. So far they had concentrated most of their ribbing on Ron, knowing that even subtle innuendos, especially when made in the presence of their mother, would get under his skin. They had assumed that Hermione would be equally affected. They hadn't expected her to be unfazed by their insinuations. Even more unexpectedly, she had called their bluff and turned the tables on them by performing what could only be interpreted as a sexual act, on their brother right under their mother's nose. With a silent look they agreed that she would have to pay. They had been too easy on her. They would have to reclaim control of the situation. But they'd have to do it delicately or Ron would come to her defense, whether she wanted him to or not.

"So that's the way it is now, is it?" Fred asked.

"Got Ickle Ronnie wrapped around your little finger?"

"You snap them and he heels like a good widdle boy," Fred laughed.
"Better give him a treat?" George said, pushing the jar of jam towards Hermione. "Or he might start growling again."

"You think you're very clever, don't you?" Hermione asked condescendingly.

"Never in my wildest dreams," Fred declared, "would have I expected to see the prim and proper Hermione Granger?"

"Bookworm extraordinaire..." George added.

"...do something so brazen."

"Clearly you've been holding out on us," George snickered.

"It's always the quiet ones, isn't it?" Fred scoffed.

But rather than take the bait, Hermione just snorted and shook her head at them as she continued to eat her breakfast.

"Tell us Hermione?" George began.

"Did Ron teach you that little trick last night, or did you learn it... somewhere else?" Fred finished.

"WATCH IT!" Ron shouted angrily.

"It isn't going to work," Hermione stated calmly, "You aren't going to embarrass me."

Fred and George glanced at each other again and silently agreed they'd have to take it up another notch.

"I'm not ashamed of it," Hermione said locking her eyes on the twins seated across from her and staring at them defiantly. "I'll even admit it for you'd like."

"Admit it then," George said, even though he wasn't sure what she was going to own up to.

"I fancy Ron," Hermione replied, completely straight-faced. It took a great deal of effort on her part, to hide the fact she was both agitated and annoyed, but she managed to do it.

For a moment, neither of the twins was sure how to react. They just sat there staring at her. Then the side of Fred's mouth curled up into a roguish smirk.

"Then snog him," he demanded.

"What?" Hermione asked in a scandalized tone of voice.

The twins ventured a quick glance at one another, sensing their victory was close at hand.

"You heard me," Fred replied. "Snog him!?"

"Right here at the kitchen table," George added.

"In front of all of us," Fred continued.

"I've already seen it, thank you very much," Ginny muttered, stabbing her eggs with her fork and bringing a large clump up to her mouth.

Her comment took Fred and George by surprise, but they managed to cover it up quickly.
"You two are mad," Hermione declared, causing them both to dissolve into a wave of laughter. "Barking mad," she clarified.

The twins turned to face her with identical smirks.

Ron instantly saw their mistake and he bit his lip as he fought to suppress a smirk of his own. You almost had her, Ron thought to himself, but you had to go and get smug about it. Too bad you don't know her like I do, or you'd know that there is nothing that irritates Hermione more than some condescending prat that thinks he has her beaten.

"So much for not being embarrassed," George chuckled.

"I am not embarrassed," Hermione lied smoothly.

"Then snog him," Fred chuckled.

"I will not," she stated in a dignified manner. "It would be inappropriate."

"Inappropriate?" Fred cried and erupted into another fit of laughter.

"Let me get this straight," George snickered. "You won't snog him at the kitchen table because that would be... inappropriate?"

"But you'll lick him?" Fred added. "How appropriate was that?"

"I suppose you are right," Hermione admitted with a sigh as she turned to look at Ron.

BLOODY HELL! his mind cried out in surprise when he saw the resolve in her eyes. She's going to do it. Wait a minute... Ron thought, trying not to smile. She's going to do it.

"So you admit that we're right?" Fred asked.

Hermione's only answer was to shrug her shoulders an instant before she leaned forward and kissed Ron softly on the lips. She lingered there for a few seconds, then pulled away.

"That's not a proper snog," George laughed.

"Yeah," Fred added. "The kiss Mum laid on him when he became a Prefect was better than that."

"SOD OFF!" Ron shouted as his face flooded with color. He would have given just about anything not to have Harry and Hermione witness that mortifying incident. Leave it to Fred to bring it up when he least suspected it.

"Oh, it was to be a proper snog, was it?" Hermione said. "Well in that case--"

She quickly stood up and to Ron's surprise, she ended up sitting on his lap.

"Is this what you had in mind?" she asked, as she dipped two fingers into the jar of jam George had pushed at her earlier, then brought them up, and ran them over Ron's lips.

Not thinking, Ron darted his tongue out instinctually to lick the jam off, but then he realized what she was going to do and forced himself to leave it there.

Fred and George watched with wide eyes as Hermione licked her fingers briefly, before pushing them into her mouth.
Ginny groaned and dropped her head to the table, just as Hermione finished with her fingers and looked at Ron again.

_Bloody Hell_, he thought, his eyes nearly as wide as his brothers. Again he had to fight the urge to lick his own lips, this time in anticipation.

"Ron?" Mr. Weasley called out, unexpectedly pushing the kitchen door open and popping his head into the room. "Can I have a word with you in the sitting room when you're finished with--" The rest of his sentence died on his lips, however, when he noticed exactly where Hermione was sitting. His eyes widened a bit as he watched his son and Hermione both jump to their feet. Ron instantly swiped his hand over his mouth and both of them blushed furiously.

Fred and George's laughter instantly filled the awkward silence in the room.

"Who would have ever thought Dad would be the one to get to her?" George snickered.

"SHUT UP!" Ron shouted at him.

"Son, can I see you in the living room?" Arthur asked, deciding it might not be wise to wait until after Ron finished his breakfast because chances are he'd try and disappear.

"Right now?? he said, looking at Hermione nervously before glancing at his brothers, who were laughing like a couple of idiots. ?Can't it wait?? he asked his father, making it evident that he was reluctant to leave her alone with them.

"Oh I see," Mr. Weasley chuckled. "Giving her a hard time are they?" he asked. "You two," Arthur said sternly to the twins, causing them to laugh even harder. "Whatever you're doing, knock it off," he ordered as he gave Hermione an encouraging smile. "Or I'll tell your mother," he added.

It was his threat of their mother that finally sobered Fred and George up.

"Thanks, Mr. Weasley," Hermione said as she walked her empty plate over to the sink. "But that won't be necessary. I'm used to dealing with them."

Arthur shrugged his shoulders and looked at his youngest son once more. "Ron?"

"Yeah, ok," he sighed, shoveling some eggs into his mouth before putting the rest of his bacon on a piece of toast, folded it in half, and rising out of his chair. But as he approached his father, Ron halted in the doorway and spun around to glare at the twins one last time, and only then did he leave the kitchen.
Chapter 5: Confrontations

As he expected, Ron found Hermione in Percy's bedroom straightening it up. She was still making the bed when he entered the room and shut the door behind him.

"So, what did your father want? she asked, dropping the now fluffed pillow at the head of the bed before jumping up to sit on the edge of the Percy's old wooden desk.

"You don't want to know," Ron grumbled, wishing he could blot the entire conversation out of his mind.

"Oh," Hermione replied as she watched his cheeks flush ever so slightly and she realized what must have happened. Ron had been forced to have 'the talk'; that mortifying experience almost every teenager has had with a parent at one point or another.

"It couldn't have been that bad," she said, when Ron remained silent. "You weren't even down there for 10 minutes. Did... did he say anything about what he saw in the kitchen?" she asked, unable to restrain herself any longer. The last thing she wanted was for his parents to think she was some sort of 'scarlet woman'. She'd tried hard to hide it, but the fact that Mrs. Weasley believed all that rubbish printed about her in Witch Weekly had bothered Hermione immensely.

"No, he never even mentioned it. He just said that... well, he just reminded me that I needed to be respectful. You know," Ron said, his ears coloring significantly, "I should treat you the way I'd expect a bloke to treat Ginny. Stuff like that. Oh yeah," he added, rolling his eyes. "He also told me that Mum has decided that we shouldn't be closing the door when we are in a room alone together."

"But... you closed the door," Hermione gasped as she jumped up off the desk.

"Leave it," Ron demanded, grabbing her arm when she tried to rush past him to keep her from reaching the door.

"But--"

"I don't want Fred and George listening to our private conversations."

"But, your mum said--"

"She's not here right now."

"That's not the point," Hermione said sternly.

"Yes, it is," Ron argued. "Dad's always saying, 'what Mum doesn't know won't hurt her', so if I get caught it'll be his fault."

"Ronald Weasley," Hermione fumed. "If you think I'm going to let you get away with using a feeble excuse like that to break your mother's rules--"

"It's a stupid rule, Hermione," Ron interrupted.

"I don't care," she retorted. "It's still a rule and we're going to follow it."
"No, I'm not."

"OH YES, YOU ARE!" Hermione cried loudly. "Because if you don't," she added, purposely lowering her voice, "I'll make sure we aren't alone together for the rest of the summer."

Ron gaped down at her for a few seconds before he managed to close his mouth and narrow his eyes. He knew what she was doing and he wasn't about to stand for it. If he backed down now, he may as well admit that she would always be the one in control.

"Then I guess you better leave," Ron said as he crossed the room, threw the door open, and stepped out of the way so she could exit.

"Fine!" Hermione shouted, prepared to call his bluff. *If he weren't so damned stubborn,* she thought to herself, unable to believe that they were fighting yet again over something so meaningless.

"Don't bother," Ron informed her before she made it out the door. "I was leaving anyway. That's what I came up here to tell you."

"Leaving?" Hermione asked, forgetting that she was supposed to be angry. "Where are you going?"

"Dad wants me to go with him to get your school stuff," he said, pushing past her and walking out into the hallway.

"I'll go," Hermione protested, following after him.

"No," Ron replied rather sharply. "It's not safe," he added. "Your parents aren't even allowed to be there right now."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, her voice full of concern. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Ron replied, regretting nearly everything he'd said since he'd walked in the room. He didn't want to fight with her and he certainly hadn't meant to scare her. "They just cleared off for a while so Moody could check the place for hexes and stuff. You know, just as a precaution. Dad talked them into going on holiday somewhere and by the time they get back, Dumbledore will have Wards around the house and everything will be fine."

"If it's dangerous, I don't want you to go."

"I'll be fine. Besides, someone has to pack your stuff and I didn't think you'd want Dad or Bill doing it," Ron informed her. "Mum's still gone... I might be able to convince Dad to let Ginny go if you'd rather she packed your things, but I doubt it."

"No, you're right," Hermione said, grabbed Ron by the arm and dragging him back into the bedroom. "It is better if you're the one to do it," she admitted as she shut the door firmly behind them. "There are some things I... Er?" She dropped her voice down to a whisper. "...don't really want your parents to see."

"What kind of things?" Ron asked, making an effort to keep his voice just as low as hers. He didn't know what was more startling. The fact she had just closed the door and broken his mother's rule after making such a fuss about it, or the fact she had something so scandalous hidden in her bedroom that she wasn't going to try to talk him out of going to her house, even though he'd admitted it might be dangerous.

"Books mostly," Hermione replied as her face flushed.
"I think my parents already know about your little book fetish," he replied, feeling rather disappointed by her answer. There was nothing shocking about it.

"Oh stop it," Hermione hissed, smacking him lightly on the arm. "These aren't just regular books," she informed him as she walked over to Percy's desk and started rummaging through the drawers. "I'm going to write you up a list," she said, snatching up a quill and a bottle of ink and scribbling furiously on the parchment she found in the bottom drawer. "Most of them are still locked in my trunk," she informed him as she continued to write, "along with all my notes. These two are under my mattress," Hermione said, underlining the titles of the last two books on her list and handing the parchment to Ron. "Make sure you double-check the ones in the trunk so you can be sure they are all there."

?Hermione?? Ron gasped, his eyes widening in shock as he quickly scanned her list.

Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts
Curses that Kill
Self-Defensive Spell Work
Jinxes for the Jinxed
A Compendium of Common Curses and their Counter-Actions
The Dark Arts Outsmarted
Moste Potente Potions
?Curses that Kill??

"Now you see why I don't want your parents finding them," she whispered.

"What the hell are you doing with all these books?" Ron whispered in disbelief.

"Research."

"RESEARCH?" he all but shouted.

"Shusssssshhh," Hermione hissed in an effort to quiet him down.

"But... where on earth did you get them? BLOODY HELL! You nicked them from Hogwarts didn't you?" Ron asked incredulously.

"I didn't steal them. I borrowed them," she clarified.

"Oh and I suppose that makes it OK?" Ron asked sarcastically. "Just because you only borrowed them, that doesn't mean Madame Pince isn't going to notice they're missing from the Restricted Section."

"I didn't get them in the Library," Hermione shot back. "Honestly, I have more sense than that."

"Then where?"

"I took them from the Room of Requirement," she stated as if it were so obvious he shouldn't have even had to ask.
"When?"

"During our D.A. meetings. Honestly Ron, we walked back to the Common Room together. Are you telling me that you never noticed I was taking books?"

"You always have a bloody book with you. All of a sudden it was supposed to stand out as something unusual??

"Don't swear," she scolded, more out of habit than because she thought he'd stop doing it.

"This one is from the Restricted Section though," Ron said, pointing down at Moste Potente Potions. "I recognize the title."

"Actually,? Hermione admitted, ?that book is mine. It was a Christmas gift from Sirius,? she explained uncomfortably, her cheeks coloring when Ron continued to look at her oddly.

"You never told us he got you anything," Ron said, still not sure if he should believe her.

"That's because he gave it to me it in box full of catnip with a stupid feathery little cat toy," Hermione stated, both embarrassed and irritated by the turn the conversation had taken.

"For Crookshanks?"

"No," Hermione confessed as she turned crimson. "For me. Harry must have told him what happened to me when we took the Polyjuice Potion."

Ron tried to stifle a laugh and repress his grin when Hermione glared at him, but he didn't do a very good job. He silently wondered if Harry knew his Godfather had given Hermione a practical joke as a Christmas gift.

"Look at the Polyjuice section when you get the book," Hermione instructed. "He circled the passage that says it is only for human transformations and drew a little cat with a great big bushy tail."

Unable to hold it in any longer, Ron doubled over with laughter.

"It's not funny," she stated angrily.

"Yes, it is," he chuckled. It was a shame he couldn't share the joke with Harry without reminding him of Sirius.

"Oh shut up," Hermione replied irritably. "There's something else I need you to get for me," she said, dropping her voice down to a whisper. "But don't let anyone see it."

That got Ron's attention and he sobered up the instant he saw the serious expression on Hermione's face.

"Don't lock it in my trunk either," she stated. "You mum might insist on going through it later. The books I can explain away if I have to, but I don't want to risk her tossing this out."

"Tossing what out?" he asked warily.

"In the bottom drawer of my bureau, on the left-hand side, under the jumpers you'll fine a... a container with... with some pills in it."

"Pills?"
"Muggle medication."

"I know what they are," he said crossly. "Why do you need them? What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you taking Muggle pills?" he asked, studying her suspiciously. "And why don't you want anyone to know?"

But rather than answer straight away, Hermione remained silent and just stood there, staring at him. Ron of course, knew her well enough to know that she was contemplating whether she should tell him the truth or attempt to lie, and that knowledge only served to deepen his concern.

If she's going to lie to me about it, it must be really bad.

"All right, fine," Hermione said in a huff. "Why can't anything ever be easy with you?"

"Picking a fight isn't going to work," Ron informed her. He wasn't about to let her distract him. Not when something might be wrong with her. "Why do you need them? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Hermione admitted with a sigh. "It isn't that kind of medication."

Ron studied her intently, not sure if he ought to believe her.

"They aren't to cure anything," she assured him when she saw the skepticism on his face. "They're to prevent something from happening."

"To prevent what from happening?" Ron asked, still clearly concerned.

"Oh for Heaven's sake, do I have to say it?" she replied in an agitated tone of voice.

"To prevent what, Hermione?"

"Please, can't you just let it go? I'm not even taking them."

"Then what the hell do you need them for?" he asked, feeling the anger start to surface. "You said you wanted them because they'll prevent something. What is it? What do they prevent?"

"Ron,? she begged. "I won't touch them unless you tell me why you want them?"

"You want to know? Hermione retorted angrily. "Fine, I'll tell you, but you're going to be sorry that you made me tell you."

"I'm still waiting."

"FINE! I want them because they'll prevent me from but Hermione caught her self mid-rant and lowered her voice, "getting pregnant," she whispered, bypassing red and turning a deep shade of maroon. "There. Are you happy now? Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Pregnant?" Ron cried out loudly. "You're not... You haven't... Bloody Hell, not with Krum!" he stammered, his embarrassment giving way to genuine anger.

"OF COURSE NOT!" she shouted indignantly. "Viktor never touched me."
"He didn't--" Ron started to ask.

"No."

"You haven't--"

"NO!"

"Ever?"

"NEVER! Have you?" she asked.

"What?"

"Have you ever...you know, done that?"

But Ron ignored her question and fired back one of his own. "If you haven't, then why do you need those...things?"

"You answer my question first," Hermione demanded. "Have you ever--"

"No."

"Ever gotten close?" she pressed. "Ever been in a position where you were with someone and actually thinking about it??

"Once," Ron confessed, blushing yet again.

"And when exactly would that have been??

"Last night," he admitted reluctantly.

"Well then, it looked like you've answered your own question," Hermione replied. The heat from her face was so intense now, she was afraid she might spontaneously combust if the conversation went on much longer.

"What?" Ron asked, wrinkling his brow in confusion as he played her comment over again in his head. "Oh," he uttered quietly as the realization dawned on him.

"Just because I have the pills, doesn't mean I'm ready to, you know, do that," Hermione said, dropping her eyes to her feet. "Because I'm not. And even if I were taking them, which I'm not, she said again, "they take a while to start working. I just wanted to be prepared, if... when... Well, you know me. I'm always prepared."

"But you're a witch," Ron reminded her. "You don't need to use some shoddy Muggle medication for that. All you have to do is cast a Contraception Charm. Oh, right," he said as he remembered that her mother was a Muggle and wouldn't have been able to teach Hermione how to do that. "But that's Ok," he said, more to himself than to Hermione. "Bill and Charlie taught the twins and I how to--? but he faltered and blushed again deeply. "Well, they taught us what to do ages ago," he finally admitted.

"Your mother taught me how to cast a Contraception Charm last summer."

"My Mum?" Ron asked looking completely horrified.

"She taught Ginny and me, actually."
"GINNY?" Ron shouted indignantly. "She's too young to be doing that."

"But it's alright for me to do it?" Hermione asked.

"You're not my baby sister," he muttered.

?Ginny isn't a baby anymore, Ron. It won't do you any good to treat her like one. But I agree with you. She probably is too young and so am I.?

"I didn't say you were too young. Besides, you're having another birthday in September."

"You're impossible," Hermione stated, shaking her head at him. "Just because I'm having a birthday soon, that doesn't mean I'm going to be ready for anything like that. A bloke can dream, can't he?

?But you will bring me the pills, right??

?I still don't see why you need them,? Ron replied. ?If you can cast the charm, why even bother with that Muggle rubbish?"

"Just because it's Muggle, doesn't mean it's rubbish. It happens to be easier and more effective."

"How could some barmy pill be more effective than magic?"

"Sometimes it's not so easy to remember to cast the spell before you... you know. And you have to cast it every single time for it to be effective. Just ask your Mum. If you forget, even once, you can end up with... twins."

"Those two weren't just an accident. They were a bloody catastrophe," Ron tried to joke.

"You shouldn't talk about your brothers that way. But that's beside the point," Hermione continued. "My point is that the magical way isn't necessarily the better way."

Besides, I have no way of knowing if a Contraception Charm will interfere with the other spell I'm going to cast, she thought. I'm only going to get one shot at it and there is too much at risk to mess it up.

Unfortunately, before Ron could reply, there was a knock on the door. Arthur Weasley waited a moment, then pushed the door open and stepped into the room. "Not interrupting anything am I?" he asked.

"No sir," Hermione answered quickly.

"We were just talking," Ron added.

"And you have my word that I won't do anything improper with Ron under your roof."

"HERMIONE!" Ron shouted. Have you gone completely mad? he tried to say with his eyes.

"What?" she asked, oblivious not sharing his mortification. "Your parents have to be able to trust us," she explained.

"No need to worry about that," Mr. Weasley chuckled. "Molly was saying just this morning how lucky we are that Ron chose such a responsible young woman to--"
"Bloody Hell," Ron moaned, his face now beet red. "Dad, please--"

"All right, son," Mr. Weasley chuckled as he clasped Ron's shoulder. "Are you ready to go?" he asked. "The Portkey Dumbledore left is set to activate in 5 minutes."

"Yeah, I'm ready," Ron grumbled. "I got a list and everything," he added, holding up the parchment for his father to see.

"We shouldn't be gone long," Mr. Weasley informed Hermione. "Bill is downstairs and Fred and George are locked in their room doing Merlin knows what. You'll be perfectly safe. Shall we?" he asked Ron as he motioned towards the door.

"Yeah, I'll be down in a minute," Ron said, hoping his father would take the hint and leave.

"I can't stall the timer," he warned from the doorway.

"I know. I'll be right down," Ron assured him.

Mr. Weasley smiled knowingly and then walked off towards the staircase.

"Here," Ron said, reaching into the back pocket of his jeans and pulling out his wand. "Just in case," he added, holding it out for Hermione to take.

"Ron?" Hermione said in shock, staring up into his determined blue eyes. "I can't take that. What if you need it?"

"I won't," he said, giving her a confident smile. "But, I knew you'd worry, so I borrowed Ginny's."

Hermione made no move to take his wand from him, so in the end, Ron just set it down on the desk beside her. Logically, he knew that he ought to keep his own wand and leave Ginny's with her, but for some reason he just felt better leaving his own wand behind. In a way, it was an extension of himself and he felt better knowing that she'd have it to protect herself with if anything happened. Besides, it wasn't as if he hadn't used his siblings' wands before. He'd spent his first two years at Hogwarts with a hand-me-down wand after all. He had no doubt that Ginny's wand would work for him, even if it wasn't attuned to him specifically.

"I'll see you in a bit," he said, folding up the list of books Hermione had given him and shoving it in his back pocket. "You didn't get enough sleep last night," he informed her as he approached the door. "Why don't you take a quick nap?"

"Actually, that's not such a bad idea," Hermione admitted. She did feel rather drained.

"I'll let Ginny know," Ron said as he walked out into the hall and closed the door behind him.

It was less than an hour later when Hermione was roused from her nap by the sounds of someone talking rather loudly downstairs. Wondering how long she had been asleep, she rubbed her eyes and sat up. Now that she was fully awake, Hermione recognized Ginny's voice as it filtered through the gap left by the half opened bedroom door.

"You can't just barge in here and .... Get the hell out of here, Per..."

But then Ginny's voice faded for a moment and Hermione strained her ears in an attempt to hear anything else. For a split second she thought she heard a deeper, male voice mutter something before...
Ginny's angry shout drowned it out.

"I don't care who you're with! You can't see... You're going to... talk to Bill... He's out back trying to get rid of the..."

Then there was more muttering she couldn't quite make out. But whoever was arguing with Ginny was getting louder, or closer, and this time Hermione was almost sure she heard two distinctly different male voices trying to speak at the same time. Until Ginny interrupted them that is.

"HEY!? Hermione heard the youngest member of the Weasley family shout loudly. "I SAID YOU CAN'T SEE HER!" There was a loud thump and then Ginny exploded. "GET YOUR HANDS OFF'A ME YOU SON OF A... BILL!" she heard Ginny call out for her eldest brother as her footsteps echoed down the stairs. "BILL!!"

Hermione just had time to realize that Ginny couldn't possibly have been fighting with Fred and George, because neither of them would ever lay a hand on her, when there was a knock on the half opened door and it was pushed open by a man she had never seen before. She instantly thrust her hand under the pillow she had been resting on to grasp Ron's wand and she would have cursed the unknown man right where he stood if Percy Weasley hadn't entered the room at the same time her hand closed on the wand.

"GET OUT!" Hermione shouted loudly, narrowing her eyes at Percy.

For his part, Percy acted as if he hadn't even heard her. In fact, he didn't even look at Hermione. He stepped to the side and let his eyes scan his old bedroom as his boss walked through the door.

Hermione scowled at the Minister of Magic when he took a step towards the bed she was sitting on and gave her a placating smile. But rather than calm her, all his smile did was incense her more. She glared silently at Cornelius Fudge for a moment longer and then locked her angry glower on the redhead attempting to ignore her.

"GET THE HELL OUT!" she shouted again.

"I say?" the unknown man still standing by the door declared as he looked at the Minister and arched his eyebrow in surprise.

"I MEAN IT, PERCY!" Hermione bellowed so loudly Fudge actually took a step away from her himself. "YOU BACKSTABBING, EGOISTICAL, TURNCOAT! HOW DARE YOU SET ONE FOOT IN THIS HOUSE AFTER THE WAY YOU'VE TREATED YOUR FAMILY."

"Now wait just a minute," Percy stated, finally deeming it necessary to look at Hermione and acknowledge the fact she was speaking to him. But before he could say anything else, there was a loud crack and Fred materialized out of thin air right next to the bed and promptly pointed his wand at the unwelcome trio standing before him.

"YOU HAVE SOME NERVE TRYING TO TALK TO ME AFTER ALL THE HORRIBLE THINGS YOU'VE SAID ABOUT HARRY!" Hermione shrieked loudly. "SO UNLESS YOU'RE HERE TO APOLOGIZE, YOU HAVE UNTIL THE COUNT OF 3 TO GET YOUR PRETENTIOUS BACKSIDE OUT OF MY SIGHT," she screeched as she pulled Ron's wand out from under the pillow and pointing it right at Percy's chest, "BEFORE I CURSE YOU INTO OBLIVION!"

"The Howlers," Fudge muttered to himself as he gaped at the scene taking place before him.
"You heard her," Fred said, turning his own wand on his brother. "Get out of her room."

"ONE!" Hermione shouted.

"This is my room," Percy cried resentfully.

"Not anymore, it isn't," Fred informed him with a smirk. "This room is hers now. And she asked you to leave. So get out!"

"TWO!" Hermione continued to count.

Blushing deeply, Percy glanced over at his boss as if looking for an answer about what he ought to do. Seeing nothing but shock on Fudge's face, Percy did the only sensible thing he could do.

"THREE!" Hermione bellowed.

Mr. Weasley and Bill both materialized in the center of the room just in time to see Percy turned tail and run out into the hallway, slamming the door shut behind him to block any curses that might be following. Unfortunately for Percy, George was waiting for him and as he made his hasty retreat, George stuck his foot out to tripped his brother. Percy had no choice but to abandon the paperwork he had been clutching in his hands, in order to break his fall. George snickered loudly as he watched his older brother attempt to gather the papers into a pile on the floor, but before Percy managed to scoop the pile up into his hands again, George strode forward and planted both of his feet firmly on top of the Ministry documents.

"Got another Howler, did you Perce?" George taunted Percy as he rose to his feet. "Up close and personal this time?"

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS GOING ON UP HERE?" Ron shouted as he tore up the stairs, Ginny right on his heels "What's he doing here?" Ron asked George, screwing his face up when he said 'he,' as if it left a sour taste in his mouth.

"He came here to harass your girlfriend," Fred replied, exiting the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

"Girlfriend?" Percy questioned, looking from Fred to Ron, who was glaring murderously at him.

"If you did anything to her I swear I'll--" Ron started before his brother interrupted him.

"If anyone was in danger it was this stupid git," Fred laughed, pointing at Percy with his wand. "He damn near wet himself when she pulled your wand on him and threatened to curse him into oblivion. It was bloody brilliant."

"I've seen you get her pretty hacked off, Ron," George chortled happily. "But I've never heard her shout like that."

"Well, maybe after the Yule Ball," Fred snickered.

"Yeah, that one was pretty impressive, wasn't it," George chuckled. "Reminded me of that row Mum and Dad had about..."

"OH SHUT UP!" Ron growled at the twins even though he was still glaring at Percy.

"Still, bet that was nothing compared to those howlers you got. Right, Perce?" Fred asked.
"I don't know what you are talking about," Percy replied, staring back at his brothers with a straight face and trying to act dignified, but no one was buying it.

George caught Fred's eye and they both snorted loudly at their brother's feigned confusion.

"What I would have given to be there to witness it," George snickered.

"What are you two talking about?" Ginny asked, looking as confused by the comments as Ron did.

"She didn't tell you?" Fred asked Ron with a smile.

"Your girlfriend has been sending howlers to this git at the Ministry," George laughed as he pointed at Percy.

"Perkins told us," Fred added.

"He was there when the first one went off," George explained. "Lucky bloke. He got to hear the whole thing. But then, he wasn't the only one, was he?" George asked Percy.

"She times it perfectly," Fred said, his face full of sincere admiration.

"Of course," George chuckled.

"It went off right in the main lobby," Fred explained.

"Just after everyone arrived at work," George added.

"She told him off for writing you some bloody letter," Fred informed Ron.

"She told him that you would never be anything like him," George said.

"Called him a--" Fred began and then seemed to pause to consider it for a minute. "A greedy fool, wasn't it Percy?"

"I think it was a materialistic collaborator," George suggested.

"No, it was a materialistic fool and a pretentious little collaborator," Fred corrected.

"Yes that was it," George agreed with a chuckle. "And a grasping devious spy."

"Who sold his family out for a prestigious job and a fancy title," Fred added, all the humor draining out of his face.

"Who is too stupid to realize he's doing You-Know-Who's dirty work," George continued.

"No, that last bit about You-Know-Who was in the second one," Fred informed his twin brother.

"You know?" George replied, "I think you're right."

"Bloody genius, that one," Fred laughed.

"She sent it to him disguised as a Christmas card," George explained.

"In a green envelope," Fred added.

"Right to the Minister's office."
"How do you know about that?" Percy asked the twins guardedly.

"And of course Perfect Percy would never open personal mail at work so it exploded," George explained an instant before he and Fred started laughing.

"Right in the middle of Fudge's office," Fred hooted loudly. "Told him off good for being such a git."

"And ruining Christmas for Mum," George added.

"Called you a smug, self-righteous prat, didn't she Perce? Oh no wait, that was me," Fred informed his older brother with a smirk.

"She did tell him that he ought to be ashamed of himself though. Dad almost died and he didn't have the decency to even visit," George explained.

"She said he was too busy doing You-Know-Who's dirty work," Fred added.

"Only she didn't say You-Know-Who, did she Percy?" George asked, even though he knew the answer.

"Oh no," Fred replied. "She shouted out his name. Right there in the Minister's office."

"Caused quite a scene, that," George snickered. "Or so I heard."

"People screaming."

"Is it true Fudge almost passed out?" George asked Percy.

"Too bad they didn't sack you," Fred hissed at his brother.

"You know what Fred, I reckon maybe we shouldn't give Hermione such a bad time right now. We owe her one for putting this," George said as he pointed at Percy, "in it's place."

"Owe her another one for what she did to his little mentor, Umbridge," Fred added.

"That was bloody fantastic," George laughed.

"Almost wish we had still been in school to witness it."

"Almost."

"I guess Ickle Ronniekins will have to bear the brunt of it now," Fred said.

"He's used to it though. Where's the fun in that?" George asked, his voice full of regret.

"Well, maybe an occasional prank," Fred suggested.

"Or joke at her expense," George added with a mischievous smile.

"Just so she knows we still care," Fred explained.

"Yes," George agreed. "We wouldn't want her to think we don't appreciate her. After all, those disguised Howlers are selling like mad," he added, kicking the paperwork he had been standing on at Percy. "Time for you to go," George said, glaring at his brother with a serious expression.

"Before Mum gets home," Fred added with a glower of his own. "Wouldn't do to have her find you
But Percy made no move to leave, so Fred took matters into his own hands.

"Wingardium Leviosa," he said, pointing his wand down at the floor so the paperwork Percy had dropped would float up in the air.

"Don't come back," George warned his older brother as he snatched the Ministry documents up and thrust them against Percy's chest.

"Don't owl," Fred added.

"Forget that you know us."

"You pompous git."

"Now get out of our bloody house," George barked as both he and his twin brother pointed their wands at Percy's chest.

Percy took a moment to glance at Ron and Ginny, who both look completely stunned and then he disappareated with a pop.

"Bloody prat," Fred swore under his breath.

"Good thing Mum wasn't here," George said.

"Bit odd though, isn't it?" Fred asked his twin brother. "I mean that he'd show up when both Mum and Dad were gone."

"Do you think the Ministry is watching the house?" George questioned.

"Makes sense, I suppose," Fred replied. He looked over at Ginny and Ron for a moment and then back at George and somehow he was able to communicate something to George with the look, although neither twin attempted to voice what it was.

"You two," Fred finally said as he looked at Ginny and then at Ron again. "Stay inside until AFTER we've talked to Dad."

"Why?" Ginny asked.

"He's still in there with the Minister," George said, ignoring Ginny's question. "And Hermione."

"I wonder why she didn't order Fudge out of the room as well," Fred thought out loud.

"She probably didn't want to give him an excuse to sack Dad," George answered.

"Still, they've been in there a long time."

"Extendable ears you reckon?" George asked.

"Accio extendable ears," Fred said, pointing his wand at the staircase. Within a matter of moments, 4 long flesh colored objects came flying down the hall and landed in Fred's outstretched hand. He immediately handed them out amongst his siblings and all 4 of them popped one end in their ears so they could listen to the conversation taking place on the other side of the door.
The reporters were a nice touch, they heard Bill say. Having them lurk around the house snapping pictures. Inspired really. You knew of course, I'd go out and chase them off. Gave you the perfect opportunity to slip inside.

I don't know what you're talking about, the Minister replied. They certainly didn't come with me.

But you did tell them where she could be found, Mr. Weasley asked, his voice betraying no emotion whatsoever.

Me?? they heard Fudge ask, as if he were astounded by the accusation. Certainly not. Someone in the Ministry might have let it slip, but I wouldn't know anything about that.

Well, as you can see, she's fine, Mr. Weasley said. Now I'll thank you to leave my home.

Come now, Arthur, a voice they didn't recognize said. Be reasonable.

I won't have you interrogating her, Mr. Weasley replied, his voice finally taking on an angry timbre.

Mr. Weasley, it's ok, they heard Hermione say. I don't mind. I'll talk to him.

Hermione, you don't have to say -- Bill's started.

I know I don't have to, Hermione interrupted him. But I will.

Her comment was met with silence. For a moment Ron thought someone might have placed a silencing charm on the room, but then he realized he would have heard them utter the spell.

You see Arthur, Fudge's finally declared, breaking the silence. She understands how important this is. That's a good girl.

That was a mistake, Ron whispers to his brothers with a smirk.

I do not appreciate your condescending tone, Mr. Fudge, they heard Hermione reply sharply. Nor will I sit here and let you talk down to me as if I were some silly 5 year old. If that's what you have in mind, you can leave right now.

No... no, of course not, Fudge sputtered. I didn't mean to... That is to say--

I'll answer all your questions, Hermione stated. But you are going to have to do something for me in return.

And what might that be?? they heard Fudge ask suspiciously after a prolonged silence.

You are going to let Viktor Krum go.

Now see here! I will not be dictated to by some--

You will let him go, Mr. Fudge, Hermione stated definitively. One way or another. I will see to it.

Are you threatening me?? the Minister asked, his voice now so low it came out almost as a growl.

It was more of a statement of fact, then a threat, they heard Hermione reply, but you can take it any way you like. Either I will be talking to you or I will be talking to the reporters you so kindly
revealed my whereabouts to. What I won't do is sit back and watch you send another innocent man to Azkaban. You can either let him go now or you can wait until after I've spoken to the press and told everyone what an unfortunate victim he is. Captured by Death Eaters; forced to do their bidding against his will; thrown to the wolves and used as a scapegoat by the Ministry. I imagine it will cause quite the uproar. Especially when the Bulgarians get involved. I suggest you let him go before his match. Unless you want to deal with all those fanatical Quidditch fans who no doubt will accuse you of keeping an innocent man in prison in an attempt to sabotage Bulgaria chance to make it to the World Cup.?

?Snape was right about you,? Fudge spat out angrily.

Ron didn't wait to hear what Hermione's reply was. He pulled the flesh colored string out of his ear and dropped it on the floor where he stood. Then without saying a word to anyone, he turned and marched off down the hall. Fred and George exchanged a glance as Ginny watched Ron storm down the stairs. All three of them stood there in silence looking at each other as they heard the backdoor slam shut.

?Stupid prat,? Fred said. ?We clearly told him to stay inside.?

?He's upset about Krum,? Ginny tried to explain.

?Bugger! George swore. ?Maybe you ought to go tell him to come back inside,? he suggested to Fred

?Me? Why don't you do it?? Fred asked.

?Mum just healed one black eye. I don't fancy having another one.? 

?You two are pathetic,? Ginny said. ?I'll go get him.? 

?No, you won't,? George replied, grabbing her by the arm to stop her from following after Ron. ?Mum would kill us if we let anything happen to you.? 

?I'll just be in the back yard,? Ginny shot back as she tugged herself loose.

?No, I'll go,? Fred said. ?I'll just keep an eye on him until he's ready to come in on his own,? he told George. ?You stay inside,? Fred said to Ginny.

Realizing that there was no point arguing with them, as George was obviously going to stay behind and watch her every move, Ginny gave in. ?Fine,? she said resentfully.

?And you better tell Hermione that Ron's in a temper when she's through in there,? Fred added as he headed off towards the stairs. ?Because you know she's the only one that's going to be able to calm him down.? 

Stupid bloody Viktor Krum, Ron swore to himself as he heaved a stone into the middle of the pond. You great Bulgarian git, he thought, throwing the next one even further. Why did you have to come here and mess everything up? If you had just stayed at your own bloody school where you belonged, none of this would have happened. But you had to come to Hogwarts and get all chummy with Hermione. It's not enough that you have everything else I've ever wanted. You had to go and try to steal her too. And you're still fucking trying aren't you? Ron seethed, as he leaned his shoulder against a tree and glared at the pond.
Out of rocks to toss, he watched as the ripples from the last stone he'd cast washed against the muddy bank and the surface of the pond became smooth once more.

It's all just some big game to you, isn't it? Like she's some elusive snitch you can catch if you just chase after her long enough. Well I've got news for you, Vicky... I know what you're up to and I'm going to be there waiting for you. If you ever touch her again... taking a bludger to the face will seem like a fucking picnic compared to what I'll do to you.

He knew that she was there before she even spoke, but Ron decided to ignore her. He didn't want to talk to her. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He just wanted to be left alone.

"Your brothers want you to come back in the house," Hermione said as she came up behind him.

"They can sod off," Ron barked, not even bothering to turn around and look at her.

Don't say it, Hermione told herself. This isn't the time to nag him about his swearing. You'll just set him off, she thought with a sigh.

"You'll need this then," she said, reaching around his back to thrust his wand forward.

Ron looked down at his wand and then took it out of Hermione's hand, expecting her to back away. She obviously had other plans however, because she wrapped her arms around his chest and proceeded to hug him from behind.

"You shouldn't be out here, Hermione," Ron said, but with less anger in his voice then before. "Those blasted reporters are probably still skulking about."

To his utter surprise, Ron heard Hermione chuckle behind him and her hold on him tightened. "Poor Harry," she teased, leaning into the hug and pressing herself firmly against his backside. "Just imagine how shocked he'll be when he sees our picture plastered across the front page of his morning paper. I can see the headline now, 'The Girl that Escaped cheats on The Boy Who Lived.'"

"That's not funny, Hermione."

"It's ludicrous," she said as she stood on the tip of her toes and rested her chin on his shoulder. "But I bet Harry would get a kick out of it. Once he got over the shock of seeing us together like this, that is."

"I don't think so," Ron said, pulling away from her.

"Come on Ron, don't be like this," Hermione implored. "You didn't expect me to let them cart him off to prison did you?"

So she does know why I'm out here, Ron thought, still not willing to look at her.

"No, I suppose not," he finally admitted, both to himself and to her.

"Then why are you so upset?"

"I don't want you seeing him," Ron answered without thinking.

"Who said I was going to see him?" Hermione asked.

"He'll want to talk to you," Ron stated. "Apologize to you. Thank you."

"So?"
"He'll want to see you," he said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Probably," Hermione admitted.

"I don't want you to."

"Then I won't," she replied quickly.

Completely taken off guard by her reply, Ron spun and looked into Hermione's deep brown eyes. "What do you mean you won't?" he asked skeptically. Why isn't she arguing with me? Is this some sorta trick or something?

"I mean I won't see him," Hermione stated coolly, her face betraying no emotion whatsoever.

"Ever?" Ron asked as he narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously.

"Well... I don't think I can promise that," Hermione admitted. "But," she added when she saw Ron bristle, "I won't see him again until you're okay with it."

"What if I'm never okay with it?"

"Then I suppose I'll never see him again," she replied.

"Why?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"Why what?"

"Why would you agree to do that?" he questioned.

"Because I care about you, you idiot," Hermione stated as her calm facade finally crumpled and she grinned at him despite herself. "And I don't want to hurt you, or upset you, or see you get all jealous over nothing," she tried to explain.

"It isn't nothing," he shot back bitterly.

"It is nothing, Ron," Hermione stated, her voice taking on a note of irritation. "But until you realize that it's nothing, I'll stay away from him. You have my word. I will not see Viktor Krum again until you realize how thick you're being."

"THICK?" Ron retorted. "You think I'm thick?"

Hermione had to bite her lip to keep herself from smiling. She just couldn't help but find his distress endearing. "In this particular case? Yes," she informed him.

"First you call me stupid, then you... you laugh at me?" Ron asked resentfully.

"Are you mad?" Hermione asked as she fought down her own outrage. Being insecure about Viktor was one thing. The fact he actually believed that she would ridicule him when he was upset was another. "I'm not laughing at you."

"I can see you biting your lip to hold it back."

"Oh for heaven's sake, Ron."

"You think this is funny?" he cried miserably.
"Of course I don't," she shot back.

"Then why are you smiling?" Ron demanded.

"Because you are so damned adorable," Hermione replied, no longer trying to hide the fact she was annoyed.

"WHAT?"

"You heard me. You?re adorable. Sulking out here all worried and upset about something that is absolutely ridiculous," she said.

Ron opened his mouth to say something back, then appeared to think better of it. He pressed his lips together tightly and settled for giving her an incredulous look instead.

"You went and got yourself all worked up over nothing," Hermione stated irritably. "Your brothers are afraid to confront you. Although they'll never admit it, she thought to herself. "So they sent me into the lion's den to do it for them. Of course they knew you wouldn't maul me, and we roar at each other so often it's second nature. But I don't want to fight with you. I don't like seeing you upset and insecure. All I want to do is wrap my arms around you and kiss you until you realize you are being a stupid prat. That's why I'm biting my lip and holding myself back. Because if I don't, I'm liable to pounce on you," she admitted. "But... I don't really want to do it out here in the open. Especially with reporters sneaking about. So please, Ron," Hermione implored as she reached out and took his hand in her own, "won't you come back into the house?"

"You are unbelievable," Ron stated. He didn't know whether to be insulted or flattered by what she'd just said.

"Is that a bad thing?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not sure yet," he admitted.

"Are you still angry with me?"

"I'm not sure about that either."

"Will you come back inside?"

"Are you planning on snogging me if I do?" he asked, still unsure if it was a ploy she was using to get him into the house.

And if it is? It's not like I'm going to refuse, Ron thought as Hermione smirked.

"Actually," she replied, taking a step closer to him, "I'm planning on snogging you regardless. Out here, in there, it doesn't much matter to me anymore."

As she advanced, Ron unconsciously took a step backward and found his retreat cut off by the tree he had been leaning against earlier. Not that he really wanted to escape. Her reply had just taken him by surprise. He had been almost certain that her offer was part of some strategy designed to get him into the house. He now realized he might have been wrong, but before he had time to work her strategy out any further, Hermione managed to close the distance between them and Ron felt the warmth of her body as she pressed herself up against him and pinned him to the tree. Without saying a word, she looked up into his eyes.

BLIMEY, he thought, mesmerized by her lips. He closed his eyes in an attempt to escape their pull.
and as he did, he heard someone groan. It took him a moment to realize the sound had come from him. "Hermione?" he asked, his eyes still shut tightly.

"Yes?" she replied softly.

Thrusting his hand deep into his pocket, Ron dug around and pulled out a plastic container and handed it to her. "I think these are yours," he said.

She took the small container from him with a smirk and quickly squirreled it away. "You're a master of subtlety," Hermione laughed as she pulled her hand out of her own pocket and watched Ron's face turn crimson. "I said I was going to snog you, not shag you."

"Can't blame a bloke for trying," he said, finally opening his eyes and shooting her a cheeky grin.

"No, I suppose I can't," Hermione replied with a chuckle. "Not when the bloke happens to be you. So?" she asked, her bright brown eyes locked on his. "Out here then?"

"No," Ron said, pushing her away from himself. He noticed her expression change from amusement to surprise, even if she did manage to hide it quickly. "I don't reckon it's a good idea to get too... er... distracted out here," Ron explained, taking Hermione's hand and leading her back towards the house.

"If you say so," she said as she allowed him to pull down the path leading away from the pond. "Still, a bit of privacy would have been nice. There are entirely too many people in your family. We're never going to get a chance to really be alone, you know. Someone is bound to walk in or--"

Ron stopped so abruptly, she ran right into the back of him.

"Ron? Is something wrong?"

"Did you hear something?" he whispered.

"No," Hermione replied as she followed his gaze to the tall grass to their right. She hadn't realized how overgrown that field was when she marched down to the pond to get him. When she felt Ron's grip on her hand tighten, her heart began to thump wildly against her chest.

"Here," Ron said, letting go of her hand and reaching into his pocket again. He quickly pulled her wand out and pressed it into her hand. "I got this out of your trunk earlier. Can you run?" he whispered.

She didn't have a chance to answer him. Startled by a clapping sound generated by a group of birds taking flight in the field beside them, Hermione jumped and instantly turned away from Ron to see what the commotion was.

Ron, who was in front of her, pointing his wand at the grass, immediately pushed Hermione behind him. "Go! Now!" he hissed, shoving her in the direction of his house.

She couldn't leave. She seemed rooted on the spot. Hermione stood her ground behind him; silent; eyes wide; waiting.

"Hermione!" Ron whispered urgently, trying to get her attention. "GO! I'll hold off whoever it is."

This time Hermione looked right at him and shook her head, refusing to leave. She saw the fear in his eyes give way to anger.
"Damn it," he growled at her.

"Shut up," she hissed back. "I'm not leaving you."

"Bugger!"

"Ron, don't swear."

He goggled at her. "Are you for real? We're cut off from the house by a field that is probably crawling with Death Eaters, who are going to attack us any minute, and you're worried... about me... swearing?"

"Well swearing isn't going to help," Hermione shot back irritably.

"So what do you suggest?"

"Either we make a run for the house together, or we stand and fight whatever comes at us. But I'm not leaving you alone to--"

"Or," Ron said, staring at the grass in front of them, "we attack first."

Before she even had a chance to process what he had said or to object to it, Ron sprinted into the field.

Hermione stood there for a moment, completely horrified, her mouth open in shock.

STUPID BLOODY PRAT!

Those were the first words to pop into her mind as she watched the tall grass engulf him.

What is he thinking? Running into a field full of Death Eaters, she asked herself as she plunged in after him. *He better pray that they find him before I do,* she thought as she chased after him.

She was only seconds behind him, but she didn't know the area the way Ron did and the grass was so tall that she was unable to see where he'd gone. And as Ron had to be at least 6 feet tall now, if not more, this was an unexpected development. Hermione was starting to suspect that the field might actually be enchanted, perhaps in an attempt to keep Muggles away from the Burrow. The grass certainly hadn't looked this thick from the path. But now that she was inside, it was much thicker and taller than she would have suspected. In fact, it was so dense that she suddenly realized if she went in any further, there was a good possibility she would lose her way. As she had no idea where Ron was, she had no choice but to stop running and listen, in the hopes that she'd at least be able to hear him moving somewhere ahead of her. Unfortunately the field was dead silent, which only strengthened her suspicion that there was indeed some sort of spell on it.

This complicated matters, Hermione thought, looking back over her shoulder in the direction she had just come. She knew that the path was directly behind her, which meant The Burrow was behind her and off to the left. *I can't risk getting lost in here,* Hermione thought as she looked up at the sky and tried to use the sun to acclimate herself with her surroundings. *DAMN IT!* she swore to herself, as she realized that wasn't going to work. She knew what she had to do, but did she dare do it? Was it worth getting expelled? She could go back to the house and get help, but that would mean leaving Ron out here all alone. No, she wasn't going to do that.
With a sigh, Hermione placed her wand in the palm of her hand and uttered the spell.

"Point me," she said, causing her wand to turn in her hand and point due North which let her know that the Burrow was located North and slightly to the West of where she stood.

Well, so much for not using magic, she thought as she cautiously began to move forward. This field had better be crawling with Death Eaters, because if it’s not, and I get myself expelled helping you chase a fox or some blasted bird, I’m going to KILL you, Ron Weasley.

As Hermione slowly pushed her way further into the field, she couldn't help but notice the eerie calm surrounding her. There was no noise whatsoever. There was no movement either for that matter. And despite the fact there was a slight breeze blowing, the grass was not swaying at all. Even her own footsteps seemed rather muffled.

"Where is he?" Hermione whispered to herself as she studied the field. Alert and tense, her wand gripped tightly in her hand, Hermione started to consider Apparating to Ron. Of course if I try to Apparate anywhere, it should be back to the Burrow where I can get some help, but I can't just leave him out here alone. And if I Apparate again, I'm sure to get expelled. What if we are out here chasing nothing? she wondered.

Hermione was startled out of her thoughts, when the grass moved to her left. She immediately spun around and narrowed her eyes at the spot as she strained her ears for any other sound of movement.

That wasn't nothing, she told herself as she took a silent step forward. She pointed her wand at the spot the noise had come from and was just about to cast a stunning spell, when she was blinded by a brilliant flash of white light.

She covered her eyes and instinctually took a step backwards when she heard a low hum that seemed out of place. As the humming sound cut off abruptly, Hermione heard a throaty growl and a loud thud that was unmistakably the result of something large being slammed to the ground. She realized that something large, was in fact a person, when she heard them grunt as the impact expelled all the air from their lungs.

Blinking away the spots that were still clouding her vision, the first thing Hermione saw was his red hair. With a wave of relief, Hermione realized that the growling sound she had heard had come from Ron as he tackled someone to the ground. He was still sprawled out on top of the man, pinning his shoulders to the ground with his knees. Hermione could hear the man gasping desperately as he tried to get back the air that had been knocked from his body by the force of his fall.

"RON!" Hermione shouted, running up behind him to stare down at his quarry. What she saw startled her. It didn't make sense. The person pinned to the ground couldn't have been more than a few years older than Ron and herself. He looked so young; so pale. His eyes, they weren't the eyes of a Death Eater. They weren't full of hate and malice. They were full of... fear.

Dropping to her knees beside the man, who was clearly too terrified to even attempt to struggle, Hermione reached out and grasped his arm. She quickly forced the sleeve of his shirt up so she could study the skin on his forearm.

"He's not a Death Eater," she said, dropping his arm and looking up at Ron, who continued to glaring murderously at the stranger he had pinned to the ground.

"RON!? she shouted. ?He isn't a Death Eater."

"He tried to curse you," Ron growled. "I saw him. He blinded you with that spell."
"It wasn't a spell," Hermione said as she reached down and plucked something up off the ground. "It was a camera," she explained holding it out by a leather strap and letting it dangle in the air for Ron to see. "He must be one of those reporters Fudge tipped off."

The man pinned to the ground started nodding his head frantically. "Yes--" he agreed as he looked up at Hermione, his eyes still wide. "Daily Prophet."

"BLOODY VERMIN!" Ron grumbled loudly, but even as he did so, he shifted his weight off the man's chest, allowing him to get a decent breath. "Stalking around in the grass, scaring the daylights out of us," he growled. "Your lucky ALL I did was jump you."

"THEY'RE OVER HERE, DAD!" Bill shouted as he came crashing through the grass and halted in front of them. He couldn't help but stare incredulously at his youngest brother, who was sitting on top of a strange young man, glaring menacingly at him.

"Ron... Hermione... Are you two all right?" Mr. Weasley asked as he parted the grass and entered the depression Ron had created when he collided with the reporter. Panting hard, Mr. Weasley leaned forward and rested his hands on his knees as he attempted to catch his breath.

"Yes," Hermione replied.

"What on earth... were you two... thinking..." Mr. Weasley asked, his eyes jumping from Hermione to his son, "...sneaking off into this field?"

"We didn't sneak," Ron said defensively as he released the reporter and rose to his feet. "We heard a noise when we were coming back to the house."

"Someone was following us," Hermione interjected.

"So you go crashing into the field to confront them?" Mr. Weasley questioned, raising up to his full height.

"You!" Bill said, glaring down at the reporter still cowering on the ground. "I thought I told you to clear off." Without another word, Bill reached over and grabbed the camera out of Hermione's hand. The reported gasped loudly when Bill opened the back and pulled the film out, exposing it to the light.

"HEY! That's--" But what it was, the reporter never finished saying.

"I clearly told you NO PICTURES," Bill shouted down at the man, as he wrenched the film completely out of the camera and banished it with his wand. After the film vanished, Bill tossed the useless camera back down on the ground.

"What if it hadn't been a reporter?" Mr. Weasley scolded. "What if it had been Death Eaters? You could have been killed."

"They would have killed us just as easily if we had stood there and waited for them to attack us first," Ron said irritably. "At least this way, we could surprise them."

"Just wait until your mother finds out about this. She is going to kill you."

"Not if I get to him first," Hermione muttered under her breath. Bill was the only one that actually heard her however, as evident by the smile he quickly tried to hide.

"You aren't really going to tell her, are you Dad?" Ron moaned.
"It's not like I can hide it from her," his father grumbled back, knowing he'd likely end up sharing the blame. "You two go running off half cocked, doing magic in the middle of the ruddy field--"

"We didn't do any mag--" Ron started to protest and then stopped abruptly. He spun around to look at Hermione, who was glaring angrily at him. "You didn't?"

"Of course I did," she spat out as she narrowed her eyes even further. "What were you thinking, running off like that? It scared the hell out of me when I couldn't find you. I couldn't risk getting lost, so I cast a direction spell."

"Lost?" Ron asked as if the very idea was ridiculous.

"This field is enchanted," she shouted at him.

"Yeah, I know," Ron replied.

"Well I didn't. You might have mentioned it before you went charging off into it. Oh forget it. What's the point?" she asked sarcastically as she threw her hands up in the air. "Someone tell me which way the house is," she demanded, turning away from Ron. "I'm finished talking to you."
True to her word, Hermione refused to speak to Ron as Mr. Weasley led them back to the house. Not that it was for lack of trying on Ron’s part. Despite Hermione’s obvious irritation with him, he attempted to engage her in conversation not just once, but twice. Unfortunately he was rebuffed with an angry snort after each attempt.

Bill, who was watching the pair with a great deal of amusement, found it rather difficult to keep a straight face the second time it happened. He’d heard about their infamous rows, of course, but he’d never actually witnessed one in the making. Oh, he’d seen them bicker, but this… this was something altogether different. Every time Hermione snorted at Ron, she reminded him of an enraged dragon.

_I have to write Charlie_, Bill chuckled to himself. _He'll get a kick out of this. She's clearly angry enough to breathe fire. Maybe he can give Ron some tips_, Bill chuckled to himself as he watched his little brother's face harden with resolve.

Evidently Ron had summoned up enough courage to try and speak to Hermione one last time before they reached the house.

_Poor bloke_, Bill thought as he placed his hand on Ron's shoulder and shook his head in warning. _Doesn't have a clue why she's so hacked off._

Heeding his brother's advice, Ron slowed his pace and watched silently as Hermione threw open the gate and stormed into his backyard ahead of everyone else.

As soon as the rest of them entered the yard, Mr. Weasley and Bill stopped walking and promptly started whispering together. Not sure if he ought to follow Hermione or avoid her, Ron glanced over at his father. Mr. Weasley tilted his head towards the house, even as he continued to speak to Bill, and let Ron know he wanted him to go inside.

There wasn’t really anywhere else for him to go anyway, so Ron took a deep breath and entered the kitchen, expecting Hermione to be halfway to her room already. Unfortunately she’d been waylaid by the twins, who’d obviously been waiting for her to return.
“You’ve had an owl,” George said gleefully, snatching a letter off the counter and waving it under Hermione’s nose just as Ron entered the room.

"Oh, sod off!" she shouted, jerking the letter out of his hand and tearing it in half.

"Aren't you going to at least read it first?" Fred asked, unable to hide his surprise.

"I don't need to read it," Hermione spat out angrily. "I know what it says. It's the same blasted letter Harry got when Dobby cast a Hover Charm in his kitchen."

"Hermione?" Ron asked, somewhat baffled by her behavior. First she’d cursed and then she’d torn up an official letter from the Ministry without even looking at it. Neither of which she’d would normally do.

"What?" she demanded as she turned around and glowered at him.

"Are you... all right?" he asked, reaching for her arm. But before his fingers even touched her, she violently yanked it out of reach.

"DON'T!" she shouted angrily, turning her back to him.

"Oh, this is my fault now?" Ron asked, so irritated that he failed to notice his father had followed him into the kitchen.

"It was ALWAYS your fault, Ron," Hermione yelled back.

"OOOooh. Trouble in Paradise?" Fred snickered.

"Already?" George asked with a hearty laugh.

Neither Ron nor Hermione heard the twins' comments, however. They were far too focused on each other to hear, let alone acknowledge, anyone else in the room.
"It isn't my fault you did magic," Ron retorted, his voice becoming deeper as his anger got the better of him.

"I wouldn't have had to do magic in the first place if you hadn't run off into that field."

"I didn't ask you to follow me," Ron yelled back. "In fact, I specifically asked you to go back to the house. If you would have just done what I bloody well told you to do, none of this would have happened."

"You knew perfectly well that I was going to follow you," Hermione yelled, her face now red with rage.

"But I didn't know you were going to cast spells while you did it."

"I couldn't find you, Ron. What if I had gotten lost in there?"

"You wouldn't have gotten lost," he shout back incredulously. "I knew where you were the whole bloody time."

"Well I didn't know that, now did I?" Hermione bellowed. "Because you didn't bother to tell me. You just ordered me back to the house and disappeared."

"ORDERED YOU?" Ron barked in angry surprise. "I didn't order you to do anything. It would be a bloody waste of breath, wouldn't it? Because you are too pigheaded to do ANYTHING I ask you to do."

"PIGHEADED?" Hermione screamed as she clenched her fists at her side.

"Let's go boys," Mr. Weasley said quietly, grabbing both Fred and George by their arms and dragged them out of the kitchen.
"But Dad--" Fred protested as he was hauled into the sitting room against his will.

"Why is it you turn everything into a bloody contest to see who has the strongest will?" they heard Ron's slightly muffled voice shout.

"At least we can still hear them," George whispered as he smiled at his twin brother.

"That's not true," they heard Hermione protest.

"Oh yes, it is," Ron shot back. "You constantly tell me what to do. But if I ask you to do something you ignore me and now.... NOW YOU’RE ACCUSING ME OF TRYING TO CONTROL YOU!"

"He's got her there," Fred snickered.

"That's enough," Mr. Weasley said, waving his wand at the kitchen door and Shielding the room to prevent the twins from hearing anything else.

"Aw, come on Dad," George whined.

"George, go find your sister and help her pack," Mr. Weasley said. "It's no good staying here if they're watching the house," he whispered when he noted the confused look on his son's face. "When you finish with Ginny, go pack your own trunk."

"Dad? Where's Bill?" Fred asked, shooting his father a questioning look. He might have been engrossed in the brawl that had broken out in the kitchen, but not so much that he'd failed to notice that Bill hadn’t come back into the house.

"He had an errand to run. He'll be back in a minute," Mr. Weasley informed them. "Now go pack," he said to George. "No, Fred," he added, when both of the twins started moving towards the stairs. "You stay here. I need to talk to you for a minute."
"I have never accused you of trying to control me!" Hermione screamed at Ron.

"Yes you did!" he bellowed back, his face screwed up with rage. "You just said I gave you a bloody order."

"You did."

"NO, I DIDN'T!" Ron roared angrily. "All I did was ask you to go back to the house. When you refused, I accepted it."

"You accepted it and then you tried to ditch me," Hermione hissed.

"DITCH YOU?" Ron cried out in disbelief.

"You think I don't know what you were doing? You were hoping I'd go back to the house when I couldn't find you." And it almost worked, she fumed.

"Have you completely lost your mind?" Ron asked as he gaped at her. "I've never tried to ditch you."

"OH YES, YOU HAVE!" Hermione screamed. "Just because I didn't call you on it, doesn't mean I failed to notice the fact that BOTH you and Harry tried to leave me at Hogwarts when Harry had that vision about Sirius. 'Ron and I will...go ahead, and Hermione can stay here with you three--'" she quoted back to him furiously.

"I didn't say that," Ron informed her. "Harry did. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"I know who said it," Hermione declared. "I didn’t hear you object or try and talk him out of it."

"I didn't have to," Ron shot back quickly. "I knew there was no way you were going to stay behind."
"But you would have liked me to."

"Well, obviously," he admitted. "But I didn't ask you to, did I? And it isn't the way you're making it sound. Harry was just trying to--"

"I know what he was trying to do and I won't have it. I'm not going to let you two shove me to the side and then watch as you take all the risks. I don't want you to protect me."

"WELL THAT'S JUST TOO DAMNED BAD!" Ron shouted. "Because I am going to protect you and there isn't a bleeding thing you can do about it. So you better get used to it, Hermione."

"ARRGGHHH! You are the most infuriating person I've ever met," Hermione cried as she turned away from him and slammed her fist down on the kitchen table to vent her frustration.

But rather then turn around to face him again, Hermione kept her back to Ron and stared out the kitchen window silently. He watched as she brought her fist up and lightly ran her fingers over the spot where it had connected with the table. She’d obviously used more force then she’d meant to and injured herself. Ron had just come up behind her and was about to insist that she let him look at her hand, when she spoke again.

"What was I supposed to do if something happened to you in that field?" Hermione asked, her voice now faint and full of pain.

Ron sighed loudly and took a moment to push down what was left of his own anger before he reached for her. When he grasped her hand, Hermione spun around to face him with tears in her eyes.

Ron didn't say a word, because there was nothing he could say. There was no answer to that particular question. At least no answer he could voice. He'd asked himself similar questions when they were confined together in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts after the fiasco in the Department of Mysteries, and yet he'd never been able to come up with an answer. All he knew for sure was that the idea of something happening to Hermione terrified him. She obviously felt the same way. Ron could see it in her eyes.

*That's what this is all about, he thought. She's trying to use anger to drown out her fear.*
Rather than speak and risk saying the wrong thing, Ron just tugged on her hand and motioned for her to come closer. It was a small gesture, but all the invitation she needed. Hermione stepped forward almost immediately and let her face fall against Ron's chest as he gathered her into a hug.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said gently, in an attempt to soothe her. "And I wasn't trying to ditch you. I really did know where you were the whole time. I assumed you knew where I was as well," he admitted, as he held her close. "But... I'm not going to apologize for trying to protect you. Keeping you and Harry safe is always going to be my first priority."

"I know," Hermione sighed. "It's who you are and I love you for it. But you have to understand that you can't shield me from what's coming. Like it or not, the three of us are caught up in the middle of this war and we're going to have to fight our way out. You can't fight my battles as well as your own. You can't fight Harry's either."

"I know that," Ron begrudgingly admitted. "Look, I realize that I have to let you make your own decisions and fight your own battles, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. I hate this, Hermione. I really do. But I am trying, you know? I asked Ginny to stay at Hogwarts that night. I didn't ask you. I wouldn't have left you behind. I knew that Harry needed you. I regretted that decision...after what happened. I mean... you almost died, but ...if you hadn't been there... well I'm just glad that at least you were there for Harry."

"Don't do that," Hermione said, pulling away and looking up at Ron sadly. "We've already been through this. You were there for Harry."

"Not when it mattered," he muttered.

"Stop it!" Hermione rebuked him. "That's not true and you know it. It wasn't your fault we all got separated, but it worked to our benefit. You did the best you could and you got Ginny and Luna out of the way before you were hit with that spell. You can't blame yourself for that. You didn't fail anyone."

"Um hum," he muttered, looking down at the floor.

"I'm serious, Ron. If you're going to blame yourself for getting hit, then you have to blame me as well," Hermione informed him. "I could have Petrified Dolohov or Stunned him. I knew a curse would work, but I was holding back. I was trying to shut him up when I should have been trying to incapacitate him. I assumed that a Silencing Charm would be good enough. If I hadn't been trying to
prove that Charms can be used defensively, he never would have gotten me. I still think they'll work though... Charms I mean. Obviously not a Silencing Charm. Well, not the way I had hoped anyway, but--"

"Hermione?" Ron interrupted when he saw her eyes alight with excitement and he realized she was about to steer their conversation in a whole different direction. One he didn't really want to think about right now.

"Yes?" she replied, even as she continued to contemplate other charms that could potentially be effective in a fight.

"Promise me you won't try an experiment with Charms again during an actual fight," Ron said. "I mean during D.A. meetings is one thing, but not against .... You-Know-Who or his cronies."

"Can I try and transfigure them?" she asked to avoid giving him an answer.

"If that worked, don't you think McGonagall would be teaching us how to do it?" Ron replied.

"I suppose," Hermione admitted. "Ron? You do know that I don't deliberately try and ignore you, right? I mean, I'm not just trying to be stubborn or anything. If it were a true contest of wills neither of us would win because you're just a stubborn as I am," she informed him. "I know that you're usually the one who gives in and that isn't fair. I know I have to bend a little. I will try, I swear, but ... it's hard. I'm afraid if I give an inch... you and Harry will run right over me."

"We wouldn't make it very far without you, Hermione," Ron replied. "Harry and I both know that. Look," he said, eyeing her cautiously. "I know that you've spent the past 5 years looking after us and it's not something you can just stop doing. But you have to tone it down a little, especially with Harry. I know you're only worried about him, but he doesn't want you mollycoddling him. I'm not saying that he doesn't appreciate it on some level. I mean... I know we complain and fight you, but we almost always listen to you. That isn't going to change. Just don't be such a bloody know-it-all about everything. I mean I know you're brilliant," Ron added as he watched Hermione cross her arms and take on a fighting stance, "but is it nice to rub our faces in it all the time?"

"Very funny."

"Seriously, Mione," Ron said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders again and pulling her back against him. "I'm not saying this to upset you. It's just that you said you were going to listen to me
more when it came to Harry, right? So just... you know... tone it down a bit. You can be like a big sister or something. You know... look out for him and give him advice and all, just don't be so disapproving if he doesn't always want to follow it."


"Not with me?" Ron asked, pretending to be hurt.

"I don't mother you," she informed him. "We have... different issues."

"Issues? We don't have issues," Ron protested. "Not anything serious anyway."

"Do you really think I try and control you?" Hermione asked. "I don't mean to."

"No," Ron replied with a sigh. "Not really. I was just upset. I know you’re just trying to looking out for me. I probably shouldn't tell you this. No, I know I shouldn't tell you this," he amended, “but I sorta like that you nag me. I mean... sometimes it really does get on my nerves, but... well... you know, I sort of depend on you to keep me on target. I can mess around without really worrying about it all that much because I know that you're going to step in and get me back on task when I need to be. If it weren't for you, I never would have been able to get though the O.W.Ls. Not with Prefect meetings and Quidditch practice and everything else we had going on last year."

"Can I get that in writing?" Hermione teased.

"Get what in writing?" Ron asked, giving her a confused look. "I don't know what you're talking about," he laughed back.

"Seriously though, Ron," Hermione said. "I know that I have to... ease up a little. Not just with Harry, but with you too. I know I'm a bit of a control freak, but you shouldn't have to be the one that always backs down. I really will make an effort to be more flexible. I can't promise I'll be successful though, so if something is really important to you and I'm not listening, you’ll have to get in my face and make me listen."

"If I do that, you are liable to bite my head off," Ron said, making it sound like a joke, even though he was serious.
"It's never stopped you before," she replied.

"Humm, that's true," he confessed with a lopsided grin. "I suppose now is as a good a time as any, right?"

"What?" Hermione asked, pulling away and looking up at him in shock. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Um... yeah," Ron replied sheepishly. "Just remember, you're the one that told me to do it."

"OK," Hermione said, taking a deep breath and trying to mentally prepare herself for whatever he was about to say. "Just give me a moment," she continued, closing her eyes. "I didn't expect this so soon."

_I will not get upset. I will not get upset_, she chanted in her head. _Whatever this is, it's important to him, so just listen and don't get upset._

"All right," Hermione said as she opened her eyes and met his gaze. "What is it?"

"Dobby."

"Dobby?" Hermione asked in surprise. She wasn't sure what she had expected, but this certainly wasn't it. "What about him?"

"Well...um... I don't really know how to tell you this," Ron replied.

"Just spit it out," Hermione replied. "What about Dobby?"

"He's the one that's been taking all the clothes you've been hiding in the common room."

"What?"
"He's the only House-elf left that will clean Gryffindor Tower," Ron said quickly. "The rest of them won't go near it because they're afraid you're going to force clothes on them."

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, then shut it quickly, and bit her lower lip.

Ron watched her cautiously for a moment and then decided he may as well finish.

"I was going to let Harry tell you, but... well, I don't think he's going to. It isn't as if Dobby is complaining or anything. I mean, he really likes the hats and all. But then... he's a bit of a nutter, isn't he?" Ron asked. "It's just that... you aren't really helping them, and well... it's a lot more work for Dobby, isn't it? Cleaning the entire tower by himself. Plus it's a lot of work for you, right? Just think of all the other things you could be doing with that time. Aren't you going to say anything?" Ron asked, no longer able to bear the silence. "Or are you just going to let me go on rambling?"

"What do you want me to say?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know. Say whatever you want."

"Why did you wait until now to tell me this?" Hermione asked looking down at the floor.

"Um... well," Ron stammered. "I guess I assumed Harry would tell you, only he didn't. And... well, I didn't really want to start another row. And... I guess I sort of thought you'd think I was just saying it because I don't support spew and stuff. But that's not it, really," he assured her. "So are you mad at me?" he asked cautiously.

"No," Hermione sighed. "Not really. A little disappointed, maybe. Not with you," she clarified when she saw Ron blanch. "With the situation. He really had to clean the tower all by himself?" she asked.

"Yeah," Ron replied, unconsciously nodding his head. "But he didn't mind. I mean, you know Dobby. He was thrilled to be able to clean up after Harry."

"Ron!"

"What? I'm serious."
"I know you are. But that's not the point. I didn't mean to make more work for him. I'll have to find a way to make it up to him."

"You could invite him to join spew," Ron joked.

"You know, that's not such a bad idea. Just think of the insight he has. I bet if people heard how the Malfoys treated him--"

"Hermione," Ron interrupted. "Don't go messing with Lucius Malfoy," he said sternly. "I'm dead serious. I don't want you stirring up trouble with him. He's dangerous. Malfoy is a Death Eater and we both know he isn't going to be stuck in Azkaban for very long. I don't want to give him another excuse to come after you. Promise me that you won't start spreading stories about him."

"He isn't going to--"

"Promise me, Hermione," Ron demanded, crossing his arms in front of his chest and staring at her with determination. He wasn't going to back down on this and she knew it.

"But, he isn't going to come after me because of anything I say," Hermione protested. "He'll come after me because I'm Muggle-born."

"You think I don't know that?" he asked, clasping her shoulders and pulling her against him protectively. "But that doesn't mean you need to give him any additional excuses. I mean it, Hermione. I want you to promise me that you won't go spreading stories about Malfoy."

"Fine," Hermione sighed. "I promise."

"You promise what?" Ron pressed, forcing her to say the words. He wanted to hear them. He needed to hear her say it out loud.

"I promise I won't purposely antagonize Lucius Malfoy," she replied. "Is that what you want me to say?"
"Yeah, he thought. Unfortunately hearing her say it didn’t really make him feel any better.

"It’s rather quiet in there," Mr. Weasley said, after pointing his wand at the kitchen door and lifting the Shield he’d placed around the room to keep the twins from eavesdropping. "Sounds like they’ve made up," he added with a slight smile as he looked at Bill, who’d Apparated into the room a few minutes earlier. "Do you suppose we ought to knock just to be safe?"

"Where is the fun in that?" Fred asked with a chuckle as he unceremoniously pushed the door open and strode into the kitchen with no warning.

“Guess that settles that,” Bill said, shrugging his shoulders slightly. “I’ll be waiting,” he added, and then he vanished from the room with a pop.

Assuming that Fred's presence in the kitchen would have brought Ron and Hermione's attempt to 'make up' to a screeching halt, Arthur decided that it was probably safe for him to enter the kitchen as well.

As he pushed open the door and entered the kitchen, he noticed that Fred was already standing by the fireplace, looking disappointedly at Ron who were standing in front of the table beside Hermione, looking rather cross.

"Sorry to interrupt," Arthur said as he approached the trio. "But we really couldn't wait any longer. I hope you two had a chance to sort everything out," he said, looking pointedly at Ron.

"Er... yeah," Ron replied, letting his eyes fall to the floor. "It's fine."

"Well that ought to make this a bit easier then," his father said, shifting his gaze Hermione.

"Make what easier?" Ron asked, his eyes snapping back up to stare at his father. He didn't like the sound of this.

"Well, you see--" Arthur started. "It appears that the Ministry may be watching the house, so I've decided that it's probably best, given the circumstances, if we spent the remainder of the summer
elsewhere. Unfortunately, there is a good chance that the Floo Network is being monitored as well, so you’re going to have to floo somewhere that won't rouse suspicion. Fred is going to floo to the joke shop,” Arthur informed Hermione, ”and you're going to follow after him. They won't be expecting you to show up there,” he explained. "Not after what happened yesterday. Diagon Alley is the last place they'd expect you to be. And unless they’re monitoring the network closely, they'll just assume you were George flooing to work after Fred."

"I'll go first," Ron said, when Hermione glanced at him apprehensively. It was clear to him that Diagon Alley was the last place she wanted to go. "It will be fine."

"No, Ron," his father stated. "You're staying here."

"What?" he cried in outrage. "I'm not letting her go alone."

"Bill is already waiting outside the joke shop," Arthur said as he turned to Fred. "Just let him in when you get there and wait for Hermione inside," he instructed. "George will Apparate in as soon as we've finished packing."

"Right," Fred replied, grabbing a hand full of floo power from pot by the fireplace. "Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes," he said, throwing the powder at his feet and disappearing in a ball of emerald flames.

"Don't worry," Arthur said as he placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder and steered her away from Ron and over towards the fireplace. "We’ve already arranged for someone from the Order to meet you and Bill at the Leaky Cauldron. They'll take you to Molly. The rest of us will join you as soon as we can."

"Wait a minute," Ron protested. "Why do I have to stay here? Just have George pack my stuff, or Ginny."

"I'm sorry, son," Arthur said. "But you and Ginny can't use the Floo Network right now."

"Why the hell not?" Ron asked. "Fred just used it."

"Yes," his father agreed. "He used it to go to work, and George will be using it right after him,” he added, motioning towards Hermione. “If a third person goes with them, it will look suspicious and
"He's right, Ron," Hermione said as she attempted to give him an encouraging smile. "It’ll be fine,” she said, despite her own misgivings. “Bill will be with me.”

Ron looked into her eyes for a moment and then visibly deflated. "Fine," he huffed, crossing his arms in front of his chest to show he still wasn’t happy with the situation.

"Here, you may need this," Arthur said as he scooped a small pile of folded paper off the kitchen counter and handed it to Hermione. "Molly fished it out of your pockets earlier,” he added when she took the money out of his hand. "You're going to have to walk through Muggle London. It may come in useful."

"All right," Hermione said, stepping backwards into the overlarge fireplace. "See you in a bit," she said to Ron as she reached into the pot of floo powder and grabbed a handful. She wanted to say more, but Mr. Weasley was still standing there and she figured she’d probably wasted enough time already.

"Yeah, see you," Ron replied, obviously wanting to say more himself, but thwarted by his father's presence. Hermione seemed to be able to read what he was feeling on his face however, because she gave him a small smile just before the flames sprang up around her and she vanished from the kitchen.

"Almost there," Bill said over his shoulder as he turned the corner and guided Hermione down a narrow street lined with shabby houses. Their brisk walk had been considerably longer than originally planned and Hermione's already aching body was starting to protest. She wasn’t going to complain, however. It was her fault after all. She was the one that had followed the Muggle off the train, even though she knew it wasn’t their stop. She was the one that led Bill and Tonks out of the Underground Station and onto the streets as she chased after him. She was the one that had emptied her pockets and offered to give the Muggle all the money she had if he’d let her borrow his mobile phone for 5 minutes. It was her own fault she hadn’t thought to save a few pounds so they could get back on the train and continue on to the stop at Kings Cross as planned. What should have been a leisurely 20-minute walk, had turned into a 90-minute jaunt across London and she only had herself to blame. But talking to Harry on the phone; telling him that she was all right and hearing the relief in his voice had been entirely worth it.

"What time is it?" Hermione heard Nymphadora Tonks ask behind her.
"10 minutes later than the last time you asked," Bill replied, not even bothering to look at his watch this time.

"Moody is probably sending out search parties as we speak," Tonks grumbled as they continued to march past one ramshackle house after another.

"We aren't *that* late," Bill retorted in what he hoped was a confident voice. They might not have resorted to search parties yet, but his mother would definitely be waiting for them and she was not going to be happy about the delay.

"It's my fault," Hermione admitted, knowing full well what awaited them once they arrived at their destination. "I'll take the blame."

"Mum has a bit of a blind spot where her girls are concerned," Bill informed her. "Doesn't matter what you tell her, it'll still be my fault."

Hermione snorted. She couldn't help it. He sounded just like Ron. She smiled to herself as she remembered the day he had lamented to her and Harry about how his mother would hold him responsible for Fred and George leaving school. It wasn't as if he could have stopped them. Nor could Bill have stopped her from jumping off the train. She hadn't planned to do it and she certainly hadn't given him any warning. When the Muggle man in the business suit had walked past her and exited the train, his mobile phone to his ear, she had acted on impulse. She was up on her feet and out the door before Bill could so much as pull his wand.

Looking back on it now, Hermione realized it was rather a stupid thing to do.

*Those train doors don't stay open very long. Bill and Tonks could have easily been stranded on the train. Of course if that had happened, one of them would have probably blasted the door clean off in order to get out. What a mess that would have been. Even so, I could have lost them in the crowd. What was I thinking?* she asked herself as she tried to keep pace with Bill, who marched on ahead of her seemingly oblivious to the type of neighborhood he was leading them through.

Not that Hermione was paying all that much attention herself. She was too caught up in her own thoughts to concentrate on her surroundings. Not that it really mattered. Each house they past was more run down and dilapidated than the next and after a while, the peeling paint, broken windows and neglected yards overgrown with weeds all sort of blended together. The graffiti was new though. The freshly painted jagged letters covering the brick walls and fences caught her attention for a moment, but the words were mostly unintelligible and she quickly lost interest.
I’m NEVER going to live this down, she grumbled to herself miserably as she thought back on how she had been forced to flee Diagon Alley. And I was forced, she told herself, as she thought back to what had happened, there’s no doubt about that.

She’d been reluctant to leave the relative safety of the twins’ shop once she arrived. She hadn’t wanted to face the people doing their shopping on the other side of the door. She didn’t want them looking at her; whispering about her; feeling sorry for her, but she knew it would happen. As soon as she set foot in public, someone would recognize her and the finger-pointing would begin. The abduction and her subsequent escape were front-page news after all. That was only part of the problem however.

The other part of the problem was that she had been abducted just a few yards away. The day before she’d felt safe on Diagon Alley and now she knew that sense of security was just an illusion. She wasn’t safe out there. Even the joke shop probably wasn’t completely secure, but then very few places were now that Voldemort had returned. But just because she was in danger; just because she was afraid, that didn’t mean she was going to hide. If she did that, they’d win. And Hermione wasn’t about to let them beat her that easily. It was a matter of will, and she had plenty of that. All she had to do was will herself to walk out that door and take her life back. And she would. She just needed a few moments to collect herself first.

Unfortunately, while she was doing that, Fred came up with a plan of his own and before Hermione even realized what was happening, he grabbed a pointed hat made out of some sort of lurid pink material off a shelf and thrust in at her. Initially, Hermione had been puzzled. She stared at the hat in silence as she took in the hideous lime green ribbon and the ostentatious yellow feathers that adorned it. Then with a gasp of horror, she realized what it was and started to protest.

Fred had simply laughed at her distress, so she’d tried appealing to Bill. She informed him that she’d rather face an entire horde of Death Eaters then walk down the street in a Headless Hat, but rather than listen to her, Bill took the revolting thing out of his brother’s hand and plopped it down on her head.

Bill turned another corner and Hermione managed to follow him, even though her mind was still elsewhere. She could feel Tonks walking right behind her and knew the young Auror was alert for any signs of danger, which left her free to contemplate other things. Luckily her companions weren’t looking at her face and neither of them could see the blush spreading across her cheeks as she remembered what happened next.
She’d whipped the horrendous hat off her head so fast, it didn’t even have time to vanish. Feeling like a complete idiot, Hermione had thrown it back at Bill and tried to use reason to get out of wearing it. Unfortunately, she still wasn’t quite sure how, Fred had outsmarted her. In a way, that was more humiliating than the fact she ended up wearing the blasted hat.

Where did I go wrong? she asked herself as she thought back on the turn the conversation took next.

When she’d pointed out that being headless would only draw additional attention to herself, she’d been certain she’d prevail. How could anyone argue with the logic of that statement? Bill had wavered for a moment, and appeared to come around... and then Fred took control of the situation again. Before Hermione even knew what had happened, he scooped up as many Headless Hats as he could hold and ran towards the door.

“Just give me 10 minutes, and this place will be swarming with headless kids,” he’d shouted back over his shoulder as he disappeared.

And to her absolute horror, Fred returned in less than 5 minutes and informed them that he had given the hats away to anyone willing to ‘promote’ the store for the next half hour. There were now at least 5 or 6 headless people wandering up and down Diagon Alley with instructions to send anyone that asked to Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes.

To make matters even worse, Fred had popped over to Madame Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions and borrowed a cloak so Hermione could cover up her Muggle clothing until she reached the Leaky Cauldron. She had no logical arguments left. ‘It’s humiliating’ wouldn’t work anymore than ‘because I don’t want to’ would and she knew it. In the end, she had no choice but to put the horrid thing on and follow Bill to the Leaky Cauldron.

She hadn’t been able to get the blasted thing off her head fast enough, but the moment she entered the pub and tore the hat off, she’d almost wished she hadn’t. The hush that fell over the room had been almost instantaneous. Suddenly all eyes were on her. The adults at least had the good grace to stare at her silently. It was the children standing over by the fireplace about to floo home with their mother that drew her attention. One of the little girls actually pointed at her and then leaned over and started whispering furiously with her sister. As if their hisses had broken a Silencing Charm that had been cast over the room, people started turning to their neighbors and conversing in low voices.

Tonks had taken some of the attention off Hermione when she jumped up from a table in the corner and approached them. In her haste, she had tripped over a chair leg and staggered sideways into a man sitting on a barstool. The collision prevented her from falling to the ground, but she managed to clip his drink and upended it into his lap. With a loud curse, the man jumped to his feet and the glass hit the floor where it shattered. Without thinking, Tonks grabbed a towel off the bar and began wiping the man’s robes as she attempted to apologize.
Hermione and Bill had started at her right along with everyone else. It was one of those scenes you didn’t want to watch and yet at the same time you just couldn’t look away.

“TONKS!” Bill cried out, when he finally found his voice.

“What?” she’d asked as she turned to look at his startled face.

Bill didn’t answer her, however. He just stared at her in disbelief. Tonks gave him an odd look, and then followed his gaze down to her hand.

“OH MERLIN!” she cried out when she realized exactly where she was rubbing the man.

Her face instantly flushed a brilliant shade of red that clashed violently with her bright pink hair. “I’m soooo sorry,” she had moaned. “I didn’t mean to... OH!” she cut off abruptly when she realized she still had the rag pressed firmly against his crotch. “Sorry,” she muttered again as she yanked her hand away, let the rag drop to the floor, and reached for her wand.

“No!” the man had protested when she pointed it at the wet spot on his robes. “I’ll do it,” he added, covering the botch with both of his hands.

Tonks merely looked at him for a moment and then lowered her wand. “At least let me buy you another drink,” she shouted after him as he ran down a darkened hallway towards the loo.

"There," Bill said as he pointed just ahead of them at the neglected square of yellowing grass opposite the houses of Grimmauld Place.

"I thought it was supposed to be unplottable," Hermione said, becoming aware of her surroundings as she followed him up the street and watched him mount the worn stone steps leading to the battered black door she recognized.

"It is," Bill replied as he glanced at the silver serpents twisted together in front of him. For a moment Hermione thought he was going to reach out and use the doorknocker to announce their arrival. "I've spent years navigating my way through Egyptian tombs," Bill continued as he pulled his wand out of an inside pocket instead. "You didn't really expect me to get us lost on the streets of London, did you? This was child's play compared to some of the places I've had to find."
"They asked me... about it," Hermione said quietly. "Where the headquarters was," she clarified when Tonks looked at her oddly.

"You didn't have to lie to them," the young Auror replied, making it obvious that someone had already shared the details with her. "Even if you had told them flat out where headquarters was located, none of them wouldn't have remembered. You might as well have been speaking Gobbledygook, for all the good it would have done them."

"Then why did she ask?" Hermione inquired.

"To test your loyalties," Bill replied as he tapped the door once with his wand. "To see what you're made out of," he added, stepping away from the door the moment he heard the metallic clicks that reverberated on the other side.

"Where have you been?" Mrs. Weasley hissed as she threw the door open, taking all three of them by surprise. She appeared so quickly, Hermione suspected that she had actually been standing on the other side waiting for them. But rather than linger for a response, Mrs. Weasley ushered the trio inside and quickly closed the door behind them.

"Well?" she demanded, her hands on her hips as she stared down her eldest son. "You should have been here over an hour ago," she added louder than she should have. "What happened?"

Without warning, the moth eaten velvet curtains covering Mrs. Blacks portrait shot open revealing the enraged old crone. "FILTH!" she shouted as she brandished her fists at Bill. "SCUM! BE GONE FROM THIS HOUSE!"

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW WORRIED I'VE BEEN?" Mrs. Weasley shouted, not in anger, but so she could be heard over Mrs. Black's rant.

"BLOOD TRAITORS! DIRTY HALF-BREED!" Mrs. Black's image added the moment she noticed Tonks.

"Good afternoon to you too, Aunt Walburga," Tonks replied as she stepped forward and attempted to pull one side of the curtains closed.
"How dare you!" the old woman in the portrait hissed, her eyes bulging out of their sockets as she was addressed to by someone she clearly viewed as an inferior. "YOU’RE NO RELATION OF MINE!" she screeched, lunging forward in the canvas, her claw like hands groping as if she were trying to wrap them around Tonks neck, but then she froze. "YOOOU!" she shouted, her yellow skin becoming pallid as she spotted Hermione. "MUDBLOOD FILTH! YOU DARE SULLY THE HOME OF MY FATHERS WITH YOUR VILENESS?!"

"YOU MUST BE STARVING!" Mrs. Weasley shouted at Hermione, her back to the portrait, purposely ignoring the barrage of bigoted slurs. "WHY DON’T YOU GO DOWN TO THE KITCHEN, DEAR? I LEFT YOUR LUNCH OUT FOR YOU."

"HOW DARE YOU DEFILE THESE HALLOWED HALLS WITH YOUR TAINT?!"

"GIVE IT A REST, YOU OLD HAG!" Bill cried as he pushed Tonks out of the way, grasped both sides of the curtains, and stood directly in front of the mad woman trying to claw her way out of her portrait. "This isn't your house anymore," he stated with a smirk. "Sirius left it to--"

"BILL!" Mrs. Weasley cut him off. "Stop taunting her and just close the curtains," she added in a normal tone of voice.

It took a great deal of effort, but Bill and Tonks eventually managed to draw the curtains back over the portrait.

"Calm down, Mum," Bill said before the deluge of questions began again. "Nothing happened," he added as they headed down the hallway. "We just had a little trouble with those underground trains the Muggles use."

"What kind of trouble?" Mrs. Weasley asked suspiciously.

"It was my fault," Tonks replied. "I just had to try those moving stairs and--"

"Actually, it was my fault, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said, cutting Tonks off. "I jumped off the train at the wrong stop."

Mrs. Weasley stopped at the head of the staircase leading down to the basement kitchen and glared at her son accusingly. "This is how you watch after your... after Hermione?" she demanded. "Merlin
"He didn't know I was going to do it," Hermione said in Bill's defense. "I didn't know I was going to do it," she added truthfully. "I know it was stupid, but I wasn't thinking clearly. When I saw that Muggle talking on his portable phone I just reacted. I had to catch him. I had to use his phone. I had to talk to Harry. I wanted him to know I was ok. I knew if he could just hear my voice--"

"You... spoke to Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked, instantly forgetting her anger.

"I was worried about him," Hermione stated. "He's all alone, with no one to talk to and nothing to do but imagine the worst."

If Bill didn't know any better, he'd swear that Hermione had just pulled one over on his mother. One moment she had been worried and angry at him, and now... she was completely focused on Harry. The two of them were worrying about him...together. If he hadn't seen Hermione chase the Muggle off the train and beg him for his mobile phone; if he hadn't heard her conversation with Harry, he'd be tempted to doubt her sincerity.

"I knew if I could only speak to him... make him see it wasn't his fault--" Hermione continued.

"Of course you were worried about him," Mrs. Weasley replied as she reached out, placed her arm around Hermione's shoulder, and escorted her down to the kitchen.

"What just happened here?" Tonks whispered to Bill as they stood at the head of the stairs, gawking at the now closed door.

"I wish I knew?" he replied with a chuckle.

"You don't think she actually planned that, do you?" Tonks asked.

"I'm not sure," Bill admitted, "but I wouldn't be all that surprised if she had. If she did--"

"You owe her one," Tonks laughed.
"Yeah," he agreed, laughing with her. *Guess I do.*

"Are members of the Order still 'guarding' him?" Hermione asked as Mrs. Weasley ushered her into the kitchen.

"Don't worry, dear," she replied as she steered Hermione towards the table. "Harry understands why he needs to be there now. It won't be like last year."

"Does he know they're there? Are any of them talking to him?" Hermione inquired as she watched Molly retrieve a platter of sandwiches off the counter and set it down on the table.

"You need to eat," Mrs. Weasley informed her.

"He's not ...dealing with this very well," Hermione admitted, ignoring the food on the table. "He needs someone to talk to," she continued, feeling more than a little guilty about what she was doing. She had told Ron she'd try to stop mothering Harry, and here she was doing it again. "Or maybe someone to just spend some time with him so he doesn't feel so alone. Maybe Professor Lupin could check in on him every once and a while," she suggested. "They might be able to help each other. I don't know... maybe Ron’s right," Hermione sighed more to herself than to his mother.

"And what does Ron think?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"That Harry needs some space. That he'll talk about it when he's ready. But what if there’s no one there for him to talk to when he *is* ready? It isn't good for him to bottle it all up inside and let it fester."

"No it isn't," Molly agreed.

"I'm not suggesting we force him to talk. Ron is right about that. He’ll open up when he's ready. But he shouldn't be left on his own all summer either. Harry needs to know there’s someone there for him, even if all they do is sit beside him and keep him company."
"I'll talk to... OH FOR HEAVEN SAKE S!" Molly cried loudly as a cloud of soot came billowing out of the fireplace. "THAT BLASTED OWL!" she shouted as Pigwidgeon emerged from the dust and shot up into the air, chirping merrily as he circled the room above them. No longer brown, but covered in black grime, Hermione would have taken him for a bat if it weren't for his large yellow eyes and the letter dangling from one of his legs.

"PIG?" Hermione said in surprise as the tiny owl spotted her and landed on her shoulder. "You might have gotten stuck in there, you know?" she reproached him as she reached for the letter. "And what if there had been a fire?"

"Your letter is on the counter," Mrs. Weasley stated as she attempted to grab the tiny owl sitting on Hermione's shoulder. Pig saw her coming, however, and launched himself out of reach before her hand closed around him. "That one is for Harry," she explained as she eyed the twittering owl zooming around the room excitedly, "but he won't deliver it. I've put him out of the house three times," she said in exasperation, "but he just keeps finding ways to get back in."

Hermione was only half listening as she tore Ron's letter open and gazed down at his hurried words.

Hermione-

It's a madhouse here. Fred's trunk just exploded. Dad and George are busy trying to sort it all out so I slipped off while they weren't looking. Dad says we probably won't get there until sometime tomorrow. Mum and Bill are going to stay with you though. I sent Pig on ahead so you could write to Harry. The feathery little git better still be there when you arrive. I added a letter of my own for Harry, but I specifically told him NOT to deliver it UNTIL he has yours too.

See you sometime tomorrow.

Ron

P.S.

Stay away from Kreacher. There's no telling what he'll try now that Sirius is gone. Actually, now that I think about it, sleep in my room. He may have done something to yours. I'm not joking. And BOLT the door when you're alone.
P.P.S.

Pig is supposed to come back to you after he’s made his delivery. You should probably remind him of that. I’ll be too busy hauling your mental cat clear England to deal with him too. You have no idea how hard it was getting him into that carrier again. The little bugger actually drew blood this time.

"It's all right, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said as she set her letter down on the table and grabbed a large bowl off the dresser. "He’s just doing what Ron told him to do," she explained as she took the bowl over to the sink and filled the bottom half with warm water. "Come here, Pig," she ordered and then snatched the owl up off her shoulder the minute he landed so she could remove Harry's letter. Dropping the letter on the counter, Hermione placed the small owl on the rim of the bowl. "You better clean yourself up," she said sternly. "You can't go to the Dursley's looking like that. You'll make a mess and get Harry in trouble. You can have some of my sandwich when you're through," she added when the owl hopped into the bowl of water and ruffle his feathers. "Mrs. Weasley, do you have any parchment?" Hermione asked. "I promised Harry I would write him as soon as I got here."
"I can't believe you still insist on wearing those horrid boots to work," Molly Weasley said to her
elest son almost as soon as he materialized in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place and sank into a chair
beside Hermione. "And that awful earring. Really Bill, couldn't you at least take it off while you're
there?" she added as she handed him a steaming cup of tea. "I'd think you wou--"

"I've told you before, Mum," Bill cut in before she got any further into her tirade. "The Goblins don't
care what I wear."

"But you aren't exploring tombs, you have a desk job now. Shouldn't you look a more--"

"Respectable?" Bill finished for her, having been subjected to this conversation so many times now
he could practically quote it back in his sleep.

"There's nothing wrong with looking respectable," his mother replied quickly.

"There is nothing wrong with my hair either," he shot back, knowing what she was going to mention
next. "So drop it."

"But you look like a criminal," Mrs. Weasley protested. "Just a trim?" she asked hopefully, reaching
for her wand.

"NO!"

"Number 11," Hermione mumbled to herself. It had been a long, boring day. As tired as she’d been
when they arrived, she hadn't been able to get much sleep during the night, which left her feeling
short tempered and irritable. Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that the large house was
entirely too quiet and she found it unnerving. Of course that was only a small part of the problem.
Afraid that if she stayed in her room, she'd fall asleep and be subjected to the same horrific
nightmare, Hermione sought refuge in the kitchen, which was usually bustling with activity. But as
she wasn't in the mood to listen to Mrs. Weasley harp on her son, she had let her mind wander.

"What was that you said, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked Hermione as she set a plate of scones down on
the table for Bill to snack on.

"That's how you did it," Hermione said, turning to face Bill. "That's how you led us here. You
weren't looking for number 12. It's unplottable, but number 11 isn't. All you had to do was find the
house next door."

Bill, who was caught by surprise, looked at Hermione thoughtfully for a moment and then laughed.
"Actually," he chuckled, "I was looking for number 13, but I'm impressed. It only took you a day to
figure it out. Most people wouldn't have even bothered trying. Ever consider a career as a Curse
Breaker?" he asked before taking a sip of his tea. "I can put in a good word for you at Gringotts."

"Not really," Hermione admitted.

"You might want to," Bill replied. "I hear Arithmancy is one of your favorite subjects. I have a
feeling you might enjoy it. Personally, I can't think of anything better than solving a good mystery.
There’s nothing like the rush you get from cracking a difficult spell. You should see some of the
curses I've stumbled upon. Those Ancient Egyptian wizards really knew their stuff. Some of them are damn near undetectable unless you know exactly what to look for. Loads of research involved before any attempt can be made to get past them of course. But that's right up your alley, isn't it?"

"It does sound intriguing," Hermione said.

"It's bloody fantastic," Bill replied.

"It's dangerous," Mrs. Weasley chimed in as she opened the door leading to the pantry and began rummaging around for something to prepare for dinner. "Risking your life hunting for treasure you don't even get to keep," she continued to mutter to herself. "Where is the sense in that, I ask you?"

"Don't listen to her," Bill leaned in and whispered. "Mum thinks everything that's fun is dangerous," he chuckled. "I'm working on a particularly nasty spell at the moment," he continued in a normal tone of voice. "Although there isn't much chance I'll get blown to kingdom come sitting at my desk," he added loudly for his mother's benefit. "Still, even researching how to break it is fascinating. The first step to breaking a curse is learning how to cast it, after all. Want to take a look?" he asked Hermione. "I brought my notes home on the off chance I might find time to work on it."

"Sure," Hermione replied, her eyes lighting up with excitement. "But, I don't want to get you in trouble," she added. "It isn't classified or anything, is it?"

"No, I can consult with anyone I want," Bill assured her as he leaned down, rifled through the bag at his feet, and produced a pile of notes. "The Goblins don't care, so long as I come up with a solution."

By late afternoon, Hermione and Bill had parchment strewn out all over the kitchen table and they were so engrossed in their conversation that it took them a while to register the fact that Mrs. Black’s portrait had started shouting obscenities. But then Hermione realized what those shouts meant and for the briefest of moments she was torn. She'd thoroughly enjoyed her discussion with Bill and she felt it would be rude to just abandon him in the middle of it. However, if the shrieks upstairs were any indication, the rest of the Weasley family had arrived and the prospect of learning more about a fascinating Ancient Egyptian curse, while appealing, wasn’t about to keep her from running upstairs to greet them.

Besides, Bill obviously understood, because he watched her jump out of her chair and chase his mother up the stairs with a knowing smile on his face. He took his time gather his notes together and made sure they were safely stow away in his bag before he followed them, however. It wasn’t likely he was going to get anymore work done tonight and if the twins about, it was best to have important documents tucked away.

Hermione exited the kitchen right on Mrs. Weasley's heels. She was just in time to watch Ron abandon both of the trunks he’d been dragging down the hallway and retreat to the door so he could help his father close the curtains that usually hid the disagreeable old witch shouting at them.

"You better shut the hell up," Ron warned the haggard old lady as he grasped a hold of one side of the curtain and started tugging on it furiously. "Or I might just take a leaf from Sirius's book and shred your portrait with a butcher knife. Fat load of good that Permanent Sticking Charm will do you then. You can hang there in tatters for all I care."

"Just ignore her," his father said as he pulled on his own side of the curtain. But to his surprise the
old witch stopped shouting and sized Ron up with her wrathful glare.

"You wouldn't dare," she hisses, narrowing her eyes even further.

"Just try me, you old bat," Ron snarled back. "If you call her that again I'll--"

"Go help your sister," Mrs. Weasley said as she rushed up beside Ron and pushed him towards Ginny, who had just heaved her own trunk and Crookshanks' carrier over the threshold and kicked the door shut with her foot.

But as Ron relinquished his side of the curtains to his mother and moved towards his sister's trunk, Ginny sprung the latch on the cat carrier and Hermione's large ginger cat jumped out and shot between Ron's feet, nearly tripping him in the process.

"Bloody menace," Ron muttered under his breath as he leaned down and grabbed the end of Ginny's trunk to catch his balance. "He did that on purpose."

"Oh, he did not," Ginny retorted as the two of them carried her trunk down the hall and dropped it with the others near the foot of the stairs. "I suppose you're going to accuse him of trying to knock Hermione over too?" she asked, directing his view to the purring cat currently circling his master's feet, arching his back and rubbing himself against her legs.

"I know it was a long trip," Hermione said apologetically as she bent over and scooped the cat up into her arms. "But it couldn't be helped," she added, rubbing him behind the ears, causing him to purr even louder. "I'm sure you were a good boy," she said, her eyes no longer on the cat, but locked on Ron who appeared to be frozen in place a few feet away from her.

Oh no, he wasn't, Ron mumbled to himself. He was a--but the rest of the thought vanished, only to be replaced with another one as soon as he looked into Hermione's eyes.

Why am I so bloody nervous? Don't just stand here like an idiot, he reproached himself. Say something.

"Hi," he uttered meekly.

Oh, THAT was brilliant. You've been thinking about this moment for two bloody days and 'hi' is all you can come up with. You really are an idiot.

"Hi," Hermione replied with a timid smile as she let Crookshanks drop to the floor. The large cat looked up at her unhappily, then locked his disgruntled stare on Ron. His bushy tail now swishing back and forth in irritation, he turned around and stalked up the stairs.

"That cat hates me," Ron grumbled, at a loss for what else to say. "Look what he did," he whined, pushing the sleeve of his jumper up so Hermione could see the trail of scratch marks running down the inside of his arm.

"Maybe if you stopped calling him names," Hermione suggested, stifling a laugh. He just looked so cute brandishing the scratches about as if something unforgivable had happened. He reminded her of a little boy tattling on one of his siblings.

"I call Pig names all the time," Ron shot back. "You'd think the feathery little git would get the point by now."

He has. That's why he ignores you, Hermione thought as she threw her arms around Ron's neck. "Is it ridiculous that I missed you?" she whispered, pulling him close and breathed him in deeply.
"No," Ron chuckled softly, burying his face in her bushy hair and relaxing against her body. "Ridiculous was writing you a letter almost as soon as you left."

"I'm glad you did."

Knowing that his family was probably watching, Ron forced himself to release his hold on her and took a step back. "Where did everyone go?" he asked when he opened his eyes and realized that they were standing in the hallway alone.

"I guess they went down to the kitchen," Hermione replied even though she wasn't entirely sure. She hadn't noticed them leave. In fact, once Ron was standing in front of her, she seemed to forget anyone else was even there to begin with. Just like when they fought, everyone else faded to the background and he was all she saw.

"You didn't get enough sleep," he said looking down at her, concerned. "Kreacher didn't bother you, did he?"

"No, I haven't seen him," Hermione admitted. "I don't think he's here anymore. I didn't ask about it though. I don't really want to know what happened to him."

"I hope they fed the little bugger to Buckbeak."

"Ron!"

"He deserves it, Hermione," he proclaimed as he took a few steps backward and sat down on his trunk. "He betrayed Sirius."

"I know," she admitted as she sat down beside him. "I keep expecting to see him," she confessed. "I know Sirius is gone, but every time I go into the kitchen, part of me expects to see him sitting there," she said quietly as her eyes glassed over.

"It'll probably take a while to really sink in," Ron replied, wrapping his arm around Hermione's shoulder and pulled her against him.

"I'm glad you're here, Ron."

"Yeah, this place is pretty creepy at night. Especially when you're alone."

"That's not what I meant," Hermione declared.

"I know," Ron admitted. "But it's still true. Although, I suspect Fred and George were responsible for most of the noises I heard. Their room was right above mine, after all."

"I didn't hear anything last night."

"So you stayed in my room then?"

"Yes," she admitted.

Good. I'll have Bill look the girls' room over tonight and if that demented little bugger left any surprises behind, he'll find them.

"But you didn't get much sleep," he stated as he took in Hermione's appearance. Unsure how to respond, she let her eyes drop to the floor. She wasn't about to tell him that every time she had fallen asleep she'd dreamt that Death Eaters were attacking the Burrow. "I'll sleep better
tonight," she finally said.

"Yeah, having Ginny in the same room will help," Ron agreed, letting her off the hook. A tired Hermione was an irritable Hermione and he didn't want to set her off. "I was glad when Harry got here. I don't suppose he'll want to come this summer though. I doubt he'll ever want to come back to this house. Did he write back?"

"No, not yet," Hermione replied. "But, I talked to him yesterday."

Ron's eyes widened with shock. "You went to see him in--"

"No. No, I spoke to him on the telephone," she explained quickly. "I wanted him to hear my voice so he'd know I was ok."

"And those horrid Muggles actually let you speak to him? They didn't... cut you off?"

"Well I didn't yell at them, now did I?" she teased, smiling when she saw Ron's ear redden. "But I doubt they would have let me talk to him if they knew who I was, so I lied. I told them I was Mrs. Figg's niece."

"Who?" Ron asked, his brow knit together in confusion. "Oh... that old Squib with the cats?"

"Yes. I fed his aunt some story about how I was supposed to invite Harry over for tea and because she knew he'd hate it, she put him on the phone."

"Such a lovely woman," he said sarcastically. "So? How was he?"

"He said they're treating him all right. Feeding him and everything. I suppose they're afraid Moody will drop by and hex them if they don't."

"No, I mean... did he seem--" Ron began.

"Distant?" Hermione finished.

"I was going to say angry, but... was he distant?"

"Not at first," Hermione admitted. "I think he was too relieved. I told him I was all right and he seemed fine... up until I told him what happened wasn't his fault. He went quiet for a minute and then asked how you were taking everything."

"And?" Ron pressed.

"I told him the truth."

"You told him that we were--"

"No, I told him that you took it badly," Hermione explained. "That you blamed yourself, but that I managed to convince you what happened wasn't your fault. I did convince you of that, right?"

"You didn't really expect to ease his conscience with a fellytone conversation did you?" Ron asked, purposely avoiding her question.

"Ron?"

"What?"
"You two are going to drive me stark raving mad if you keep this up," Hermione grumbled as she pushed his arm off her shoulder and stood up to confront him.

"If we keep what up?" he asked, even though he was fairly certain of the answer. "I'm not doing anything."

"Yes, you are," Hermione replied, sounding more than a little irritated with him. "You're being thick on purpose. Now stop trying to change the subject."

"I wasn't," Ron protested. *Ok I was, but I was hoping you wouldn't notice.*

"It wasn't your fault, Ron. Now say it back to me."

"It wasn't your fault," he said with a lopsided grin.

"You're impossible," she declared, shaking her head in exasperation. Feeling herself near tears again, this time for no good reason, Hermione shifted her eyes to the ground and avoided looking at Ron directly. "We should probably take your trunk upstairs," she said, surprised that her voice sounded so steady.

What is with me tonight? Why am I so emotional? I was happy just a minute ago and now I'm... I'm what? Angry? No. I'm--

"Hermione?"

"What?" she asked, her eyes locked on the trunk Ron was sitting on.

"Come here," he said, motioning for her to sit down next to him.

"If you don't want my help, that's fine," Hermione said, turning her back to Ron and looking towards the kitchen where she assumed the rest of the Weasley family had assembled. But even as she said it, she realized she wasn't really talking about the trunk anymore. "Don't worry about the other two," she said, pointing at her own trunk and Ginny's. "We'll take care of them later," she added as she started to walk off.

Ron was up off his trunk and had his hand on her shoulder before she managed to get more then two steps away. "Hermione?" he said as he pulled her to a stop.

"Dinner will be ready soon. You're mother will be looking for us."

"Will you please look at me?"

Why? So I can see the guilt in your eyes? Hermione thought. She did turned around to face him, but avoided his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked.

"I don't know," she admitted, and it was partially true. She was upset that he wouldn't let her help him, but that was only a small part of the problem. Her emotions were running the gamut tonight and she didn't know why. All she knew for sure was that she didn't want to talk about it until she had a chance to pull herself together.

"I do," Ron said. "You are exhausted."

"That's not it," she replied. *It's more than that.*
"Then what is it?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do. Now tell me what it is," he demanded.

"I said I don't know. Why can't you just drop it?" Hermione shot back, the sadness she’d been feeling turning into irritation.

"Because I can't help you unless I know what the problem is," Ron retorted, sounding a bit annoyed himself. This was definitely not the reunion he had been fantasizing about for the past two days.

"You want to know what my problem is?"

"Yeah, I do."

"It's just..."

Just what? Hermione wondered.

"It's just... too much," she replied, saying the first thing that popped into her head. "I'm worried about you and Harry and my parents and it's just too much," she said. She brushed the warm tears off her cheeks the instant she felt them there, but the damage had already been done. Ron had already seen them. The next thing she knew, his was standing right beside her.

"You don't have to worry anymore," he said as he pulled her into a hug. "You're safe. Harry is safe. Your parents are off having a lovely holiday somewhere. And I'm here now. We are all fine."

"No, you aren't," Hermione said, choking back a sob against his chest. "My parents have no idea the kind of danger they're in. And you and Harry... You're both blaming yourselves for something that wasn't your fault and I hate it. I hate that I am the cause of it. I hate that you're both trying to deal with it on your own. I hate that you want me to talk about it, but you won't tell me how you feel in return. I hate it that you won't let me help you. And I hate feeling like this. I hate that they made me feel--"

Feel what? she asked herself. 

*Powerless!* her mind shouted. *Vulnerable. Afraid.*

"I can't afford to be weak," Hermione declared. "I can't fall apart." *I won't let those bastards beat me down.* "I have to be strong."

"Hermione, you're one of the strongest people I know. You've just gone through something horrible. No one is going to think any less of you if you're having a hard time. It doesn't mean you're weak. It just means you're human, that's all. There's no one here to see but me and I've seen you cry before, so just... let it out."

"Weren't you listening to me? I just told you I don't want to. If I break down, they win and I refuse to let that happen."

"So what? Are you going to sit around and brood about it like Harry?"

"No, of course not," she replied. *I'm going to continue my research and beat them at their own twisted game.*

“But you are going to push me away and deal with it on your own?” Ron continued.
"That’s you, not me?" Hermione retorted. “Just because I don’t want to talk about it right now, doesn’t mean I don’t want to talk about it at all. It means I don’t want to do it now, in the middle of the hallway, where anyone could walk in on us.”

Besides, she continued silently to herself. *I need time to gather my thoughts and figure out what I'm really feeling first.*

"Ok, you're right," Ron admitted. "This probably isn't the best place to get into something like that. We don't have to talk about it now. I can think of a more effective way to make you feel better anyway," he added, his lopsided grin returning. "But we probably shouldn't do that in the hall either."

“Ron!” Hermione cried in a scandalized tone of voice. But even though she tried to look annoyed, she couldn’t help but be amused by the way he’d steered the conversation in that particular direction. She’d always heard that teenage blokes had a one-track mind and Ron obviously was no exception. Why talk, when they could snog? Typical. "I don't know why I put up with you."

"Because I'm a good kisser," Ron suggested, his grin broadening into a cheeky smile.

"Who told you that, you smug prat?" Hermione asked, biting her lower lip to keep herself from smiling back at him. It was nice to see him have confidence in himself for change.

"You did," he replied, noting her grin and the mischievous gleam in her eye.

"Oh well, I take it back then," she replied in jest.

"You can't," Ron informed her.

"I just did," Hermione retorted, not bothering to hide her smile anymore. This banter was normal. This was comfortable. As odd as it seemed, this was how they flirted.

"Too late," he snickered. "You've already confessed. Or are you forgetting that you told me I 'take your breath away'? Maybe I need to refresh your memory," Ron suggested, reaching out and lightly caressing Hermione's cheek with his hand. "What, no witty comebacks?" he asked as he watched her eyes flutter shut.

"Oh, is that what you're waiting for then?" Hermione teased, her eyes still shut. "I thought we'd finished that little game."

"I really did miss you," Ron whispered, so close now that she could feel his breath on her lips as he spoke.

"Prove it," she whispered back, knowing he wouldn't back down from the challenge.

For a moment Hermione thought she heard Ron snigger, but it ceased to matter when she felt his lips brush against hers. The kiss was tentative and only lasted a moment, then he was gone.

"I'm still breathing," Hermione informed him and this time she was sure she heard him chuckle.

"So you are," he replied, his nose brushing against hers as he leaned in and claimed her lips a second time.

This kiss was nothing like the first. It was neither soft nor gentle and although it took him a moment to get the positioning right, it was full of ardor. At the same moment his lips locked on hers, Ron wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist and heaved her body against his own. The feel of him
pressed so firmly against her had an almost instantaneous effect and before she knew it, her entire body was burning with a heat that matched the ferocity of his kisses.

She liked this side of Ron. Over the years she'd caught glimpses of this forceful, passionate side when they fought and not only did it intrigue her, it excited her as well. Ron was a puzzle she was still struggling to figure out. There was a duality about him that just didn't make sense. He was rude and tactless, yet he could be so sweet and thoughtful when he wanted to be. Even the way he kissed her was a contradiction. His mouth was hungry and demanding, but as he devoured her lips, his hands were gently tracing small circles on her lower back. Leave it to Ron to be both passionate and tender at the same time. Did he do it because somehow he instinctually knew it would drive her mad or was it just his nature?

"How was that?" he asked when he unexpectedly abandoned her lips and dragged Hermione with him to the nearest trunk.

"Much better," she replied, her heart thumping wildly as she sat down beside him and looked up into his deep blue eyes.

"So you admit it was good, then?" he asked with a cocky air he knew would irk her.

"I admit nothing," she laughed. It had been good. A bit wetter than she might have liked, but still good.

"We'll see about that," Ron chuckled and leaned in to kiss her again.

"OY! That's revolting," George bellowed from where he stood frozen on the first floor landing. "I think I've lost my appetite."

"Get a room," Fred added as he appeared behind his twin brother.

"We could use yours," Ron shot back, much to Hermione's chagrin.

"Use your own bloody room," Fred countered as he descended to the ground floor and pushed past the couple on his way to the kitchen.

"That's the first place Mum will look."

"Ron!" Hermione cried, walloping him in the arm to shut him up.

"OW!"

"That's true," George responded with a smirk, watching his younger brother unconsciously rub the spot where Hermione had hit him. She might be petite, but apparently she packed a mean punch and George had more than a sneaking suspicion that she'd been coached by Ginny. "Doesn't mean we want you two shagging in our room, though," he added, laughing out loud when Hermione gasped.

"We're not --" she started to protest, but then she realized George was just trying to rile her up. "Forget it," she muttered under her breath, unwilling give him the satisfaction of a denial. "You two have completely ruined the mood," she said, standing up and pushing past both of the twins so she could retreat to the kitchen, "so I may as well go to dinner."

"Thanks a lot," Ron grumbled as he watched Hermione disappear.

"Any time," Fred sniggered.
"Looks like our work here is done," George added, "I'm starved. Let's eat."

Upon entering the kitchen, Ron was disappointed to discover Hermione seated beside Bill and already engrossed in conversation. His father was sitting on the other side of her, so he took the seat directly across the table and waited for her to acknowledge him. After a moment or two, she looked his way and smiled, but then she turned back to Bill and continued talking to him about some ruddy curse.

As the meal progressed, Ron noticed that Hermione was purposely avoiding the twins. Periodically she’d glance at him or Ginny, but she hadn't looked at Fred or George once since they entered the room. He assumed she was worried she’d set them off if she did, not that they normally needed encouragement.

It was remarkable, actually, that they’d kept their big mouths shut so far. But rather than tease him or Hermione about the snogging session they’d stumbled upon, the twins were talking quietly with his parents about the atmosphere in Diagon Alley. That wasn’t likely to last, however. Sooner or later, one of them would bring it up, and Ron was bound and determined not to be there when they did.

Having wolfed his dinner down at top speed, Ron was rather anxious to get out of the kitchen and away from prying eyes. The problem was, Hermione didn't seem to notice. He kept waiting for a lag in her conversation with Bill so he could get her attention, but apparently it wasn't going to happen. Drastic measures were called for. He just prayed it was her foot he was about to nudge under the table and not his father's.

Summoning up all the courage he had, Ron extended his leg until his foot touched something directly in front of him. Nothing happened. Ron glanced quickly at his father and then back to Hermione, but neither of them reacted. Thinking that maybe it was a table leg rather than a human one, Ron lightly ran his toe downward and stopped abruptly when he realized his foot was now directly on top of someone else's.

Definitely not a table leg, he thought, breathing a silent sigh of relief when Hermione glanced his way and he saw her cheeks flush ever so slightly.

Now that he had her attention, he needed to get her to follow him, so he cocked his head towards the door subtly as if to say, “Let’s go.”

The rosy hue on her cheeks became a little more pronounced and she dipped her head forward just once, letting him know she understood. But unlike Ron, who stood up and walked his empty plate over to the sink, Hermione remained seated, so he caught her eye again from where he stood behind Bill and looked at her questioningly. She held his gaze for a moment, then glanced at the door, and back to him quickly. Realizing that she wanted him to go first, Ron thanked his mother for the meal and left.

It was several minutes, however, before Hermione ascended to the ground floor hallway with his sister, who appeared to be in a sour mood.

"She could have at least let me finish before she kicked us out," Ginny fumed.

"She told you to take your plate with you," Hermione said in Mrs. Weasley's defense.

"That isn't the point. I was trying to listen to their conversation," Ginny replied.
"I know that," Hermione shot back. "And so did she. That's why she kicked us out. Perhaps you should have been more subtle about it."

"What conversation?" Ron asked, as he got up off his trunk and approached the girls.

"The one your parents were having with Fred and George," Hermione explained. "About how people are taking the news that—"

"That what?" Ron asked, looking pointedly at Hermione when she caught herself and stopped speaking. "What?" he asked again, despite the fact he could tell she was on edge.

"That the Ministry let Krum go," Ginny finished with a sigh. Like Hermione, she clearly expected to see her brother bristle at the news.

"Oh," Ron said, after a prolonged silence, but he didn’t have a chance to say anything else before Hermione grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out of earshot.

As she watched them go, Ginny couldn't help but smile to herself as she realized what Hermione was doing. She’d pulled him dangerously close to Mrs. Black's portrait, and Ginny had no doubt that she had done it on purpose. If Ron lost his temper now, he'd disturb the old witch and she'd out shout him. Not only would he have to deal with Hermione if that happened, he'd have to face the wrath of his mother as well. While Ron wasn't always the sharpest tack in the box, he had enough sense to realize his predicament and keep his voice down.

Ginny watched with interest as Ron and Hermione conversed together in hurried whispers. Strangely enough, when he glanced her way, he didn't look angry. If she had to name it, she'd say he looked disappointed, but he turned away before she really had a chance to be sure. Hermione must have suggested something that her brother wasn't too keen on though, because not only did he shake his head back and forth as he disagreed with her, he reached out and took both her hands in his to plead his case.

The fact that he initiated the contact caught Ginny slightly off guard. Ron had never really been the touchy-feely type, and until recently he’d avoided touching Hermione whenever possible. She knew things were different between them now. She’d walked in on them snogging after all, and Ginny had no doubt that she had done it on purpose. If Ron lost his temper now, he'd disturb the old witch and she'd out shout him. Not only would he have to deal with Hermione if that happened, he'd have to face the wrath of his mother as well. While Ron wasn't always the sharpest tack in the box, he had enough sense to realize his predicament and keep his voice down.

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Yet there it was. They were holding hands and it had a visible effect on Hermione. Her face had softened and she was listening to whatever Ron was saying with no signs of interrupting.

That's new, Ginny thought to herself as she observed their interaction. Ron obviously knows how to work her as expertly as she can work him. This should be interesting.

It was true, Ginny wasn’t privy to all the inner workings of Hermione’s friendship with Ron and Harry, but it always seemed to her as if Hermione held more power than the boys did. She was always telling them what to do, and while Ron would argue with her about it, and Harry might complain, in the end, they usually did what Hermione wanted. From what Ginny had observed over the years, the reverse was not true. Hermione rarely listened to the boys once her mind was made up about something. And her mind was almost always made up immediately.

But she was listening to Ron now. Not only that, she was considering whatever it was he wanted, and that was definitely a new development. They weren't arguing at all, they were discussing. Ginny had never actually seen that happen before and it threw her. When Hermione dragged Ron off, Ginny’d had no doubt that she'd be the ultimate victor. Ron was pig-headed, but Hermione almost
always won and now she had the added benefit of snogging privileges to hold over his head. But now that their discussion was over and the couple was walking back towards her, Ginny had no idea who had actually come out on top.

"Want some help with that?" Ron asked when he reached her, pointing down at Ginny's trunk.

"No, that's ok," she replied, still a little shocked that Ron hadn't stormed off in a huff. "I'm just going to take what I need upstairs. Mum will make Fred and George carry it up later," she added.

"Oh, ok then," Ron said, glancing at Hermione who arched her eyebrow and nodded her head at Ginny. "So what is it you need?" he asked lamely.

"What's it to you?" his sister shot back defensively. *What the hell is going on here?*

"Nothing," Ron protested. "I was just curious is all."

"Not that it is any of your business, but I thought I'd start my Potions homework."

"Er... ok then."

"Ron and I are going to play chess in the drawing room upstairs," Hermione told Ginny. "You're welcome to join us," she added quickly. "If you want. There’s a writing desk in there."

"Don't you two want to... be alone?" Ginny asked.

YES! Ron shouted in his head, but he had sense enough not to say it out loud. The matter had already been decided, much to his chagrin.

"This doesn't bother you, does it?" Hermione asked, her face flushing slightly as she pulled her hand, which was still intertwined with Ron's, up into the air for Ginny to see.

"No," Ginny replied honestly. "I think it's great. But that doesn't mean I want to watch you snog all night."

"We're going to play chess," Hermione clarified.

"Sure you are," Ginny snorted.

"We are," Ron sighed, making no effort whatsoever to hide his disappointment. "So you may as well join us."

"RON!" Hermione cried sharply.

"What?"

"May as well?" she scolded.

"What's wrong with that?" he questioned. *I invited her didn't I? It's what you wanted.*

"It was rude."

"It was not," Ron protested. "Rude would be saying she’s a better player than you are."

"Just for that, I'm not going to play you," Hermione informed him, letting go of his hand and folding her arms in front of her chest.
"Ginny, help me out here," Ron whined.

"You're a tactless git," Ginny said, "and beyond my help."

"But you'll still play, right?" Ron implored his sister.

"I suppose you're going to pester me until I say yes?"

"You know you want to," Ron replied with a grin. "No one in their right mind would choose to work on Potions if they had another option."

"Is that so?" Hermione asked.

"Quick. Arithmancy or Potions? Which one would you do first?" Ron shot back.

"Honestly," Hermione moaned, biting her lip and shaking her head in exasperation. He had her and they both knew it.

"See, I'm right," Ron proclaimed with a smile. "So Gin?"

"One game," Ginny replied. "Then I'm working on my essay."

"Sure you will," Ron chuckled as he popped the lid on his trunk so he could retrieve his chess pieces.

An hour and a half later, Ron and Ginny were in the middle of their third game. Hermione had relented in the middle of the first match and would have played the winner, if she hadn't fallen asleep before the game ended. She was now snuggled up against Ron, who was sitting comfortably on the sofa with one arm draped around her shoulder, telling his pieces where to move.

"There you three are," Bill said as he popped his head in open doorway. "All clear."

"Are you sure?" Ron asked.

"Yes. It's perfectly safe," Bill insisted.

"What are you two talking about?" Ginny asked, looking away from the chessboard and at her eldest brother.

"Ron was worried Kreacher might have done something to your room."

"So that's what all this chess nonsense was about," Ginny said, instantly looking insulted. "You were just trying to keep me out of my room so Bill could checked it out?"

"No," Ron answered truthfully. "That wasn't it at all. Hermione didn't want you to feel left out."

"I'm going to bed," Ginny said, rising up out of her chair and storming out the door.

"She's just upset because she can't beat me," Ron chuckled as his brother walked into the room and looked down at the chessboard.

With a chuckle of his own, Bill spun the board around so Ron could examine it from her angle. "She'd have had you in check in two moves," he laughed.
"No she woul--" Ron started to protest. "OH. I would have spotted that as soon as she moved her knight."

"No doubt," Bill replied, sitting down in Ginny's now vacant chair. His eyes shifted from his brother to Hermione, who was sleeping soundly beside him.

"Fancy a game?" Ron asked his older brother.

"Not tired?" Bill questioned.

"Of playing chess?" Ron retorted as if the very idea was ludicrous. "Not likely."

"I may give you a run for your money."

"You can try," Ron said confidently. "But you'll fail like everyone else."

"You're a cocky one, aren't you?" Bill chuckled.

"The last time you beat me, I was 8 years old," Ron replied as Bill turned the board back around and replaced the missing pieces.

"Maybe I let you win," Bill challenged.

"For eight years?" Ron laughed, "White moves first."

"So things are serious between you two now, are they?" Bill asked as he advanced one of his pawns.

"Er…yeah. I guess so," Ron said, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Congratulations."

"Um, thanks," Ron replied, purposely avoiding his brother's gaze by studying the board.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Er… do I have a choice?" he finally asked as he sent his own pawn forward.

Ignoring Ron's question, Bill asked his own instead. "How in the world did you make up so fast after that fight?"

"What fight?" Ron asked, as Bill made his next move.

"That row you had about what happened in the field. One minute she wouldn't even speak to you, then I leave for 10 minutes, and when I get back you two are acting as if nothing happened. I'm just curious how you did it."

"Oh, well...er--" Ron stammered. "She wasn't really that mad. Pawn to G5."

"She did a damn good impression then," Bill chuckled. "Bishop to C4."

"I reckon I just know her well enough to tell the difference."

"That's good," Bill said, clearly not buying his brother's explanation. "It'll save you both a lot of grief."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, trying not to sound concerned. "Knight to F6," he ordered, before he turned away from the board and looked down at Hermione who was still resting peacefully.
"The fact that you know her so well," Bill explained. "That you can do... whatever it is you did to make her forgive you... the next time you do something stupid."

"What makes you think I'm going to do something stupid?"

"I was 16 once, you know."

"So?"

"So, I made a lot of mistakes. And I'm here to make sure you don't make the same ones."

"Bloody hell," Ron moaned. "I already had this talk with Dad."

"Yeah, I remember Dad's talks. But what I'm about to tell you may actually be useful."

For a moment Ron was torn between extreme embarrassment and curiosity. Useful in what way? he wondered, glancing down at Hermione again to make sure she really was asleep. Is he talking about technique? Or some secret way to a woman's heart?

"Ok," Ron said, his curiosity finally winning out. "What is it then?"

"Patience little brother," Bill chuckled. "The wisdom I'm about to impart took me years to gather. You wouldn't want to rush me, would you?"

"Yes."

"I might skip something important."

"Why don't we skip the whole thing, then?" Ron retorted, his interest waning quickly.

"You love her, don't you?" Bill asked, suddenly very serious

OK, this wasn't part of the bargain.

"That is going to make it difficult."

"Make what difficult?" Ron asked. "Why would that make anything difficult?"

"I'm getting ahead of myself," Bill replied. "How do I say this?" he asked himself out loud. "Do you know what women really want?"

For a moment Ron just sat there, gaping at his brother in disbelief, then he snorted. "Oh sure," he scoffed. "How am I supposed to know that when they don't even seem to know themselves?"

"You may have a point there," Bill chuckled. "So let me rephrase the question. Do you know what Hermione wants?"

"I don't know. I guess some of the time. Why?"

"She wants that," Bill said looking at the couple seated together on the couch.

"Huh?" Ron blurted out. He was now completely lost and had no idea what Bill was talking about.

"That," Bill said again as he pointed at them. "That right there. What you’re doing right now."
"I'm not doing anything," Ron argued. "She isn't even awake."

"She didn't sleep very well last night. I could tell," Bill said when his brother started to protest. "But she's sleeping now. Why do you think that is?"

"Because she was exhausted," Ron replied.

"No," Bill informed him. "It's because you gave her what she needed."

"We didn't do anything," Ron protested. "Ginny was in here the whole time."

"And there it is," Bill said with a smile. "Not only did you spring the trap, little brother, you just dove headfirst into the abyss."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ron asked. The longer this conversation went on, the more confused he seemed to become.

"You assumed what she needed was... physical. You're thinking like a bloke."

"I am a bloke."

"But Hermione isn't."

"Not this again," Ron groaned. "Look, I've always known she was a girl." Even before she started screaming it at me 4th year. "It just took me a while to figure out she was... that she could be... more than a friend."

"The important thing is that you did figure that out," Bill said. "But that isn't what I mean."

"What do you mean, then?"

"Most girls your age don't really want the same thing blokes do. They want to be close to you. They want to feel appreciated and loved. They want to hold hands and snuggle up with you. They want to kiss and touch a little, but that's really pretty much it."

"That not true," Ron insisted. It can't be true. "There are plenty of girls at Hogwarts that do more than that."

"Just because they do it, doesn't mean it's what they really want."

"Why would they do it if they didn't want to?" Ron asked.

"Because it gets them the other things I mentioned. A lot of girls your age are afraid a bloke won't like them if they don't." Ron silently thought this over for a moment before he replied. "But that's ridiculous. Hermione would never think that. I mean... she has to know that I wouldn't drop her just because she didn't want to... I mean... that's not why I... I'd... I'd wait," he stammered, the tips of his ears heating up as his face flushed.

"Good answer," Bill said, giving his brother an encouraging smile. "You should probably mention that to her."

"What? But she has to know already."

"Does she?" Bill asked. "Step back and look at the bigger picture for a minute. Those other girls..."
"the ones that do put out. They get a lot of attention from the blokes at school, don't they?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose."

"And the girls that the boys aren't fawning all over... they see that, right?"

"I guess."

"And they're probably a little jealous," Bill continued.

"Some of them might be," Ron admitted.

"What are Hermione's roommates like?"

"They are a couple of gossiping twits," Ron replied, unsure why Bill would suddenly change the subject, but willing to go along, for now. "Nothing like Hermione."

"Are they... popular?"

"Well, yeah," he admitted. "But they're always giggling for no reason," he added as if that were a bad thing. "I mean, sure, they're nice to look at and all, but Lavender carries her wand around just so she can curl her eyelashes with it. Seriously, what's up with that? Why would anyone care that much about their eyelashes? It's not like we're looking at them, if you know what I mean."

"So they're shallow?" Bill asked.

"You could say that."

"And yet all the blokes seem to like them? How do you think that makes a smart girl like Hermione feel?"

"What do you mean?" Ron questioned. "She thinks they are a couple of idiots."

"Merlin, was I ever this thick?" Bill muttered to himself.

"HEY!" Ron cried a bit louder than he meant to, causing Hermione to shift in her sleep. Both of them froze when she groaned softly and nuzzled deeper into the crook of Ron's neck. The two brothers looked at one another silently for a moment, waiting to see if she was awake. But as she made no further attempts to move and continued to breathe deeply, they both decided it was safe to continue.

"Ok," Bill said softly. "Let me put it all together for you. According to you, Hermione's dorm mates are a pair of idiots. They're shallow and don't care about anything but how they look and catching the attention of the male population. Correct?"

"Yeah, that pretty much sums them up," Ron agreed.

"Hermione on the other hand is... what is she, exactly?" Bill asked.

"Amazing," Ron replied almost instantly.

"Can you be more specific?"

"Yes, but I'm not going to be."

"Alright then," Bill said, knowing there was no point pushing him when he had his mind set. "So
Hermione, who is this 'amazing' girl, has spent the past 5 years listening to her roommates gossip about various boyfriends. And of course being the smart girl that she is, she’s figured out that some teenage boys care more about what a girl looks like and how far she’ll go, than who she really is as a person. It is a physical connection, not an emotional one those boys are after."

Ron's eyes got large as he remembered the way Hermione had yelled at him after he said he'd rather go to the Yule Ball alone than with a troll like Eloise Midgen.

BLOODY HELL! She thought I was one of those blokes.

"So basically, you're going to take the best-looking girl who'll have you, even if she's completely horrible?" he heard Hermione's voice shriek inside his head.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," he heard himself reply.

BLOODY HELL! I was one of those blokes. What if she thinks I'm still like that?

"Why didn't you tell me all this two years ago when it might have made a difference?" Ron moaned. "What am I supposed to do about it now?"

"I'm not you," Bill replied. "I can't answer that."

"What would you do?" Ron pressed him.

"At your age?" Bill asked. "I'd be dating her roommates. How do you think I figured all this stuff out? It took me a long time to realize there’s more to it than just having a good time. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't a cad or anything. I just didn't take the time to really get to know most of the girls I got involved with. That way when it stopped being fun it was easy to call it quits and move on. I've never really taken the time to get emotionally involved before the other stuff started. But you two are already there. You've known each other too long not to be emotionally involved and that changes a lot of things. You don't have to go through all those awkward 'getting to know you' chats, for one. And you don't have to worry about uncomfortable silences or finding way to fill them, if you catch my meaning. That puts you way ahead of the game. Filling those silences is what steers a relationship in a superficial direction. On the other hand--"

"On the other hand what?" Ron asked, sounding a bit panicked now.

"If things go wrong--"

"Why would you assume things are going to go wrong?"

"You never know," Bill replied. "Something could happen to--"

"Don't," Ron interrupted when he realized what Bill was hinting at.

"I was there, Ron. I saw how you reacted when Mum told you she they had her."

"I don't want to talk about that," Ron said vehemently. **EVER! I don't even want to think about it.**

"I know you don't," Bill said. "But that's one of the down sides to being emotionally involved. You run the risk of getting hurt. You aren't the only one taking that risk either. She is a great girl. I don't want to see either of you get hurt."

"I would never--"

"Not intentionally, I'm sure," Bill replied, "but things happen. Relationships rarely seem to work out
the way we’d predict. Just... take it slow for now and be sure you aren’t unintentionally pressuring Hermione into doing something she isn’t really ready to do.” Bill suggested. He wanted to tell his brother that they were still young and they’d have the rest of their lives to do that, but he knew it wasn’t really a very strong argument at this point, considering they were all caught up in the middle of a war. "And if it’s her idea,” Bill continued, "you might want to take a minute and ask yourself why. Is it what she really wants, or is she suggesting it because she thinks it is what you want?"

"Is that all then?” Ron asked sarcastically. I should turn her down, even if it's what she wants so she doesn't think that is all I am interested in?"

"You still remember that charm I taught you?"

"Yes,” Ron groaned, his face flushing again.

"If you’re unsure--"

"No, I remember how to do it."

"Don't forget,” Bill warned

"I won't."

"Because Mum WILL kill you."

"Don't I know it."

"You know that... women aren't the same as men."

"I figured that out a few years ago,” Ron snorted uncomfortably, "but thanks for the stating the obvious."

"No I mean... it isn't the same when you're... together. Especially in the beginning. It will be painful for--"

"Bloody hell," Ron muttered, his ears taking on the same coloring as his face and hair.

"This isn't fun for me to talk about either. Especially with her sitting right there. I wouldn't put it past her to pretend to be asleep."

Ron actually laughed, despite himself. Me either, he thought. "Trust me," he said, "She's asleep. She'd be blushing like mad by now if she weren't. I don't want to hurt her," he muttered, more to himself than for Bill's benefit.

"You will. There is no getting around it," his brother said matter-of-factly. And I'm not just talking about ...at first."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, feeling that knot of panic coiling up in his stomach again.

"Well, all girls are different of course, but... you are my brother and we seem to have the same build so I assume that--”

"BLOODY HELL!" Ron shouted.

"Whatzammater?” Hermione moaned as her eyes fluttered open and she pushed away from him. "Wh...what is it?" she asked again, covering her mouth to yawn as she spoke. "Ginny didn't beat you, did she?" she questioned, turning to the person sitting in the chair across from them. "Oh,” she
said when she saw Bill sitting there instead. "What happened to Ginny?"

"Unlike some people, she decided to sleep in her bed," Ron teased, thankful that Hermione was still groggy and didn't seem to realize what she'd woken up to.

"Oh, stop it," she said, as smacking him lightly on the arm. "How long was I asleep, anyway?" she asked, trying to stifle another yawn.

"A couple hours."

"Really?" she said, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. "And you sat here with me and let me use you as a pillow all that time?"

"It's not like you weigh anything," Ron answered quickly. "And I still had one hand free to move my pieces with," he added. "Besides, I didn't even need that to give Ginny a sound trouncing."

"Don't believe a word of it," Bill laughed. "She would have had him in check in two moves if she hadn't gone to bed."

"No, she wouldn't have. Speaking of bed," Ron interjected when Hermione yawned again. "I know you're knackered, 'Mione. Why don't you go get some sleep?"

"I'm comfortable here," she protested.

"Suit yourself," Ron said, looking down at the chessboard again. "I think I might turn in myself once we finish this game. I'll wake you up again then, shall I?" he asked studying the board. "Whose move is it?" Ron asked Bill.

"I don't remember," his brother answered honestly. "Guess we'll call it a draw, then."

"No way," Ron retorted, letting go of Hermione and sitting upright. "We'll just start over again," he said, rearranging his pieces. "Where are you going?" he asked Hermione when she unexpectedly stood up. "I thought you were staying."

"I just remembered something," she said as she walked towards the door. "I'll be back in a few minutes," she said, and then she was gone.

As soon as she disappeared from view, Ron looked over at his older brother seriously.

"We can finish this later," Bill said.

"No," Ron protested. "What did you mean?"

"It isn't anything you need to worry about right now," Bill replied quietly. "You aren't there yet, are you?"

"No," Ron admitted.

"Then don't worry about it."

"Oh, sure. You tell me that I am going to hurt her and then tell me not to worry about it? Like that's going to happen."

"Ok, look. All I meant was sex is usually uncomfortable for girls in the beginning.”
"You said painful before."

"It can be," Bill sighed. "Or so I’ve been told. It depends."

"On what?"

"On all kinds of things. Just… make sure she’s relaxed," Bill said before Ron could ask him any additional questions. "When… if you ever get to that point," he said, looking over his shoulder at the door to make sure they really were alone before turning back to face his brother, "make sure she’s relaxed. And keep in mind that the actual act itself probably isn’t going to do it for her, even after she is used to it."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked for what felt like the hundredth time.

"You’ll probably have to take care of her in other ways," Bill said quickly, glancing over his shoulder again.

"How?" Ron asked.

"All women are different," Bill retorted. "You’re going to have to figure that out on your own. Just pay attention to how she reacts when you... touch her and eventually you’ll be able to tell what she likes and what she doesn't."

"What if I can’t figure it out?"

"Then ask her," Bill suggested.

"Are you mental?" Ron cried. "I can't do that."

"Sure you can. You just ask her what she wants."

"I can't."

"Well, you’re on your own, then," Bill said. "Just remember this, because it is the key to everything. Take care of her needs first. She'll be more relaxed afterwards and... more eager to take care of your needs. But you don't have to worry about any of this right now," Bill said, as he stood up to leave. "Right now, you need to figure out a way for her not to feel pressured. Tell her what you told me earlier," he added, as he walked towards the door. "That you don't mind waiting. She needs to hear that. Don't worry about the rest. It will fall into place when you’re both ready."

"He didn't beat you already, did he?" Hermione asked, as she appeared in the doorway with a book in her hand.

"No, I decided to call it a night," Bill said, as he prepared to make his exit.

"Wait," Hermione said as he went to push past her. "I was thinking about that curse you’re working on before I fell asleep," she said. "It sounded vaguely familiar and I was certain I’d read about a similar curse somewhere. Here," she said, handing the book in her hand to Bill. "I marked the page for you," Hermione added when he looked at her. "It isn't the same of course, but it is quite close."

"Bloody hell, Hermione!" Bill shouted when he looked down at the book in his hand and saw the title *Curses That Kill* printed on the cover. "What are you doing with a book like this?" he demanded, looking at her with wide eyes.

"Research," Hermione replied with a casual shrug of her shoulder. "I borrowed it from Hogwarts so
"I'll need it back," she added.

"Why would you be researching something like this?" Bill asked, waving the book in front of her face.

"Because that's what Hermione does," Ron interjected. "She can't help herself."

"Where did you get this?" Bill demanded.

"I told you, I borrowed it from Hogwarts."

"I never saw any books like this when I was at Hogwarts."

"Maybe you weren't looking in the right place," Ron said with a smirk. Bill had been Head Boy. He probably knew the library as well as Hermione did. But he hadn't known about the Room of Requirement.

"Maybe they've gotten some new books since then," Hermione suggested. "I don't know what to tell you. That's where I got it and I have to return it. If you don't think it will be helpful, I'll just take it back now."

"I'm not sure you should have books like this," Bill said, studying Hermione closely. "Maybe I ought to just return it to Dumbledore for you when I'm through."

"If you prefer," Hermione replied without even batting an eyelash. "It doesn't matter as long as Madam Pince gets it back. I've already read it, you know?" she added, as she walked over and sat on the couch next to Ron. "More than once, actually. So I don't really need it anymore."

"You're turning into Mum," Ron yelled at his brother after he nodded his head at Hermione and stepped out of the room. "He won't really give it to Dumbledore," Ron said quietly when Bill was gone. "He was just testing you to make sure you really did get it at school."

"You'd think I was skulking around Knockturn Alley browsing for books on Dark Magic, the way he reacted."

"He probably did," Ron snickered. "You've had some rather dodgy stuff lately. Did you see the look on his face when he found out you had a potion that could blind people?"

You don't know the half of it, Hermione thought to herself. If they knew what I had locked in my trunk right now--

You think it's funny?" she asked.

"Hell, yeah," he laughed. "He was afraid you might have learned how to cast all those spells."

"I did," she replied seriously.

"WHAT?" Ron cried, his mouth falling open. "You ... wait... you're taking the mickey out on me, aren't you?" he said when he saw her fighting back a smile.

"Even I couldn't learn all those spells that quickly," Hermione said with a smirk. "You do scare pretty easy, though."

"That was mean," Ron whined.

"How about I make it up to you?" Hermione asked.
"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, a deal is a deal," she replied. "And I agreed we could have some 'alone time' as soon as Ginny went to bed."

"You aren't under any obligation you know," Ron said. "I mean... I know you're tired and... I don't want to keep you up if you'd rather go to bed... er... I mean to sleep. We can... we don't have to do anything."

"Did I miss something?" Hermione asked, giving Ron an appraising look. "Weren't you the one telling me that it was going to be near impossible for us to find time to be alone with your family around to watch us. And now that we are alone, you want me to go to bed?"

"I don't want you to," Ron said. "But I think you probably should. We have all summer, right? There's no point exhausting yourself," he continued as he stood up and held his hand out to help her stand up as well. "Besides, we have all day tomorrow to... be alone."

"Ok," Hermione said, taking Ron's hand and allowing him to pull her upright.

She wasn't quite sure what was going on, but she didn't see any reason to argue with him about it. Maybe he was tired from his trip. The past couple days hadn't been easy on him either. Or maybe he was just worried about her and didn't want to say so because he thought she'd get defensive and stay up just to make a point.

Whatever it is, I'll figure it out tomorrow, she decided as they left the sitting room and walked into the hallway together.

"Well, goodnight then," Ron said, leaning down to give her a chaste kiss on the cheek before he stalked off towards the stairs that would take him up to his room.

"Goodnight," Hermione replied, staring after him, her brow knit in confusion. *What the hell just happened here?* she wondered as she watched Ron retreat.
Insecurities

Chapter 8: Insecurities

What am I going to do? Ron asked himself as he got out of the shower and threw on a fresh pair of clothes. *The cold showers defiantly aren't working.*

Well, that wasn't exactly true, they worked until he got out and saw Hermione again, but it was all down hill from there. The days weren't so bad really. His mother had kept them busy cleaning the upper stories of the house and as much as Ron hated housework, part of him was thankful to have something else to occupy his time. Having Ginny in the same room with them as they cleaned was a tremendous help as well. Not only did her presence keep him from skiving off his chores and dragging Hermione off to some dark corner, his sister also provided a release for his mounting frustration. At times Ron felt a bit guilty about that. It wasn't Ginny's fault that he was so aggravated. It was Bill's, but there wasn't a lot Ron could do about it now.

Not that Ginny was the only one Ron was short with, by any means. Nearly everyone that crossed paths with him had been on the receiving end at one point or another. Everyone except the one person he usually fought with. Somehow, Hermione had made it through the past five days unscathed. Which was ironic, because she was the one person that would have happily taken the bait and given him the fight he was searching for, if for no other reason than to alleviate her own frustration. But while Hermione snapped at him, mostly for the snide comments he made to his sister, Ron hadn't retaliated. He'd been sorely tempted, on more than one occasion, but somehow he managed to swallow his rude retorts.

As frustrating as it was to be near Hermione at times, the prospect of not being with her at all was even worse. Ron looked forward to the evenings when they found time to be alone together. Even if all they did was play chess or sit side by side on the sofa and talked. Hermione was both the source of his happiness and his aggravation. Holding himself back every time they were alone was slowly driving Ron mad, and yet at the same time he felt as if Hermione was the one thing keeping him sane. He wasn't about to start a fight with her and jeopardize that. The only thing that would accomplish would be to ensure he ended up frustrated and alone.

What's the use of having snogging rights, if I can't snog her? Ron lamented as he returned to his room and threw himself on his bed.

Not that they didn't kiss, because they did. Just not as often or as long as he might have liked. Thanks to Bill and his unsolicited advice, Ron kept inventing excuses to end things before he had a chance to get carried away and he was far from satisfied as a result.

It's worse than it ever was before, because it's all I can bloody think about now. DAMN IT, BILL! Why did you have to ruin everything? Haven't you ever heard the expression, 'Ignorance is bliss?' I want my bliss back. BUGGER!

As Ron lay in his room, cursing at the ceiling, Hermione was shut up in hers, reading a book. Well, reading might not be the best word to describe what she was doing. Trying to read, would be a more accurate assessment as she'd been looking at the same page for at least 15 minutes. She must have read it 4 times by now and yet, she couldn't remember a single word.
What's the point? she grumbled, slamming the book shut and dropping it on the bed beside herself. *This is getting ridiculous. I can't even distract myself with some leisurely reading. I'm going to have to force him to talk about it,* Hermione thought. *But am I ready to hear the answers?*

It had been days and she still hadn't figured out what was going on with Ron. Every time she asked, he denied anything was out of sorts. Of course he'd never been the easiest person to figure out. Hermione knew that he could be moody from time to time, but it never lasted very long. He was easy to rile up and might spend a day or two in a funk, but it rarely lasted longer than that. And it wasn't as if he seemed especially angry. He was just irritable.

At first Hermione thought that maybe he was just tired, but that obviously wasn't the problem. Ron was still perturbed after he had a full night's sleep and it only seemed to get worse. He now spent most of his afternoons in a perpetual bad mood. He was short with his sister and had taken to shouting at the twins nearly every time he encountered them.

Hermione hadn't missed the fact he was taking his aggravation out on his family and not her. She'd pushed him a few times just to see if he'd push back, but so far he held himself in check. Whatever was bothering him, his family was bearing the brunt of it, which led her to wonder if he was simply frustrated that they were always under foot. He'd warned her that it would be nearly impossible to really be alone together with them all living under the same roof. And he'd been right. It wasn't impossible, but it was difficult. Someone always seemed to pop in to see what they were doing and more often than not, it was his mother. But it happened so frequently that Hermione suspected Mrs. Weasley was doing it on purpose. Not that she was interrupting much.

She and Ron had taken to spending their evenings in the drawing room on the first floor near the girls' bedroom. There was a comfortable sofa in there and a big fireplace. It was cozy and Hermione enjoyed snuggling with Ron on the couch. They'd talked a lot about what had happened to her and about Harry, and Ron was unusually attentive in the evenings, which was nice. He held her hand when they sat together and couldn't seem to keep from touching her. Not that Hermione minded. It was all very innocent and sweet, and yet she couldn't help but find it exhilarating.

Every time she felt his fingers run down her arm or brush against her neck as he reaching for her hair, she'd break out in goosebumps. At times she still found it hard to believe that she could feel so much from a simple touch, but she was becoming accustomed to it. More than that, she was becoming dependent on it. More often than not, Hermione now found herself waiting with baited breath for the moment his fingers found their way to her face, because she knew what would come next. He almost always touched her face before he leaned in to kiss her.

The problem was that the kisses never lasted long enough. Ron was holding back and every time things started to heat up, he'd pull away and find an excuse to take a breather. She knew it was probably because he was worried someone would walk in on them, and in all likelihood someone would, but at this point she was so frustrated she didn't really care if his entire family pulled up a chairs and watched.

Whatever was bothering Ron was starting to take a toll on her as well and it had to stop. At first she'd simply been concerned about him, but she'd trusted that whatever it was, he'd work it out if given enough time. But now she was starting to get worried. Not only that, she was becoming increasingly nervous about it.

What if it isn't his family he's irritated with? Maybe it's me? Maybe he's changed his mind about being with me and he doesn't know how to tell me.

And maybe I'm driving myself insane worrying about nothing. JUST STOP THINKING ABOUT IT! she scolded herself.
"I just need something else to focus on," Hermione mumbled, jumping off her bed and throwing her trunk open. "Something more absorbing than this book," she continued, sweeping the discarded tome into her trunk and replacing it with a stack of parchment.

He knew that it wasn’t a good idea to leave the house. He knew it was probably dangerous. He simply didn’t care. It wasn’t the first time he’d walked blindly into danger and it certainly wouldn't be the last. Unless there really was a pack of Dementors out there waiting for him, that is. It wouldn’t matter that he had his wand shoved in the back pocket of his jeans. Harry Potter simply had no good thoughts in him to make use of at the moment. All he felt, when he felt anything but dead inside, was anger or despair. Presently, anger was the emotion ruling the young man stomping towards the park.

I'M SICK OF IT! Harry thought, his striking green eyes burning with resentment.

He was sick of his uncle telling him off for moping about the house. He was sick of listening to how he ought to be grateful he still had a roof over his head and a warm bed to sleep in. He was sick of looking at Dudley's enormous face and listening to his snide little remarks. The last one, about how he looked like his dog had just died, was the final straw. Harry had to get out of there or he was liable to do something that even Dumbledore wouldn't be able to gloss over. He was fairly certain his cousin didn't realize why the comment had set him off. He was simply expanding on the remarks his father made. True, Dudley had backed off when he saw the furry flash in Harry's eyes, but he had no idea how close he’d actually come to being cursed right where he stood.

I'm sick to death of the lot of them, Harry ranted to himself as he approached a park bench and promptly tripped. He staggered forward, but managed to keep his balance and right himself with a modicum of dignity. Flopping down on the bench in front of himself, Harry glared at the ground to see what he had stumbled over, but he saw nothing. He had tripped over nothing.

"You want to be a bit more careful there, Harry," a disembodied voice warned beside him. "You never know who'll you run into around here."

Even as Harry's hand closed around his wand, there was a whooshing sound and Fred Weasley appeared in front of him, the Invisibility Cloak he had been wearing clutched in one hand.

"FRED!" Harry cried in astonishment as the comedic red head sat down beside him. "What are you doing here?"

"I went for a walk and ended up in Surrey," Fred replied sarcastically. "What do you think I'm doing? It's my day to mind widdle Harrykins and see that he stays out of twoble. You are doing a bang up job, mate."

"Sod off."

"I didn't know you could channel Ron," Fred laughed. "That impression was spot on. That's about all he's said to me in days," he continued. "I can go back under the cloak if you prefer," Fred added, "but Hermione thought you might like some company."

"Hermione? How is--"
them like bloody House-elves. They're not likely to see daylight until September."

"Yeah, well," Harry grumbled, unable to feel much sympathy for his friends. "At least they have each other."

"OY, is that nice, I ask you?" Fred cried, placing his hand over his heart as if he had been mortally wounded. "I may not be Ronnikins, but I'm not chopped liver either. And after I came all the way to Surrey to lift your spirits with the tale of Hermione and the Headless Hat. There's gratitude for you."

"She wouldn't be caught dead wearing one of your hats," Harry shot back, but despite his foul mood, he couldn't help being slightly amused by the mental image he got.

"Oh, but she did wear one," Fred replied with a hearty laugh. "Not willingly of course," he continued. "It's a shame she was invisible really. What I would have given to see her face. She's still not talking to me. Then again... maybe that's a good thing," Fred added, sobering a bit. "She's a bit too much like Mum when she's angry. She really laid into Percy the other day. Not that he doesn't deserve it, the prat."

"Percy?" Harry asked in surprise. "What happened?"

"It's a long story."

"I've got time."

"Somehow, I knew you'd want," Fred chuckled. "Where should I start?"

Hermione was seated in the middle of her bed, completely absorbed in what she was doing, when she heard the soft knock on the door.

"Come in," she shouted, not even bothering to look up and see who'd entered the room. "Just give me second," she added, marking a spot in the book that was open in her lap with a finger as she leaned forward and scribbled something on the parchment beside it.

"I can come back later," Ron said, staring at the mounds of paperwork she'd surrounded herself with. Not only were there several open books littered about the bed, there were piles of notes strewn about in a pattern only Hermione would understand.

"Don't be silly," she replied, glancing up and giving him a warm smile, even as she continued to write. "Just let me finish this up."

"No, it's ok," Ron said, a bit apprehensive now. He knew Hermione didn't like to be interrupted when she was in the middle of a project. "I didn't know you were working on your homework."

"It's not homework," she informed him, her eyes now glued on the book again. "Stay. I just need a minute to finish."

Please tell me you're not doing all this just for a little extra credit, Ron thought, as he approached the bed and reached down to grab one of the open books so he could see what she was working on. Marking the page with his hand, he flipped the book closed and saw *Moste Potente Potions* written on the cover.
That explains the notes in the margins, Ron thought to himself, flipping it back into an open position. Hermione isn't likely to deface a book that isn't hers. But Snape doesn't give extra credit, so what's all this, then? he wondered, glancing down to one of the sections she'd underlined.

A coupling potion is most often used to amplify or magnify information incoming and outgoing between two or more individuals.

Once you have been conjoined, you will experience feelings, thoughts and on rare occasions physical sensations that are not your own, but those of the individual you have connected with. Emotional sensitivity is the most pronounced result.

After the connection has been forged, you should be able to feel or sense any strong or overwhelming emotions your partner is experiencing as if those feelings were in fact your own. However, the severity of the experience depends on the magnitude of the feelings and/or emotions being broadcast. Sometimes you will feel exactly what your partner is feeling and sometimes you will experience the sensations more than the person you are linked to because they’re used to their own levels of emotion and you are not.

Warning!!! This experience can be overwhelming and is often disruptive to ordinary life events.

The key to avoiding this pitfall is to recognize the difference between your own feelings and those being broadcast to you. Once this has been accomplished it is possible to tune out or block all but the most extreme emotional experiences.

Well, that explains a lot, Ron thought sarcastically as he set the book down in the same place he had found it. He knew from bitter experience not to disturb her system of organization.

"So this is the research you told me about?" he asked, glancing down at the various piles of notes, some of which were written on that white lined paper Muggles use. "How long have you been working on this, anyway?" he asked.

"A while," Hermione replied and then went quiet again. She knew that Ron wouldn't be satisfied with that answer, but she didn't want to talk about her research with him just yet, so she shoved the parchment she had been writing on into her book, slammed it shut, and dropped it on the bed behind herself. "So what's up?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

"Nothing," Ron replied, watching Hermione scoot towards the side of the bed and motion for him to join her. "I just saw the light was on," he added as he sat beside her, "and I thought I'd see what you're up to. I didn't mean to bother you."

"Oh, you aren't bothering me," she replied quickly.

"So this conjoining thing here," Ron said, grabbing Moste Potente Potions off the bed again and holding it up for her to see. "It sounds a bit like what's been going on with Harry and You-Kn--"

"Voldemort," Hermione corrected before he even had a chance to finish.

"Yeah... him," Ron said. "Are you trying to figure out how to sever their connection?"

"I don't think it's possible," Hermione admitted. "They aren't linked by a potion. They’re linked through Harry's blood and by the curse Voldemort used on him when he was a baby."

"Oh," Ron said. "What are you doing, then?" he asked, unable to keep the question to himself.

Damn, Hermione thought. She knew he'd get to that eventually, but she really didn't want to get into
"You're sweet, Ron," she said, scooting a little closer to him, "and I appreciate what you're doing," she added, knowing that he was making an effort to talk to her about something she was interested in, "but I don't want to bore you."

"You won't," he replied, genuinely interested. She's obviously put a lot of effort into researching… whatever this was. And if it would help Harry, he wanted to know about it. "So what's this all about then?" he asked. "If you aren't trying to find a way to sever the link between them, what are doing?"

"Oh, you know," Hermione said evasively. "Just looking for anything that might help. I'll let you know when I find something useful. We don't have to talk about it right now."

"All right," Ron agreed, studying her intently. The fact that she didn't want to talk about whatever she was working on put him more than a little on edge. It was possible that she really didn't have anything useful yet, but it was just as possible that she did, only she didn't want him to know about it for some reason. He wasn't quite sure which scenario was actually true. "So what do you want to talk about, then?"

"I don't know," she replied, gazing in his deep blue eyes. Who said we have to talk at all? she thought, feeling the heat of his leg pressed against hers as they sat side by side. "What do you want to talk about?" she asked, even as she reached up to touch his lovely red hair. The moment she touched him, she was lost. Before she even realized what she was doing, Hermione leaned forward and kissed him softly.

Caught off guard, Ron pulled away and then realized what he’d done. He instantly regretted it and he set about to rectify his error before she got the wrong idea.

Hermione's face was still fairly close to his, but he knew it wouldn't be for long if he didn’t act. So without even thinking about it, Ron reached over and ran his finger lightly over her reddened cheek as he locked his eyes on hers, then he leaned in again very slowly and covered her lips with his own.

It wasn't a deep kiss or a passionate one, but it still felt like he was coming home. One kiss turned into another and then another. Each one full of tenderness and the affection he felt for the girl sitting beside him.

Unsure of what he ought to do with his hands, Ron left them on the bed to assure that the only part of his body touching her was his lips. Hermione however, didn't seem to have the same concerns. The hand she had buried in his hair dropped lower until she was playing with the strands around the nape of his neck and every time she moved her fingers, they brushed against his skin.

The contact had the desired effect and Hermione giggled softly when she felt him shiver. She loved that fact she could do that to him. She learned from the experience. That first night, when Ron had kissed her neck, the pleasure she felt had nearly driven her insane. She now suspected he'd react much the same way. If she ever had an opportunity to try it out that is. Her mouth always seemed to be occupied when the inspiration struck and she never acted on it for fear he'd pull away from her the moment she abandoned his lips.

He’s liable to pull away anyway, Hermione thought as she placed her free hand on his chest, fistved his shirt to keep him in place, and leaned forward so her upper body was pressed against him.

But rather than struggle, Ron responded to her advances and snaked his arm around her waist as one kiss ended and another one began. He peppered her lips with a series of kisses. They were soft and gentle at first, but as the heat between them intensified, the contact lasted longer.
Then without warning, Hermione's stomach flipped and the electric heat that had ignited in her heart, quickly spread throughout her body. She stifled a moan when she felt his tongue brush against her lower lip, seeking permission to deepen the kiss further. Before she even realized what she was doing, Hermione lay back on the parchment spread across the bed and pulled Ron down on top of her.

The weight of his body holding her down as he kissed her was too much, and despite her efforts to hold it back, she moaned into his mouth. As if the sound broke a spell that had been cast over him, Ron suddenly realized what he was doing. Hermione nearly cursed when he pulled away from her and sat upright.

This is getting ridiculous, she thought, groaning again, this time in disappointment.

Breathing heavily, Hermione opened her eyes and looked up at Ron and as she came up on her elbows, the longing in her brown eyes was replaced by irritation.

"Why do you keep doing that?" she asked.

"Kissing you?" Ron replied playfully.

"Pulling away," Hermione said seriously. "Something’s wrong and I want to know what it is."

"It's nothing," he protested.

"It's not nothing," she retorted. "You’ve been on edge for days. I thought maybe you were just afraid someone was going to walk in on us, but it's more than that. Have you... changed you mind about us or something?"

"What?" Ron replied, unable to keep the alarm he was feeling out of his voice. "Of course not!"

"If it's not you, then it must be me," Hermione stated as she sat upright. "If you don't find me attractive, I'd rather you just tell me," she said sadly, unable to look him in the eye, "so I don't go on making a fool out of myself."

Without thinking, Ron grabbed Hermione's hand and pressed it into his lap so she'd know exactly how attractive he found her. There was no way she could deny what she felt there. But the moment her face flushed, Ron realized what he'd done and released her hand as mortification set in. No longer able to look at her, he let his eyes drop the floor, his own face now several shades darker than hers.


"But, isn't that supposed to happen?" Hermione asked, looking at him innocently.

Bloody hell, Ron groaned to himself. Why did I do that? She's really going to think I'm a perv now. And she's right.

"I don't understand what the problem is," Hermione stated, her brow knit together in confusion.

"What?" Ron asked in surprise. How could she not see he was a pervert? Why wasn't she upset with him after what he'd forced her to do?

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," she continued when she noticed how uncomfortable he was. "I feel it too, you know," she said softly. "When you kiss me. You might not be able to see it when you
"Look at me, but I still feel it. And I like it. I like the way you make me feel and I don't want you to stop kissing me."

"I'm not just thinking about kissing you," Ron admitted, his ears so red now, they'd surpassed the color of his hair.

"What are you thinking about doing?" Hermione asked.

"I'd think that would be fairly obvious," Ron moaned, wishing the ground would open up and swallow him whole. "I can't help it 'Mione," he added miserably. "Merlin knows I've tried. "I don't know what to do," he admitted. "It's driving me mad." "I don't want you to think that's all I'm after, because it's not. But every time I kiss you... I can't help but think about it," he confessed with a guilty look. "But I'm not one of those blokes." Not anymore.

"What blokes?" Hermione asked, at a complete loss. "You're not making any sense."

"One of those blokes that's only interested in a girl because of how she looks or how far she'll let him go," Ron started to ramble. "I know that's what you think and that's why you were so mad at me before the Yule Ball. I didn't mean to be like that. I didn't even realize I was, I swear. But that's not what this is and I don't want you to think that it's just physical, even though that might be how it looks."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Hermione asked, as Ron cut off abruptly and stared at the floor, thoroughly dejected.

"Bill said that--"

"BILL?" Hermione shouted. "You went to Bill and told him about--"

"No, he came to me," Ron interrupted before she had a chance to finish. "He cornered me and told me I had to make sure I didn't pressure you because it isn't what you want."

"Unless he can read my mind," Hermione shot back crossly, "he doesn't know what I want."

"Yeah, he does," Ron countered. "It took me a while to figure out what he was saying, but it all made sense."

"Enlighten me, then," she demanded. "What is it I want?"

"You want to be close and hold hands and kiss a bit. But anything more than that and you're liable to feel like I'm only interested in you because... But I don't want you to think that, because it's not like that. I don't mind waiting. Honestly. It isn't just physical. I mean, sure I think about the physical stuff, but I want more than that too. And I do care about the type of person you are. And... and... oh hell, I'm obviously not explaining it very well," he sighed as Hermione’s scowl become even more pronounced.

"The next time someone else tells you what I want," she said sternly, "ignore them. If you have any questions about that, the person you need to ask is me."

"I didn't ask him," Ron said miserably. "He just came up and told me."

"I'm still not exactly clear what he told you," she said. "But I think I've got the general idea."

"He told me if I pressured you, I'd mess everything up."
"As far as I'm concerned, the only person messing anything up here is Bill," Hermione replied. "Whatever he told you, ignore it."

"But... I don't want you to--"

"Ignore it."

"But--"

"There's no way Bill could know what I want," she informed Ron. "Because what I want changes with my mood."

**BLOODY HELL!**

"If it changes, how am I supposed to know?" he asked in a panic. *And what if you want something now, but change your mind and regret it later?*

"You can always try asking me," Hermione replied calmly. "And if you do something I don't like, I'll tell you."

"I'm so confused," Ron moaned, falling onto his back and staring up at the ceiling.

"Sometimes, I'm confused too," Hermione said, gathering her notes up into one pile and dropping them on her nightstand before she lay down next to him.

"Girls are bloody infuriating," Ron grumbled. "Why can't you just make up your mind already? What's so hard about that? How the hell is a bloke supposed to make you happy if you change your mind all the time? It's not fair. We don't do that. You always know what we want."

"That's because ultimately you just want the one thing," Hermione joked.

"But at least you know that," he whined. "It's not bloody fair."

"All's fair in love and war," Hermione chuckled as she leaned over and kissed him softly. "Ask me what I want, Ron," she whispered, just before her mouth descended to his neck.

Merlin! he thought, suppressing the groan that threatened to burst out at her implied meaning.

"What... what do you want?" he asked in a husky voice.

"I want you to stop holding yourself back and snog me senseless," Hermione replied before claiming his lips with her own.

As Mrs. Weasley exited the kitchen and walked up the stairs to the ground floor, she couldn't help but think about how silent the house was. It was something she was sure she'd never get used to. It was so unlike her own home, which was cozy and bustling with activity. But even with the chaos caused by various members of the Order popping in and out unannounced, Number 12 Grimmauld Place, with its many floors and boundless rooms, simply felt unnatural to her.

She missed her own home. She missed her own kitchen. She missed sleeping in her own bed. But it couldn't be helped right now. Keeping her children safe was much more important than where she had to sleep. But there were days she wondered if they would ever truly be safe, even at Hogwarts. And when they did go back to school, would it be safe for her and Arthur to return to the Burrow? If he couldn't get his hands on Harry, Hermione or Ron, would he come after her or her husband?
Better me than my children, Molly decided as she approached the parlor near Mrs. Black's portrait and peered inside the open doorway to see how much progress Ginny and Hermione had made cleaning the grime off the filthy hardwood floors. She’d set the girls to work, knowing that they’d be able to accomplish the task without disturbing the wretched painting that hung just on the other side of the wall. She hadn’t expected them to finish so quickly, but they obviously had. The room was now empty and the floor was spotless.

They must have gone up to help Ron scrub the fixtures in the bathroom, Mrs. Weasley thought to herself as she began climbing the stairs to check their work. *That tub’s a job in and of itself. It’ll take ages for him to scour all those stains off the surface. But it's getting late,* she noted after glancing out one of the dingy windows overlooking the street and noticing that the daylight was waning. *Arthur and the boys will be home from work soon. The kids have earned a bit of rest. They can finish the bathroom tomorrow,* Mrs. Weasley decided as she walked past the open door of the girls' bedroom.

Her daughter's bright red hair caught her eye as she walked past the room, causing Mrs. Weasley to halt and step back until she was standing in the doorway. Ginny was lying on her stomach in the middle of her bed, her feet in the air, quill in her hand, busily writing on a sheet of parchment.

"Where’s your brother?" she asked, staring into the room as if she expected Ron to pop out of one of the wardrobes.

"How should I know?" Ginny replied, looking up from the letter she was composing. "I'm not his keeper."

"Where’s Hermione?" Mrs. Weasley demanded, hoping to get a less ambiguous answer this time around.

"She's probably with Ron," Ginny said, dipping her quill in her bottle of ink and dropping her eyes down to the parchment once more. "Last time I saw her, she was going to help him clean."

"Why didn't you go with her?"

"I finished my chores," Ginny said, looking up at her mother defiantly. "I'm not doing his too."

"Apparently I'm not giving you enough of them then," Mrs. Weasley shot back.

Everything has to be a fight with you, doesn't it? You've been difficult ever since I refused to let you visit Harry with your brothers. Well it isn't going to work.

"I'll just add a few more to tomorrow's list, shall I?" Mrs. Weasley asked, watching Ginny's mouth fall open in indignation. She waited a moment longer to see if her daughter was going to argue, but Ginny seemed to catch herself mid-stream and bit back her comment. Pursing her lips, Ginny muttered something unintelligible under her breath as she glared down at her letter.

"What's that?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "I didn't quite catch what you said."

"I said fine," Ginny grumbled. *Add all you want to the bloody list,* she continued in her head. *Because the more you add, the slower I am going to work.*

"That's what I thought you said," her mother replied, as she left the doorway to seek out Ron and Hermione. She’d just decided to start her search with his room, when she heard hushed voices coming from the drawing room nearby.

Relieved that they hadn't squirreled themselves away somewhere secretive and reassured by the fact they were talking, which meant they weren't doing other things, Mrs. Weasley hesitated, no longer
certain if she ought to pop her head in the room and check on them or not. It was the position of the
door that finally settled the matter for her. True, it wasn't completely closed, but Ron knew that a
two-inch gap didn't equate to an open door.

How many times do I have to tell him? she asked herself as she approached the door and glanced
inside the room. As she expected, they were seated together on the sofa. Ron had wedged himself in
the corner, using the armrest for added support while Hermione reclined against him. For a moment,
Mrs. Weasley was torn. The scene in front of her was so intimate that she felt it would be wrong to
eavesdrop on their private conversation.

On the other hand, she thought when Ron gathered Hermione's hair up in his hand, bared her neck,
and leaned forward to kiss it. The conversation appears to be over.

Had the two teenagers known that she was in the doorway, it probably would have ended there. As
they didn't, Hermione turned her head just enough to allow Ron access to her lips. The kiss was
gentle and would have been nothing to get overly worked up about, had it ended. The problem was,
it didn't. Rather than break away, Hermione simply shifted her body into a more comfortable position
as the kiss deepened.

Mrs. Weasley had seen enough. But just as she was about to walk into the room and prevent
anything more serious from happening, her husband stopped her.

"Molly?" he whispered in an accusatory manner, as he came up behind her. "What are you doing?"
he asked, glancing over her shoulder into the room himself to see what she was looking at. Not
waiting for her to answer, he reached for her arm and started steering her away from the door.


"Leave them be," Mr. Weasley chuckled, placing his hand on his wife's back instead and pushing
her further down the hallway. "Let them enjoy at least part of their summer."

"But, dinner is almost--" she started to protest.

"They'll come down when they're hungry," Mr. Weasley replied, knowing full well that it wasn't
dinner she was worried about.

"That's not the point."

"No, it isn't," he replied, gazing at his wife knowingly.

"What’s that supposed to mean?" Mrs. Weasley asked, sounding somewhat defensive.

"Molly, you can't keep them from growing up."

"I'm not trying to."

Mr. Weasley arched one eyebrow at her as if to say, 'Aren't you?' and then he responded, "Ron isn't
the first one to have a girlfriend, love."

"This isn't the same thing Arthur, and you know it."

"Yes, I do," he admitted. "We both knew this was likely to happen. Don't pretend it isn't what you
wanted."

"But it's too soon," Mrs. Weasley replied. "They are too young."
"Charlie was younger than they are now when you caught him and that Fawcett girl going at it in that out of the way corner of Flourish and Blotts. You didn't react like this."

"That was different," Mrs. Weasley insisted.

"And that's what's really bothering you, isn't it?" her husband asked.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It isn't ridiculous," he replied. "It's only natural that you'd feel this way. Ron and Ginny are the youngest, but they aren't children anymore. I realize it is hard to let go, but you're going to have to find a way to do it. He'll be of age in a few months, Molly. Old enough to join the Order."

"He can't join the Order," Mrs. Weasley said sharply. "He's still in school."

"Old enough to make his own decisions," he continued, purposely ignoring his wife's comment. "Besides, this isn't really anything new. Hermione has been looking after him since he was 11 years old. Just because he depends on her, that doesn't mean he needs you any less. You are always going to be his mother."

"This is absurd. They haven't even gone on a proper date."

"So you don't think they're serious, then?" Mr. Weasley asked, even though he knew the answer. "You don't think it'll last? People said that about us, you know."

"It was different with us," she protested. "They're too young to handle this much responsibility. It's too soon, Arthur."

"I'll grant you that they've had to handle more than anyone their age ought to," he admitted. "But I think they've done a pretty good job of it so far."

"But it is only going to get worse," she argued. "We're in the middle of a war. Something will have to give."

"And you are afraid it'll be their relationship?"

"They have enough to worry about already. Trying to maintain a serious relationship will only add to it."

"I disagree," Mr. Weasley replied. "I know you've been watching them, but I think you've missed what's going on in front of you. They're comforting each other, Molly. Look at what they've been through in the past few months and how they've bounced back. They depend on each other and you need to let them spend time alone together. You must have noticed how Ron's been behaving ever since you started interfering."

"I am not interfering," Mrs. Weasley said defensively.

"So you haven't been checking up on them?" her husband asked. "You haven't been sending the twins in to interrupt? You didn't suggest Bill have a talk with him and then question him about how serious things were between them?"

"So what if I did? I'm his mother. I have every right to be concerned," she shot back as she placed her hands on her hips and squared herself for a fight. "I love that girl, Arthur. If they rush into something they aren't ready for, they could ruin everything."
"Meaning if it doesn't work out, it will ruin all your plans?" Mr. Weasley replied calmly. "You can't live his life for him, Molly. I know you have your heart set on Hermione being part of the family, but that isn't your decision to make. You have to step back and let them make their own choices. Even if they make a few mistakes in the process."

"I just want them to be happy," she replied with a sigh.

"I know you do, love, but you aren't doing them any favors. Hermione's a good girl and she knows how to handle Ron. Trust her to keep him in check and stop interfering. You'll do more harm than good if you don't."

"But--"

"You have to let them make their own mistakes, Molly. It's the only way they'll learn. Either it will make them stronger or it won't. Only time will tell."

Much to Molly's surprise, Ron and Hermione were actually the first ones to wander into the kitchen for dinner.

"Whatever you're making smells great, Mum," Ron said as he came up behind her to see what she was cooking. "When's it going to be ready? I'm starved." As if on cue, his stomach growled loudly, triggering a soft giggle from Hermione.

"When are you not starving?" she asked as she grabbed a stack of plates off the dresser against the wall and started setting the table.

"After I've eaten," Ron replied, reaching for the sliced bread his mother had left on the counter only to have his hand smacked away. "Just one piece?" he whined.

"Anything else we can do to help?" Hermione asked, returning to the dresser to retrieve the silverware.

"Actually," Mrs. Weasley said, whirling around to face Ron. "You could go get your sister and your father."

"Do I have to?" he asked, looking thoroughly put out.

"Yes, and I better not hear you shouting from the bottom of the staircase, either."

"What about Bill?" Ron asked as he walked towards the door.

"What about him?" his mother replied.

"Am I supposed to get him too?"

"Unless you plan on taking his dinner up and serving it to him in his room," Mrs. Weasley retorted as he left the room.

When Ron returned from his task a few minutes later, he was surprised to find Fred and George not only seated at the table, but already eating. Not bothering to say anything, he fell down in the chair directly across from Hermione and started loading his plate up with food.

"Nice of you to wait for the rest of us," Ginny said, as she entered the room and sat down beside Hermione.
"Wha?" George muttered, his mouth so crammed, it was impossible for him to say much else.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Mrs. Weasley scolded as her husband and eldest son walked into the room and took a seat.

"Sorry, Mum," George replied.

"What have you done now?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Nothing," George said quickly.

"A likely story," Bill chuckled while he served himself.

"Fine, don't believe me then."

"Tough day, Dad?" Fred asked, noticing the haggard expression on his father’s face.

"It's been an absolute nightmare," Mr. Weasley replied. "And Fudge certainly didn't help matters any. Look like a right fool now, doesn't he?" he continued.

"It's his own fault really. Trying to pin the...er... incident on Krum in the first place," Bill added.

"It probably would have worked too, if Hermione hadn't strong armed him into letting Krum go," Fred laughed.

Unlike Fred, Hermione didn't find the comment very amusing. There was absolutely nothing funny about the situation. I wish they'd drop it, she thought, as she glanced at Ron apprehensively to gage his reaction. He froze for a split second, the potato chunk he was about to eat suspended in midair. But he recovered so quickly that she doubted anyone else had seen it.

Feeling her eyes on him, Ron looked up and met her gaze as he resumed eating.

"Well, he had no business leaking that story to the press in the first place. Seeing as how it was all a pack of lies," Mrs. Weasley said as she reached for a slice of bread. "Arthur, dear? Have you sorted out that little matter with the Department of Magical Transportation yet?"

"Er...well, you see--" Mr. Weasley stammered.

"I know you've been swamped, dear but--"

"No, that isn't the problem," he informed his wife. "I've tried talking to them a couple of times actually, but Margaret Edgecombe is being rather stubborn about the matter. She's a strong supporter of Fudge, don't you know?"

"OH!" Hermione said as comprehension blazed across her face. "I'm sorry Mr. Weasley. I didn't realize she worked in that department. If I'd known...well, please don't waste anymore of your time trying to talk to her."

"You know Margaret Edgecombe?" Bill asked, caught more than a little off guard.

"Not personally," Hermione replied.

"Even so, she's not likely to forget you anytime soon." Ginny sniggered.

"I know I probably shouldn't ask," Bill said, "but what did you do to her?"
"I didn't do anything," Hermione stated truthfully.

"No," Ron agreed with a smirk. "That deceitful daughter of hers has no one to blame but herself."

"Edgecombe?" Fred replied, finally cottoning on. "I knew that name sounded familiar."


"Do you think she still has those pimples?" Fred chortled.

"I'm sure of it," Hermione replied, looking both embarrassed and pleased with herself at the same time. "And she'll have them for a good long time too."

"Maybe you two could swing a deal," Fred suggested.

"Yeah. I bet she'd overlook the fine if you agreed to lift that jinx," George added.

"I'd rather pay the fine," Hermione stated. "Besides, I couldn't lift the jinx even if I wanted to."

"You mean she's stuck like that forever?" Fred cackled.

"A leopard doesn't change its spots," Ron replied with a knowing smile.

"No, there's a way to get rid of them," Hermione informed the twins. "But it isn't something anyone else can do for her. She has to do it on her own."

"What do you mean?" George asked curiously.

"Well, even if she does have to lift it herself," Fred said, "you've still got the counter curse to bargain with."

"There is no counter curse," Ron informed his brothers. "Once a sneak, always a sneak."

"But you just said--" George replied.

"Oh, she can get rid of them," Hermione stated, "but not with a counter curse. That's the beauty of the spell. The only way to get rid of the word is to stop being a …"

"...lying, backstabbing, deceitful little spy," Ron finished for her.

"Well, I was going to say sneak," Hermione stated, "but Ron's basically right. The only way she can get rid of the spots is to prove that she's trustworthy."

"And that's not going to happen," Ron scoffed.

"It doesn't matter," Hermione said. "My parents will pay the fine when they get back from their holiday."

"That's not the point," Bill said. "You shouldn't have to pay it at all. Not given the circumstances."

"It doesn't matter," Hermione said again. "I don't care," she added, even though strictly speaking, it wasn't the truth. Bill was right. It wasn't the money so much as the principle of the matter that bothered her. Not that she was about to admit it. She didn't want to rock the boat any more than necessary. The Minister of Magic was already unhappy with her. If she continued to make trouble, he might take it out on Mr. Weasley. Luckily the conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Remus Lupin.
If Mr. Weasley looked a little weary, Lupin looked positively exhausted when he sat down at the
table. His skin was pale, his eyes were bloodshot, and Hermione noticed there were dark circles
under them. Not surprising really, considering there had been a full moon the night before.

Mrs. Weasley immediately rose up out of her chair so she could get him a plate.

"No, Molly," Lupin protested before she managed to take a step. "I already ate, but thank you."

Ignoring him, Mrs. Weasley retrieved a plate, then returned to the table, and served his dinner to him.
"You should eat again," she said, plopping the meal down in front of him. "It will do you good."

"No, I'm fine really," he protested.

He doesn't look fine, Hermione thought, as she watched him run his fingers through his hair. She had
just started to contemplate whether Snape was still making the Wolfsbane Potion for him, when
Ron's question drew her attention.

"How's Harry, Professor?" Ron asked, knowing that Lupin had volunteered to spend the afternoon
'guarding' him.

"Quiet," Lupin replied and then went silent himself. "He seemed to come out of it a bit after I gave
him your letters," he added, coming back to himself. "He said he'd send one back with George
tomorrow."

"Oh, speaking of letters," Mr. Weasley said, reaching into his robes and pulling out a small bundle of
envelopes. "I believe these are yours," he continued, handing the letters to Hermione.

The owls had started arriving at Grimmauld Place almost as soon as she did. One more nuisance to
deal with, courtesy of the Daily Prophet and their ridiculous articles. Luckily, Dumbledore had
placed restrictions on owl deliveries so as not to draw undue attention to the house, so it was a simple
matter for Molly to magically forward the letters being sent by well wishers to the Ministry. Every
couple of days, Arthur would pick them up and deliver them to her personally. Why he continued to
do it, she didn't know. He knew she had no intention of reading them. She never read them. Even
Fred and George had lost interest in them by now.

At least there's isn't as many this time, she thought, as she untied the bundle and started flipping
through the envelopes just to make certain there was nothing important, like a letter from her parents,
mixed in with the ones sent to her by strangers.

Harry told me to ignore them, she reminded herself, and eventually they'd stop sending them. It's
about time they stop--

It was the sharp intake of breath that caught Ron's attention and caused him to look away from Lupin
and over at Hermione. "What is it?" he asked, when he noticed she was staring down at the letter in
her hand as if it were a howler.

"N..Nothing," she replied quickly, but rather than toss it on the pile of letters to be discarded, she
slipped it to the bottom of the pile in her hand so he wouldn't see who it was from.

"If it's nothing then why didn't you throw it in that pile with the others?" Ron asked, eyeing her
suspiciously. "It's from him, isn't it?"

Without warning, Fred and George cut off their conversation with Bill, and spun around in their
chairs so they wouldn't miss any of the fireworks.
Ron only gave her a second to answer him and when she didn't, he leaned forward and snatched the
stack of letters out of her hand. Hermione immediately made to grab them back, but Ron scooted
away from the table and started shuffling through them before she had the chance.

"I knew it," he growled, dropping all but the offending letter on the table as he rounded on
Hermione. "You were going to hide this from me, weren't you?" he asked waving the letter in front
of her face, oblivious to the fact his entire family was now watching them.

"Honestly!" she said, caught somewhere between guilt and anger. "I hadn't decided what I was
going to do with it yet."

"Well don't let me get in the way," Ron hissed as he tossed the letter at her and stood up. "You must
be dying to know what Vicky has to say," he added, turning his back on her and stalking out of the
room.

"Idiot," Ginny groaned under her breath a split second before Hermione snatched the letter off the
table and followed him out of the kitchen.

"RON!" Hermione shouted as she chased him up the stairs. "You're being unfair."

"Unfair?" he shouted back, not even bothering to turn and look at her as he stomp towards his room.
"I'm bloody being unfair?"

"I can't help it if he writes to me."

"He'd stop writing if you'd stop encouraging him," he shot back.

"WHAT?" Hermione cried, truly angry now. "You better not be suggesting what I think you're
suggesting," she said menacingly.

Ron stopped abruptly and spun around to face her. He hadn't meant for the comment to come out
that way. "What I mean is if you stop replying, he'll stop writing," he clarified.

"I told you I wouldn't see him," Hermione said. "But I never said I'd stop writing him."

"So you're going to answer it?" Ron asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

"What do you suggest?" Hermione shot back. "I throw it in the bin with the rest? He'll just write
another one."

"And you can bloody well toss that one out too," he growled. "Toss them all out and eventually he'll
get the message."

"He's got the message already," Hermione cried. "How many times do I have to tell you we're just
friends?"

"No, Hermione. He hasn't got the message. He still thinks there's a chance or he wouldn't be writing
to you. And as long as he thinks there's a chance, he's going to keep after you."

Hermione sighed loudly and shook her head at him, at a loss for what else to say. He just didn't
understand. "Here," she said, thrusting the unopened letter toward him. "Read it."

"I don't want to read it," Ron said, recoiling from the letter. The last thing he wanted to do was read a
love letter written to her by Viktor Krum. If he saw the word 'Hermowninny' in print, he might
actually retch.
"Well, that's just too damn bad," she said, stepping forward and shoving it against his chest. "Take it," she demanded. "And read it," she added, when his hand closed over the letter. "Maybe it’ll help you understand what I've been trying to tell you," she said, turning her back on him and descending the stairs to her own room. "I know you don't trust him and that you probably never will," she continued, as she disappeared from view. "But you should trust me," she shouted.

Two days later, Ron still hadn’t read Viktor Krum's letter. He had no intention of reading it. Ever. His mind was made up, his heels were dug in and he wasn't going to budge. If only it wasn't so damned tempting. Every time he entered his room, his eyes were drawn to it. No matter what he did or how he tried to distract himself, the blasted letter seemed to draw his attention. It was almost as if the ruddy thing had a voice of its own and if he ignored it for too long, it would start speaking in his head.

Read me and you can toss me out. Read me and she might talk to you again. Read me and you'll know exactly what that grouchy git wants with her. Read me. Read me. READ ME!

But he wasn't going to do it. He wasn't going to be dictated to by a bloody letter. A letter from Krum no less.

To hell with him, his letter, and all the trouble he’s caused. *It's his fault they got Hermione in the first place. So what if he was under the Imperius Curse? If he really cared about her, he should have been able to throw the curse off. Harry can throw it off. Even Hermione managed to break free of it. If he cared about her, he would have fought it*, Ron reasoned. *He would have fought them, but he didn't."

"Stop being a stubborn arse and just read it," Ginny said, startling him out of his thoughts.

Ron looked up just in time to see his sister rise up from Harry's bed and snatch the letter off the bureau. He'd been so distracted that he actually forgot she was sitting there.

*Stupid bloody letter,* he cursed in his head.

"I don't need to read it to know what it says," he protested, shrinking away when Ginny pushed the letter towards him.

"So you’re enjoying the silent treatment then?"

"We talk," he argued.

"Oh yes, I've noticed how polite you two are when you are forced to speak to one another," his sister replied, dropping the letter beside him on the bed. "How you can turn something as simple as asking for a dust rag into an insult is beyond me. Isn't all that forced politeness driving you mad?"

"You prefer we yell at each other?"

"At least then you'd get it out and could start acting normal again."

"This is normal," Ron protested. "Two days without talking is nothing. We've gone way longer than that."

"Only because you are a thick prat," Ginny replied, as she rolled her eyes at him. "Stop letting your pride get in the way and read the bloody letter."
"No."

"Fine," she said, snatching it from the bed. "If you won't read it yourself, I'll read it to you."

"If you open that letter, Ginny," Ron growled out in warning, "I swear I'll--"

"You'll what?" his sister called his bluff. "Curse me? I don't think so," she laughed. At least not until we're back at school.

"Give me that," Ron demanded. He leaned forward to wrench it away from her, but she was faster than he was. She jerked her hand back before he could reach it and by the time he was on his feet, she had Harry's bed between them.

"DON'T!" Ron bellowed as she started to open it. "I MEAN IT GINNY!" he shouted loudly. "I don't want to hear it. This isn't about him anymore."

It was the unexpected mood shift that caused her to falter. She'd expected the angry outburst. What she hadn't expected was to see him deflate and look so despondent.

"What are you talking about?" Ginny asked, not even bothering to hide her confusion. "If it isn't about Krum, who is it about?"

"Hermione," Ron replied miserably as he fell back on his bed. "Don't you see Gin? She was right. It doesn't matter whether or not I trust him as long as I trust her."

"And you don't?" Ginny asked incredulously. "You can't possibly be serious?" she cried, shaking her head at him in disbelief.

"You don't understand," he whispered inconsolably.

"No, I guess I don't," his sister said, glaring down at him angrily. "Because the Hermione I know would NEVER do something like that, you insufferable prat," she added, dropping the letter back on the bureau as she stormed out of his bedroom.

"I know she wouldn't," he whispered, as the door slammed shut. That's the problem.

Hermione was seated on the sofa in the drawing room, her nose buried in a book, when he found her.

Typical, Ron thought, staring down at her, waiting to see if she would acknowledge him. Always hiding behind those books. You'd think she'd remember to turn the page once and a while.

"This arrived for you at the Ministry this morning," Ron said, holding out the envelope his father had given him for her to take.

"I told you he'd keep writing," Hermione replied as she glanced up briefly and spotted the letter in his outstretched hand. "Looks like you have two of them to read now," she added, before refocusing her attention on the book.

"It isn't from him," Ron said, catching Hermione by surprise. Despite the decision she'd made when he entered the room, she found herself looking up into his captivating blue eyes. "It's from Neville," he added with an air she couldn't decipher.
"Oh," Hermione replied, reaching out to take the unexpected letter even though she wasn't entirely sure she wanted it. She didn't want to read the condolences sent to her by strangers. Did she want to read them if they were sent to her by classmates? She hadn't minded when it was Harry, but Harry was different and his letters had actually been helpful. He'd been only too happy to give her advice on how to deal with her newfound fame. After his initial, "welcome to my world" jokes. But Neville? He'd never written to her over the summer and she wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

It was the feel of Ron's fingers unintentionally brushing against her hand as she took the letter from him that brought Hermione back to reality. She expected him to let go. Truth be told, she expected him to jerk away as if he'd been burned, but that didn't happen. For a moment they just stood there with their hands extended, staring at one another, then without warning his hand dropped. Hermione noted the calm expression on his face as he continued to watch her, but it seemed a bit forced.

"Is there something else?" she finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Yeah," Ron said, "I was just wondering if... well, you said I could borrow your Transfiguration book. You know, because I don't have mine anymore. So can I? Borrow it, I mean?"

"You want to borrow my Transfiguration book?" Hermione asked, shooting him an odd look of her own. "Now?"

"That's what I said isn't it?" he shot back. "Look if it's a problem, I'll--"

"No," she interrupted, "it not a problem. It's in my trunk. I'll go get it for--"

"Don't bother," Ron said, turning around and walking towards the door. "I'll get it," he said. "And I'll be sure and return it as soon as I'm done."

"Whatever," Hermione shouted after his retreating form.

It took Ginny less than two minutes to make an appearance. She'd obviously been in their bedroom when her brother barged in and she didn't look very happy about it.

"Did you know Ron is going through your trunk?" she asked. "He said you did, but--"

"It's ok," Hermione assured her. "I told him he could. He's only after my Transfiguration book."

"Are you sure that's all he's after?" Ginny asked, looking at Hermione as if she were daft.

"He packed my trunk," she replied with a nonchalant shrug of her shoulders. "If he wanted to snoop though my things, he would have done it then."

"He probably did," Ginny muttered under her breath as she sat down on the sofa. "He didn't actually read it, did he?" she asked, noticing the letter in Hermione's hand.

"What?" Hermione replied, lost in her own thoughts. "Oh, no. He just brought me this one. It's from... Neville."

"Oh," Ginny replied, sounding slightly disappointed. For a minute there, she thought she might have gotten through to him after all. "So, what did Neville have to say?"
"I don't know," Hermione replied, opening the envelope and removing the letter. "I haven't read it yet," she added, taking a moment to look it over. "Pretty much what you'd expect," she said, handing the sheet of parchment to Ginny. "He's sorry for what happened. He hopes I feel better."

"He's worried about you," Ginny said, skimming the letter herself.

"It's probably a bit unnerving for him. You know, because I was tortured by the same woman who tortured his parents until--"

"Yeah," Ginny agreed, not needing her to finish. "She used it on him too. I suppose he can understand what you went through better than the rest of us, having experienced it himself and all."

Then as if she suddenly realized what she was talking about, Ginny shut her mouth and looked at Hermione anxiously. "Sorry," she added, somewhat guiltily.

"It's all right," Hermione said, giving her redheaded friend a weak smile. "I don't mind talking about it. You can ask me."

"I asked Fred and George, but the wouldn't tell me anything."

"I would have thought you'd go to Ron first."

"I did," Ginny admitted, "but... he wouldn't tell me anything either. He got all protective and told me I better not bother you about it."

"You're not bothering me," she replied. The look on Ginny's face, made it plain that she didn't believe her, so Hermione continued, "No, really, it's ok."

"Did... did they really... well... I sort of overheard Bill talking to Fred and George," Ginny confessed. "Did they really use the Crucius Curse on you 10 times?"

"I don't know," Hermione replied honestly. "I didn't exactly keep count. But it felt like a lot."

"How... I mean... it must have been awful. How did you... how could you stand it?"

"It wasn't like I had much of a choice," Hermione said, closing her book and setting it on the floor. "I know this might seem odd, but it was... Pettigrew," she admitted.

"What? He didn't--"

"No, he helped me without realizing it," she replied. "He reminded me what I was fighting for. And I'd rather die than become anything like him."

"Did... did you really try and goad Lestrange into killing you?" Ginny asked, unable to contain herself now that someone was actually talking to her about it.

"Yes," Hermione admitted, smiling at her friend despite their morbid conversation. "You do pick up a lot don't you?" she chuckled softly. "Heard that from Bill too, I suppose? Well, it's true. I called her a few choice names which I won't repeat."

"Weren't you ...afraid to die?" Ginny pressed.

"Not the way you mean," Hermione replied, instantly becoming serious again. "I was afraid of what it would do to Harry and Ron though," she said softly as her eyes glassed over. "Afraid of what it might push them to do."

"It was awful," Ginny said quietly. "When Mum revived Ron and he realized where he was he went
after Fred," she continued, trying to forget the murderous look her brother had in his eyes and how he had launched himself over the kitchen table to get at the twins. "Bill and Dad had to hold him back. Then he sorta just crumpled to the floor."

She cut off abruptly when Hermione covered her face with both hands and choked back a sob.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said, wiping away her own tears before they could fall. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"I knew it would be bad," Hermione admitted. "But it's still hard to hear."

"He didn't tell you?"

"He did," she replied, "As much as he could. It's not easy for him to talk about how it made him feel though," she continued. "You know Ron. He isn't so good with his own feelings. He encouraged me to talk about it, and helped me deal with my feelings. He just avoids discussing his own. He wants to push it aside and try and forget it happened, so I don't press him."

"It isn't something he'll ever forget," Ginny said.

"I know," Hermione admitted. "But he's happier not talking about it."

"He really cares about you," Ginny said. "We could all see it. He was devastated."

"Do you think I am being too hard on him?" Hermione asked, suddenly feeling very guilty for giving him the cold shoulder.

"About this whole Krum thing?" Ginny replied. "If you'd asked me that 15 minutes ago I would have said no, but honestly... I don't know. I think... you should probably try talking to him again."

"He doesn't listen. Not when it comes to Viktor."

"Maybe he listens more than you think."

This is a bloody waste of time, Ron thought as he stared down at the open book sitting on the desk in front of him. At this rate it will take me all summer, he lamented.

In the 20 minutes that he'd been at it, his name and the title of his essay were all he'd managed to write on his sheet of parchment.

Two bloody feet? Even if I write really big, it's going to take forever. I wish Harry was here. At least then I'd have someone to complain about this with. I could write him another letter, Ron thought, but what am I supposed to say?

"Hey Harry. How's your summer going? Hermione got a letter from Krum the other day and of course I made a bloody prat out of myself. She hasn't spoken to me since. I'm so bored I actually tried to do homework, but it's no use. I can't concentrate."

At least it would give him something to laugh about.

A letter was actually starting to look better and better. At least it seemed to flow freely and Ron was seriously considering crossing out the title, and using the parchment to write Harry, when he was
interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Want some help?" Hermione asked, as she stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

"No," Ron replied quickly.

Lucky it's still an essay, he thought, looking down at the sheet of parchment. *The last thing I need is for her to go off on me for skiving off my homework to write a letter.*

"You seemed a little... out of sorts when you came to see me earlier," she said after a prolonged silence. "Do you want to... talk about it?"

"Sorry," Ron replied, his eyes glued on the book he was pretending to read. "Guess I have a lot on my mind. I'll be fine once I get this essay done."

"It's not the essay and we both know it," Hermione stated. "The fact that you're even doing it this early, is, well... odd."

"I thought I'd get it out of the way so I could enjoy the rest of the summer," Ron lied. He didn't need to look up to know she didn't buy a word of it.

"That still doesn't explain why you're so--" *So what?* she asked herself. "I'm worried about you."

"Well, you don't have to be. I'm fine," Ron replied, turning the page of the book so she'd think he was still reading it. "So... what did Neville have to say?" he asked casually.

Hermione narrowed her eyes as warning bells went off in her head. She knew he couldn't read a book and carry on a conversation at the same time. And she was dead certain that no matter how nonchalantly he'd asked, there was nothing causal about that question.

Neville? she thought. *No, he can't be. Surely he isn't... jealous of Neville? NO! It couldn't be. Could it?*

"Is that what this is all about?" she asked. "You're not seriously upset about that letter too, are you?"

Hermione gave him a moment to reply, and when he didn't, she walked over and sat down on the edge of the desk where he was working.

"Ron?"

"I never said I was upset," he said with a sigh, pushing the parchment away from himself and closing her book. There was no point keeping up pretenses. She wasn't buying it and even if she did, it was obvious she wasn't going to let this go.

"But you are. I can tell," Hermione replied.

"Yeah, well... it isn't because of that letter," Ron admitted.

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know," he said quickly.

It was a lie and they both knew it.

"You can't seriously be jealous of Neville?"
"I'm not jealous," Ron stated, looking into her deep brown eyes so she'd know it was true.

But something is bothering him, Hermione thought. *Something other than Viktor, and Neville is part of it in some way.* "What is it then?" she pressed.

But rather than respond with words, he simply sighed again. He didn't know what to say.

I know Neville fancied Hermione, Ron thought to himself. *She only thinks of him as a friend, but his interests in her were different. He did ask her to the Yule Ball after all. Not that I think Hermione would choose Neville over me. She did turn him down. But then she already had a date, didn't she? Wonderful, famous, Quidditch star and school champion, Viktor Krum. Why would she settle for Neville? Why would she settle for me, for that matter? What do I have to offer her?*

Ok, so he could put it into words, but did he really want to?

"Ron?" Hermione asked, her eyes full of concern. "Please talk to me."

"If Krum hadn't asked you to the Yule Ball, would you have gone with Neville?" he asked without thinking. The moment the question left his mouth and he saw her eyes go wide, he regretted it.

Hermione didn't like this. Not one bit. She knew she'd have to tread very lightly or the conversation was liable to blow up in her face. It was her own fault, really. She just had to press him. But she hadn't expected it to come back to this. Any time Ron brought up Viktor it ended badly. How was she supposed to answer him without starting a fight? But then, they were already fighting, so what did it matter?

"Probably," she admitted. "Why?"

"Even if ... even though I asked you?" Ron ventured.

"Are you asking me who I wanted to go with?" Hermione replied. "Or who I would have gone with?"

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes there is," she informed him. "I wanted to go with you, but I didn't think you'd actually ask me. You and Harry were... well, it doesn't matter. I didn't think you'd ever ask me. And I didn't want to go alone. Especially if you two had dates. So I agreed to go with the first person that did ask me."

"Krum."

"Yes. And if Neville had asked me first, I would have gone with him," Hermione explained.

I wish you had, Ron thought. *Neville I can compete with.*

"But you said you wanted to go with me, right? So why would you settle for Neville if he isn't who you wanted to be with?"

Hermione's mouth fell open as all the pieces came falling into place in her mind. "It was just a dance," she replied quickly. "It was only one night. It's nothing like what you're thinking. I wanted to go with you," she insisted. "And when you asked me, part of me wanted to say yes. But I couldn't. Just like Ginny wanted to go with Harry, but she couldn't. We had already agreed to go with other people. We couldn't just take that back."

"So you went with Krum, even though you didn't want to?" Ron pressed. "You settled for him?"
"No," Hermione answered anxiously. "Well, I guess... in a way I did," she reluctantly admitted. "But it is not like what you are thinking. It was only for one night. It was just a chance to have some fun. It didn't matter in the scheme of things if he was my first choice or not, as long as we both had fun, so I wasn't settling. I DON'T SETTLE! Not for things that are important. And you and Harry were going to be there, so I assumed we'd be able to spend time together as well."

"If it wasn't important, then why were we so angry with each other?" Ron asked, looking at her miserably.

You started it, Hermione thought, but she refrained from saying it out loud. "You're missing the point, Ron."

"Which is?"

"You were the one I wanted all along," she replied, leaning forward to grab his hand.

"Why?" Ron asked, jerking his hand away before she could grasp it. "Why would you possibly want me? What do I have to offer you compared to... someone like Krum? I have nothing. I am nothing," he said, looking down at the ground despondently. "I'm not good looking like Bill. I'm not a great Quidditch player like Charlie. I'm not brilliant like Percy. Even Fred and George are better than me. They're funny and popular and... I'm just nothing. I'm not heroic and courageous like Harry," he moaned. "The only thing I'm good at is chess, for all the good that's going to do me in life. You can do so much better than me, Hermione. I don't want you to settle. I don't want to... hold you back," he said, thoroughly dejected.

"Are you quite through?" Hermione asked, her voice low and surprisingly harsh.

It definitely wasn't what he expected.

What did I expect? Ron wondered as he looked up and saw her glaring at him angrily. Not that.

He’d expected her to look resigned. He’d expected to see sadness and perhaps a little pity in her eyes. But not this smoldering anger.

"Well?" she demanded. "Are you finished belittling yourself?"

No longer able to stand the disappointment he saw on her face, Ron shifted his gaze to the floor and simply nodded his head.

"If I ever hear you say you are nothing again, Ronald Weasley," Hermione shouted, "I swear to God I'll... I'll... hit you with a Silencing Charm so strong you won't be able to speak for a solid month. Do you hear me?"

"But--"

"SHUT UP!"

"But--"

"NO!"

"Hermi--"

"NO!" she cried, placing her fingers under his chin and forcing him to look up at her. "I'm going to tell you something and you better not even think about interrupting me," she warned, letting go of his
"First of all, you’re every bit as heroic and courageous as Harry is. Who sacrificed himself so Harry could reach the Sorcerer’s Stone? You did. Who is it that tries to pound Malfoy into a bloody pulp every time he calls me a Mudblood? You do. Who is it that faced down his greatest fear when he had to fight Hagrid’s wretched Acromantulas? You did. And who was it that stood up on his broken leg and told Sirius he’d have to kill all three of us if he wanted to hurt Harry? That was the bravest thing I’ve ever seen, Ron. More courageous than anything I’ve seen Harry do."

Even if he’d wanted to interrupt her, Ron wouldn’t have been able to. Not just because she told him not to, but because he had been thoroughly shocked by her speech. Sure when you list it all like that he came off sounding pretty brave, but he knew that he wasn’t. He’d been scared out of his mind, when he did all those things. Well, not with Malfoy, he’d just been angry then, but all the other times. For a moment he was tempted to tell her that it wasn’t brave if you were afraid while you did it, but he was more than a little intimidated by her right now. He was too cowardly to speak, which just served to prove his point. So even after he gained his wits again, he said nothing and settled for shooting her a skeptical look instead.

"I know Harry’s fought Voldemort," Hermione continued. "And he’s done loads of other things, but he didn't have a choice. That's what makes what you did so courageous."

That's true, Ron admitted to himself. And Harry was afraid when he fought him. He told me later. He was afraid, but he still stood up to him and that was brave.

"That night in the Shrieking Shack, when you pulled yourself up, Sirius told you to lay back down before you hurt yourself any further," Hermione said in a normal tone. "He made it clear that he didn't want to hurt you, but you stood up to him anyway. You thought he was a deranged killer, but you looked him right in the eye and told him he was going to have to kill you to get to Harry. And you meant it. It was the second time I’d seen you willingly risk your life for Harry. And I can't think of anything braver than that," she continued, her voice breaking as her eyes glassed over. "I know you don't think of yourself as a hero, Ron, but you are. You're my hero and you have been ever since the day you saved me from that blasted troll," she added, wiping her eyes.

"As for all that other rubbish," Hermione said, pulling herself together quickly for fear he’d think she was finished and interrupt her. "In case you haven't noticed, of all your brothers, the one that you resemble the most is Bill. And I'm not just talking about your height. You are just as handsome as he is," she informed him, her cheeks flushing ever so slightly as she did. "Better in my opinion, because I don't particularly care for his hair. But don't tell him I said that. I don't want to hurt his feelings. And your eyes are much prettier," she added, causing Ron to blush.

"Admittedly, I don't know Charlie very well, and I've never seen him play Quidditch in a real match. Not that I'm an expert or anything, but I think you’re probably better than you realize. Fred and George told Harry you were pretty good when no one was watching you and if they think you’re good, then you probably are," she reasoned. "It was your first year, so of course you have to take that into consideration and you have to allow yourself time to adjust. I mean it's not like playing in your paddock is it? And don't even get me started on that horrid song. Besides, you were brilliant in the game against Ravenclaw. Everyone says so."

"As for Fred and George, well there are two of them and they do work off each other. When they are separated, they aren't nearly as bad as they are together. They can even be...civilized. For a little while anyway. Ok, so Fred and George are funny, but they don't make me laugh the way you do," Hermione said with a smile. "Sometimes it almost seems... forced with them. Like it's expected of them so they put on a show. They are very good at it and I know they enjoy it, but I prefer your face.
sarcastic wit to their slapstick antics any day."

"I can't believe you don't see how great you are," Hermione continued, causing Ron to blush again. "Don't get me wrong. One of the things I love most about you is how down-to-earth you are. I'm glad you aren't a smug, pompous git like Percy. But just because I'd hate to see you all conceited and full of yourself, doesn't mean you have to take it to the other extreme. Stop obsessing about your brothers," Hermione said sternly. "You aren't them. You are your own person. No one expects you to be them, Ron. The only person that compares you to them, is YOU."

Strictly speaking, that wasn't the truth. His mother did it too, but Hermione didn't think it wise to mention that fact.

"No one else cares," she pressed on. "The rest of us see you. YOU! Ron Weasley. The brave, loyal, witty, sarcastic, fun-loving guy, that everybody likes. And in case it slipped your mind, not only did you become a school prefect, but you also managed to win the Quidditch Cup, without any help from The Great Harry Potter or The Brilliant Hermione Granger. You did those things all on your own and you should be proud of yourself."

"Okay. Okay, I get it," Ron said, holding out his hand to stop her. "I'm wonderful," he added, turning a brilliant shade of red. "You can stop now."

"Do you?" she asked, looking at him seriously. "Do you really get it, Ron?"

"Yeah, okay? Stop. You're embarrassing me."

"Oh no, we can't have that, can we?" Hermione said, rolling her eyes at him. "Just one more thing and I'm through."

"Yeah, what's that?" he asked, knowing she'd tell him whether he wanted her to or not.

"I'm going to let you in on a little secret, but I swear, if you ever repeat this, I'll deny I said it. Oh god," she moaned. "I can't believe I'm about to say this out loud."

Hermione paused for a moment, took a big breath and then let it out.

Bloody Hell, Ron thought. It must be bad.

"Fred and George... were right," Hermione said with a sigh.

Huh?

"Right about what?" he asked.

"About what really matters," she said in a voice so low it was barely above a whisper. "I know your Mum wanted them to do well in school and get good, solid, respectable jobs at the Ministry like Percy did," she elaborated. "But she was wrong. They were right. They did what was best for them. I think you should do the same thing. I'm not suggesting you drop out of school," she added quickly. "Or that I'll let you skive off your homework and fail your N.E.W.T.s, because I won't. What I mean is you shouldn't worry so much about what other people think. Especially when it comes to something as important as what you're going to do with the rest of your life."

"Look at your father. He's spent his life doing something he loves. Something that's important to him. Not because it pays well, or because he gets respect for doing it, but because he finds it rewarding. It makes him happy and that is what is truly important. Fred and George just followed in his footsteps. They chose a career that would make them happy. So did Bill and Charlie, if you really
think about it. Percy is the only one that chose a career based on how much prestige went along with it. Find something you love, Ron. Something that you'll find fulfilling. If that's being an Auror, then I'll help you and support you any way I can. If it's something else, that's fine too. Don't let your Mum, or anyone else bully you into a Ministry job if it'll make you miserable. Just figure out what's right for you and do that."

Ron honestly didn't know how to reply. He knew that the know-it-all bookworm was just a facade she wore. There was so much more to Hermione than that, but she hid it from everyone else with her books and her marks and her obsession with rules. He was one of the privileged few that knew the real Hermione. Even so, he never expected her to encourage him to go against his mother's wishes.

"WOW, Hermione!" Ron finally said, looking at her with sincere admiration. "That was much better than anything McGonagall told me when she gave me my career advice last year. Maybe you ought to write it all down and give that speech to the fifth years. I'm sure Ginny would appreciate it."

"Ginny is smart enough to figure it out on her own," Hermione said.

"And I'm not?" he asked, pretending to be offended even as he smiled at her.

"You'd have worked it out eventually. I just thought I'd save you the trouble," she replied. "So... are we all right?"

"Will you take that back now?" Ron asked, pointing at the letter lying on his dresser.

"I still think you should read it," Hermione said, watching Ron rise out of his chair and snatch the letter up.

"No," he said, handing it to her. "You were right. It doesn't matter what he wants if it isn't what you want. And I do trust you," he added. "That's part of the reason I didn't read it."

"You think it was a test?" Hermione asked, as she took the letter from him.

"It was a test," Ron replied. "I was testing myself. I really didn't want to read it, which was odd. If you had handed me one of his letters last year and told me to read it, I would have. Hell, if you had left one sitting in the common room, I would have read it without your permission. Knowing that it would upset you. Knowing that I'd be invading your privacy. I still would have done it. So why did I resist the temptation now? You handed it to me. You gave me permission to read it. But suddenly I didn't want to. It felt wrong. Not because I'd be invading your privacy, but because things are different now. You told me you weren't interested in him. You chose me and if I read that letter, it would mean I didn't really trust you."

"That's my fault though," Hermione said. "I used him to make you jealous. It was just... sometimes that was the only way I could tell if you still cared and I wanted you to care. I wanted you to fight for me. But you didn't. I could see that you wanted to, but you didn't. Why?"

They stood there in silence for a moment as Ron stared at the floor. "I guess I just didn't know how," he said uncomfortable.

"Was it because you didn't think you were good enough?"

He didn't reply right away. That was part of it. A big part of it, but there was more to it than that.

"Yeah," Ron finally muttered, staring at his feet. "That and I was afraid I'd ruin things between us."

"Viktor is the one that's not good enough," Hermione said, jumping off the desk and standing in
front of him. "It isn't something he did or didn't do," she added, taking Ron's hand in hers. "It isn't about what he can give me or what he can't," she continued, as he brought his eyes up and met her gaze. "It's that he isn't you. No one compares to you, Ron. No one else could even come close."

"Do you mean that?"

"Don't you see? If it were anyone but you, then I'd be settling. And already told you, I don't settle. Not when it comes to something this important."

"I missed you," he whispered, standing up and lightly brushing the fingers of his right hand over her cheek. Ron knew he was grinning at her like an idiot, but he just couldn't contain it. It didn't matter that there was a war looming on the horizon. It didn't matter that they were confined in this dingy house for the rest of the summer. There was nowhere else he'd rather be. He was standing here, in his bedroom, with the girl he fancied and she really did want him. She wasn't with him out of convenience. She wasn't biding her time until someone better came along. She wouldn't vanish if he closed his eyes. He didn't have to worry about her staying with him out of pity or obligation. He didn't have to try and be somebody he wasn't, because she knew who he was and she wanted him anyway. She really wanted him. Suddenly the world was a perfect place.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," Ron whispered, the moment he saw her eyes flutter shut. Somehow the fact she wasn't looking at him, made it easier to say.

"I'm not going anywhere," she whispered back, moving in closer and pressing herself against him. She was so close now she could feel his heart pounding against his chest as he leaned down and claimed her lips.

And claim them he did. Ron wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly as he kissed her. She was his and he didn't ever want to let go of her again. She was his and he was hers and as long as they had that, nothing else mattered.

As the kiss deepened, Ron started nudging Hermione backwards with his body. Two or three small steps and the back of her legs collided with his bed.

"No," she said, prying her mouth off his just long enough to utter that solitary word and then she kissed him again.

"Why not?" Ron asked, pulling away so he could see her face. She appeared to be a bit dazed by the question, but that fact was lost on him. He was too busy taking in everything else. Her flushed cheeks; the way her lips were wet and red from their kisses; her unruly hair, which his hands had teased into an utter mess. Yet despite her disheveled appearance, she'd never looked better to him.

"You know your mother is going to come looking for us eventually," Hermione replied.

"No she won't," Ron insisted, dipping his head down and leaving a trail of gentle kisses on her neck. "She still thinks we're fighting," he added, smiling to himself when he felt her shiver against him.

"What if she does?" Hermione asked, determined to maintain a hold on her sanity, despite the way he was making her feel. "Do you really want her to find us snogging in your bed?"

"No," he admitted. Her wrath would be swift and it would be brutal. Yet even knowing that, he was willing to risk it. The rewards far outweighed the risk in this case. "What about Harry's bed?" he teased, spinning her around and steering her towards it instead.

"Honestly, Ron."
"This isn't about that promise you made them is it?" he asked. "You won't have to do anything inappropriate," he added with a lopsided smile. "I'll do all the inappropriate stuff for you."

"You will, will you?" she asked with a soft giggle. "That's awful generous of you, but it won't be necessary. I promised I wouldn't do anything inappropriate under their roof. We aren't under their roof anymore."

"You little minx," Ron laughed. "You added that bit about being under their roof on purpose."

"Of course I did," she admitted. "It's not like we were going to be there for very long. Although, I did expect it to be most of the summer."

"It's a shame really," Ron teased, using his body to push her backwards and pin her against the wall between the bureau and the door. "If you only knew about all the fantasies I've had about the two of us in my room. But then... this is my room too, isn't it?" he asked with a cheeky grin, leaning to the right and bolting the door. It wouldn't keep his mother out. Not if she really wanted to get in. But it might buy them a few precious moments. "Even if it's not at the Burrow. One room is as is good as another," he stated moments before he captured her lips in a crushing kiss.

"This would be a lot easier if we were lying down," Ron muttered a few minutes later, hoping she'd relent.

"You're the one that's too tall."

"Hey! I'm perfect. Remember?"

"I never said you were perfect," Hermione laughed. "You have a horrible temper and you're too tall."

"Or maybe," Ron countered, as he grasped her waist and lifted her in the air so her face was level with his own, "you're just too short. Better?" he asked, using the wall to help sustain her weight.

"Better," Hermione agreed, wrapping her legs around his body to help support herself.

"Mione," he groaned softly, glancing over his shoulder at the bed.

"You better put me down," she said, realizing the position she was in and what it suggested.

"Mione," he pleaded, as she released her hold on him and slid down the wall.

"We can't," she replied firmly.

The regret in her voice was nothing compared to the disappointment he felt at her words. But rather than argue with her, Ron released his hold on her and let his head fall against the wall in submission. For a moment he considered banging his head against the wall a few more times, but he knew it probably wouldn't do much to help the situation. In that split second of inattentiveness, Hermione ducked under his arm and unbolted the door.

"No, don't leave," Ron cried, opening his eyes and grabbing her from behind before she could retreat out the now open door.

"I don't think we should stay in here," Hermione replied. "It's too tempting."

"So you are tempted?" he asked, unable to contain the smile caused by that revelation.

"Yes."
"But we can't?" he asked, even though he knew what the answer would be.

"You know we can't."

He did. But he wasn't going to admit it. "But we can do other things."

"What other things?" Hermione asked coyly, arching her eyebrow at him.

"Come back in here and I'll show you," Ron replied, hauling her back until her backside was pressed firmly against him before leaning forward to kiss her neck.

"You aren't playing fair," Hermione groaned as her entire body shuddered against him. She knew the sensible thing to do was flee before what little control she had left slipped away, but it felt so good to be in his arms and she’d missed him tremendously.

Does it always feel this good, after a fight? she wondered, as she spun around and sought out his lips. *If it does, we are going to fight more often.*
Chapter 9: Her Worst Fear

Ginny couldn’t help but laugh at her bushy haired friend as she stood there, gaping at herself in the mirror, a look of utmost horror plastered across her face.

"NO! No! No," Hermione chanted, as if denying what she saw would make it go away. "I specifically told him not to leave any marks there," she cried, fingering the large red blotch on her neck. "Oh God! This is awful," she moaned, gathering her hair to one side and covering the mark with it, before turning around to face Ginny again.

"That'll never work," Ginny managed to get out before she dissolved into another wave of laughter. "Not unless you plan on holding your hair in place all day. That thing was practically glowing when I woke up. Someone is bound to see it."

"Oh, shut up," Hermione groaned, her face flushing a color that was a shade or two lighter than Ron's token. Ginny had been teasing her mercilessly ever since she'd woken up. Even so, it had taken nearly five minutes of ribbing before Hermione finally looked in the mirror and realized how bad the situation truly was. "Oh God," she moaned again as she realized Ginny was nothing but a warm up act for her brothers. "I can't go down to breakfast like this."

"You're going to have to come down sometime," Ginny chuckled. "And when you do Mum’s going to see it. It's better to face the music now and get it out of the way. She might even feel sorry for you once Fred and George get going."

"I'M GOING TO KILL RON!" Hermione growled.

"You didn't leave any marks on him, did you?" Ginny asked, knowing that if she had, the twins would likely target him first.

"Of course not," Hermione replied. "What kind of idiot leaves something like this in plain sight?"

"Well, you've always known Ron was a bit of an idiot," Ginny snickered. "You've got no one to blame but yourself, really."

"You're not helping, Ginny."

"You want help?" the young redhead asked, grabbing Hermione by the arm and dragging her out the bedroom door. "Then come on and let's get it over with."

"No. Wait," Hermione protested.

She just needed a little time to think. If she just had a few minutes, she might be able to come up with a logical excuse to explain away the bruise on her neck. A logical excuse. That's all she needed. Such a simple thing really. There must be one. If she just had a moment to think she was sure she'd come up with something.

"It's no good putting it off," Ginny said, tugging her down the hall. "Hiding will just make it worse,"
she continued. "Trust me. Best thing you can do is go down there as if you didn't have a care in the world and take whatever those two throw at you. If they see fear in your eyes, you're dead."

Deep down Hermione knew that Ginny was right. She wasn't entirely sure how long these types of bruises lasted, but she knew it was longer than she could stay holed up in her room. If she missed breakfast, Mrs. Weasley would come looking for her and worse, Fred and George would know she'd been hiding. She wasn't about to give them the satisfaction. She'd have to face them. That was all there was to it. Unfortunately, she was going to have to face them a bit earlier than she'd expected.

"What are you two doing?" Ginny asked when she nearly ran into Fred, who was stalled on the stairs looking over the railing.

"Shush," George replied, leaning over the rail beside his brother. "Snape's down there," he whispered.

"So why aren't you?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Ginny agreed. "You're both members of the Order, aren't you? If they're having a meeting, why aren't you down there?"

"Whatever that slimy git's up to is a big bloody secret," Fred whispered back.

"Need to know basis only," George added. "You understand?"

"Meaning Mum doesn't think you two need to know," Ginny replied.

"Right in one," George congratulated his sister. "DAMN! He's gone. Did you hear anything useful?" he asked Fred as he retracted the extendable ear he'd been using to eavesdrop.

"Nope," his brother replied. "And there goes McGonagall and Shacklebolt. Guess we won't be getting anything useful from them either," Fred added, pulling the flesh colored string out of his ear and turning around to look at the girls. "BLOODY HELL, HERMIONE!" he shouted when he spotted the unsightly blemish on her neck.

The comment definitely got George’s attention, because he immediately spun around to see what his brother was carrying on about and his eyes momentarily went wide when they locked on Hermione. Without even thinking about what he was doing, George grabbed her head and cocked it to the side to allow them a better view of her neck. "Did you have a run in with a Vampire last night?" he snickered.

"She might not use a stake on him," Ginny replied sarcastically as she watched Hermione shove George away from herself, "but he'll be just as dead when he comes down to breakfast."

"CRIKEY!" Fred said, following his declaration up with an appreciative whistle.

"That's some impressive work," George chuckled, pulling his wand out and pointing it at Hermione. "But we can't have Mum see it," he added, flicking his wand at the scarlet mark before she had a chance to object.

Hermione's hand closed over the spot and the instant she felt the burn, but it dissipated after a moment, taking Ron's love bite with it.

"Got anymore?" George asked, his wand still in hand.

"One or two," Hermione replied audaciously. "But they're in places you're never going to see."
"HO!" Fred cried out. "Atta boy, Ronnie."

"PIG!" Ginny exclaimed as if she'd been insulted.

"No, owls don't leave marks like that, Gin," George laughed, pocketing his wand and proceeding down to breakfast. "Pigwidgeon didn't bite her. His master did."

"How did you do that?" Hermione asked as she followed the twins down the stairs. "I've never heard of a spell that can remove--"

"Your basic healing spell with a bit of a twist," Fred replied before she had a chance to finish. "All it took was a bit of practicing on each other to work out the kinks."

"What do you want to bet," Ginny whispered into Hermione's ear, "that they practiced giving each other the marks too?"

"OY! I heard that," Fred cried moments after the two girls started to giggle.

"Didn't deny it though, did you?" Ginny shot back.

"Well," Hermione laughed, "they do seem to practice everything else on each other."

"HEY NOW!" George shouted as if his pride had been wounded. "That's the last time I do you a favor."

"George?" Hermione said, sobering up almost immediately. "Thanks."

"Don't go getting the wrong idea," he replied, brushing her gratitude aside in a lighthearted manner. "If Mum had seen that, we'd be stuck minding you two again."

"So no footsies under the table. Got it?" Fred added.

"And for Merlin's sakes, keep your fingers out of the jam."

As the rest of his family congregated in the kitchen, Ron Weasley could be found, lying flat on his back in a tangle of bed sheets, his freckled face awash with sunlight. How the morning rays managed to burn their way through the grime covering the windows of his third floor bedroom, he couldn't begin to understand. He welcomed the warmth, but did it have to be so damn bright? It was instinct which prompted him to cover his eyes with his forearm as he fought off the last vestiges of sleep.

He had no idea what time it was. All he knew for certain was that he wasn't ready to abandon the comforts of his bed. He'd been having the most spectacular dream before he was so rudely awakened. But fate seemed to be conspiring against him. Big surprise there. He was thwarted even in his dreams. Always on the verge, but somehow never able to complete the act.

Stifling a yawn, Ron gave up the fight and opened his eyes. He didn't need to look down to know the condition he was in. It was a common morning occurrence. So common in fact, his roommates at Hogwarts affectionately referred to the condition as "morning glory." How Dean and Seamus could get dressed while discussing their "morning glories" and the girls that had inspired them, without dying of mortification, was beyond him. There were times Ron was almost certain they did it on purpose just to see him blush.
Bloody prats. Trying to drag me into the conversation so they can trick me into talking about my dreams. Even I'm not THAT thick. Of course, the fact that he'd once caught Seamus going through that ridiculous dream diary Trelawney made him keep helped clue him in on their ultimate motivation. He'd found it hilarious really, and as every single one of the dreams in the blasted diary was fabricated, he'd simply backed out of the room and left Seamus to it. Little did he know they already knew who he was dreaming about. His tendency to talk in his sleep had given him away.

Fortunately, Ron had forgotten about that recent revelation. Not that it really mattered at this point, seeing as how he had a room to himself. There was no one around to hear him if he cried out one of his best friend's names in his sleep. There was no one there in the morning when he woke up either, which meant he didn't have to abandon the warmth of his bed and subject himself to yet another cold shower. He could lie there as long as he wanted and moll over his dreams, or even better, he could think about everything that had happened the night before. Because what happened last night had been real and if he thought about it long enough, he might just be able to burn it into his memory with crystal clear accuracy. Laying back against his pillow, his eyes closed, Ron began to replay the encounter over in his mind.

He’d been more than a little surprised when she allowed him to steer her back towards the bed. Granted, she’d been the one to bolt the door this time, but he still hadn’t been sure how to proceed. For a split second, Ron had envisioned himself swiping all the rubbish off the top of the bureau, before lifting her up and setting her down on top of it. He was hoping she’d find the spontaneity of the act as arousing as he did and if not, there was always the practical aspect. Setting her on top of the dresser would have placed her roughly at face level and it would’ve made it possible for him to snog without leaning forward for an extended period of time. But he nixed the idea almost as soon as it popped into his head. It might seem like a grand romantic gesture, but knowing Hermione, she’d overlook the romantic aspects and scold him for making a mess.

The last thing he’d wanted her to do was break away from him and start cleaning his room, so the dresser was out, which left option number two: the bed. She’d already vetoed it once, but it was worth another shot. After all, it hadn’t been the bed she’d objected to, so much as what he wanted to do on the bed. So as long as he didn’t try that, there was no reason they couldn’t snog there.

And amazingly enough, Hermione seemed to agree with him. He pushed against her body hesitantly as they kissed, but she yielded willingly and allowed herself to be maneuvered. She went to the bed without protest and then sat down with him of her own accord. Encouraged by her capitulation and the fact that her tongue was entrenched in his mouth, Ron then leaned backwards and pulled her down with him.

He moaned softly when he felt her weight settle on top of him. The bed had seemed like such a good idea moments before, but once he was lying there kissing her, (in his bed, where he slept, where he dreamt about her), Ron realized just how precarious their position was. Suddenly it didn’t matter that he knew they wouldn’t be doing the things he dreamt about. Just because he couldn’t shag her, didn’t mean he wasn’t going to thinking about it. In fact, it was damn near all he could think about at that particular moment.

As he buried one hand in Hermione’s hair and ran the other up her back, Ron found himself contemplating their position. Even as he felt Hermione’s weight press down on him, he thought about how easy it would be to roll on top of her and the burning ache in his groin intensified as he imagined her legs encircling him again. Encircling him and pulling him into her.

It was at that moment that he mentally pulled himself back and reminded himself, yet again, that it
wasn’t going to happen. Hermione had made that very clear. He’d told her that he didn’t mind waiting and he’d meant it. At that particular point in time anyway. But the longer they kissed, the harder it became for him to keep the promise he’d made to himself about not pressuring her. Of course, just because they couldn’t shag, that didn’t mean they couldn’t do other things.

Besides, she said she’d stop me if I did something she didn’t want, he reasoned as he slipped his hand up Hermione’s shirt and ran it along her back, halting when he reached the catch holding her bra closed. He wanted to unclasp it, but he wasn’t sure how to go about doing it without looking like a blithering idiot.

Fortunately, Hermione seemed to sense that Ron was contemplating what she’d do to him if he ripped her underclothes to pieces, because she chose that moment to push against his chest, roll off him, and sit up on her knees.

Fearing that he’d upset her, Ron was all set to apologize, but the words stuck in the throat when she pulled her shirt over her head and dropped it to the floor. No longer sure what to say, or what to do for that matter, Ron just lay there and stared at her, his eyes wide with shock. For a few moments all he was able to do was watch her chest rise and fall and then he realized what he was doing and forced himself to look at her face.

The instant he searched out her eyes, Hermione covered her chest with one hand and reached behind her back with the other. Before he even had time to wonder what she was doing, the bra sprang open and the straps slid down her arms. That’s when he realized that her hand was the only thing left holding the thin cotton barrier in place.

Ron immediately came up on his elbows, his eyes dropping in anticipation. He stared at her hand eagerly, but to his disappointment, it didn’t move and when he searched out her face again, he saw the hesitation there. She looked nervous and appeared to be debating whether or not she really wanted to do this.

"It’s ok, love," he said, sitting upright. "You don't have to--"

But she wasn’t listening to him. Or perhaps she was listening and his words had simply come too late. Because even as he spoke, Hermione took a deep breath, shut her eyes, and let her bra drop to the bed. She didn’t open her eyes again. Not even when she felt the bed shift as Ron came up on his knees to study her.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that he shouldn’t stare at her, but he couldn’t seem to help himself. He knew he was making her uncomfortable and yet he couldn’t look away. It was the first time a woman had exposed herself to him and he was mesmerized by vision before him. So much so, that for a moment he almost forgot who he was looking at and then it slammed home with blinding clarity.

This wasn’t just some nameless dream woman, it was Hermione. He was ogling one of his best friends. Hermione…His Hermione…She had breasts. He’d known that of course, but knowing about them and imagining them wasn’t nearly the same as seeing them with his own eyes. Hermione had breasts and while they weren’t abnormally large like the women in Wanton Witch magazine, they were still bloody brilliant.

Before he even realized he was doing it, Ron reached forward to touch her, but somehow he managed to catch himself at the last second and his hand froze centimeters from her flesh.

"Can I?" he asked in a hoarse voice that sounded alien to him.
Hermione’s eyes fluttered open at that point and locked on the hand suspended in front of her chest. For a moment she looked as if she might actually speak, but in the end she simply bit her lower lip tentatively and nodded her assent.

"You're soft," he said to himself as he cupped her with one hand and stroking her gently with the other. “Wow. This is just …brilliant.”

When she didn’t reply, Ron looked up into Hermione’s face to make sure she was all right. She’d been uncharacteristically quiet since they reached the bed, but she didn’t appear to be distressed. Now that she’d committed herself, the tentative air she seemed to have had been replaced with something else. Something he couldn’t quite place. There was a serene look about her and yet at the same time there was so much more. There was acceptance and trust. It was evident in the way she had her eyes closed and her head tilted backwards as she bared herself up to him.

It was that trust, more than anything else that stoked the fire burning deep within him. It harkened back to the things she’d said about him earlier and reinforced the fact that she really did want to be with him. The wonderful, beautiful, caring young woman, who was kneeling before him in all her glory, wanted him. She’d placed herself in a vulnerable position because she trusted him. Not only with her heart, but with her body as well and that knowledge exhilarated him. Hermione was offering herself up to him, and by Merlin, he was going to take her. She was his and he was going to lay claim to every glorious inch she exposed.

Had Hermione's eyes been open, she would have seen Ron’s hesitancy give way as the passionate nature she’d caught a glimpse of in the past blazed its way to the forefront. But it wasn’t until she felt his arms encircle her and pull her to him with crushing force, that she discerned the change. By then his mouth had descended to her throat, rendering her into little more than a quivering mass in his arms.

The soft moans that issued from Hermione's lips, only served to encourage him. Wrenching his mouth from her throat, he captured her lips and in an instant, she found herself lying flat on her back. But rather than throw himself on top of her, as the ravenous beast inside him demanded, Ron settled down beside her and gave her a chance to protest. He wanted to claim her, and yet at the same time part of him wanted to protect her. Even if it was from himself. He might be caught up in a frenzy of lust, but she trusted him and he wasn't about to abuse that trust. He’d push it as far as she allowed him, but the moment she balked, he was determined to rein himself in and stop.

Of course it would have been difficult for her to voice her objections with her mouth occupied as it was. But her hands were still free and Ron had no doubt that she would use them to push him away if that was what she wanted.

For a moment she just lay there, as if in shock, and let him do as he pleased, then she reacted. But rather than push him away as he expected, Hermione wrapped her arms around him and pulled him down on top of herself. She sighed contently when his weight settled on her and almost instantly her hands began to wander. One, she buried in his thick red hair, while the other, plunged under his shirt and began to move gently up his back.

Without warning, Ron pulled away from her and Hermione's eyes snapped open just in time to see him wrench his shirt off and toss it to the floor beside her own. As he hovered above her, his eyes flicking down to her bare chest just before he covered it with his own.

Instead of seeking out her lips as she expected, Ron's mouth dipped lower and settled on her neck, where she was the most sensitive. His efforts were rewarded when his name tumbled out amid a series of soft moans. Hearing his own name spill out of her lips, was enough to trigger a guttural
"Don't--" she panted, causing him to break away from her neck and search out her face. "Don't leave a mark there," she clarified. "Not where... someone else can see it."

Ron’s eyes instantly flicked down to the large red spot he’d already created. He knew he’d pay for it later, even if strictly speaking it wasn’t entirely his fault. But rather than mention it to her now, he nodded his head in agreement and abandoned the spot. Placing his arms at her sides, he lifted himself off her and dipped his head lower. He left a trail of soft kisses down her neck as he worked his way to her shoulders.

Hermione gasped when she felt the wetness of his tongue between her breasts. He lingered there, raining butterfly kisses on the slopes, waiting for her to protest. But she didn’t object. Instead she wound her fingers into his hair again and Ron took that as a sign that he was free to continue.

Slowly, he ran his tongue up the peak and over her hardened nipple. It lingered there for moment or two, and then his mouth had descended. When he started to suckle her, Hermione unexpectedly cried out and arched her lower body up off the bed. Taken by surprise, Ron pulled away and stared at her anxiously, as he tried to figure out what he’d done wrong.

"Oh my god," she said, as her eyes fluttered open and she looked at his startled face.

"All right, Mione?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

"I'll say," she replied, blushing deeply. "I certainly didn't expect that to happen," she added with an embarrassed laugh. "You barely touched me and I--"

"You didn't!" he cried, his eyes going wide. "That wasn't...did you?" he asked, shooting her one of his lopsided grins.

"Well, it was just a small one," she admitted. "A warning shock really."

"A what?"

"A warning shock," she repeated, blushing again. "That's what the book called them anyway. It likened a female orgasm to an earthquake, because you never know how strong it's going to be. Sometimes there are small tremors or 'warning shocks' before 'the big one' hits. Then there are the 'after shocks, of course.'"

"You're talking about... about multiples."

BLOODY HELL!

Hermione had some secret sex text book. She’d read the bloody thing cover to cover and now… Now she was quoting passages about female orgasms back to him. Was this really happening? Had she really… Had he really just caused…

BLOODY HELL, Ron’s mind cried out again as he realized exactly what he’d done. He’d given her a whatcha call it, a pre-shock or whatever it was. And even if it wasn’t a full scale quake, it was still quite an accomplishment. He hadn’t even been trying to do that. Could it really be that easy? Was it possible that he was that good?

But even as Ron was swelling with pride, a second thought occurred to him. One that both excited him and concerned him at the same time.
In order for Hermione to name what had just happened, she had to be able to recognize it, which meant she’d experienced it before. What's more, she knew the difference between 'a warning shock' and 'the big one'. So either she’d done this, or something similar, with someone else, which Ron didn’t even want to think about, or she’d done it to herself.

“Bloody Hell,” he groaned loudly as images of Hermione alone in her room, touching herself, flooded his mind. Did she do it as often as he did? Did she think about him?

"Can I... I want to…to… taste you,” Ron whispered, his eyes roaming down her body and locking on her shorts. If she was already at the ‘warning shock’ stage, he might just be able to induce ‘the big one' if he tried hard enough. And he really wanted to try.

"What?” Hermione asked, too stunned to mask her apprehension.

"Haven’t you ever thought about it?" he asked, too aroused to share her mortification. “Because I have," he admitted, his voice deep and husky with desire. "Please," he begged, his cobalt eyes filled with longing. "If you don't like it, I'll stop. I promise.’"

When Hermione didn't reply, Ron was certain she was going to refuse him. As soon as she recovered enough to find her voice that is. And the longer she sat there staring at him in disbelief, the more uncomfortable he became. In fact, he was just about to backtrack and tell her to forget it, when to his utter amazement, she took a deep breath to steady herself and nodded her head.

"SERIOUSLY?” Ron cried, sitting bolt upright in shock. Had she really just agreed? Surely the nod must have been a figment of his imagination.

“"You’ll stop?” Hermione asked tentatively. “If I ask you to. You promise?”

“YES!” Ron replied, his heart hammering against his chest as he watched Hermione’s fingers move to the button of her shorts. “I promise,” he added for good measure, gaping at her as she raised her lower body off the bed and slowly slid her shorts down to reveal a pair of white cotton knickers.

Oh God! he groaned to himself, closing his eyes and taking a moment to compose himself. I can’t believe she’s doing this. I can’t believe I’m doing this. I’m going to see her starkers.

"Ron?” Hermione asked, prompting him to open his eyes and look at her. When he did, he was surprised to find her propped up on her elbows studying him. Only her eyes weren't on his face, they were glued to the bulge in his trousers. "Can I see you?” she asked, catching him totally off guard.

For a second or two all he could do was stare at her, as the question sunk in.

Why not? he thought, shrugging his shoulders as he eyed her nearly naked body once more.

It only seemed fair. He was about to see all of her and she’d probably be more comfortable with that if he went first. And Bill had told him that he needed to make sure she was comfortable. Still, if he was going to do it, he had to do it quickly, because the longer he thought about it, the more likely he was to chicken out. So without giving the matter anymore thought, Ron stood up, unbuttoned his trousers, and pushed both them and his boxers to the floor in one fell swoop.

He expected Hermione’s eyes to leave his as soon as he disrobed, but they didn't. She maintained eye contact the entire time she was scooting down the bed and it wasn't until she was standing right in front of him, that her gaze shifted to the faint scars that marred his chest and shoulders. They were barely perceptible now. Nothing like they’d been right after the Brain Incident in the Department of Mysteries. They’d likely be gone altogether in a month or two, but they weren’t gone yet and he was insecure about them.
And it wasn’t just the scars. The way Hermione scrutinized him, made Ron feel even more self-conscious, but he stood his ground. After all, he’d done the same thing to her, not all that long ago. Turn about was fair play and all that. Of course she kept her eyes closed as he studied her, which probably made it easier. But if he closed his eyes, he wouldn’t be able to gauge her reaction, and he wanted to know what she thought of him.

Hermione could be a very difficult person to read when she wanted to be and Ron knew that it was at times like this, when she was experiencing something new, that she let her guard down and her thoughts became the most discernable. She’d seen the scars on his arms numerous times, but this was the first time he’d ever seen the sadness in her eyes when she looked at them. It wasn’t revulsion, that much was evident by the way she reached out and lovingly ran her fingers over his shoulder. It wasn’t pity either, thank Merlin. She didn’t feel sorry for him, she simply regretted that it he’d suffered.

Not wanting to focus on what could have happened to him, Hermione dropped her eyes back to Ron’s chest and lingered there a moment before moving on to his stomach. He watched her closely as her gaze shifted lower and finally fell on the part of his body she’d asked to see. He had to swallow the laugh that threatened to bust out when her eyes went wide with surprise. He’d been searching for signs of revulsion or even fear, but all he saw on her face was wonder and curiosity. She’s studying me like one of her damned books, he thought as she plopped down on the edge of the bed right in front of him. He knew she probably had a million questions running though her head, she was just trying to figure out which one to ask first.

"Can I touch it?" she asked, without the slightest trace of a blush.

Ron gulped loudly. It certainly wasn’t the question he’d expected her to lead with. She didn’t even seem to realize how brazen she was being. But when Hermione was fascinated with something new, she had tunnel vision it wasn’t unusual for her to forget about little things, like decorum.

No longer trusting himself to speak, Ron simply closed his eyes and nodded his head. He could feel his heart pounding against his chest as he stood there in anticipation. He braced himself, but the expected contact didn't happen. It wasn’t until he started to wonder if she’d changed her mind that he felt her finger slide lightly down over his skin. BLOODY HELL, he thought, sucking in a deep breath as she became even bolder and wrapped her hand around him. If you lose control now she's going to kill you, he reminded himself. Take a deep breath and think of something disgusting. Spiders. Snape pulling the legs off live spiders.

"It's hot," Hermione muttered as she tightened her grip. "Is that ok?" she asked, when Ron groaned.

"Yeah, it's...It... it... feels good."

"Show me how," she said in a voice that was altogether too innocent. She obviously had no bloody idea what her touch was doing to him or how hard he was fighting to keep himself under control.

"What?" Ron asked, his eyes shooting open in alarm.

"How to... you know?" Hermione replied, sliding her hand up his length and back down again.

"OH SHIT!" Ron cried out loudly. "If you do that again, I'm not going to be able to hold it back," he warned her.

"Really?" she replied with a mischievous smile on her face that sent a jolt of fire coursing through his body. It was then that Ron realized that was precisely what she wanted. Even as he reached for her...
hand, she was moving again.

“Stop,” he groaned loudly, slapping his hand over hers.

"Don't you want to?" she asked, obviously not realizing what would happen to her if they continued like this.

YES!! a voice screamed in the back of his mind.

"I... I... I..." he stammered. "I don't know if you're ready to see that."

"I didn't... hurt you, did I?" Hermione asked seriously, after noticing the strained expression on his face. "When I touched you... you looked like you were in pain."

"No... It’s not that. It’s... It doesn't hurt," he assured her. “Not the way you mean."

"But it's... uncomfortable?" she pressed him.

Only Hermione would ask questions like this as she held him in her hand. Always the inquisitive one, his Hermione.

"It... Aches, I guess," he finally admitted. "But in a good way."

"You make me ache too," she replied, unintentionally coaxing another moan from him with her words. Ron watched as her eyes flicked down to his erection momentarily, before coming back up to meet his. "Are you sure you don't want me to--" she started to ask.

"Not yet," he whispered, closing his eyes again as he struggled to maintain control.

"Oh," Hermione said, smirking ever so slightly as she released him and rose off the bed to stand directly in front of him. "I see. You're enjoying the..."

"Anticipation," he finished, a split second before he felt her fingers in his hair, urging his head forward so she could kiss him.

"And what are you anticipating?" she asked, pulling away from his eager lips. "Oh yes," she answered herself, the moment she saw his eyes open and lock on her knickers. "I remember now," she teased, running her own hand down her stomach.

OH DEAR GOD! Ron's mind screamed as he watched her hand slip into her knickers.

"You wanted--" she began and then she stopped short. Ron watched wide-eyed, as she brought her fingers up to his lips and held them just out of reach. "Taste me."

For a moment he was so stunned, he didn't know how to react. This sexy playful side of Hermione was totally unexpected. Where the hell had she learned how to tease a bloke like into a frenzy? Did she read it in a book or was she making it up as she went along? Probably a bit of both, he decided as he darted out his tongue and leaned forward to capture her fingers.

He didn’t expect her to tug her fingers out of his mouth so quickly. But before he could protest, Hermione grabbed his head, pulled him forward, and covered his lips with her own. Truth be told, Ron was so stunned that it took him a moment to actually kiss her back, but when he did, it was hungrily. As he opened his mouth and swiped his tongue across her bottom lip, he groaned loudly and almost instantly, he felt her tongue brush against his.

BLOODY HELL! She's tasting herself on me, he thought, more aroused than he'd ever been, even
"Please... Mione," Ron begged between kisses, his hand moving down to her inner thigh. He couldn't take anymore. They had to stop. He had to stop. But he didn't want to stop. He wanted to push her down on the bed and finish what she'd started. But he couldn't. He wouldn't. She deserved better than that. "I need to..."

Hermione pulled away from him before the word 'stop' passed his lips and her warm cinnamon eyes flicked down his body quickly. "Just tell me what to do," she whispered, misinterpreting what he'd been trying to say.

But her words failed to penetrate the fog clouding Ron's mind. He heard her voice; he knew she was speaking to him, but the whispered words held no meaning. He was too preoccupied with her fingers, which had danced across the hand he had pressed against her thigh. He hadn't even realized he was touching her thigh. No, not touching, groping, he was groping her. He practically had his hand up her knickers. So why had her fingers brushed against his hand momentarily and then moved on? Why hadn't she shoved his hand away? Why hadn't she smacked him to stop him from taking further liberties?

But even as Ron pondered these questions, he received an answer. Apparently she'd decided to take a few liberties of her own.

"HERMIONE!" he cried out in surprise the moment he felt her fingers wrap around his sensitive skin. When she squeezed him unexpectedly, Ron bucked forward and nearly lost control right there and then. "WAIT!" he shouted, yanking his palm off her and reaching down to still her hand. Only somehow that wasn't quite what happened.

"You'll warn me, won't you?" she asked, moving her hand under his as Ron set the proper rhythm. Could this really be happening? Was she seriously going to...Oh, yes, apparently she was.

"You'll warn me, right?" Hermione asked again a little more urgently as he closed his eyes and allowed his had to slip off hers. But the only verbal response she managed to coax out of him was a throaty groan. "Ron!" she called out his name with more forcefully in an effort to get his attention. But it wasn't until she slowed her motions that he responded with a nod of his head.

"Don't... stop," he stammered when he finally found his voice again.

"You want me to stop?" Hermione asked, slowing her movements even further as she gave him a confused look.

"No," Ron panted. "Please.... God! Don't stop," he begged, bucking against her hand and groaned her name. "MIONE..." It was all the warning he managed to get out before his control snapped and the glorious wave of release washed over him.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard Hermione gasp, but he was far too preoccupied to focus on the sound or why she might be making it. It wasn't until the pressure subsided and he opened his eyes that he realized he'd left quite a mess on her stomach.

"Sorry," he groaned in mortification. "I tried... to warn you," he added, his chest heaving as he attempted to catch his breath. All he could do now was wait for her to regain her wits enough to react.
Time seemed to stand still as she stood there, silently staring at her abdomen and the longer she
remained silent, the more anxious Ron became about what she would ultimately say. He actually
cringed when her eyes shot up and locked on his. It was then that he realized she wasn't going to
shout at him. She wasn't upset at all. If anything, she appeared to be fascinated.

Ron’s brow knit together in confusion as he watched Hermione run her fingers through the substance
clinging to her flesh. Then she rubbed them together, as if she were testing it's consistency. This was
something new. Something she'd never encountered before and all he could do was stand there and
watch in disbelief as she brought her fingers up to study it. Then without warning she darted her
tongue out and brushed her fingers over it.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" he cried, gaping at her in astonishment.

"Oh shut up," Hermione replied defensively, her face instantly flushing a brilliant shade of red. "I
heard Parvatti and Lavender talking about how it was salty and I wanted to see for myself. Besides,"
she added, wiping her fingers against her knickers to clean them off, "you’re the one that got the ball
rolling where tasting things is concerned."

“I can't believe you just did that," Ron retorted, his eyes still wide with shock. "I can't believe you
did ANY of that.”

"Yes, well,” Hermione muttered, her blush becoming even more pronounced, “I won't do it again if
you didn’t enjoy--” she responded as she averted her eyes.

"No, I didn't mean I didn't like it,” Ron said anxiously. The last thing he wanted was for her to think
he regretted it. He was simply embarrassed that he'd made such a mess. Other than that, it had been
perfect. It had been better than perfect, it had been amazing. She was amazing. The fact that she was
even willing to do that was amazing. If he could have, he would have dragged into his bed and spent
the rest of the night showing her just how appreciative her was. "It's just--" he said, scooping his
discarded shirt off the ground and using it to wipe her stomach, "I'm really sorry about this."

"It's ok," she assured him, her eyes sparkling as she gave him a sincere smile. "It was very ... er...
educational," she said, choosing her words carefully. "I rather enjoyed myself actually," she
continued snatching her own shirt off the floor and slipped it on.

"Ron?" Hermione's voice sounded through the door, pulling him back to reality. "Are you awake?"
she asked as she continued to knock on the door. "You missed breakfast. Your mum sent me up to
get you. Ron?"

"Yeah," he shouted back, hoping to buy himself a little time. "I'm... I'm up."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he yelled as he jumped out of bed and threw on the trousers he'd been wearing the
night before. "Why?" he asked, opening his chest of drawers and grabbing the first t-shirt he saw.

"You sound strange," Hermione replied. "And you missed breakfast. You're not... avoiding me are
you?"

"What?" Ron said, flinging the door open and pulling her into his room. "Why in the world would I
be avoiding you?" he asked, not bothering to remove his hands from her shoulders.
"Well," Hermione said uncomfortably, her eyes dropping to the floor as her cheeks heated up. "I um... wasn't very lady-like last night. I mean... I all but took advantage of you."

"To hell with being lady-like," Ron replied with a hardy laugh. "It was bloody brilliant. You were brilliant."

"Do you have to swear?" she sighed, stealing a quick peak at his exuberant face out of the corner of her eyes.

"Well it was."

"So you don't think I'm... I'm some kind of cheap temptress?" she asked, her embarrassment mounting. "I really didn't mean to force you to--"

"Force me?" Ron laughed. "I practically begged you," he added, stepping closer and placing a quick kiss on her lips. "If anyone should be worried it's me. After what I did to your...HEY!" he cried, noting the pristine skin on her neck. "What happened to the mark?"

"Your brother."

"Bloody hell," he groaned, realizing he'd left her to face his family alone. "I didn't mean to... I mean, I just wasn't thinking. I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry. Please tell me Bill got rid of it before Fred and George saw it."

"Actually they--"

"They what?" he asked warily, his eyes narrowing. But Hermione didn’t answer and Ron was too busy picturing his brothers taking the mickey out of her over breakfast to notice she was staring over his shoulder. "Those bloody tossers."

"And to think, she actually lets him kiss her with that foul mouth," Fred said to his twin brother with a chuckle.

"You can say whatever you want about me," Ron snarled as he spun around to face the twins, both of whom were laughing in the doorway, "but you leave her alone."

"Ron," Hermione protested, grabbing his arm just in case decided to go after them.

"How long have you two been standing there listening to our private conversation anyway?" he barked.

"Long enough," George snickered. "You're so predictable, Ron. It's not even any fun anymore."

"At least Hermione presents us with a challenge," Fred added.

"Why do you push his buttons if it isn't any fun?" Hermione asked.

"Because we can," George replied with an impish smile.

"Prats," Hermione declared, rolling her eyes at the pair of them.

"Come on, Hermione," Fred laughed. "You know you love it when Ron climbs up on his big white horse and defends your honor."

"Black," she replied, taking the twins by surprise. They were obviously perplexed by her response, because both Fred and George stopped sniggering and stared at her blankly.
"Pardon?" Fred asked just to break the silence.

"His horse is black," Hermione replied, picturing it quite clearly in her mind.

"It's a figure of speech," Fred informed her, as if she'd missed his point.

"Yes, I know," she shot back. "But Ron's horse is black. I've seen it."

"You've... seen it?" George asked, glancing over at Ron, who shrugged his shoulders.

"What are you talking about?" Fred questioned as he furrowed his brow. "Ron's never had a horse."

"I haven't seen him since he was stabbed by the Queen," she continued, looking pointedly at Ron, "but I'm sure he's still around somewhere."

"Queen? What bloody Queen? You're talking crazy."

She's crazy all right, Ron thought as he watched his brothers stare at each other uncertainly. Crazy like a fox, he added, admiring at the way Hermione had confused his brothers into submission. They thought she was talking about a real horse. They had no idea she was referring to McGonagall's giant chess set.

"That vicious bitch," Ron said, deciding it was time he had a little fun of his own. "That horse was bloody magnificent, though, wasn't he?"

"To be honest, I was more impressed with the knight than the horse," Hermione replied, shooting him a coy smile. "Even if he does have a foul mouth."

"It does have its uses though?" Ron said, arching his eyebrows at her suggestively.

"If you two start snogging, I'm going to lose my breakfast," Fred stated, clutching his stomach as if he was about to be sick.

"Just as well," Ron shot back. "Because I don't recall inviting you to watch. So do us all a favor and get the hell out."

"We're going," George said, walking into the hallway. "But only because we have to open the shop."

"Thought we'd come up here first and give you a little brotherly advice."

"Yeah, what's that?" Ron asked, hoping they'd leave once it was delivered.

"Next time you feel the urge to mark your territory," Fred replied from the doorway, "do it in a place Mum can't see."

"Bloody idiot," George added, shaking his head at his younger brother.

"Prats," Ron shouted back, slamming the door in Fred's face.

"INGRATE!"

"WANKERS!"

"SOD!"
"Ron," Hermione said, knowing she'd better intervene before it escalated any further and their mother heard what they were shouting to one another. "Shut up," she added, covering his lips with her own.

Even without the tell-tale sign of their reconciliation displayed on Hermione's neck, it took Mrs. Weasley less than 45 minutes to figure out they were no longer arguing. She'd have figured it out sooner, but the fact Ron had missed breakfast had lulled her into a false sense of security. It wasn't until she popped her head into the small room on the main floor that she realized all was not as it had seemed.

As she expected, Hermione was doing exactly as she'd been instructed. It was Ron who was slacking off. He hadn't even touched the upper shelves of the cupboard he was supposed to be cleaning. In fact, he wasn't even anywhere near the cupboard. He was simply standing in the middle of the room, a clean dust rag still in his hand, ogling Hermione, who was on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. The look on his face and the fact his eyes were riveted to her backside, were more than enough to clue his mother in on what he was thinking.

"Ronald Weasley!" she hissed just before she swooped down on him, grabbed him by the ear, and pulled him out of the room.

"Wha--" he started to protest and then quickly changed tracks. "OWWW! MUM!"

Taken completely by surprise, Hermione spun around to see what the commotion was all about, but Ron and his mother were nowhere in sight. Dropping her scrubbing brush in the bucket of water beside herself, she rose to her feet and made it to the door just in time to see Mrs. Weasley push her son towards the staircase. Hermione had no clue what had just happened, but whatever he'd done, it was bad enough for his mother to separate them.

And hour later, when she'd finished scrubbing both the floor and the bookcase, Ron still hadn’t returned. It was obvious by then that he wasn’t coming back and her since her own tasks were now complete, Hermione decided she may as well tackle the cupboard he was supposed to clean herself.

Molly Weasley was seated at the kitchen table, having a leisurely discussion with Tonks and Remus, when the blood-curdling scream echoed through the house. For a split second everything seemed to stop, including her heart, then she reacted. Dropping the cup in her hand, Molly jumped out of her chair and sprinted up the stairs, her companions right on her heels.

"NNNNOOOOOOOO!!!"

By the time the three adults made it into the hallway, Mrs. Black's portrait was cursing up a storm, but even her shrieks weren't enough to drown out the anguished cries emanating from the room directly across from her. Ignoring the portrait, Molly burst though the door and into the room, where she found Hermione crumpled on her knees beside a prone figure.

"What happened?" Lupin asked, shoving Molly further into the room in an attempt to get through the doorway himself.

It was then that Molly realized Hermione was kneeling over her youngest son and with a gasp of
horror, she covered her mouth and choked back her own sob.

"WHAT HAPPENED?" Lupin shouted again, inching his way towards Hermione. It was too late, he knew that. He'd seen that wide-eyed, lifeless stare on too many faces to hold out any hope. She didn't need to answer the question for him to know Ron had been hit with a Killing Curse. But he needed to know who had done it and where they had gone.

"Hermione," Lupin said softly, as he crouched down beside her. "Who did this?"

"WHO CAME OUT OF THIS ROOM?" Tonks shouted at her aunt's portrait. "WHICH WAY DID THEY GO?"

"DIRTY HALF-BREED! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!"

"ANSWER ME, YOU OLD CRONE! DID THEY GO UPSTAIRS OR OUT THE FRONT DOOR?"

"Hermione," Lupin tried again, the desperation evident in his voice. But he may as well have been speaking to the wall for all the good it did him. She didn't reply. She didn't even appear to know anyone else was in the room with her. She just continued to rock back and forth, her entire being focused on the body in front of her.

"HERMIONE! WHAT HAPPENED?" Lupin shouted, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her as he spoke. "WHO DID THIS?"

"Vol...Vol...Voldemort," she stuttered between her sobs.

Molly let out a wail of her own and Tonks, having given up on her aunt's portrait, was immediately by her side.

"Mum, we heard someone scream," Ginny said, running into the room so fast, she almost collided with the two women standing near the doorway.

"What hap--" her brother started to ask as he appeared behind her. But the scene in front of him was so shocking, he forgot what he was going to say and for a moment he just stood there, staring at his own dead body. "WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS GOING ON HERE!"

Everyone except Hermione spun around and gaped at Ron as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. Relief instantly flashed across the adults' faces and before Ron could utter another word, Molly pulled him into a bone-crushing hug.

"Geroff," Ron said, shoving his mother away. "MUM! LET GO!" he shouted, pushing past her to get at his girlfriend who was still sobbing hysterically on the floor, oblivious to everything that was going on around her.

"Hermione," Ron said, placing his hands on her shoulders as he knelt beside her. "It's okay."

She didn't hear him. She didn't see him. She wasn't there. She was lost behind a shroud of pain. Ron realized it the moment he looked at her closely.

"HERMIONE!" he shouted, grabbing her tear stained face and turning it towards his own. "Look at me," he demanded. "I'm right here."

It took a moment or two, but eventually he saw the spark of recognition in her eyes.
"R-Ron?" she asked, even as she threw herself against him, hugging him as if her very life depended on it.

"Yeah," he said awkwardly, staring at his own corpse as he held her.

"Get her away from there," Lupin ordered, stooping down to help Ron pull Hermione back.

Unfortunately, Hermione's distress seemed to increase as the numbness and shock wore off. Ron had hoped she'd stop crying once she realized he was all right, but rather than abate, her sobs seemed to become even louder. She continued to cling to him desperately and her body shook with each deep, shuddering breath she sucked in.

Molly watched them for a moment, still horrified despite the fact her son was standing in front of her, very much alive. She wanted to focus on him, but her eyes kept shifting over to his lifeless form against her will. And that was just one of the internal battles she was fighting. More than anything, she wanted to touch her son. She wanted to hold him and feel that he was real. But when she tried he shrugged her off. She'd been cast aside. She knew there was nothing malicious about it. She could see that right now, Hermione needed the contact more that she did. Arthur had been right. Ron's first instinct was to comfort Hermione. Everyone else, including her, came second. But understanding that and accepting it, didn't prevent it from hurting.

As soon as they had Hermione a good distance away, Lupin released her, pointed his wand at the corpse on the floor, and advanced. He was about a meter away, when there was a loud cracking sound and the body turned into a glowing white orb.

Ron actually let out a small laugh, despite himself. "It's just a Boggart," he said to Hermione, the relief evident in his voice. "You've always been hopeless when it comes to Boggarts."

"Shut up!" Ginny shouted, glaring at her brother. "How can you insult her at a time like this?"

"RIDDIKULUS!"

"At least McGonagall isn't chasing her through the house, shouting at her for failing her O.W.L.S."

"Insensitive prat," Hermione mumbled against his neck, punching him weakly in the arm.

"Feeling better now, are you?" Ron asked, visibly relieved by the fact she was speaking.

"No," Hermione replied as the fire in her eyes was suffocated by the pain of what she'd seen.

Ron watched helplessly as fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. Irritating her had worked for a moment, but it obviously hadn't been enough. At a loss for what else to do, he simply stood there silently and let her cry.

"Maybe we ought to leave them alone," Tonks whispered to Lupin.

Molly seemed to come out of a trance of her own when Lupin touched her arm. "Yes, perhaps that's best," she agreed, nodding her head and placing her arm around Ginny's shoulder. "Come on dear," she added, steering her daughter out into the hall.

"It was just a Boggart, Hermione," Ron said again as soon as they were alone. "It wasn't real."

"It will be," she replied so softly, he would have missed what she said, had her mouth not been inches from his ear.
A pained expression covered his face as the meaning of her words hit home. "You don't know that," Ron replied, instinctively tightening his hold on her.

"Yes, I do," she said angrily. "Don't you dare lie to me. We both know it's the truth."

"Hermi--"

"DON'T!" she cried, pushing away from his body so she could look him in the eye. "We both know what's going to happen. I know you, Ron. I know how you think. You'll throw yourself in front of Harry to block that blasted curse. You'll sacrifice yourself if you get the chance," she said, glancing at the floor in front of the cupboard where his corpse had been.

"It might not come to that," Ron said in a strained voice. No longer able to look her in the eye, he pulled her back against his chest and hugged her so she wouldn't be able to see the guilt on his face.

"You better believe it won't," Hermione cried, shoving him away from herself again. "I won't let it happen. And you better not even think about shielding me either," she added, her eyes burning with cold fury. "I swear, if you get yourself killed trying to protect me, I'll never forgive you."

Without thinking, Ron took a step away as he gaped down at her in shock.

"EVER!" Hermione shrieked. "I'LL HATE YOU FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE!"

Even though he knew she didn't mean it, Ron still blanched at her harsh words. It might be the pain talking, but she'd hit him where he was vulnerable and it stung. For a moment he just stood there, staring at her with his brow creased as he fought down the urge to strike back and then he responded. "No, you won't."

"Yes, I will," Hermione whispered as her anger abated and the pain filled her eyes once more. "I will," she said again, as if to reaffirm it to herself. Eyeing him through her tears, Hermione could see that Ron didn't believe it anymore than she did. DAMN IT! she thought, as she closed the distance between them and let her head fall against his chest.

"It'll be all right," Ron said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders, hoping it would soothe her.

"No, it won't. Not if you're... if you're... I can't," she muttered. "Don't ask me to accept it, because I can't. I won't. And I'm not being unreasonable."

_She really does know what I'm thinking_, Ron thought with a guilty smirk.

"I refuse to let it happen," she said obstinately. "I won't sit back while that evil bastard takes away everyone that matters to me. I won't end up like Professor Lupin. I won't. Do you hear me? I refuse to be left behind. I will not spend the rest of my life mourning my friends. If one of us has to die, it's going to be me."

"NOOO!!" Ron shouted and much to his surprise, Hermione laughed at him.

"You can't live with my death anymore than I can live with yours."

"DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!" Ron barked, staring at her with a mixture of anger and fear in his eyes.

"I'm going to find a way to get rid of that maniac once and for all," Hermione stated, her voice full of determination. "I know there's a way. I just have to find it. And when I do--"
"You aren't getting anywhere near him," Ron interrupted. "Are you listening to me, Hermione? I mean it. This isn't your battle to fight."

"It's as much my battle as it is yours," she retorted. "And I'm going to be standing right beside you and Harry when you wage it."

"No."

"Yes."

"NO!"

"You can't stop me."

"The hell I can't."

"Are you planning on cursing me?"

"If I have to."

"You won't."

"I will. If you force me to."

"No, you won't."

Yes, I will, Ron countered in his head.

"I really don't want to fight with you, Ron" Hermione said, her voice trembling slightly as she tightened her grip on him. "Not right now, okay? I don't have the strength. We can discuss this tomorrow. Right now, I just need you to hold me. Please."

"All right, love," Ron said, letting out a sigh as he rested his chin on the top of her head. He didn't really want to fight with her either. Arguing with her wasn't going to do any good anyway. He'd never be able to talk her into staying out of things voluntarily. She was too damned stubborn. But he could, and would curse her if it was the only way to keep her safe.

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"I could never hate you," she said softly. "I love you."

Let's hope you still feel that way after I Petrify you and talk Harry into leaving you at Hogwarts.

Cut it out, Ron thought as his stomach growled ominously at him yet again. He knew he'd missed lunch and he could have cared less. He had no intention of abandoning his spot on the sofa, no matter how loudly his stomach might protest. Hermione hadn't said much since he'd led her up to the study on the first floor, but that didn't matter. He didn't need to talk to her to comfort her. As long as he sat there beside her, she was content.

Fortunately, his mother was one step ahead of him, which shouldn't have come as any surprise. She glanced at Hermione out of the corner of her eye as she entered the room and set the tray of
sandwiches down on the table in front of the couch.

"Make sure she drinks all that tea," Molly said to her son quietly before she departed.

It took some doing, but eventually Ron did manage to get her to drink the tea. He knew the only reason she did it was to shut him up, but that didn't really matter. The point was, she drank it. It wasn't until she finished, that he realized it wasn't regular tea. His mother had obviously laced it with something, probably a sleeping potion, because Hermione was out cold almost as soon as she set her cup down.

For a moment Ron just sat there, with Hermione's head propped against his shoulder, and considered letting her sleep it off on the sofa, but in the end, he decided that might not be such a good idea. The twins would be closing their shop soon and he didn't want them to disturb her when they returned to Grimmauld Place.

"Mione?" Ron said, nudging her gently. He didn't really expect her to wake up, but it had been worth a try. His suspicions about the tea now confirmed, he realized the only way he was going to get her to bed was to carry her there himself.

It wasn't a difficult task. Her room was only a few doors down the hall and she was light enough for him to lift. The hardest part had been opening her bedroom door while she was still in his arms. But once it was ajar, he simply kicked open it and carried her inside.

The glare he received from the large ginger cat sleeping in the middle of her bed was unexpected and stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Move it," he demanded, unwilling to let the cat intimidate him.

Crookshanks uncurled and leisurely rose to his feet, but rather than do as ordered, he looked up at Ron defiantly and made it a point to flex his claws as he stretched.

That little bugger is threatening me, Ron thought as he glared at Hermione's cat. "Last chance, fur ball," he warned as he approached the bed. "Move it or I'm going to flatten you. And stop looking at me like that," he added as Hermione's cat sauntered to the foot of the bed and sat down, his tail swishing behind him. "It's not like I planned this. How was I supposed to know it wasn't normal tea."

All right, it's official, Ron thought as he set Hermione down on the bed and pulled her shoes off. *You've gone around the bend, mate. Pull yourself together. You're giving excuses to a bloody cat.*

"You can glare at me all you want," Ron said, as he sat down on the edge of Ginny's bed and watched Crookshanks reposition himself beside Hermione like some sort of silent sentry. "But I'm not going anywhere. So you may as well get used to it."

Several hours later Hermione lay awake in her dark bedroom, hugging her pillow to her side as she tried to slow her rapid breathing. Tears stung the corners of her eyes as she buried her head and mentally berated herself.

It was just a dream, she reminded herself for what felt like the hundredth time. But somehow that knowledge didn't comfort her much. It might have been a dream, but it had been frightenningly real.

As she lay there, listening to the even breathing coming from Ginny's bed, she couldn't help envy the
peace her roommate had found in her sleep. Of course, there was no telling how long that would last. Hermione knew that Tom Riddle still haunted her young friend in her dreams. It didn't happen as frequently as it had in summers past, but he still put in an appearance every now and then.

With a sigh, Hermione climbed out of bed and reached for her dressing gown. Sleep was no longer an option for her, not tonight anyway. Every time she closed her eyes the dream images played in her head. The flash of green light. The sickening thud his body made when it crumpled to the ground. His eyes. Those piercing blue eyes which were normally so full of life, laughter and mischief, staring up at her, blank, empty, lifeless.

Hermione's body gave an involuntary shudder as she saw them again. Willing the image that had been tormenting her out of her mind, she grabbed the first book she spotted off bedside table and walked out of her room.

It wasn't until she reached the study that she glanced down at the title of the book she was holding and nearly dropped it in surprise.

Curses that Kill.

Of all the books she had in her room, she had to grab that one. Fate was a cruel mistress. Bill had given it back to her that very morning. She'd been in such a hurry to get to Ron's room that she'd tossed it on top of her schoolbooks instead of putting it in her trunk where it belonged. And now it was in her hand, taunting her.

She definitely wasn't going to be reading that book tonight. For a moment Hermione considered going back to her room and searching for something else to distract herself with, but she didn't want to risk waking Ginny.

Besides, it wasn’t a book she really wanted. It was Ron. More than anything else, she wanted to sneak into his room, crawl in bed with him, and hold him tight. She wanted to feel the warmth of his body. She wanted to hear the rhythmic beating of his heart. She wanted to watch his chest rise and fall with each glorious breath he took. If only there was a way to do it without waking him up. But that was impossible.

"No, that won't do," she whispered, forcing herself to descend the stairs and head towards the kitchen instead of following her heart to Ron’s room. Maybe a warm glass of milk will help.

It wasn’t until she was nearly in front of the kitchen door that she realized there was a light burning on the other side. She wasn't sure what time it was, but she knew it had to be at least two or three a.m. Members of the Order popped in unannounced all the time, but even so, it was rather late to be holding a meeting.

Placing her ear against the door, Hermione listened for any sign of voices, but the room was silent. But someone was obviously in there. She could see the light seeping through the crack under the door. Maybe they put up an Imperturbable Charm, she thought, giving the door a light push. Or not, she added as it swung open and revealed Mrs. Weasley sitting alone at the table.

"Can't sleep, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked, setting down the cup she'd been drinking from.

"Nightmares," Hermione admitted, forcing herself to walk into the room and sit down at the table.

"The Boggart?" Mrs. Weasley pressed her.

But rather than speak, Hermione let her eyes fall to the tabletop and nodded her head.
"Have some tea, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, standing up, retrieving a kettle from the stove, and filling a fresh cup. "It will help," she added, moving back to the table and placing the mug in front of Hermione.

"No. No thanks," Hermione said, staring down at the brown liquid in front of her with trepidation. She knew that Mrs. Weasley was just trying to help, but she wasn't about to take anymore of that tea. It might put her to sleep, but it also stripped her of the ability to react to things going on around her and that could be dangerous.

Earlier that evening she'd heard Ginny trying to wake her for dinner. Her mind had been aware. She'd heard every word Ginny said, but her body simply refused to obey her. Her eyelids had been so heavy, she'd barely been able to open them. She'd wanted to get up, but she just couldn't seem to make herself do it. There was no way in hell she was going to let that happen again. Sure, the chances of Grimmauld Place being attacked were slim, but she'd be damned if she was going to let some Death Eater find her in a potion-induced stupor.

"It will help," Mrs. Weasley said again reassuringly. "It's a special blend," she added. "For dreamless sleep. Ginny went through quite a bit after--" She stopped abruptly, unable to bring herself to mention Riddle or his diary. "You won't have anymore nightmares," she promised Hermione with an encouraging smile.

"How do you do it?" Hermione asked, reaching for the cup and pretending to take a sip. It was easier than arguing with her.

"Do what, dear?" Molly asked, taking a large drink of her own tea.

"How do you live with this constant fear?"

The question was so blunt, it actually took Mrs. Weasley by surprise. Her eyes widened slightly as she set her cup down and looked at Hermione appraisingly for a moment. She was saddened by the fact someone so young had dealt with so much. Her first instinct was to protect her, but deep down she knew it was too late for that. She recognized the pain in the young woman's eyes and knew that nothing she did was going to take it away.

"I wish there was some trick I could teach you," Molly replied as she sat back in her chair and regarded Hermione, "but there isn't. You just live with it, because you have no other choice."

"Sometimes it just overwhelms me," Hermione said rather candidly. "I worry about my parents and what will happen to them. I worry about Harry and what all of this is doing to him."

"Yes," Mrs. Weasley sighed. "We all worry about Harry."

"He's been through so much, and now with Sirius's death... he blames himself for it. He won't talk to either of us about it. He's pushing us away and trying to cope on his own," Hermione stated, before she realized what she was revealing and forced herself to stop.

"And you're worried about Ron?" Mrs. Weasley asked, after a prolonged silence.

"Yes," Hermione admitted, but she was reluctant to elaborate. She couldn't exactly tell his mother that she was afraid the reason Ron didn't apply himself more, or make plans for the future, was because he didn't really think he was going to have one. So rather than say anything else, she pretended to take another drink of her tea.

“But I won't let him do it,” she muttered to herself, setting her cup down as her eyes shifted to the book she'd placed on the table.
"Do what, dear?"

"Throw his life away," Hermione replied quietly.

"Who?" Molly asked with a pained expression. *Surely she's talking about Harry.*

"I'll find a way to stop it," Hermione replied grimly, her eyes still locked on the book.

"You can't block the Avada Kedavra," Mrs. Weasley said, her heart rate increasing the moment she saw the words *Curses that Kill* on the cover of Hermione's book.

"Watch me," Hermione stated, her voice hardened with determination.

Molly was so taken aback by the tenacity and defiance she saw blaze in Hermione's eyes that for a moment she didn't know how to respond. The look on the young girl's face was enough to convey just how serious she was. Thunderstruck, Molly just sat there and watched as Hermione rose up out of her chair, grabbed her book off the table, and marched out of the kitchen.
Chapter 10: Schemes and Skirmishes

Hermione's nightmares continued, but she absolutely refused to drink any more of Mrs. Weasley's 'special' tea. In fact, she wouldn't drink anything Mrs. Weasley gave her. Not after an unfortunate incident in which Molly tried to spike her morning pumpkin juice. Of course, being the bright girl that she was, Hermione realized what was going on the instant she started to feel groggy. And rather than let the offense pass unchallenged, Hermione waited for Molly to turn her back, then quickly swapped glasses with Fred, and sat back to watch what would happen.

Needless to say, the rest of the family had been more than a little taken aback when 15 minutes later, Fred started to sway like a drunken sot and promptly passed out at the table. The two women were the only ones not gaping at Fred in disbelief when Bill pulled him out of his eggs. Neither of them said a word about what they'd done, but it was fairly obvious to everyone, except poor Fred who was sound asleep, what had happened.

Having made her point, Hermione let the issue drop. She never mentioned it around Ron's mother, although eventually she did tell him and Ginny what had happened, much to their glee. The two siblings couldn't help but find the entire incident hilarious, considering it had been Fred that had ended up using his plate as a pillow. For the younger Weasleys it was poetic justice, considering all the times Fred had tricked one, or both of them, into testing one of his inane concoctions. It was about time some one turned the tables on him and gave him a dose of his own medicine.

Of course Ron wasn't exactly pleased with his mother. Deep down he knew that her heart had been in the right place, even if her methods were a little underhanded, but he still didn’t like it. He couldn't say he was all that surprised though. His mother wasn't used to people disregarding her advice. When she told someone to do something, they did it. Hermione was obviously going to be the exception to that unwritten rule.

As far as Hermione was concerned, the fact that she didn't like how the tea made her feel was all the reason she needed not to drink it. Apparently his mother disagreed. But seriously, spiking Hermione’s pumpkin juice? What was that going to accomplish, really? Sure, she would have gotten some undisturbed sleep, but eventually she would have woken up, and when she did, she would have been spitting mad. Ron figured it was probably better for everyone that Hermione realized what was happening and took the passive-aggressive stance she did. Merlin knows a little bit of tension was preferable to a full-on brawl between two headstrong women who believe they are right.

Being a guest, Hermione was not likely to complain and Ron knew that she was not comfortable arguing with his mother. But just because she held her tongue, that didn't mean she was going to be controlled. She'd told his mother once that she didn't like the way that potion made her feel and that was all she was going to say about the matter. She didn't want it. She wouldn't drink it. And if that meant not drinking anything she didn't serve herself, then so be it. It was simple enough to politely refuse any drink she was offered at the family meals. She did periodically drink from Ron's cup though, which spoke volumes.

Ron wasn't entirely sure if she did it because she was thirsty, or if she was trying to make a subtle point. He suspected the latter. Not that it really mattered all that much to him. He didn't mind if she drank out of his cup as long as he could tease her about it.

One night at dinner, he went so far as to suggest Hermione borrow one of Moody's hip flasks, but all he received for his efforts was a particularly scathing glare from his mother. She was much more
sensitive about the jokes than Hermione, who seemed indifferent to them. Even so, the jokes didn't really lose their appeal until he caught Hermione eyeing her food suspiciously. Either she really was becoming as paranoid as Moody, or his mother had tampered with her dinner; neither of which was acceptable.

Fearing what would happen if Hermione stopped eating, Ron cornered his mother the next time he found her alone and asked her not to add anything 'special' to Hermione's meals. It was a bit awkward at first, but he had no choice, really. Not drinking tea or pumpkin juice was one thing, but he wasn't about to let his mother put Hermione off food. It took some doing and a lot of explaining, but eventually he managed to convince her to back off.

After their conversation, he'd appealed to Hermione, on his mother's behalf, but it was only a half-hearted attempt. Ron knew there was no reasoning with her once she dug her heels in. She was too damn stubborn. She'd drop from exhaustion before she'd relent, if for no other reason than to make her point. But the lack of sleep was starting to take its toll on her. He knew she was already irritable and he saw no reason to tempt the beast. Arguing with her wouldn't accomplish anything, so he backed off as soon as she got huffy and resolved to take care of the situation in his own way.

A few hours later Ron was lying flat on his back, sound asleep, despite the awkward position he was in. Of course when he grabbed his pillow and slipped into the study near the girls' bedroom, it never dawned on him that the sofa was too short for him to lie down on comfortably. He'd only been thinking about Hermione and whether or not he'd be able to hear her if she had another nightmare. But if she was anything like Harry or Ginny, he suspected he would, provided he left the doors open. And if not, he'd still be there, waiting for her. She almost always came to the study when she couldn't sleep. At least that's what Ginny had told him.

But it wasn't Hermione that woke Ron up, it was her bothersome cat. Of course waking him up from a sound sleep was not an easy task. Knocking his chessboard off the table had no effect whatsoever. Noise obviously wasn't the solution. He was used to sleeping under a particularly loud ghoul after all. There was only one way to do it, and that was up close and personal.

Of course Crookshanks was smart enough to realize the risk involved. The rapport he had with this particular human was tumultuous at best. They tolerated each other, when Hermione was present, because they had no choice. When she wasn't around, all bets were off and they were free to act on their mutual resentment towards one another.

It would have been so much easier if she had just picked the other boy. But she wanted this one. The one with the temper. The ginger-haired boy that was always shouting at her. The one that made her cry. He was the one she called out for in her sleep. He was the one she wanted to comfort her.

With agile grace, the large ginger cat sprang off the tabletop and landed square in the middle of the hot-headed boy's chest, but he kept his lithe body taut so he could bound aside the moment the boy showed signs of life.

"BLOODY TOSSER!" Ron shouted, sitting upright and spotting the cat, who was now standing in the doorway. "YOU DID THAT ON PURPOSE!" he snarled, grabbing his pillow and heaving it towards the door. "What? Couldn't find any spiders to throw at me, so you thought you'd just throw yourself at me instead?" he asked as he placed his bare feet on the floor.

The moment he was upright, Crookshanks bolted into the hall.

"Bloody menace," Ron mumbled under his breath as he stomped his way across the room and out
into the hall to retrieve his pillow. "Has nothing better to do than -- Coward," he hissed the instant he
spotted the cat's head protruding from the cracked doorway leading into the girls' bedroom. "First
you attack me while I'm asleep," he said accusingly, as he advanced on the cat, "and then you
scamper off and hide in there, because you think I won't come after you."

But to his surprise, Crookshanks didn't retreat. He stood his ground until Ron reached the doorway
and only then did he duck his head inside. For a moment, Ron considered shutting him inside and
going back to bed, but he'd cracked that door open for a reason and if he shut it now, he wouldn't be
able to hear Hermione if she needed him.

Stupid bloody cat, Ron thought, as he pushed to door open a little wider and peered inside. I may as
well check on her as long as I'm here.

As he expected, Crookshanks was perched at the end of Hermione's bed, but he wasn't doing it to
taunt him. The cat wasn't glaring at him. His ears weren't down. His back wasn't arched. His tail
wasn't moving. There was absolutely nothing confrontational about his stance. He simply looked
uneasy, and with good reason. The bed was a mess and the sheets were tangled in knots around
Hermione's feet. She was still asleep, but she'd obviously been tossing and turning for some time.

Disregarding the cat, Ron approached the bed to wake her. But somehow, she seemed to sense his
presence and her eyes shot open just as he leaned down to touch her shoulder.

Hermione gasped loudly and immediately shrank away from the dark form looming over her bed.

"It's just me," Ron whispered in a hurried attempt to make himself known before she could pull her
wand on him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Ron?" Hermione asked uncertainly as she tried to slow her racing heart. "What were you doing?"

"You were having a nightmare," he replied, grabbing the blankets that were twisted around her legs,
shaking them out, and repositioning them where they ought to be. "Budge over," he added, climbing
into her bed and lying down beside her.

"Something I can do for you?" Ron asked, when he noticed his sister was propped up on her elbow
staring at them.

"N-no," Ginny replied, dropping back down and immediately turning her back to them.

"You shouldn't be in here," Hermione protested quietly.

"And you shouldn't refuse Mum's tea," Ron shot back, scooting closer and draping his arm over her.
"Now be quiet and go back to sleep," he added, entwining his hand with hers and resting them on
her stomach.

"You know why I won't take it."

"We aren't going to be attacked."

"And what happens when I become dependent on it?"

"I didn't come in here to fight with you, love," Ron said, pressing his body to hers. "Just to sleep."

"Fine," Hermione relented. It was hard to object with him spooning her, the way he was. Just being
near him, and having his arm around her, was enough to put her mind at ease. She didn't really want
him to go. And Ginny didn't seem to mind, so really, what was the harm? After all, they were just
"You're sure you don't mind if he stays in here?" Hermione asked Ginny again as they got dressed the next morning. "Really, it's ok. I'll understand if you do."

"You slept better with him here, didn't you?" Ginny asked in return.

"Well, yes, but--"

"And all you're going to be doing is sleeping, right?"

"Of course that's all we'll be doing," Hermione said, her voice dripping with indignation. "Honestly."

"Then why should I mind?"

"I don't know. Isn't it odd having your brother sleep in the same room as you?"

"No," Ginny answered. "It's not as if we haven't shared a room before."

"You have?" Hermione asked, the shock evident in her voice. "But--"

"I didn't get my own room until Bill and Charlie moved out."

"Oh," Hermione replied. "But... well, that was different, wasn't it? I mean, you were both younger. I don't want to make my problem yours. I can go to his room," she suggested.

"Are you mad?" Ginny scoffed. "Do you have any idea what Mum would do if she caught you two shacking up in Ron's room?"

"We aren't going to shack up," Hermione stated defensively. "All we're going to do is sleep."

"Yeah? Try explaining that to Mum!" Ginny scoffed.

"This really isn't funny."

"I know," the young redhead replied. "I'm sorry. Look, it isn't a big deal. Ron and I... well... you know how it is," she said awkwardly. "We're the youngest and we got left out a lot when we were little. Bill and Charlie were always off doing stuff together and Percy didn't like to be bothered. Fred and George always had each other and... well... I had Ron. Even after we got our own rooms we were still really close. Sometimes... when I'd have bad dreams, I'd go up and sleep with him. He was always really great about it actually. Which is surprising considering he's normally such a prat. It's must be one of those big brother things. He's just looking after you."

"Except he's not my brother," Hermione said quietly.

"He cares about you though," Ginny stated as the two girls exited their room and headed downstairs to get some breakfast. "Which means he's going to be overly protective of you as well. Usually it's a pain in the arse, but sometimes... it can be sort of nice. Of course if you tell him I said that, I'll deny it."

As Ron regained consciousness, he started to feel the tingling sensation coursing down his arm. Hermione was a snuggler and after a few nights of sharing her bed, it became apparent to him that he
was her pillow of choice. As luck would have it, he tended to sleep on his back, which made it easy for her. Not that he really minded all that much. It was nice waking up with her in his arms, even if it did result in some occasional numbness.

Opening his eyes, Ron squinted at the window in an attempt to gauge what time it was. Damn, he swore, when he noticed the sky outside was a dark shade of blue and no longer black. The sun might not be up yet, but it would be up soon and so would his mother.

What he really wanted to do was close his eyes and go back to sleep, but he knew sleep would have to wait until he was back in his own bed. If he was careful, he might even be able to make it out without waking Hermione up.

She deserves a bit of a lie in, he thought, as he cautiously slid his arm out from under her.

She'd been sleeping much better ever since he started sneaking into her room, but she rarely stayed in bed once he left. Ron wasn't sure if her bad dreams had stopped or not. He suspected they had, but he didn't want to ask. They were the reason he was staying with her after all and if she was no longer having them, then he really had no excuse to sleep in her room. Not one his mother would accept anyway.

Of course deep down he knew his mother wouldn't really accept nightmares as an excuse either, which is why it as necessary from him to get back to his own room before anyone else was awake. He didn't really want to think about what she'd would do if she caught him. He'd worry about that when it happened and until then, he was just going to keep on doing exactly what he'd been doing. So what if it was becoming harder and harder to sleep next to Hermione without thinking about the other things the two of them could do together in a bed?

Mum, can't police my thoughts. I can think about it all I want, now can’t I?

Well, no, he couldn't. Not without his body reacting to the thoughts. And if he kept it up, sooner or later Hermione was going to wake up first and when she did, she was going to discover the state he was in. He'd be in for it then.

Still, it's not like it's my fault, Ron thought as he watched Hermione rolled over on her back and stretched out like a cat that had been curled up in a ball a little too long. How am I NOT supposed to react to that? he asked himself as stared down at her and took in the way her arm was thrown back above her head and his Chudley Cannons t-shirt was bunched up against her breasts, exposing her midriff.

Her skin was pristine, unlike his own, which was spattered with freckles. It was faultless; a perfect milky white and it fascinated him. Without thinking, Ron reached down and lightly ran his fingertips over her stomach as he admired it. She's so soft, he thought, as he moved his hand over her.

He jumped the instant he felt her hand descend on top of his. He hadn't realized she was awake. Embarrassed by the fact he'd been caught groping her, Ron tried to pull away, but to his surprise, Hermione held him firmly in place.

"There’s something I've been meaning to teach you," she said softly, guiding his hand over her stomach.

Oh god, Ron thought as he gulped loudly. "Ginny is right over there," he whispered, glancing at his sister's bed nervously.

"That's ok," Hermione said. "I'm going to teach her too."
"Huh?" Ron asked, his brow knitting in confusion. "What exactly is it you are going to teach her?"

"Feel this?" Hermione asked, pressing his hand down hard and running it along her ribcage, stopping just below her breast.

"What?" Ron questioned, staring at her chest.

"The place where my ribcage connects with my breastbone," Hermione answered. "Can you feel the end of my breast bone?" she asked, pressing down on his hand so he could feel it with his finger tips. "The point right here?"

"Y-yeah," Ron stammered, trying to figure out what she was getting at. Was this some sort of erogenous zone he didn't know about?

"I'm going to let go," Hermione said, sliding his hand back down to her stomach before releasing him. "I want you to find it again on your own," she instructed.

Ron stared into her eyes uncertainly for a moment, and then did as instructed.

"Good," Hermione said. "Now place two fingers over the end," she coached him, hiking her shirt up in the center to expose the area between her breasts.

Bloody Hell, Ron thought as his eyes locked on the cleavage she'd exposed.

"Pay attention, Ron," Hermione scolded. "What I'm showing you could save my life... or Harry's."

That definitely got his attention. "What?" he asked, searching out her eyes and realizing that she was serious. "What exactly are you teaching me?"

"It's a Muggle technique," she replied. "Used to bring the dead back to life."

"That's not possible," Ron insisted. "Not even with magic."

"Sometimes it is," Hermione informed him. "If a person stops breathing or their heart stops, this technique allows you to breathe for them and pump their heart manually. Muggle doctors use it all the time."

"Muggle doctors are a bunch of nutters," Ron scoffed. "I mean, look at the mad things they do. They stitch people up like ripped clothing, for Merlin's sake."

"That is a very effective procedure used by people who can't magically seal their wounds," Hermione retorted. "And this technique I'm going to teach you is just as effective. Don't be so narrow minded. Just because it isn't magic, doesn't mean it won't work."

"You can't bring the dead back to life, Hermione."

"Sometimes you can," she persisted. "It depends. For example, if someone drowns and this procedure is used on them right away, sometimes it's possible to bring them back."

"Are you going to push Harry in the lake or something?"

"What happens when someone is hit by the Killing Curse?" Hermione asked, ignoring Ron's attempt at a joke.

"They die," he replied soberly.
"How?"

"I don't know," Ron said, shrugging his shoulders. "They just drop dead."

"Are there any marks on the body?" Hermione grilled him. "Any trauma?"

"You know there isn't," he replied uncomfortably.

"Then why do they die?" she asked

"How the hell am I supposed to know?"

"It stops your heart," Ginny replied softly from across the room.

Ron and Hermione instantly turned around when they heard her and only then did they realize that she’d been sitting upright in her own bed, watching them.

"How do you know that?" Ron asked, studying his sister closely. "Moody... er... I mean Crouch never taught us how it worked."

"I don't know," Ginny replied, looking down at her sheets so she wouldn't have to meet her brother's gaze. "I just do."

"She's right though," Hermione said, giving Ginny a weak smile. She suspected that her friend's knowledge was the result of her prolonged contact with Tom Riddle, rather than something she'd learned from one of their many DADA teachers, but there was no point mentioning that. "It kills by stopping your heart. So I'm going to teach you both how to get the heart started again."

"If it were that simple, don't you think Mediwizards would be doing it?" Ron asked skeptically.

"I never said it was going to be simple," Hermione sighed. "This is just the first step. Now take your shirt off and get on the ground," she said, giving Ron a shove. "You get to be the first victim. Come on, Ginny," she added as she clambered out of bed herself and knelt beside Ron on the floor. "I'll show you how it works it's supposed to work."

The last week of July was rather chaotic, even by Weasley standards. Members of the Order seemed to be popping out of the woodwork and for the first time, Ron, Ginny and Hermione were not excluded from all the conversations. Of course that was due in large part to the fact that the mission being planned, while secret, had started out as their idea. Ron and Hermione, in particular, had an inside edge and the information they provided was invaluable. No one knew the target better than they did, which ensured most of the preliminary plans were run by them at some point, so they could predict his reaction.

Unfortunately they were the only ones that had no illusions as to how Harry was going to react to a surprise birthday party. They both knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was going to detest it. If there was one thing he hated, it was being fussed over. But no matter how many times Ron told his mother this, she just didn't seem to get it and despite all their efforts, she took the simple family get together they'd suggested and turned it into a three-ring circus, complete with identical ginger haired clowns.

The twins, Ron expected. They were Harry's friends and family. It was the rest of the guest list he objected to. The members of the Order that Harry barely even knew that would be there for 'security
reasons'. How was Harry supposed to relax and enjoy himself with a bunch of wizards stalking about Mrs. Figg's house as if they expected it to be attacked at any moment?

Happy Birthday, Harry. Have some cake. Mum made chocolate, just in case we all get attacked by Dementors. But then, you like chocolate, don't you? Yeah, Harry is really going to enjoy his party, Ron thought sarcastically as he glanced over at his mother who was deep in conversation with Mundungus Fletcher.

He couldn't help but smile as he noted the scowl plastered across his mother's face. It was nice to see her glower directed at someone else for a change. 'Old Dung' was clearly the last person she wanted to be talking to. Everyone knew that Mrs. Weasley disapproved of him, including Dung himself, which no doubt explained the fleeting looks the scruffy thief was shooting at the kitchen door. If he hadn't been put in charge of arranging things with 'Figgy,' Ron suspected he'd have been long gone by now.

"So," Ginny said, pulling up a chair and sitting down beside her brother. "Do you think it will cheer him up?"

"You're kidding, right?" Ron asked, shaking his head dubiously.

"It's a shame, really," Ginny sighed. "But I suppose we'll just have to make the best of it. Still, it will be nice to see him. I mean... I'm sure he'll be glad to see you and Hermione. That's bound to cheer him up a bit. Don't you think?"

"I don't know," Ron said, shrugging his shoulders. "I suppose," he added, disregarding his sister as he glanced over her shoulder at Hermione, who had disengaged herself from Bill and waylaid Mundungus when he made a beeline for the door.

What's she up to? he wondered, as Ginny continued to ramble on.

"... about what our idiotic brothers have planned? Personally, I hope Harry pulls his wand and curses the lot of them before he realizes who they are. It would serve them right. I mean honestly, jumping out of the corners and shrieking at him the moment he walks in the house?"

"What?" Ron said, dragging his attention back to his sister who had just uttered the words 'curse' and 'Harry' in the same sentence. "What are you talking about?"

"Fred and George's plan."

"Plan? What plan?" Ron asked, as he narrowed his eyes and shot a venomous glare in his brothers' direction. "What are those tossers going to do to Harry?"

"I just told you what they were going to do," Ginny replied crossly. "Weren't you listening?"

"Um... no, not really," Ron admitted, his eyes still locked on Fred and George, who had their heads together and were whispering furiously.

"I don't know why I even waste my time talking to you," Ginny said, obviously affronted by Ron's lack of attention.

"Wait," Ron cried when his sister jumped out of her chair and started to storm off. "What are they going to do?" he asked as he chased after her.

"You want to know?" Ginny replied, wrenching her arm from his grasp the instant he grabbed it. "Why don't you just go ask them yourself?"
For a moment Ron just stood there and stared at his sister's retreating form. *Girls,* he thought, shaking his head in wonder. He had no idea what he'd done to irritate her, not that it really mattered. His brothers and the scheme they were cooking up was all that really mattered now. The question was, what were they planning? *Only one way to find out,* Ron told himself, as he marched across the room to demand some answers.

"You don't suppose he'd actually rat us out," George asked his twin brother in a hushed voice, oblivious to the fact Ron was now standing directly behind them.

"Maybe we're being paranoid," Fred suggested hopefully. "I mean, she might just be talking to him about Harry or something."

"Yeah right," George groaned. "Look at him, mate," he added, when Mundungus glanced away from Hermione just long enough to shoot them a guilty look. "He's practically shaking in his boots. She's obviously threatening to tell Mum about--"

Unfortunately George's voice dropped so low that Ron wasn't able to make out the rest of the sentence.

"There is no way she could know about that," Fred replied softly. "We've been careful."

"Not so careful Harry didn't catch us," George reminded his brother.

"That was nearly a year ago," Fred protested. "Don't you think she would have said something by now, if she'd seen that?"

"Because Hermione doesn't store away useful bits of information and then use them against people later, does she?"

"Yeah, but we're family. She wouldn't blackmail us."

"She doesn't seem to have any qualms about going after Dung though, does she?" George said softly.

"You've got to admire her style though," Fred replied, the admiration evident in his voice despite his muted tone. "It's not every day you see a teenage witch intimidate a hardened criminal."

"Impressive, isn't she?" Ron said, finally making his presence known. It was quite satisfying to see his twin brothers jump and spin around to stare at him with something close to trepidation in their eyes.

"What are you doing?" Fred demanded.

"How long have you been standing there?" George added.

"Long enough," Ron replied with a smirk.

"Why you little--"

"Tut, tut," Ron interrupted, shaking his finger at Fred in a disapproving manner. "Better watch what you say. Unlike Hermione, I have no qualms about blackmailing family."

"Go ahead and tell her you little shit," Fred replied, calling his brother's bluff.

"OY! Mummmm--"
"Shut up," George hissed, covering Ron's mouth with his hand and cutting him off before he had a chance to get their mother's attention. "What do you want?" he asked, eyeing Ron warily as he released his hold on him.

"Whatever you're planning on doing to Harry, don't," Ron insisted. "Or I'll tell Mum what I just heard."

"We aren't going to do anything to Harry," Fred shot back instantaneously.

"That's not what Ginny said."

"Ginny? That's what this is about?" George asked, scanning the room for his sister's mane of long red hair. "She's still on about that whole 'surprise' thing?"

"Fine," Fred replied before Ron could change his mind. "Seems like a waste of good blackmail material to me, but whatever. You've got a deal. We won't jump out at Harry and yell surprise and in exchange you keep your big trap shut about us and Dung."

"That's it?" Ron asked skeptically. "That's what you were planning?"

"Yup," Fred answered with a smirk of his own. "But a deal's a deal, little brother."

"Is that so?" Hermione asked as she slipped up beside the three brothers. "Exactly what type of deals are you making?"

"As if you don't already know," George replied harshly. "I wouldn't be surprised if it were your idea in the first place."

"Sorry," she replied. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh really? And what exactly were you talking to Dung about so intently?" Fred asked.

"That's none of your business," Hermione fired back almost immediately.

"It is too our business," Fred snapped. "If you're threatening our supplier it's most definitely our business."

"Supplier?" Ron asked, glancing from the twins to Hermione. "What's Dung supplying them with?"

"Oh that?" Hermione chuckled.

"Wait a minute," George cried, as his eyebrow shot up in disbelief. "You didn't know?"

"Just a few Class C Non- Tradable Substances," Hermione continued.

"I know now," Ron sniggered.

"Bloody Hell!"

"Oh relax," Hermione replied, lowering her voice so no one but the twins and Ron would hear her. "I don't care where you get your Venomous Tentacula seeds or anything else for that matter. But since you're so interested in making deals, I've got one for you. You stay out of our business," she said, taking Ron by the hand and pulling him away from his brothers, "and we'll stay out of yours."
"How long have you known about their little arrangement with Dung?" Ron asked Hermione as she pulled him out of the kitchen and up to the ground floor.

"Close to a year," she replied offhandedly. "Ever since our Prefect party."

"That long?" Ron cried in amazement. "And you never bothered to tell me?"

If he'd been expecting a reply, he would have been sorely disappointed because Hermione simply shrugged her shoulders and continued to drag him up the stair and towards the first floor landing.

"I could have used that information," he grumbled. "It would have been dead useful, you know?"

"You would have wasted it on something stupid," Hermione sighed.

"I would not."

"You just did."

"No I didn't," he protested. "I didn't even know anything when I made that deal with them. I was bluffing."

"That's not the point," Hermione replied, tugging Ron into her bedroom and shutting the door behind them.

"Yes it is."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes, it is."

"No," Hermione insisted, as she bolted the door. "It isn't. This is the point," she continued, pulling a small glass container out of her pocket and holding it up for Ron to see.

"What the hell is that?" Ron asked, leaning forward and staring at the vivid blue cloud-like substance floating about in the phial.

He might not know what the substance was, but 'the point' was still crystal clear. Hermione didn't want anyone to find out about the things Mundungus was supplying his brothers with, because he was supplying her with things as well. Things like this blue vapor, whatever it was.

"This," Hermione said, popping her trunk open and stowing the phial inside, "is a Class B Non-Tradable substance. It's also the reason you and Harry got homework planners last Christmas. It took me the better part of a year to pay for it, so don't mess with it, because I can't afford to buy anymore."

"But what is it?" Ron asked again, eyeing the phial as if it were a bomb about to explode. Everyone knew that Class B Non-Tradables were dangerous, which is why they were restricted.

Hermione studied Ron intently as she slammed her trunk closed and locked it. It was time to test the waters and see how he'd react if she shared her research with him. "Botrytis Spoors," she replied in such a casual manner, you'd think they were a part of every 6th year student's potion making kit. Only the fact she pulled the key out of her trunk and squirreling it away in her front pocket, belied her blasé response.

"Botrytis Spoors?" Ron cried as all the color draining from his face. "But...Botrytis Spoors are toxic. If you don't handle them right...if they get loose and you breathe them--"
"Oh relax," Hermione cut him off. "There's an unbreakable charm on the phial. They aren't going to get loose. You're as bad as Mundungus. All this time he's been dragging his feet and putting me off with his absurd excuses. You'd think he was going to drop dead the moment he touched them, the way he was acting. Well, he should have thought about that before he took my money."

"Hermione," Ron growled, "This isn't a joke. Those things could kill you...or Ginny."

"Don't you think you're being a little overly dramatic?" Hermione asked as she rolled her eyes him.

"OVERLY DRAMATIC?" Ron shouted. "That trunk is full of books. HEAVY books."

"I told you, there's an unbreakable charm on the phial," she retorted. "And even if there weren't, there aren't enough spoors in there to kill anyone. We might get a little sick, but I hardly thing--"

"What the hell do you even need Botrytis Spoors for, anyway?" Ron demanded to know. "This has something to do with all that research you've been doing, doesn't it? Which means you've been working on it for at least a year."

"I said I'd been working on it for a while," Hermione fired back. She'd seen enough. There was no way she could tell him what she was planning. Not with so many members of the Order in the house. Downstairs or not, they'd still hear the row that would follow. She'd just have to wait.

"What have you been working on?" Ron asked in a voice that was eerily restrained. "What are you going to do with those spoors?"

"I'm not telling you anything until you calm down," she informed him.

"I am calm."

"Um hum," she muttered. "You're like the eye of a hurricane looking for a direction to squall. Well, you can just look somewhere else. I'm not going to be the reason for all your blustering and blowing."

"Hermione," Ron growled out her name in warning.

"What?" she asked, staring straight into his intense blue eyes.

How in the world am I going to get out of this now?

"Why did you go to so much trouble to get those spoors?"

"Because I need them for a potion I'm going to brew to help protect you, you great prat."

"Me?"

"Well... us," Hermione clarified.

"Oh," Ron replied, the fire in his eyes diminishing a bit. He naturally assumed that 'us' meant the two of them and Harry. "From... Vol... From him?" he asked in a near whisper.

"Among others," she replied. "But I'm not sure it will work yet. I'm still researching it. I might not even need them at all. But just in case I do, I wanted to have them on hand because Botrytis Spoors aren't exactly something we're going to be able to borrow from Snape. And don't even try to tell me that I can't brew it," Hermione said, throwing a reproachful look his way, "because I most certainly can. I'm not an idiot. I'm perfectly capable of using Botrytis Spoors without breathing in the lot of them and even if I did, I'd have to be in a confined space for them to do any real damage so you can-"
"All right," Ron said, cutting her off before she could get any further into her rant. "All right, already. If you can brew a Polyjuice Potion, I'm sure you can brew this. Whatever it is," he added in an attempt to placate her. "Just... be careful with them, ok."

"You aren't seriously going to lecture me about the benefits of caution, are you?"

"I wasn't lecturing you," Ron said, shooting her one of his lopsided grins. It was just like Hermione to remind him that he was the one prone to reckless behavior. "I just don't want anything to happen to you, that's all."

"Nothing is going to happen," she assured him, moving in closer and taking his hand in hers. "Not if I have anything to say about it." *Not once we drink that potion.*

"Ron, Ginny, your father and I need to speak with you for a moment," Mrs. Weasley informed her two youngest children the next evening after dinner.

As if her words were some sort of prearranged signal, there was a flurry of excuses as the rest of the family and Lupin abandoned their seats and made a mad rush for the door.

Taken by surprise, the pair looked at one another and then back at their mother.

"About what?" Ginny asked as she gingerly sat back down in her chair.

Unlike his sister, Ron remained standing, the empty plate he was about to bring to the sink still clutched in his hand.

Oh no, Hermione thought as she stood up with everyone else, only to watch them duck out of the kitchen and scurry for cover. *This is not good.*

Ron tore his eyes away from his mother and glanced at his girlfriend, who seemed to be frozen next to her chair. The instant their eyes locked, he knew she was thinking the same thing he was. Somehow his mother must have found out he'd been sleeping in her room and she was about to tell them off.

If only it had been that simple.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN WE CAN'T GO!!" Ron's angry voice resounded through the lower levels of the house.

"Sounds like she told them," Bill said to Remus Lupin, an instant before the moth eaten curtains covering Mrs. Black's portrait shot open.  

"BLOOD TRAITOR!!" The old witch in the painting screeched as the tall redhead stepped forward, grabbed the screen, and started tugging it closed. "FILTHY ANIMAL!!" she shouted at Lupin, who had stationed himself on the other side.  

"Either they're talking it better than I would have suspected, or Molly's shielded the room."

"Oh, he's still shouting," Bill assured his haggard looking companion, "and I'll wager he's not the only one."
Bill was right, of course. All hell broke loose the moment Mrs. Weasley told Ron and Ginny they wouldn’t be allowed to attend Harry’s party with the rest of the family. The row that ensued nearly shook the kitchen off its foundation. Three Weasleys in a temper was an intimidating sight. Even Hermione, who was used to dealing with Ron, was staggered by the scene that enfolded in front of her. Never in a million years would she dream of yelling at her mother the way Ron and Ginny were yelling at theirs.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Hermione knew that she ought to feel just as outraged as her friends. She knew that they were fighting for her as much as they were themselves, but she couldn’t bring herself to shout at Mrs. Weasley. The best she could do was stand there and offer Ron and Ginny her silent support. The odd thing was, she could see both sides.

Mrs. Weasley made some valid points. It would be safer for everyone, including Harry, if the guests all apparated to Surrey. She’d been right when she said that the Floo Network and the Knight Bus could be monitored. There was no telling how many spies Voldemort had planted at the Ministry by now and the last thing they needed was for him to discover that Harry was away from the Dursley’s house and the safety it provided him. That was just begging for trouble.

But then, Ginny's retort that they could use a Portkey had merit, too. Hermione had a sinking suspicion that Mr. Weasley, at least, agreed. When she caught his eye from across the room, he quickly suppressed his smile. Fortunately, his wife hadn't noticed his reaction. She was far to busy with her counter attack.

"Dumbledore has more important things to attend to. He can't be bothered with creating a Portkey just so you three can attend a party."

"FINE!" Ron shouted back at his mother. "Hermione can do it."

"What?" Hermione exclaimed, making her voice heard for the first time since the row began.

"Don't be ridiculous," Mrs. Weasley retorted.

"You know the spell, don't you?" Ron asked as he spun around and stared at Hermione startled face.

"Yes, but--"

"See," he said, whirling around to face off against his mother again. "You don't need to bother Dumbledore."

"I can't do it," Hermione said softly behind him.

"Of course you can," Ron insisted. "You can do anything you set your mind to."

"That's not what I mean," she replied. "I mean I won't do it."

"What?" he roared, outraged by her refusal. "Why the hell not?"

"Because she'd get expelled, you idiot," Ginny replied. "She's already in trouble with the Department of Magical Transportation for Apparating without a license."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about that," Ron admitted in way of an apology. "Well, Dad can do it then."

"Oh yes," Mrs. Weasley cut in. "There's a brilliant plan. In case you've forgotten, your father works..."
for the Ministry. Do you have any idea what would happen if he were caught creating unauthorized
Portkeys?"

"He won't get caught," Ron replied confidently.

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, son," Mr. Weasley piped in, "but I'm afraid your mother is right.
There's no way I can do it. Not with Fudge looking for an excuse to sack me."

THIS IS SO BLOODY UNFAIR!" Ginny yelled in frustration. "It's Harry's party. He'd want us
there."

"Yeah," Ron readily agreed. The Portkey idea wasn't working, maybe it was time to switch tracks
and throw a little guilt his mother's way. "We're his best friends. How's he going to feel if we're not
there?" he seethed. "The whole point was to help cheer him up. If you go and tell him it was too
dangerous for us to come, you're just going to depress him more."

"Be that as it may, you are still not going."

"But, Mum," Ginny whined.

"No," Mrs. Weasley stated firmly, cutting her daughter off. "I've had enough of this. You three aren't
going and that's the end of it."

"But--" Ron ventured.

"I SAID NO!" Mrs. Weasley shouted at her son. "It's far too dangerous. You two have already been
 targeted by Death Eaters once," she added, motioning at Ron and Hermione. "You will not set one
foot outside this house, and that's final."

"That's not fair," Ginny cried. "They aren't after me. Why do I have to stay here?"

"BECAUSE I SAID SO, THAT'S WHY!"

It was all downhill from there. Ron and Ginny had been a formidable team, but they never really
stood a chance. It was obvious to everyone that Mrs. Weasley was not going to relent. Not as long as
the safety of her children was an issue.

Hermione remained surprisingly silent as she followed Ron and Ginny upstairs after the row ended.
She was disappointed, of course. She would have loved to visit Harry and see the expression on his
face when the everyone surprised him, but there was part of her that could understand where Mrs.
Weasley was coming from. She wasn't about to admit that to Ron or Ginny, though. It was easier to
just sit back and let them vent without getting into it herself.

And vent they did. The two siblings spent the rest of the evening in the drawing room defaming their
mother and her unfair decision. Fortunately the rest of the family had sense enough to give them
some space, which was a relief. They were doing a pretty fair job of working each other up as it was,
and the last thing they needed was Fred and George popping in to add a little salt to their wounds.

"TO HELL WITH HER!" Ron declared as he paced around the room in a temper. "I'm going and
she can't stop me."

"You'll never get past the wards they're going to set up around Mrs. Figg's house," Hermione
interjected as she watched him tread back and forth in front of the sofa.

"BUGGER!"
"Don't swear."

"How can you just sit there like that?" Ginny asked in disbelief. "Aren't you upset?"

"Of course I am," Hermione replied. "But getting yourselves all worked up again isn't going to help. Fighting with her isn't the answer. And neither is sneaking out and flying to Surrey on your broom," she added, knowing that was probably what Ron was considering.

"Then what do you suggest?" Ron asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Hermione admitted. "The Portkey idea seems like our best bet. But I don't think we're likely to find anyone that can cast the spell without worrying about the consequences. Dumbledore is the only one I can think of that the Ministry has no hold over."

"A fat load of good that does us," Ginny retorted. "There has to be someone else that can do it. We just have to figure out who."

"McGonagall was just here," Ginny said a few days later after knocking loudly on the partially open door to the drawing room and entering the room. "She left our Hogwarts letters," she continued, sifting through the stack of envelopes in her hand and removing the one addressed to herself. "And your O.W.L. results." "WHAT!" Hermione shrieked, jumping out of her chair so fast, she upended the chess board she'd been hunched over. "They're here? Already?" she asked, staring at Ginny's outstretched hand with trepidation.

Ignoring the startled cries of the chess pieces that had just tumbled to the floor and scattered, Ron sat motionless on the sofa and gaped up at his sister. That is until Crookshanks, who had been sleeping in an empty chair, noticed everyone's attention was diverted and pounced on Ron’s Queen. "Oh no, you don't," Ron said, scooping the large ginger cat up off the floor before he could do any damage.

"Well?" Ginny asked, pushing the stack of letters towards Hermione. "Don't you want to know how you did?"

"I... I can't," Hermione replied, her voice barely more than a whisper. "You do it," she said, turning to Ron with a look of utmost horror plastered across her face.

"Okay," he responded, passing the squirming cat off to Hermione and taking the letters from his sister. "I knew it," Ron said with a grin, as he quickly scanned Hermione's results. "You got an O.W.L. in everything. Even... Muggle Studies? What did you sit that exam for? You don't even take that class anymore."

"I can still take the test if I want," she replied defensively as she dropped Crookshanks on the nearest chair and snatched her results out of Ron's hand. "I... Wait, I got an E," Hermione cried, wrinkling her nose up and glaring at the offensive mark in disgust. "I can't believe this! I got an E."

"But E's are great," Ginny said in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

"No, they're not," Hermione snapped, her eyes still glued on the parchment in disbelief. "I could have done better. I should have done better," she reproached herself. "If I hadn't been distracted I could have--"

"Of course you were bloody distracted," Ron said, cutting her off. "That evil cow attacked Hagrid
right in the middle of our exam. We were all distracted."

"They didn't take that into consideration though, did they?" Hermione replied crossly.

Ron had more sense than to answer her question. She might be angry with herself and Umbridge, but that didn't mean she wouldn't take it out on him if he gave her an excuse. It would be better for everyone if he just kept his mouth shut, especially since nothing he said was likely to make her feel any better. Diverting his eyes from Hermione, Ron tore his own letter open and focused on his results.

"Well?" Ginny asked, when she saw his mouth drop open.

"Eight," he answered, sounding just as bewildered as Hermione had when she saw the E she'd received in Astronomy. "I got an O.W.L in everything but History of Magic," he continued, scanning the marks again just to make sure he'd read them correctly. "I even passed Divination," he laughed. "I never would have seen that one coming."

"OH RON!" Hermione squealed, just before she launched herself at him. "I'm so proud of you," she cried, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly.

"You two are revolting," George said as he approached the open doorway and glanced into the room. "What's she on about anyway?" he asked his sister.

"O.W.L. results," Ginny replied.

"OY MUM!" George bellowed down the hall. "O.W.L. RESULTS ARE IN!"

"What did you go and do that for?" Ron hissed as Hermione disengaged herself from him and stood beside him, beaming.

"No need to ask how you did," George said, focusing on Hermione and completely ignoring his brother's question. "What about you, Ron?"

"He was bound to do better than you, wasn't he?" Ginny snickered.

"Well?" Mrs. Weasley asked, sweeping into the room and looking around excitedly.

"Hermione got twelve," Ron replied.

"Oh that's wonderful, dear," Mrs. Weasley cried, setting the basket of dirty laundry she'd been carrying down on the sofa and giving her a quick hug. "Your parents will be so proud. And?" she asked, releasing Hermione and turning on Ron. "What about you?"

"Er.." Ron muttered, afraid his reply might lead to a repeat of the Prefect scene that occurred the year before. Damn you, George.

"Oh come on, Ronniekins," George said, snatching the letter out of his brother's hand. "It can't be that bad. I take that back," he added, wrinkling his face up in revulsion the moment he saw Ron's marks. "This is appalling," he cried waving the parchment in the air and then thrusting it back at his brother as if it might contaminate him. "Eight? You got eight bloody O.W.L.s?"

"OH, RON!" Mrs. Weasley cried, throwing her arms around her son and kissing him on the cheek. "That's wonderful."

"MUM! Please," Ron begged, shoving her away as his face heated up. "Gerroff."
"Of course you'll have to work a bit harder this year if you expect to be made Head Boy. Your brothers got 12 O.W.L.s apiece, after all, and this year is your last chance to make an impression."

Hermione's smile turned into a scowl the instant Mrs. Weasley started comparing Ron's achievement to his brothers'.

"This is all your fault, you know?" George leaned over and whispered in her ear. "You keep this up and you'll turn him into--"

"Shut up," Hermione hissed, pushing him through the open doorway and into the hall before he could say anything else. "It's no wonder his self esteem is so low, what with you two constantly putting him down and your mother comparing him to everyone else."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist," George replied, more than a little taken aback by the unexpected attack. "Ron may be an idiot, but he knows a joke when he hears one."

"You don't even realize what you've done to him, do you?" she shot back, even as she tried to fight back her mounting anger. It wasn't George she was mad at. Not really. It was his mother. "Please, just let him have this one," she pleaded. "He worked hard for those marks and he should be proud of himself. Don't belittle his accomplishment and make him feel ashamed of doing well."

"OH GINNY! THAT'S FABULOUS!" Mrs. Weasley's voice carried out into the hall. "Please, George. Don't give him a hard time about this."

"Relax, already," George replied uncomfortably. "He knows we're only joking. It isn't a big deal."

"It is a big deal," Hermione protested. "Do you think I'd stoop to begging if it wasn't?"

"WHAT? YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!" Ron's angry bellow resounded from the other room. "IF SHE GETS TO GO, SO DO I!"

George and Hermione cut off their conversation immediately and ducked back into the room just in time to see Mrs. Weasley place her hands on her hips and square off against her youngest son. "Absolutely not!" she shot back, undeterred by the indignation on his face.

"What in the world?" Hermione asked, looking at Ginny for an answer.

"Ginny just tricked Mum into letting her go to Harry's party," Ron cried, so outraged his face had passed red and gone straight to purple.

"I didn't trick her," Ginny protested. "She said I could have anything I wanted for being made a Prefect and that's what I wanted."

"IF ANYONE OUGHT TO BE ABLE TO GO IT'S ME AND HERMIONE! WE'RE PREFECTS TOO, PLUS WE JUST GOT 20 O.W.L.S. WHERE'S OUR BLOODY REWARD? HE'S OUR BEST FRIEND, NOT YOURS!" he bellowed at his sister.

"RON!" Hermione cried, shocked by his rude retort. But she might as well have saved her breath, for all the good it did.

"YOU GOT YOUR BLOODY BROOM, SO SHUT UP!"

"BOTH OF YOU, STOP IT THIS INSTANT!" Mrs. Weasley roared over her bickering children. Ron and Ginny's squabbling stopped immediately, but the pair continued to glare at one another.
"If she can ride the Knight Bus, why can't I?" Ron asked, turning his glower on his mother.

"I already told you. Your father and I discussed it and it's just too dangerous for you and Hermione to leave the house right now."

"But Ginny--"

"They aren't after your sister," his mother interjected before he could argue any further. "They're after you two and Harry. If either of you get on that bus, everyone on it will become a target. Is that what you want?" she inquired. "Are you really willing to put all those people in danger?"

"No," Ron growled, anger radiating off him in invisible waves that everyone in the room could feel. "But--"

"No more buts," his mother said firmly. "You two aren't going and that will be the end of it," she declared, picking up her laundry and marching over to the door. "And just so you know, Bill and Tonks have volunteered to stay here while the rest of us are gone, so there's no point trying to sneak out. The doors and windows are going to be magically sealed and if you go anywhere near them, Bill will lock you in your room."

Hermione saw the word forming on Ron's lips and cringed, knowing it was going to come out while his mother was still within earshot.

"BUGGER!"

Mrs. Weasley froze in the doorway, her back to the room and listened to the string of curse words that tumbled out of her youngest son's mouth.

"That no good... bloody volunteering... stay here and mind me... lock me in my fucking room, will he? I'd like to see him fucking try."

"Ron," Hermione hissed, but her warning had no effect. Fortunately, Mrs. Weasley decided it was better to just let him rage and get it out of his system. Exhaling the breath she'd been holding, Molly marched out into the hall and out of sight. The moment she was gone, Ginny and George bolted for the door and headed in the opposite direction, leaving Hermione to deal with Ron.
Birthday Surprises

Author's notes:

Warning: This chapter contains a tremendous amount of information regarding Hermione's secret and is extremely important to the plot. It is not something I'd advise you to skim. In fact, I suggest you read the R/H sections at least twice. Her plan is rather complex and comprised of several different components. But honestly, would you expect any less from a brilliant girl like Hermione?

Be advised that this chapter ends with a cliffhanger. Generally I don't like to do that, but there was just no way around it this time. Those of you who are like me and can't stand to wait for a conclusion, may want to hold off on reading this installment until chapter 12 is up as well. Of course if you do that, everyone will know the secret but you.

Anyone that is feeling a little lost, is more then welcome to ask me questions here:


I am going to post a portion of Hermione's notes there as well, so you may want to pop over and give it a read. Keep in mind that the spell she created won't be there. She didn't write it down after all. It's buried deep within her head. What I'm going to post is more of a look into the thought process she used to come up with the spell. It's some of what she'll be showing Ron in the next chapter. Once she gets past his locked door and his thick head that is.

Chapter 11: Birthday Surprises.

Harry Potter didn’t know what day it was, or what time it was for that matter. Not that it mattered all that much to him anymore. He had spent the past week holed up in his bedroom with the curtains drawn, trying to hide from the world. Unfortunately, the world seemed rather reluctant to let him drop out of sight. He’d only managed two Dursley-free days, when his uncle came stomping up the stairs and decimated his solitude with shouts about ‘owls’ and ‘mad men in bowler hats’. Harry knew at once that the mad man Vernon Dursley was referring must be Alastor Moody. He hadn’t forgotten the way Mad-Eye had threatened his uncle in the train station at the beginning of the holiday. Apparently Vernon hadn’t forgotten either.

After barging into Harry’s room, his uncle had promptly produced a pad of yellow lined paper and demanded that Harry write to ‘his lot’ before anymore ‘miscreants’ or ‘scoundrels’ showed up on his doorstep. That was when Harry realized why his Uncle Vernon had invaded his sanctuary. He’d gone longer than three days without contacting anyone from the Order and they’d sent someone around to check on him. Whoever it was had probably threatened to come back if they didn’t hear from him by morning.

For a moment or two Harry had been tempted to do nothing, just to see what would happen. If his friends believed he was being abused, if they thought the Dursley’s had locked him up again, they might try and break him out. He might even be able to leave. But then he realized he had nowhere else to go. He couldn’t go to The Burrow. Ron and his family weren’t there anymore. His friends
were all living in Sirius’s house and that was the last place he wanted to be. He’d rather stay with the Dursleys than be locked up in his Godfather’s home. Being at Grimmauld Place would be too painful. He’d see Sirius everywhere he looked. But Sirius wouldn’t really be there. Sirius was nowhere. Sirius was gone. And as far as Harry was concerned, it was all his fault.

That settled the matter fairly quickly. Determined to stay where he was, Harry grabbed the pad and pen out of his uncle’s outstretched hand without saying a word. *I’m Fine,* he scribbled as quickly as he could and then he tore the sheet of paper off the pad, folded it in half and thrust it at Hedwig.

"I don’t care who you deliver it to,“ he told his owl as he stood up, opened his window, and held the curtains back so she could fly out. "Just give it to Ron or whoever you find there. It doesn't really matter."

His message sent and his uncle appeases, Harry had flopped back on his bed and resumed staring at the ceiling.

Not much had changed in the days that followed. Hedwig had returned at some point, laden with a package and two birthday cards; one from Ron and one from Hermione, neither of which he bothered to open. They lay side by side on his desk, next to the unopened present. He’d get to them sooner or later. It wasn’t as if they were going anywhere. He’d wait until he was hungry to check what was in the box. Knowing Ron, it was probably something chocolate.

But he wasn’t hungry just now. In fact, he hadn’t been hungry in days. He ate the food his aunt shoved though the cat flap at the bottom of his bedroom door, but he didn’t really taste it. It might as well have been cardboard for all the flavor it had.

"BOY!"

The sound of his Uncle Vernon bellowing at him from the foot of the stairs brought Harry back to reality.

“BOY! GET DOWN HERE!”

What now? Harry thought, glaring at the door resentfully as he rose off his bed. He hadn’t done anything. Why couldn't they just leave him alone?

"What do you want?" he asked as he reluctantly descended the stairs. "I didn’t do anything. I haven’t been out of my room. I’m not disturbing you. In fact, I’m doing exactly what you want. I’m pretending that I don’t exist."

But rather than take the bait, Vernon waited until Harry reached the foot of the stairs before he speaking again. "Off you go," he said, shoving the startled teenager out the open front door.

"What?"

"You better put some shoes on first," Mrs. Figg said, staring down at Harry’s mismatched socks and pushing him back inside the house. "And comb your hair while you’re at it," she added.

"Will somebody tell me what’s going on here?" Harry cried, gaping at Mrs. Figg in astonishment.

"I’ve had enough of you lazing about the house," his uncle informed him. " It’s high time you went out and helped earn your keep."

"What?"
“Mrs. Figg has some chores she needs done around her house and she’s been kind enough to pay you to do them,” he continued, waving two twenty pound notes under Harry’s nose. “Not that you’ll receive a single pence,” he added, shoving the money into his pocket. “This is the least of what you owe us. Now go get your trainers and then get out of my sight.”

“Ron,” Hermione groaned softly, as she tried and failed to push him off herself. "Please," she begged, tilting her head just enough to impede the passionate kisses he’d been bestowing upon her. Unfortunately, Ron misinterpreted her meaning and rather than stop, he simply moved his lips to her neck, thinking that was what she wanted.

They’d been going at it pretty hot and heavy every since his family had left Grimmauld Place. Upon reflection, Hermione realized that coming up to Ron’s room and falling into bed with him probably wasn’t the best way to start a conversation. But then, they did have the entire day to themselves. There was no reason to ruin it straight away. As long as she got to it before everyone else came back, that was all that really mattered.

Of course an hour of serious snogging had nearly driven the notion of telling him about her research completely out of her head. She was sorely tempted to drop the matter entirely. When she remembered about it at all, that is. Ron was very good at distracting her. It was difficult to think with his mouth, and his hands, doing the things they were doing. Besides, she didn’t want to think. Right now, she just wanted to enjoy the way Ron was making her feel.

I’m just going to upset him and he’s been upset enough recently, she thought, looking for a reason to justify not telling him. I have the rest of the summer to tell him about my research.

But you’ll never have another opportunity like this one, the annoying, rational side of her mind piped in. You’re not likely to get him alone again. Even when you’re back at school, there will always be someone around and this is DEFINITELY not something you want to risk anyone overhearing.

All right. I’ll tell him, she informed herself. I’ll do it in... ten minutes. Another ten minutes won’t hurt, she decided as she felt Ron’s hand slip off her breast and glide over her stomach. It was such a delicate caress, and yet it sent fire coursing though her veins. Fire and ice. Inside she was burning up, but on the outside, his touch had elicited goosebumps.

"You drive me mad," Ron muttered, as he placed his hands on either side of her, rose up, and scooted down her body, tracing the course his hand had just taken with a series of soft kisses as he went.

Hermione moaned, when his fingers plunged under her skirt and brush across her inner thigh. He certainly knew how to stoke the fires. He was barely touching her and yet she was practically breathless from it all. The rational part of her mind was all but lost. The aching, burning need had swirled around it and shoved it aside. Unfortunately, the instant Ron’s fingers slipped under the waistband of her knickers, the rational side woke up again and shoved back.

"Stop," she panted, almost against her own will. The rational side of her knew what he was about to do. It also knew that once he started that, she’d be lost entirely. There would be no sharing of secrets. There would only be kisses and caresses and feelings. Once he finished with her, she’d reciprocate and it would continue until they fell asleep in each other’s arms, the same way they had the night before. "We... can’t," Hermione said, much sharper than she intended to.

But intentional or not, her tone of voice caught Ron’s attention. It registered with him even before her words did. The weight of his body instantly shifted as he pulled up off her and repositioned
himself so he could search her eyes.

The instant he locked his baby blues on her, she saw the swirling emotions. The desire; the disappointment; his own frustration. But beyond all of that, there was confusion. He didn’t understand why she had stopped him. Even worse, he thought she was irritated with him, but he didn’t understand why.

"Sorry," Ron muttered, as he closed his eyes and attempted to get his raging hormones under control.

He still wasn’t sure what was going on. Just moments ago, she’d been begging him. Hadn’t she? Yes. She’d moaned out his name followed by the word ‘please’. Apparently she’d changed her mind somewhere between her plea and his capitulation. It was bloody infuriating, but there wasn’t a lot he could do about it. He’d just have to rein himself in and slow things down a bit.

"You didn’t do anything wrong," Hermione assured him as she sat upright and pulled her bunched up shirt down to cover her stomach.

"I shouldn’t have... pushed you."

"You didn’t push me," she insisted. "That isn’t why I stopped you. I ... well... there’s just something I need to talk to you about, that’s all."

"You want to talk?" Ron asked, staring at her in absolute disbelief. "Now? Can’t it wait?"

Obviously if she preferred talking to what he’d been doing, he wasn’t very good at it. But how did she expect him to get better if they didn’t practice?

"No. I’m afraid it can’t," Hermione replied. If I wait any longer I’ll never tell you.

"But... Mione," he whined. "This is the first time we’ve been alone... REALLY alone...all summer. It’s probably the only chance we’ll have to--"

"I know," she said quickly, cutting him off. This is the only chance I’ll have to tell you with no one else around to overhear it.

"I wasn’t trying to pressure you. Honest," he shot back sounding a little panicked. That’s it. It has to be. It was so bad she doesn’t want me to do it again. Only she’s too polite to tell me I’m a fumbling idiot. Or... BLOODY HELL. Maybe she’s going to tell me how to do it better.

"That’s not what this is about," she replied, but she avoided his eyes as she said it. "Please. This is important."

This is soooo not a conversation I want to have, Ron thought, his face burning at the mere idea. But his embarrassment turned into anxiety the instant he noticed the somber expression on her face. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear she looked like she was about to cry. This is bad. Really, really bad.

"Look, if I’ve done something to... You aren’t going to--" he sputtered, unable to finish the sentences for fear of hearing the words spoken out loud. "I know I’ve been an angry git lately, but please don’t--"

"Wait!" Hermione cried, reaching out to him the moment she realized why he was so distressed. "Oh, Ron. Just because I said I needed to talk to you, that doesn’t mean I’m going to break up with you."

"You’re not?" he said, breathing a silent sigh of relief.
"Of course not. Why would I possibly do something like that?"

"Because I’m an obnoxious prat and when I’m not shouting about something, I’m groping you like some crazed pervert."

"I don’t mind that so much," Hermione replied as she gave him a cheeky smile. "If I did, I certainly wouldn’t have come up here and slipped into your bed last night."

"You only came up here because I was mad at Ginny and I refused to come down to your room. All you wanted was a little comfort and I--"

"I came up here because I wanted to be with you, Ron," Hermione assured him "Not because I had a nightmare. And you weren’t the only one with roaming hands," she added, her face flushing as she thought back on the liberties she had taken. Without Ginny in the room to keep them in check, there had been a great deal of kissing and heavy petting before either of them had actually fallen asleep.

"So you aren’t mad at me for... touching you?"

"No," she said, but her face flushed again at the memory of the places his fingers had been and the wanton sounds they’d coaxed from her.

"But, you don’t want me to do that again? You just stopped me."

"That’s not why I stopped you. I just... I need to talk to you and if we go there, I’ll forget what I have to say."

"Okay," Ron said, staring at her nervously as he tried to mentally prepare himself for whatever he was about to hear. Whatever she was about to tell him was bound to be bad. She’d just interrupted a perfectly good snogging session, after all. "So," he said, taking a deep breath and letting it out. "What is it you need to say?"

"I...uh--" Hermione stammered, then stopped and took a deep breath of her own to steady herself. "I think I might have come up with a way to block the Killing Curse."

"WHAT?" Ron asked, his eyes going wide as he gaped at her in disbelief. He’d been running over a list of possible problems in his head, but that particular possibility never even entered his mind. "That’s... that’s not possible."

"Yes it is," she snapped, more than a little insulted by his lack of faith in her abilities. "All it takes to create a spell is a little imagination and a lot of research."

"That’s not what I meant," Ron fired back. "There are rules and restrictions you have to follow. They have a whole section devoted to this type of thing in the Improper Use of Magic Department."
It’s located on the same floor as my dad’s office. You have to submit proposals and follow their guidelines. And after you’ve done all that, you have to meet with a committee and let them run all kinds of barmy tests. If you don’t jump through the Ministry’s hoops you could get in serious trouble."

"I’m not worried about that," Hermione admitted.

"They’ll haul you in for questioning. They could arrest you," Ron said, almost as if he were trying to scare her. "And even if they don’t," he continued. "They’ll probably expel you from Hogwarts."

They can’t arrest me OR expel me if I’m dead, Hermione thought sadly.

"Not that it matters in this particular case," Ron persisted when she remained silent. "Because you can’t block the Killing Curse. It’s not possible."

"The Killing Curse is generated through hate," Hermione said as the tears she had been trying to hide brimmed and started to cascade down her cheeks. "You just need something that is stronger than the hate to shield yourself with. Love is stronger than hate. It’s the strongest force there is. It can withstand time and distance. It can overcome hurt feelings and betrayals. Sometimes it’s even strong enough to persevere after death. The love Harry’s mother felt for him is still with him, even today. The counter curse is powered by love."

"Even so," Ron objected, his heart thumping so wildly, it felt as if it had jumped out of his chest and lodged itself in his throat. "There’s no way you can know if it’ll work. It’s just a theory, right? You'll still have to submit it to the committee."

"It’ll work," Hermione insisted.

"But you can’t be sure. You’ll have to--"

"It’s already worked, Ron."

"What? You didn’t bloody try it did you?"

"Of course not."

"Then how--" Ron started to ask, but even as he did the pieces came crashing together in his mind. "Wait," he whispered, the color draining from his face. "The only person to ever survive that curse was Harry."

"That’s right," Hermione said, as she saw the comprehension in Ron’s wide eyes. "He was saved by his mother's love."

Breathe, Ron reminded himself as he stared at her in horror. "She died, Hermione."

"I know," Hermione whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. "It’s an act of desperation. A last resort. The counter curse is the exact opposite of the Killing Curse. Rather than kill with hate, you sacrifice out of love."

"Sacrifice what?" Ron asked, even though he was fairly sure he already knew the answer. And he didn’t like it. Not one bit.

"Yourself," she replied solemnly. "You give up your own life to protect the life of someone you love."
"NO!" Ron shouted, but it was fear talking rather than rage. "There has to be another way."

"There is no other way."

For a moment or two all Ron could do was sit there and gape at Hermione in shock as everything she’d said sank in. It couldn’t have been more than a few seconds, but during that time, several thoughts shot through his mind.

How am I supposed to react to this? What am I supposed to say? No fucking way am I going to let her do something like that. But then it’s not really all that different than what I was planning on doing, is it? And it could be useful to know, just in case. But I’ll have to make sure she doesn’t get the chance to use the spell herself. That means I’ll have to keep a close eye on her the next time we get in trouble. A silencing charm would prevent her from saying the incantation. What is the incantation? I’ll need to know what it is.

"All right," he sighed, sounding utterly defeated. "What’s the spell?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but before she uttered a single sound, she seemed to change her mind and close it again. "I'm not going to tell you," she whispered, looking at Ron sadly and shaking her head at him. "I'm sorry."

"Hermione," Ron growled as he reached out and grabbed a hold of both her arms. His whole body was shaking now. She felt it the instant his fingers locked onto her. She wasn’t entirely sure if it was suppressed rage or fear, not that it mattered. She knew what would happen if she told him how to cast her spell.

"I’m not going to tell you, Ron," she said softly, knowing that the words that were about to leave her lips would push him over the edge, but that he needed to hear them all the same. "It has to be me."

"NO!" he shouted, recoiling from her as he did so.

The pain she saw in his eyes nearly broke her heart, but she had to continue. He had to understand why. "Harry needs you," she sobbed, unable to keep her own anguish inside any longer. "He needs you more than he needs me. He’ll fall apart without you."

"BOLLOCKS!!" Ron roared. "I WON’T LET YOU DO IT!"

"I don’t want to do it. I don’t want to die," Hermione moaned and then she threw herself on him. "I don’t want to lose you," she said, hugging him tightly. "Oh god--" Unable to finish, Hermione broke down completely and cried in Ron’s arms. Then without warning, she pulled away from him and ran out of the room.

Ron was so stunned that he just sat on the edge of the bed, trying to comprehend what had just happened.

No, he thought.

It was the only word his brain seemed capable of forming.

No, he thought again, wiping away his own tears before they could fall.

"No," he said quietly, unwilling to accept what he’d just heard. "NO!" he shouted, as he jumped off his bed and chased after Hermione.
Despite the fact that she was at a party, Ginny was not enjoying herself. She should have been thrilled. She’d done the impossible. She’d gotten her mother to relent. Anyone that knew Molly Weasley reasonably well would agree that it was quite a feat. Ginny had bested her mother. She was here, at Harry’s birthday party. She was here, but her brother and his girlfriend were not. And therein lay the problem.

Ginny had spent the past 40 minutes watching her brother’s best friend become more and more despondent. Oh, he put up a good show for a while. He’d been genuinely shocked when he arrived and he was truly flattered by the effort that went into his party. No one had ever thrown Harry Potter a birthday party after all. The fact that his friends would go to so much trouble for him had touched him. The problem was, the two friends he’d wanted to see the most weren’t there. Not because they didn’t want to be, but because they couldn’t be.

No one had actually come out and told Harry why Ron and Hermione were absent, but he was a smart young man. It didn’t take someone as brilliant as Hermione to put the pieces together. Fred had already told him that his mother had them under house arrest at Grimmauld Place. That’s why they weren’t there. They were stuck in that grimy old house and they’d spend the rest of the summer locked up there, because of him. Because he’d turned them into targets.

Harry tried not to let his disappointment show. He tried to hide the dejection he felt. He smiled when her Mrs. Weasley hugged him. He even laughed at a few of the twins’ jokes. But Ginny wasn’t fooled. She had spent the better part of four years studying the young man with the tousled black hair and glasses. She could read him like a book. She knew he wasn’t happy. She knew that he was blaming himself for something that was beyond his control. She knew he felt guilty. Ginny knew the path he was treading, because she’d walked it herself. None of this was Harry’s fault. Ginny knew that. The problem was, Harry didn’t.

Oh well, Ginny thought as she glanced over at Harry, who was now sitting alone, staring out the window while mutilating a perfectly good piece of birthday cake. Hermione did warn me this would happen. She said he’d withdraw and try and push everyone away. She also told me not to put up with it.

You’ll have to stand up to him, she replayed Hermione’s advice over in her head. You’ll have to get in his face and refuse to go away, no matter what he says to you. It’s nothing personal. It’s just what Harry does when he’s upset. You have to make him realize that you’re not going to leave. It’s a test. He wants you to go away, but at the same time he wants you to stay, because if you stay, it means that you care. He needs to know that you’ll stand by him no matter what. But at the same time, you have to show him that you won’t put up with any of his rubbish. Don’t let him sulk. When he starts acting like a prat, call him on it. He’ll respect you more for it. Plus once he sees he can’t push you around, he’ll stop trying.

"You know, I can think of better ways to smash that cake," Ginny said, as she pulled a chair up beside Harry and sat down. "Fred’s arse topping the list."

"What?" Harry asked, prying his eyes off the window and locking them on his unexpected companion.

"That mangled lump that used to be cake," she clarified. "If you’re not going to eat it, you can discretely set it down in his chair. Maybe if he has a huge stain on the back of those hideous dragon hide pants, he’ll toss them out. He thinks he looks good in them. I think they make him look like a gigantic frog."

"I didn’t think they were that bad."
"Not that bad?" Ginny moaned. "His legs are covered with green scales. At least George had sense enough to get red ones."

"I suppose," Harry muttered, using the same tone Ron used whenever he wasn’t really listening to her.

All right, Ginny thought as she watched Harry shift in his chair so he could resume staring out the window. *Joking didn’t work. Maybe some good old-fashioned sarcasm will get his attention.*

"So this is how it’s going to be, is it?" Ginny asked, forcing herself to sound irritated. "You’re just going to sit over here all alone and continue to brood."

"Yeah, I think so," Harry replied. "It’s my birthday. I ought to be able to spend it how I want."

"I didn’t spend the past three days fighting with Mum so I could attend the Harry Potter Pity Party," she responded. "So snap the hell out of it. You’re 16 years old. Don’t you think it’s time you grew up a little?"

"Excuse me?" Harry cried, dropping the mangled cake to the floor as he spun around and gaped at Ginny in shock. "You don’t know what I’m--"

"Don’t I?" Ginny hissed, cutting Harry off. "Rather than sitting here feeling sorry for yourself, maybe you ought to think about someone else’s feelings for a change. You aren’t the only one that loved him, Harry. And you aren’t the only one that lost him."

"You don’t know what you’re talking about," Harry cried. How dare she talk about Sirius. She barely even knew him. She didn’t know what he had lost. "I didn't ask for your opinion, so why don’t you just SHUT THE HELL UP!"

"Have you even considered how hard this must be for Professor Lupin?" Ginny asked, completely undeterred by Harry’s outburst or the people she knew must be staring at them by now. "Sirius was his best friend. The only true friend he had left. He’s lost everything and everyone that ever mattered to him," she continued. "You still have your friends. You still have a family. He has no one. No one but you. And every time he reaches out to you, you push him away. I’ve seen the pain in his eyes when he comes by after visiting you. We all have. But he keeps trying because he loves you and you’re all that he has left. He isn’t going to give up on you. None of us are. And sitting here, feeling sorry for yourself, isn’t going to do you, or anyone else, any good. But maybe if you went over there and actually talked to him you could help heal each other."

All the anger that Harry had been feeling was instantly buried under the deluge of guilt that washed over him. Prying his wide eyes off Ginny, he ventured a quick glance over at Remus Lupin, who was chatting with Mr. Weasley. "I... I can’t," he whispered, dropping his gaze to the floor. "I don’t know how he can even stand to look at me after what I’ve done. What am I supposed to say to him?"

"What happened wasn’t your fault," Ginny replied sympathetically. "Anymore then it was Hermione’s fault. She blamed herself for a while, you know."

"Why?" Harry asked, jerking his head up in shock. "She wasn’t even conscious."

"Because she thought it might be a trap and she didn’t stop you," Ginny explained. "She told me that Professor Lupin overheard her talking to Ron about it. Do you want to know what he told her?" Ginny asked, but she didn’t wait for him to respond. "He told her that Sirius knew the risks and that those risks were what made it exciting for him. He told her that he’d been cooped up for far too long..."
and he just couldn’t resist the idea of having another adventure. He said that Sirius died the way he would have wanted to and that the only one to blame for what happened was Lestrange. Professor Lupin doesn’t blame Hermione and he doesn’t blame you either, Harry. Because it wasn’t your fault.

"If I HAD listened to Hermione, if I had just stayed at Hogwarts or checked it out better, he’d still be alive."

"If I hadn’t opened that diary; if I hadn’t poured my soul out to Tom Riddle, the Chamber of Secrets never would have been re-opened and nobody would have been petrified. Do you think that was my fault?" Ginny asked. "Do you blame me for what happened to Hermione and the others?"

"Of course not," Harry replied honestly. "That wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t help it. Voldemort was controlling you."

"He tricked me," Ginny amended. "But I allowed him to do it. I knew better than to trust an object that could think for itself. Dad’s warned us about it enough times. But I didn’t listen. Not to him. Not even to myself. I went right on writing in that blasted thing even after I realized something was wrong. I could have told someone what was happening, but I didn’t."

"But you didn’t really know. You didn’t know what you were doing. I did. I knew and I went anyway."

"He tricked you, Harry. He might have gone about it a different way, but he manipulated you just like he manipulated me. It wasn’t your fault. There was no way you could have known that the vision you had was planted and not real."

"Hermione knew," Harry muttered.

"No, she didn’t. Not really," Ginny assured him. "She suspected that it might be a trap, because that was the type of thing Voldemort would do, but she didn’t know for sure. She told Ron that she considered cursing you for a moment, but that she was afraid you might be right and she didn’t want anything to happen to Sirius. She wanted to save him too. The vision you had about Dad was real. There was no way you could have known that the one you had about Sirius was fake. It wasn’t your fault. And don't think I’m going to let you distract me. Now quit stalling and go over there and talk to Professor Lupin. It’ll do you both good."

Harry studied Ginny intently for a moment and then shifted his gaze back over to the haggard fellow whose salt and pepper hair stood out like a sore thumb among the sea of ginger that surrounded him. "What do I say?" Harry asked, rising up out of his chair with a sigh.

"Hello is always good to start," Ginny replied. "Thanks for the gift might work too."

"I didn’t open his gift."

"Well then, open it and after you’ve done that, you can go talk to him."

"All right," Harry replied, shuffling his feet as he started to walk away. "You know," he said, turning around to face Ginny again. "I never knew you were so bossy."

There’s a lot about me you don’t know, Ginny thought. "Yeah well, it’s more entertaining to sit back and watch Hermione bully you two. Doesn’t mean I won’t step in when I need to, though. So stop your stalling and get to walking."

"All right," Harry said, giving her a weak smile. "I'm going. I'm going."
Ron didn’t bother knocking. When he reached the room Ginny and Hermione shared, he threw himself against the door, expecting it to be locked. But to his great surprise, it wasn’t. It wasn’t even completely shut. The door gave way so effortlessly that it was all he could do to prevent himself from falling flat on his face as he stumbled into the room.

The door slammed into the wall with a resounding bang and immediately alerted Hermione to her boyfriend’s presence. Not expecting such a loud entrance, she jumped and tore her eyes off the stack of parchment she’d been riffling through just in time to see Ron reach for a chair and steady himself.

"I WON’T LET YOU DO THIS!" Ron bellowed when he spotted her standing behind her desk. It was then that he noticed the books and papers spread out over the surface. Upon seeing them, he was seized by an overwhelming urge to rush forward and tear them to shreds. If he destroyed her research, he might just be able to stop her.

"It’s not there," Hermione said, discerning his plan the instant it crystallized in his mind.

"DAMN IT!" Ron thought, flicking his eyes back up and locking them on hers in an attempt to gauge whether or not she was telling the truth. Why else would she run back here and rummage though these bloody papers unless she was trying to get rid of it before I could find it?

"It’s not there," Hermione repeated, her face impassive and unreadable.

"BUGGER!" Ron silently railed. How does she do that?

He knew that she wasn’t anywhere near as calm as she appeared. She’d been a sobbing mess when she ran out of his room. Her mind had to be churning with emotions and yet not one of them was showing through. Her face was as expressive as a brick wall. Bloody partitions. That’s what it is. She’s shoved it all aside and covered it with those damned mental walls of hers.

"I’m not stupid enough to write it down," Hermione informed him, tapping her forehead to let him know where the spell was located. "But you’re welcome to look if you like."

"I’ll stop you," Ron stated with a surprising amount of confidence. "Even if I have to curse you to do it. I’ll hit you with a silencing charm so you can’t utter the incantation or I’ll... I’ll tell Dumbledore."

Ron wasn’t entirely sure how he expected Hermione to react to his threat. Anger seemed like the most logical reaction. Anger he could handle. A little concern would have been nice. At least then, he’d know that he’d gotten to her. The last thing he expected was for her to laugh at him. But laugh she did. How the hell was he supposed to deal with that?

"When did we become each other?" Hermione chuckled.

"WHAT?" Ron asked, clearly insulted by the fact that she didn’t take his threat seriously.

"I tell you about my reckless plan and you threaten to tell on me," she guffawed.

"It’s not reckless, Hermione. You’re talking about bloody killing yourself."

"What about you, Ron?" Hermione asked, becoming stone cold sober so fast, it nearly made his head spin. "Can you look me in the eye and tell me you aren’t planning on throwing yourself in front of Harry and acting as a human shield to protect him from that blasted curse? Look me in the eye and promise me you won’t do that."

"FUCK!" Ron roared, grabbing the chair he’d used to regain his balance and heaving it across the
room with such force that it splintered when it collided with the wall. "I can’t," he reluctantly admitted, "but I’d only do it if I had to. If there was no other way."

"Only if I have to," Hermione echoed his own words back at him sorrowfully. "Hopefully it will never come to that. And you have no right to be angry at me for doing the exact same thing you’re planning on doing. The only difference here is I don’t need to be standing right next to Harry to protect him. As long as I can see him, I can shield him. Fortunately, I think things through a bit more than you two do. Unlike you, I’m not reckless and I have no intention of staying dead."

She’s trying to make me feel guilty. But that isn’t going to work. I won’t let you distract me. "Once you’re dead, you’re dead, Hermione. Just ask Sirius," Ron retorted. *I can play this game just as well as you can.*

He knew that Hermione felt like she was at least partially to blame for what happened to Sirius in the Department of Mysteries. She’d admitted it to him not long after they’d arrived at Grimmauld Place. Fortunately, Professor Lupin had overheard them and he’d taken it upon himself to help Ron assure her that the only one to blame was Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Ron knew it was a low blow taking something she’d told him in confidence and throwing it back at her the way he just had. But if that’s what it took to keep her alive, then by Merlin, he’d do it.

Once again, her reply threw him for a loop.

"Do you know what a Coupling Potion does?" Hermione asked, completely ignoring his attempt to goad her.

What? he thought as his mouth dropped open. "No," he admitted, narrowing his eyes a bit as he watched her pull *Moste Potente Potions* out of a stack of books and begin thumbing through it. "But I’m sure you’re going to tell me," he added, as he walked over and sat on the edge of her desk.

"It’s used to link your soul to someone else. To bind you to them," Hermione explained, handing the book off to him so he could look at it. "It’s not very long," she informed him, pointing at the book. "Go ahead and read it for yourself."

Ron let his eyes wander past the list of ingredients and the instructions and locked on to the description.

A **Coupling Potion** is most often *used to amplify or magnify information incoming and outgoing between two or more individuals.*

Once you have been *conjoined,* you will experience feelings, thoughts and on rare occasions physical sensations that are not your own, but those of the individual you have connected with. **Emotional sensitivity** is the most pronounced result.

After the connection has been forged, *you should be able to feel or sense any strong or overwhelming emotions your partner is experiencing as if those feelings were in fact your own.* However, *the severity of the experience depends on the magnitude of the feelings and/or emotions being broadcast.* Sometimes you will feel exactly what your partner is feeling and sometimes you will experience the sensations more than the person you are linked to because they’re used to their own levels of emotion and you are not.

**Warning!!!** This experience can be overwhelming and is often disruptive to ordinary life events.

The key to avoiding this pitfall is to recognize the difference between your own feelings and those being broadcast to you. Once this has been accomplished it is possible to tune out or block all but the
most extreme emotional experience.

"I've already read this," he stated, looking back up at Hermione.

"You have?" she asked, clearly surprised. "When?"

"A few weeks ago," Ron replied. "After we first got here. It was open on your bed. I read this while I was waiting for you to finish with your notes."

"So you do know what a Coupling Potion does?"

"It forges a link between you and someone else," Ron said. "A bond that allows you to feel their emotions. Like Harry and You-Know-Who."

"It’s similar," she said, cutting him off, "but not the same. I don’t think their souls are linked. Just their bodies. My guess is that link was forged when he used Harry’s blood to create a new body. That," Hermione said, pointing at the open book in Ron’s hand, "will be more intense. It is a spiritual connection."

"You can’t possibly make this," Ron said, after he let his eyes fall back down to page and he skimmed the ingredients needed to brew the potion. "Half these ingredients are illegal."

"They’re not illegal," Hermione replied. "Just restricted."

"It might as well be the same thing. There are... BLOODY HELL... class B Non-tradable substances on this list," he said, looking up and searching her face. "So that explains the Botrytis Spoors. What about the Uvularia Root and Haemanthus? I suppose you already have those too?"

Ron could have kicked himself after he asked the question. He knew the answer even before she walked over to her trunk and produced a box that was indistinguishable from those found in any other Hogwarts student’s potion making kits. Only when she removed the top, he could see that it wasn’t filled with Shrivelfig or Spine of Lionfish. This box contained an unbreakable phial of electric blue Botrytis Spoors, a blood red tuber that resembled a shriveled heart, as well as a few other things he didn’t recognize and really didn’t want to know about. One of them was bound to be Haemanthus, and the rest?

Well, it didn’t really matter what they were. The point was, Hermione had enough ‘restricted material’ here to land herself in some pretty hot water if her trunk was inspected. Although, admittedly, the chances of that happening were slim. Not only was she a Prefect, she was such a stickler for rules that no one would ever suspect her of transporting restricted ingredients to school so she could brew another illegal potion. Very few people knew Hermione well enough to know that when she did decide to break a rule she didn’t just bend it, she obliterated it.

"Fletcher!" Ron growled tetchily. This is all his fault. "He got you all this," he continued, sweeping his hand over the top of her illicit potions box. "The Uvularia Root and the Haemanthus? How did you get him to do it? What did you threaten him with?"

"Nothing," Hermione replied quite coolly. "I simply told him he owed it to Harry. Don’t look at me like that," she added, when Ron's mouth fell open. "It’s the truth and he knew it."

"So once we get back to Hogwarts you’re going to brew this Coupling Potion. I assume that means you want to link your soul to Harry’s."

"It’s a bit more complicated than that," Hermione informed him.
"Just a bit?" Ron questioned.

"All right, it’s ridiculously complicated. It even gives me a headache," Hermione admitted.

"Short version?"

With a sigh, Hermione sat down on the edge of her bed and motioned for Ron to come and sit beside her. "The Killing Curse kills by stopping the heart of its victims," she began after Ron had joined her.

"Which is why you taught me that P.C.R. thing."

"C.P.R.," she corrected him. "Yes, that's right. Only there’s more to it than that. Once your heart stops, the curse expels your soul from your body."

"Sort of like what a Dementor does?"

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "That’s a good way of looking at it. Technically, it should be possible to get the heart started again because the curse doesn’t damage the body. But what about the soul? Once it has been released, there’s no way to get it back. It’s gone. So even if you do manage to get the heart beating again—"

"The person would just end up like a Dementor victim. Alive, but soulless. So that’s why no one ever bothered to try and restart the heart of a victim?"

"More or less. But, somehow when the curse rebounded off Harry and hit Voldemort, his soul remained. His body died, but his soul lingered. He must have done something to it with Dark Magic to keep it earthbound. And eventually he was able to put it in a new body, which got me thinking. If he can do it, why can’t we? We don’t need to use Dark Magic to keep our soul from crossing over. All we have to do is bind them to something that is earthbound."

"I see where you’re going. We won’t need new bodies, because that Muggle technique you taught us can restart our hearts."

"Yes."

"So you’re planning on binding your soul to something with that potion?" Ron asked. "So that Harry or I can bring you back?"

"More or less," Hermione admitted, but there was something in her eye, that made Ron’s heart rate increase.

"What aren’t you telling me?" he asked.

"You can keep a body alive with C.P.R. You can restart the heart with magic. You can bind your soul so it doesn’t cross over. But, there’s still the matter of getting your soul back in your body. That’s where it gets... complicated."

"You-Know-Who did it with a resurrection spell. We can just use the same one."

"That won’t work. That spell was used to give him a new body."

"That spell? So are you saying you have a different one? One that will work?"

"I think so."
"You think?"

"This whole thing is theoretical. If just one part of it goes wrong, it won’t work."

"Ok, my head really is starting to hurt," Ron said, covering his eyes with his hand and rubbing his temple. *Here I was thinking you might actually have this all worked out and then you go and tell me the most important part might not work*

"You remember that Greek Myth I told you about?" Hermione said, drawing Ron’s attention back to herself. "I meant it when I said that you are my other half. There’s no one that could ever take your place in my heart or in my soul."

"You’re telling me this, because you are going to link your soul to Harry’s, right?" Ron asked, trying not to let the pain he was feeling come through in his voice.

"No. I’m telling you this because we’re already connected," she replied. "I want to link my soul to you."

"Me?" he cried in shock. "But... Harry is the one that needs--"

"It won’t work with Harry," Hermione interrupted.

"Sure it will, you just hav--"

"No, it won’t," she insisted. "It has to be an... an act of love."

"You love Harry."

"Not in the same way I love you."

"You love him enough to sacrifice yourself for him," Ron said, nearly choking on the words as he forced them out.

"Maybe you ought to read my notes, so you can understand why--"

"I don’t want to read your bloody notes," he said crossly. "Just tell me why you two can’t drink the damn potion and be done with it?"

"We could, if... we only wanted to link our souls for a few..."

"Which is precisely what you want. You bind your soul to Harry, he binds his to you, so that if one of you gets hit with that blasted curse, your soul sticks around long enough for us to get it back in your body."

"It’s more complicated than that," Hermione said, obviously getting frustrated. "I told you, getting the soul back into the body is the hard part. It will take certain... sacrifices. Sacrifices I’m unable to make for Harry."

"What are you talking about? Just a little while ago you were telling me you were prepared to give your life for him."

"I am."

"Then what is it you can’t give Harry, that you can give me?"

"Everything else," she replied.
"What’s that supposed to mean?"

"It means that for this to work I’d have to... give him... my body." She whispered the last bit so softly he almost didn’t hear her.

"YOUR WHAT?" Ron shouted. No. It can’t be the way it sounded. She meant something else. Maybe he has to possess her or something.

"My body," she repeated louder. "I’d have to sleep with him. It’s called a Coupling Potion for a reason."

It was EXACTLY the way it sounded. He hadn’t wanted to believe it, but there it was. She just admitted it. She was going to... have sex with Harry. Ron couldn’t believe it. His mind simply refused to wrap itself around what he’d just heard.

She’s going to shag my best friend. My girlfriend is going to shag my best bloody mate.

Hermione waited patiently for what was about to come. In a way it was almost a relief now that the end was near. Now that she’d told him how the potion worked, things could only get better. After the inevitable explosion that is. She knew it was coming. Right now all Ron seemed capable of was gaping at her in horror, but it wouldn’t be long now. His face had already flushed and turned a deep scarlet. But it was his eyes she was focused on. You could always see everything Ron was thinking in his eyes.

Hermione saw the shock and the pain that instantly replaced it. It hurt her to see that, especially since she knew that it was unnecessary. If he’d only listened to what she’d said. ALL of it. This wouldn’t be happening. But that wasn’t the way Ron’s mind worked. He did exactly what she thought he’d do. He latched onto the part about her and Harry and completely ignored the statements that preceded it.

She’s fucking going to give herself to Harry so that goddamned potion will work. I can’t believe this. She fucking told me about it BEFORE she did it. As if that will make it all right. Is she asking my permission? Is she giving me a choice? But I don’t have a fucking choice, do I? If I don’t let her do this, my jealousy, my possessiveness, could cost Harry his life. Not just Harry. It could cost Hermione her life as well. I have to give up the love of my life... to save my best friends. That’s what she meant when she said sacrifices. I’m going to have to sacrifice my heart.

That’s when the rage set in.

Hermione recognized it the moment she saw his eyes ignite. Ron’s entire face hardened and he glared at her with such venom that she actually shrunk away from him. *This is going to be bad,* Hermione thought as she tried to brace herself for the outburst she knew was looming on the horizon. Only this time, Ron didn’t react as she’d predicted. He never said a word. He simply got up and walked out, slamming the door so hard the books toppled right off the edge of her desk.

This isn’t what was supposed to happen, Hermione thought, looking around the empty room in disbelief. DAMN IT, RON! she swore as she jumped off the bed and threw the door open to chase after him. How dare you walk out on me?

“RON!” Hermione shouted as she raced up the stairs, trying to catch him before he could make it to his room. Unfortunately he had longer legs, which made the task all but impossible. She’d barely made it to the second floor landing when his door slammed shut. “Ron, open this door!” she
demanded, banging on it loudly, but getting no response.

“DAMN IT!” Hermione cried, as she continued to pound on the barrier standing between them. “IF YOU DON’T OPEN THIS DOOR RIGHT NOW,” she shrieked. “I SWEAR TO GOD, I’LL BREAK IT DOWN!”

“I’D LIKE TO SEE YOU BLOODY TRY!” Ron bellowed back from the other side, “YOU AREN’T ALLOWED TO DO MAGIC AWAY FROM HOGWARTS, REMEMBER?”

“Son of a--” she muttered, incensed by how readily he’d dismissed her. “I’ll show you magic,” she mumbled, turning away from the door and stomping her way over to the staircase. “Just you wait.”

“So,” Ginny said, slipping up beside Harry the moment she saw Professor Lupin depart. “Feeling any better?”

“I guess,” Harry replied.

“You guess?” Ginny asked, clearly not satisfied with that answer. “Either you are or you aren’t. So which is it?”

“If I tell you that I do, will you leave me alone?”

“That depends,” she replied.

“On what?”

“On whether or not I believe you.”

He tried to fight it, he really did, but in the end Harry just couldn’t hold the smile back.

At least that was honest, he thought. Brutally honest.

He couldn’t help but find it refreshing. Everyone else was treating him with kid gloves and he was getting rather sick of it.

Has she been taking lessons from Hermione? he wondered. Or maybe she’s always been this way and I just didn’t notice before.

The truth was that Harry hadn’t really noticed Ginny all that much. He’d always just thought of her as Ron’s little sister. Last year was the first time he’d even had a real conversation with her.

Four years. I’ve known her for four years. But what do I really know about her? he asked himself. She’s a decent flier and remarkably good at Quidditch, considering her brothers never let her play. She’s definitely not someone I’d want to face in a duel. Her Bat Bogey Hexes are infamous. Even Fred and George fear them and that’s saying something. She has the same sense of humor as Ron. And his temper too, although she’s better at keeping it under wraps. Of course if Hermione wasn’t constantly pushing his buttons or taking the bait when he pushed hers, Ron’s temper wouldn’t be as evident either.

But those were all superficial things. Most of them could be applied to any member of her family.

What do I really know about Ginny, the person? he wondered, looking at her as if it was the first time he’d ever really seen her. Not a hell of a lot.
“Ready to try some of your birthday cake?”

“Huh?” Harry asked, dragged back to reality by the sound of Ginny’s voice.

“I asked if you wanted to actually **EAT** a piece of Mum’s cake,” she replied, grabbing his arm and pulling him towards what was left of it. “You know, as opposed to mashing it to bits with your fork and then throwing it on the floor.”

“I didn’t throw it,” Harry retorted, sounding more defensive then he meant to. “It fell.”

“Well, don’t drop this piece,” Ginny replied, shoving a plate under his nose. “Or you’re liable to—”

But she never finished her sentence. The flame that sprang to life and hovered in the center of the room had drawn her attention. And it wasn’t just Ginny. Nearly everyone had noticed the bright flash of light. The room went deathly silent as the blaze was extinguished and a single golden feather wafted to the floor, followed by a note.

“Fawkes,” Harry muttered, glancing at Ginny’s startled face and then over at Mr. Weasley who had stooped down and retrieved the sheet of parchment off the floor.

“What is it Arthur?” Mad-Eye asked, when all the color drained from Mr. Weasley’s face.

“They were defenseless Muggles,” Arthur said, unclenching the fist he’d made and thrusting the crumpled piece of parchment into Moody’s hand.

Harry stared, wide-eyed, at Mr. Weasely. He’d never seen him look so angry. His wife was the one that usually lost her temper. If Mr. Weasley was this angry, something had to be seriously wrong.

Ginny had come to the same conclusion. The last time she’d seen her dad this livid had been the night he’d had that huge row with Percy. Whatever that message from Dumbledore said, it wasn’t good news.

“Right,” Mad Eye said, to the members of the Order that had gathered around him to read the note. “McGonagall and Hagrid are already in Bristol. Dedalus, you and Hestia take Abberley. Arthur, you and your boys go to Lewisham. Remus, you and Emmeline go check out Mossley. Doge, you’re with me. We’ll take Lincoln. Molly...”

“I know what to do,” she said, walking away from the group and heading straight for Harry and Ginny.

“Well, what are ya all waiting for?” Moody barked. “Get going.”

“What’s going on?” Harry asked as he watched the assembled wizards and witches disapparating behind Mrs. Weasley’s back.

“Why did Dad take Fred and George to Lewisham?” Ginny asked, unable to keep the fear out of her voice. “What’s happened?”

“Get your cloak, dear,” Molly said, ignoring her daughter’s question and ushering her towards the door. “We’re leaving. Come on Harry,” she added, grabbing his arm and dragging him along with them. “You too.”

Hermione was still grumbling to herself when she threw open the kitchen door and blew into the
room like a small tornado, taking Bill and Tonks completely by surprise. The pair jumped and Tonks sprang away from Bill so fast, she whacked her elbow on a bowl of apples sitting on the edge of the table and sent it crashing to the floor. Not that Hermione noticed. She didn’t even acknowledge the startled couple as she stormed past them and started rummaging through the drawers where the cutlery was kept.

“Stupid prat,” they heard her mumble, as she wrenched a drawer completely out of the dresser and dumped it upside down on the counter. “Insufferable git,” she cried, pulling the next drawer so hard it fell on the floor, scattering its contents everywhere. “I’ll show him magic,” she spat out as she spied what she’d been looking for, stooped down, and retrieved the large wooden mallet used to tenderize meat up off the floor. Without so much as another word, Hermione stood upright, grabbed a butter knife off the counter, and then proceeded to stomp back out of the room.

“Mother of Merlin!” Tonks cried, staring at the now closed door with wide eyes. “Shouldn’t we do something?” she asked Bill as they listened to Hermione’s thundering footsteps fade away. “Before she pummels him to death with that mallet?”

“It’s best to just stay out of their way when they get like this,” Bill said, taking his wand out of his pocket and using it to repair the bowl Tonks had broken.

“They’ve... done this before?” Tonks asked in complete amazement.

“So I’ve heard,” Bill replied nonchalantly, waving his wand over the cutlery scattered across the floor and causing it to fly into the discarded drawer. “I’ve never actually seen an entire row myself,” he added, pointing his wand at the mess on the counter. “But from what I’ve been told, they’re always having a go at each other. It’s no big deal. Ron seems to know how to handle her.”

“But...she’s going after him with a knife,” Tonks protested.

“Yeah, that’s new,” he chuckled. “But it’s only a butter knife after all.”

“He’s your brother,” she cried in disbelief. “Aren’t you worried?”

“Better a knife than a wand,” he laughed. “At least this way he stands a decent chance of disarming her.”

“BILL!”

“They’ll work it out,” he replied, obviously not sharing her concern. “They always do.”

That can’t be true, Tonks thought, looking at her friend as if she thought he might be a few brick shy of a full load. “Didn’t you see the look in her eyes? If someone came after me with a look like that—”

If that boy knows what’s good for him, he’ll bloody well run for his life.

Hermione trudged her way over to Ron’s locked door, making no effort whatsoever to veil her approach. Not only did she want Ron to know she was there, she wanted him to know that she wasn’t going to be put off. Without saying a word, she wedged the butter knife she’d pilfered under the pin in the hinge at the top of the door and then used the mallet to hammer it loose. Three hard swings and the pin popped out.

“What the bloody hell are you doing?” Ron shouted when the top of his door lurched to the side.
“MAGIC!” Hermione screamed back, as she knelt down and proceeded to hammer the pin out of the bottom hinge as well. Standing upright, she worked her fingers between the door and the wall, creating a gap. Then she grasped a hold of the door and pulled it towards herself until she felt the lock pop out of place. Her task completed, Hermione released the door and watched, with satisfaction, as it toppled into the middle of the bedroom with a loud crash.

“You... you... you broke the bloody door down,” Ron stammered as he gaped at the obscured floor in utter amazement.

“I told you I would, you great prat!” Hermione shouted as she swept into the room, the mallet still clenched in her left hand.

“Well... well... you can just get the hell out!” Ron shouted back, prying his wide eyes off the door and locking them on his furious girlfriend.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she cried. “Not until you listen to what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

“I’ve heard enough. I don’t want to hear anymore.”

“IT. WON’T. WORK. WITH. HARRY!” Hermione bellowed.

“Yes, you’ve told me,” Ron replied as he wrinkled his face up in disgust. “It won’t work unless you-...” But he couldn’t bring himself to say the words. The mental pictures running through his head were bad enough. He didn’t want to name it. “Unless you’re... with him. I get it, Hermione.”

“No, Ron, you don’t,” she proclaimed loudly. “You’re the one that brought up Harry in the first place, not me. You just figured he was the one that needed protecting and assumed I’d link myself to him, despite what I said. So I’ll say it again, and maybe this time you’ll actually listen to me.” Hermione paused a moment just to make sure she had his full attention and then continued, “The only person I have any intentions of doing that with is you, you thick prat. I couldn’t link myself to Harry, even if I wanted to. It has to be an act of love. I don’t love him. He doesn’t love me. Not that way. The idea of sleeping with his is... well, it’s... He’s like my brother. And even if that wasn’t a factor, it still wouldn’t work. If we were together, the entire process would be tainted by our betrayal of you. Do you understand what I’m telling you?” she asked.

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“I’m really lost here, Hermione,” Ron said, running his hands through his hair in exasperation. “I thought this whole counter curse thing was to protect Harry,” he added, slumping down onto the edge of his bed.

“We can use the counter curse to protect anyone,” she attempted to clarify. “But only after we’ve taken the potion. Otherwise it’s suicide. We need the potion to protect our souls. We can’t just drink it or the connection will only be temporary. It will wear off within a fortnight unless we maintain the link.”

“And how exactly are we supposed to do that? We don’t have to drink the ruddy stuff every couple weeks do we?” Ron asked, repulsed by the very idea. I sure hope it tastes better then that foul Polyjuice Potion, he thought, completely missing the fact that Hermione’s cheeks had flushed bright red at his question.

“Well,” she answered, averting her eyes, “as I said, it’s called a Coupling Potion for a reason. The most effective way to maintain the link is to have intercourse on a regular basis.”

HEL-LO, Ron’s mind cried, elated by that bit of information. “How regular are we talking?” he
asked, his whole face lighting up with excitement. Any plan that involved shagging on a regular basis couldn’t be all-bad. In fact, it was downright appealing. The more he thought about it, the better it sounded.

We ought to get started on it right now. Ok, so the potion isn’t brewed yet, he reminded himself, but we can always get in a little practice. Isn’t she the one that’s always lecturing me about how important it is to practice new spells? There will never be a better time to start practicing than right now, while the house is empty.

Insensitive git, Hermione thought, not liking the turn the conversation had taken or the thoughts she knew were running through his head. Deep down she knew that he hadn’t meant it to come out the way it sounded. She knew that he cared about her and he wasn’t in it just for sex, but his comment still annoyed her. The fact he didn’t even realize he’d just made her feel like a piece of meat, irked her even more. “I suppose that depends,” she replied tetchily.

“What?” Ron asked. He’d been so lost in his own thoughts that he hadn’t really heard her reply.

“I said it depends.”

“On what?” Ron pressed. It was only after he asked the question that he realized she was irritated with him. What did I do now? he wondered.

“On whether or not you continue to act like a randy bugger who only cares about how often he’s going to get lucky.”

“Hermione!” he cried, floored by the fact she’d just cursed at him. Uh oh! Guess that means there isn’t going to be any practicing.

“I suggest you shut up and read my notes before you dig yourself in any deeper,” she suggested.

“Um, ok,” he readily agreed, hoping it would pacify her.

“I’ll go get them,” Hermione snapped, pursing her lips and narrowing her eyes before turning her back on him and walking toward the empty doorway.

“Wait!” Ron cried when it dawned on him that she might not come back. “I’m sorry,” he added as he jumped off his bed and closed the distance between them. “Don’t be angry.”

“You’re sorry for what?” she asked, spinning around to face him again.

“Er... for whatever it was I did,” he replied, putting on a sad expression and gazing down at her with his best version of puppy-dog eyes.

Damn it, Hermione thought as she felt her resolve begin to crumble. He was just too adorable to stay mad at. “You don’t even know what you’re apologizing for,” she said, more to remind herself why she was irritated, than anything else.

“But I know I’m sorry,” Ron shot back, fixing her with one of his irresistible lopsided grins. “I know I can be a prat, but I don’t mean to be. You’ll forgive me though, won’t you? Please.”

He didn’t really need to beg at this point. He could see that he’d gotten through to her. She was trying not to let it show, but her bearing had changed. Her body language was far less rigid than it had been mere moments ago. Even so, he wasn’t sure it was a good idea to try and touch her just yet.

“Mione?”
“Oh, I suppose,” she sighed, biting her lower lip to hold back a smile. “You wait here,” she said, deciding it was definitely better if they stayed in a room without a door for the time being. “I’ll go get my notes and be right back.”

“Hermione?” Ron said when he reached the end of the page. “What does this mean?” he asked, pointing at the line that read, **Coupling potion + blood (sacrifice) + love = additional protection??**

“Sacrifice? What the hell kind of sacrifice?” he demanded. “I mean this is obviously more than just pricking your finger and adding a few drops of blood to the potion. You aren’t planning on cutting your hand off or anything like that are you?” he asked, obviously reminded of the sacrifice Wormtail made to restore his master to his body.


Ron studied her closely for a moment, then shifted the sheet of parchment he’d been reading to the bottom of the pile, and let his eyes drop back down to next page of her notes.

Blood = life; it has life giving properties

** VIRGIN’S BLOOD HAS STRONG MAGICAL PROPERTIES!! **

Sacrifice = spilling of blood.

MUST BE AN ACT OF LOVE!!!

Add blood to potion to increase protection

My blood to protect him

His blood to protect me???

Or

Semen = life; it has life giving properties

Also spilled during an act of love

“BLOODY HELL!” Ron cried, his eyes going wide as he stared down at the last line on the page, which just so happened to be written in red ink as if to drive the point home.

**Coupling potion + blood + semen + love = protection + linking of souls**

The sacrifice she kept referring to in her notes was her virginity. Virgins’ blood had magical properties. Everyone knew that. Even Muggles knew it on some level, they just didn’t realize that they knew it. Over time they’d taken the knowledge and warped it with outlandish stories of young girls who were fed to dragons or thrown in volcanoes or something equally stupid. The manner of death didn’t seem to matter as long as it was gruesome and resulted in an entire town being saved.

Bloody idiots, the lot of them, Ron thought.

Not only did Muggles not seem to realize that the gender of the donor made no difference from a magical standpoint, they went and misinterpreted the protective aspects of the blood. Virgins’ blood did have protective properties, but they were minor. It was used mainly in healing potions and
restorative draughts. But this... What Hermione was suggesting... It went far beyond anything Mediwizards did. She wasn’t just going to use her normal blood. She wanted to use the blood that resulted from the actual loss of her virginity, which was bound to be more potent. As far as Ron knew, that was unprecedented. It was brilliant. Absolutely, mind-bendingly brilliant. The question was, did he dare drink it?

“How the hell did you come up with something like this?” Ron asked, peering down at the last line of her notes again. “It’s bloody brilliant, but... don’t you think you ought to run it all by Dumbledore? I mean, you are planning on altering the potion, right? I looked at the list of ingredients and blood and... semen weren’t on there. I mean, I know you’re adding it to strengthen the connection and add a bit of extra protection for us, but what if that’s not the only effect it has?”

“Are you mad?” Hermione shot back, arching an eyebrow at him. “You don’t honestly think he’d let us do this, do you? I’d have to tell him about my counter curse and I’m not going to do that. And neither are you,” she added for good measure.

“Why the hell not? If he can use it to block the Killing Curse, why not tell him? Why not tell everyone in the Order?”

“Well, for one thing, their souls aren’t protected. It would be tantamount to committing suicide. And you can’t force them all to drink a Coupling Potion. I mean... they’d have to be willing to bare their soul to someone else and I don’t think that’s very likely. More importantly, the less people that know about this, the better. No one else can know about this, Ron. Not even Harry.”

“Why not? You know you can trust him.”

“Not until he gets better with his Occlumency,” Hermione added quickly. “Otherwise Voldemort might find out and we can’t let that happen. Now that he has a body, he’s mortal. He’s made himself vulnerable and we’re going to use that to our advantage. If he knows we can block the Killing Curse he won’t use it.”

“And that would be bad because?” Ron asked, staring at Hermione as if she were slightly mad.

“Because if I can shield Harry the curse will rebound back on whoever cast it. Don’t you see?” she said keenly. “If we’re lucky Voldemort will end up killing himself with his own curse again.”

“I don’t like the idea of keeping things from Harry,” Ron protested.

“Neither do I, but—”

“This isn’t some small secret we’re talking about. This is HUGE! I mean, you do realize that if we do this,” he said, pointing down to her notes, “we’ll basically be—” But he never finished voicing his thought.

“Be what?” Hermione asked, shooting him a puzzled look.

She doesn’t know.

“Um... connected,” he finished lamely.

How could she not know? This is Hermione you’re talking about. She knows EVERYTHING. But she’s Muggle-born. She’s probably never even heard of the Lànain. But what she's suggesting we do is essentially the same thing, isn’t it? We’ll be bound together. And not just by blood. Ok, so our magic won’t be linked, but other than that it’s pretty much the same thing.
“You were the one that said we shouldn’t tell him we were together,” Hermione reminded him.

Ok, maybe she does know, Ron thought to himself. There was only one way to find out. He was going to have to ask her.

“Um... Hermione,” he said ventured cautiously, “has Professor Binns ever mentioned the Lànain in any of our History of Magic classes?”

“The what?”

“The Lànain?”

“Not that I recall. Why?”

“Er... never mind. It’s not important.”

“Then why did you bring it up?”

DAMN! Now what are you going to do, you idiot? Quick, pick a fight and distract her.

But before he got around to doing it, Ron realized Hermione had already been distracted. She wasn’t even looking at him anymore. She was staring over his shoulder at the empty doorway. It wasn’t until he twisted around to see what she was looking at that he realized that the doorway wasn’t empty anymore, his mother was standing in it.

For a moment, Ron felt blind panic clawing at him. How much did she overhear? What’s wrong with you, you idiot? What were you thinking, talking about the Lànain in a room with no door? But, no one was supposed to be here. Bloody Hell! If she heard me talking about the ancient binding ceremony with Hermione, she’s going to go ballistic.

“Mum?” Ron said, shocked that his voice hadn’t betrayed his fear. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to speak to your brother,” she replied, her eyes moving from the empty doorframe to the missing door, which had been propped up against the wall. “Where is he?”

“Downstairs, I think,” Ron replied, his stomach flipping again for an entirely different reason. “Why?” he asked. It was far too early for the party to be over. If she was here, something must have happened. “What’s going--”

“Never you mind,” she said, cutting him off before he could ask anymore questions. “It’s nothing for you to worry about,” she added. “You two just stay up here and finish your homework,” she said as she spun around and headed towards the stairs.

“She thought we were doing homework,” Hermione said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Yeah, but what’s she doing here?” Ron asked. “Why isn’t she at Harry’s party? And why ask us where Bill was? Why not Apparate straight into the kitchen? She had to know that’s where he was going to be.”

“You think she was checking up on us?” Hermione questioned.

“Obviously,” he replied. “But she sure didn’t stick around very long. Something strange is going on here,” he said rising up off the bed and heading for the door. “Come on,” he said, motioning for Hermione to follow him. “Let’s go find out what it is.”
“MUM!” they heard Bill cry in astonishment, even before they reached kitchen door and placed their ears against it. “What are you doing here? Why aren’t you at Harry’s party? It can’t be over yet.”

“There’s been an attack,” Molly replied. Ron and Hermione glanced at each other with wide eyes, but neither of them spoke. Instead they listened to the sound of chairs screeching across the floor as Bill and Tonks jumping out of their seats. The scraping was proceeded by a bang, as one of the chairs, most likely Tonks’, toppled over, and then there was silence.

“Where’s Harry?” they heard Tonks ask, the concern evident in her voice. “Is he all right?”

“It wasn’t Harry,” Molly reply.

“What about Ginny?” Bill asked, his voice wavering slightly as if he were afraid he might not really want to know the answer.

“Your sister is fine,” they heard Molly assured her son.

Ron and Hermione both breathed a sigh of relief. Harry and Ginny were both all right.

“Dumbledore and I just left them at the Dursley’s,” Mrs. Weasley continued.

“You left Ginny with those Muggles?” Bill cried in disbelief.

“It’s the safest place for them to be right now,” his mother shot back fiercely. “As long as they stay inside that house no one, not even You-Know-Who, can touch them. Tonks, dear,” she added. “You better go check in with Kingsley. The Dark Marks have the Ministry in a bit of an uproar.”

“Dark Marks?” they heard Bill asked. “How many?”

“At least five that we know of. All widely dispersed. They all appeared at relatively the same time. That’s all the information I have right now, other than the fact that they were after Muggle-borns. Kingsley didn’t have time to pass on anymore information before the Minister showed up and started interfering. You need to check in,” she said again. “Fudge has called in every available Auror.”

“Wait a minute,” Bill cried. “I...I don’t think you should go.” His comment was met with silence. “Someone needs to stay here with Mum, just in case.”

“Bill,” Mrs. Weasley replied. “Tonks is an Auror. She has to go.”

“But... I don’t think it’s such a good idea. I mean, Fudge doesn’t know where you are,” he argued. “How can he call you in, if he doesn’t know where you are? It’ll look suspicious if you show up. He’ll want to know how you knew there was trouble.”

“He’s not smart enough to think of something like that,” Tonks objected.

“Bill,” Mrs. Weasley replied, sounding rather annoyed. “Don’t be ridiculous. Of course she has to go.”

“But--”

“Oh, just ignore him,” Tonks sighed. “He always gets like this if he’s around when I get an assignment. Honestly, you’d think all that Auror training I had was for nothing, the way he carries on.”

“Tonks,” Bill tried again. “You can’t go. They’re attacking Muggle-borns.”
“And what’s that supposed to mean?” she shot back sounding more than a little insulted. “That just because my father’s Muggle-born, I’m not capable of taking care of myself? That’s a load of bunk, and—”

“Oh will you calm down,” Bill cried. “For Merlin’s Sake. You know that isn’t what I meant. It’s just that... Hermione’s Muggle-born and you’re her parents Secret Keeper. If they can’t find her, they might try and go after them. So you should probably stay here.”

One look at Hermione’s ashen face was all it took to press Ron into action. “I thought you were her parents secret keeper,” he said to Bill as he pushed the door open and marched into the kitchen.

“RONALD WEASLEY!” his mother shouted as she puffed up and spun around to face him. “I told you to stay upstairs.”

“Yeah well, I didn’t,” Ron shot back. “And it’s a good thing too. Otherwise I never would have known what was going on. You certainly wouldn’t tell me. No one tells me anything.”

“That’s because you are NOT a member of the Order,” Mrs. Weasley shouted angrily. “Despite what you might think.”

“What about my parents,” Hermione asked, entering the kitchen herself. “Were they attacked or not?”

“No,” Mrs. Weasley said, after an uncomfortable silence. “None of the attacks were anywhere near your home.”

“But they’re still in danger, right?” she asked.

“We don’t know that,” Mrs. Weasley said, but before she could say anymore, Hagrid unexpectedly appeared in the middle of the kitchen and brought the conversation to an abrupt halt.

“Professor Dumbledore sent me ter retrieve yeh,” he said, shoving the tip of his pink umbrella towards Bill and Tonks. “Turned it into a Portkey,” he explained, waving the umbrella under their startled faces. “We’ve found survivors at the Creevey’s. Those ruddy bastards,” he shouted angrily.

“Hagrid,” Mrs. Weasley tried to interrupt before he could say anymore, but he took no heed.

“All them attacks were part o’ some sick plan meant teh get at Harry. As if he don’ have enough teh deal with righ’ now.”

“HAGRID!”

“Sixteen people dead. One fer each year o’ his life. The Creeveys were the last family hit. RUDDY COWARDS! Attackin’ defenseless Muggles and kids. He was a milkman fer Merlin’s Sakes. He had no way ter defend himself or his family. They lef’ his wife alive teh pass on their message, but it didn’ stop em usin’ the Cruciatus on her and forcin’ her teh choose which one o’ her children would be the las’ victim.”

“Oh my god,” Hermione moaned, warm tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Blimey!” Hagrid cried, when he spun around and realized Ron and Hermione were standing behind him. “What’er you two doin’ down here? You shouldn’ be here. You shouldn’a heard that.”

“Who was it?” Ron asked, but his eyes were riveted on Hermione as he did so. “Who was killed?”
“Er—” Hagrid muttered, looking over at Molly uncomfortably. “Um... Well…”

“WHO THE HELL WAS IT?” Ron shouted. “We’ll find out anyway. It’ll be all over the Daily Prophet tomorrow.”

“He’s right, Mum,” Bill cut in before she could start arguing. “They’re going to find out. Even if you do manage to keep the Prophet away from them, they’ll be going back to school soon. This isn’t something you can keep from them.”

“Oh, go ahead then,” Mrs. Weasley sighed, knowing that Bill was right.

“Was it Colin or Dennis?” Ron asked in a strained voice.

“Both,” Hagrid replied sadly, averting his eyes and swallowing hard. “Near as we could tell, they got Colin firs’. Didn’ wan’ him defendin’ his family, see. Then after they got his dad they made his mum choose between Dennis and her daughter.”

“I didn’t even know they had a sister,” Hermione whispered to herself. There was a lot she didn’t know about the Creeveys. They weren’t in the same year as she was, but that wasn’t a good excuse. They were both members of the D.A. She ought to have at least known they had a sister. “Is she a witch?” Hermione asked as Ron placed his arm protectively around her shoulder and pulled her against him.

“Dunno,” Hagrid replied honestly.


“What about my parents?” Hermione said in protest.

“Look,” Hagrid said, turning to Bill and Tonks. “We’ve got ter go. Professor Dumbledore is waitin’,” he added, holding the umbrella Portkey out for them to grasp.

“Tonks?” Bill asked, shooting her a beseeching look. She glanced at Hermione and then back at Bill. “All right,” she relented, nodding her head in agreement with his request. “I’ll stay.”

“It’s just me, Hagrid,” Bill said, reaching over and grasping a hold of the Portkey.

“It’s really started, hasn’t it?” Ron whispered, his mind reeling as his mother pushed him and Hermione towards the kitchen door.

The war had started. People were really dying. People he knew. Kids he went to school with. He knew that he ought to feel something. Anything other than what he was feeling. Fear. Outrage. Sorrow. But those weren’t the emotions weighing down his mind. What he felt was relief. Relief that Hermione wasn’t one of the Muggle-borns that had been killed. Colin and Dennis were dead and he was relieved.

What kind of sick bastard am I? Ron thought, his stomach churning with guilt as he allowed his mother to lead them upstairs. They were just kids. Why did they have to kill them? Why?
Chapter 12: The War Begins

“BOY!” Vernon Dursley bellowed as Harry ushered Ginny up the stairs and shoved her towards his room. “GET BACK DOWN HERE RIGHT NOW!”

“You better stay up here,” Harry said, reaching around Ginny to push his bedroom door open for her. “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he added as he turned around and retreated back down the hall.

“What?” Ginny heard Harry shout back as he descended to the ground floor.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Vernon barked the instant his nephew was in sight.

“Packing my stuff,” he replied, as if it ought to be obvious. “You were standing right there when Mrs. Weasley told us to do it.”

“How dare you sneak off and hook up with those... those... people,” Vernon raged as a vein popped out on his forehead and began to throb.

“You have some nerve,” his Aunt Petunia piped in, stepping out of the living room and joining her husband in the hall, “bringing that woman and her brat back here.”

“I will not have one of those ginger haired freaks in my house!” Vernon shouted, his fat face taking on an impressive purple hue.

“DON’T YOU CALL HER THAT!” Harry shouted back.

“FREAKS!” Vernon bellowed. “The lot of them. And I won’t have one staying in my house. Not after what they did to Dudley. Do you hear me, boy? I won’t have it. You get that...that girl out of here. NOW!”

“He has a name you know?” the uninvited guest snapped as she turned the corner of the staircase and came into view. “And so do I,” she added irritably, stomping down the rest of the stairs and halting beside Harry. “It’s Ginny. And I’d be only too happy to take Harry and leave,” she said, glaring at his aunt and uncle. “It would serve you right.”

“What’s that supposed to mean,” Vernon barked, eyeing the fiery redhead suspiciously.

“Don’t waste your breath,” Harry muttered, turning away from his uncle to address Ginny. “Come on,” he said, tugging on her arm to try and get her to follow him back upstairs.

“Didn’t you listen to anything Professor Dumbledore said?” Ginny asked Vernon, jerking her arm out of Harry’s grasp as she spoke.

She wasn’t finished with the Dursleys yet. Not by a long shot. She’d heard far too many horror stories about Harry’s relatives and the way they treated him to let this opportunity slip by. Now that she was face to face with them, she was going to set them straight.

“Voldemort is attacking Muggles, you idiot. That’s why my mum left us here. Because as long as Harry stays in this house, we’re all safe. You might want to remember that the next time you--”
“NO!” Petunia shrieked, her eyes going wide with horror as she realized just how serious the situation truly was. “Dudley! He’s out with Piers. Vernon,” she cried, grabbing a hold of one of her husband’s beefy arms, “we have to do something. I’ll ring the Polkisses’.”

“No, Petunia. Wait!” Vernon yelled before his wife made it halfway to the kitchen. “We can’t have him out walking the streets,” he explained, all the color draining from his cheeks. “What if that maniac sets more of his Demonizers on him?”

“What the hell is a Demonizer?” Ginny asked, turning to Harry with a puzzled expression on her face.

“He means Dementors,” Harry muttered back under his breath.

“You,” Vernon hissed, turning away from his wife and pointing a plump finger at Harry. “Go to the Polkisses’ and bring my son home.”

“What if that maniac sets more of his Demonizers on him?”

“Are you mad?” Ginny shrieked. “There’s no way Harry’s going out there all by himself.”

“He won’t be by himself,” Vernon cried, marching over to Harry, grabbing him by the collar, and shoving him towards the door, before turning around to administer the same treatment to Ginny. “You’ll be with him.”

“NO!” Harry shouted, pushing his uncle away from Ginny before he had a chance to touch her. “I’ll go,” he said, whipping his wand out of the back pocket of his jeans. “But Ginny is staying here.”

“The hell you will,” Ginny protested.

“PUT! THAT! RUDDY! THING! AWAY!” Vernon bellowed.

“Do you want me to go after Dudley or not?” Harry asked. But before his uncle had a chance to respond, Ginny sprang into action. Without warning, she reached over and snatched Harry’s wand right out of his hand. “HEY!” Harry yelled as he suddenly found himself staring down the point of his own wand. “Give that back.”

“Don’t make me curse you, Harry,” the young redhead replied, taking a step back, but keeping the wand steady.

“PETUNIA!” Vernon yelped, throwing his arms out while stepping in front of his wife. “Stay behind me,” he added, eyeing Ginny as if she were some deranged lunatic who had just burst into his home and threatened them with bodily harm.

“Ginny?” Harry said, holding his hands out in the air as if to stop her. “What are you doing?”

“Mum will kill me if I let leave,” she replied. “And when she’s finished with me, she’ll come after you. Trust me, Harry. A Body Bind is preferable to what Mum’ll do to you if you walk out that door.”

“We both know you aren’t going to curse me,” Harry said calmly as he took a step towards her. “You’ll get expelled.”

“No, I won’t,” Ginny replied, taking a step back to maintain the distance between them. “They have to give me an official warning first. Besides,” she added with a smirk. “This is your wand. If anyone gets expelled, it’ll be you.”

She was right, of course. Any magic Ginny preformed in his house, with his wand, would be
attributed to him. It had happened before. He’d received his first official warning when Dobby, the House-Elf, popped in and cast a Hover Charm in the kitchen. Dobby hadn’t even used a wand and yet somehow Harry had still wound up taking the blame. If Ginny cast a spell, any spell, in the Dursley’s house, Fudge would chuck him out of Hogwarts so fast his head would spin. She had him and she knew it... or did she?

“Which is why I know you won’t do it,” Harry fired back. “Now stop playing around and give me back my wand.”

For a moment, Harry thought he’d actually gotten through to her and he breathed a silent sigh of relief, along with his aunt and uncle, when Ginny relaxed and lowered her arm. Only Ginny didn’t give his wand back as he expected. In fact, when he reached for it, she shoved it behind her back and when her hand came back into view, Harry’s wand had been replaced with her own.

Fortunately, Dudley choose that precise moment to return home and when he opened the door, it slammed into Harry and knocked him right into Ginny.

“DIDDY!” Petunia screamed as her husband jumped forward, seized their son by the arm, and hauled him away from two teenagers sprawled out on the floor.

“What’s going on?” Dudley asked, ignoring his mother’s attempts to hug him, while staring at Harry and Ginny who had untangled themselves and rose up off the ground. “Who’s she?” he asked, even as he noticed Ginny’s long red hair and realized the answer to his own question. “Where are the other ones?” he said, his eyes going wide with horror as he leaned back and peered into the living room searching for more Weasleys.

“Well then,” Harry said, grabbing Ginny’s wrist and pulling her in front of himself. “You don’t need us now that Ickle Diddykins is home. Come on,” he added, pushing her up the stairs again. “Let’s go pack my stuff so we can get the hell out of here.”

“You know we can’t leave,” Ginny said, handing Harry’s wand back as they marched upstairs. “Dumbledore told us to wait here until he came back for us personally.”

“Didn’t happen to mention how long that was going to be though, did he?” Harry grumbled, following her into his dark room.

“How do you make this thing work?” Ginny asked as she leaned over and peered at the lamp sitting on his desk. “It doesn’t have a wick. There isn’t even a place to put the oil.”

“Just twist the switch on top,” he replied, popping the lid to his trunk and moving to the small chest of drawers to retrieve his cloths.

“Where?” Ginny asked, running her hand over the shade.

“Here,” Harry replied, leaning over and clicking the lamp on, before returning to his drawers.

“Wow,” she said automatically, kneeling down and squinting at the bight light that issuing from under the shade. “So this is what an electric light looks like. We learned about them in Muggle Studies, but I never realized they--”

“Guess they forgot to tell you not to stare at the light bulb,” Harry said, pulling Ginny away from his desk. “You’ll hurt your eyes if you keep that up.”

“Damn, that thing was bright,” Ginny muttered, rubbing her eyes, hoping to get rid of the white spots clouding her vision.
“You weren’t seriously going to curse me, were you?” Harry asked, dumping an armload of clothing into his trunk.

“Actually,” Ginny replied, glancing around Harry’s messy room and taking it all in now that her vision had cleared, “I would have. If you’d pushed me to it, that is,” she added, spotting Hedwig sitting on top of her cage and walking over to stroke the owl’s soft white feathers. “I’d gladly take an official warning if it meant keeping you safe. Besides,” she added as an afterthought. “I’d rather have the Ministry on my back than Mum.”

“Can we open the window?” Ginny asked when Harry didn’t reply.

It was the middle of the summer and the upstairs bedroom was rather stuffy.

“That’s better, isn’t it?” she said to Hedwig, after she’d drawn the curtains and pushed the window open.

The owl hooted back in agreement before she unfurled her wings and ruffled her feathers.

“Go ahead,” Harry sighed when Hedwig looked at him questioningly. He knew she was restless. She’d been stuck inside the darkened bedroom for days. “But we might not be here when you come back,” he shouted as the owl swooped out the window.

“Do you know anyone that lives in Abberley or Lincoln?” Ginny asked, grabbing Hedwig’s cage and plopping it down beside Harry’s partially packed trunk.

“No. Why?” he replied, scooping *Quidditch Through the Ages* off the floor and tossing it on top of his trousers.

“What about Mossley?” she inquired.

“No,” Harry said, realizing why she was asking. “Do you?”

“No,” Ginny answered weakly, “but... I’m almost certain that the Colin Creevey is from Bristol and--”

“And what?” Harry asked, clearly worried by this new bit of information.

“Dean Thomas lives in Lewisham,” Ginny whispered. “You don’t think--”

“NO!” Harry snapped hotly. “You dad mentioned ‘defenseless Muggles’. Dean and Colin aren’t defenseless,” he added, knowing he was grasping at straws, even as he said it.

“What if we were wrong, Harry. What if it’s not Muggles he’s after. What if he went after Muggle-borns.”

“Hermione,” Harry groaned, sinking down on his bed.

“I’m sure Hermione is fine,” Ginny said flatly. “She’s at Grimmauld Place and Ron won’t let anything happen to her. It’s everyone else I’m worried about.”

It had been nearly 40 minutes since Mr. Weasley and the twins had apparated back to Grimmauld Place. A full half hour since Ron had spoken to her. He’d been lost in his own thoughts ever since George slipped out of the drawing room and back down to the meeting that was taking place in the basement kitchen.
Frankly, Hermione didn’t know how he’d even managed to get away long enough to tell them about what had happened in Lewisham. But he had gotten away and he had told them. It didn’t matter that they weren’t members of the Order. It didn’t matter that their mother would object. As far as the twins were concerned, Ron and Hermione had a right to know. Dean Thomas had been their friend after all.

George didn’t have time to give them all the specifics, much to Hermione’s relief. The truth was, she didn’t think she could bear to hear it. Not right now anyway. She didn’t want to know how they had died. She didn’t want to picture it in her mind, because if she did, it wouldn’t be Dean’s parents she saw there, it would be her own, and she couldn’t stand to think of them suffering because of her. Knowing what curses had been used wouldn’t bring them back. Dean was gone. Just like the Creeveys. Killed because he was Muggle-born. Killed because he was a Gryffindor and close to Harry. In fact, he was the only other Gryffindor Muggle-born in their year, which made Hermione wonder if Voldemort hadn’t targeted him simply because he couldn’t get at her.

Did Dean take my place? Would he have been attacked if I were at home with my parents? If I hadn’t been hiding here, would I have been the first victim instead of him? But, Voldemort already had one chance to kill me and he didn’t, she reflected. In fact, he stopped Lestrange when she was about to do it. But does that mean anything? Maybe it just wasn’t the right time.

Hermione didn’t like the direction her thoughts were headed. Speculating about Voldemort’s plans for her wasn’t going to accomplish anything. Dwelling on the what ifs wasn’t going to get her anywhere. Besides, there were other matters to attend to. Things that were far more important. Like the silent companion who was sitting beside her with his arm draped across her shoulder. She didn’t have to look over at him to know that he was upset by what had happened. Who wouldn’t be? But there was something else going on.

He was too quiet. Too calm. It wasn’t like Ron to sit still for an extended period of time, unless he was playing chess. It was even less like him to do so silently. Ron was never silent. When he got upset, he got angry and shouted to vent his feelings. He didn’t internalize thing like Harry did, he let them out. Only for some reason, he wasn’t letting it out this time. He was keeping it all bottled up inside and that wasn’t good for him. And if he wasn’t going to vent on his own, Hermione decided she’d just have to give him a nudge.

“Are you all right?” she asked, even though she already knew the answer to her question.

But rather than reply with words, Ron simply glanced over at her and nodded his head.

“I don’t think you are,” Hermione said, loosening her grip on his side and pulling her head off his chest as she purposely baited him. She’d hoped that at the very least he’d speak in order to deny it, but Ron never said a word. He simply shrugged his shoulders and shot her a look that said, ‘Think whatever you want.’

All right, Hermione thought, more than ready to vent a little of her own frustrations now. If that’s the way you’re going to be.

“There’s no point lying about it,” she said, intentionally using an accusatory tone of voice. “You may as well tell me what you’re thinking about.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Ron replied abruptly.

“I think you should.”

“I said I don’t want to,” he snapped, removing his arm from her shoulder and sitting upright on the
couch. “So drop it.”

“So you can turn into Harry and push me away while you brood?” she shot back quickly. “I don’t think so.”

“I’m not pushing you away,” Ron said irritably. “I’m sitting right here next to you, aren’t I?”

“Your body is here, yes,” Hermione replied, pleased to see his anger coming to the surface. “But your mind is obliviously somewhere else. You might feel better if you talk about it.”

“I’m fine,” Ron insisted. “Or at least I was until you started nagging me.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am!”

“Then why are you shouting at me?” Hermione retorted. “You can deny it all you want, but I know you and I can tell when something is bothering you. This isn’t just about the attacks. There’s something else and I want to know what it is.”

“Just drop it,” Ron growled in warning.

“I will not,” Hermione pressed. “I’m worried about you,” she added, her concern now evident in her voice. “And I can’t help you unless I know what’s wrong.”

“There is nothing for you to worry about,” Ron replied with a sigh. He’d been so close to letting it out, but he couldn’t very well be angry with her for being concerned about him. “I’m fine,” he lied.

“No, you aren’t.”

“Hermione,” he said, sounding more than a little exasperated.

“Ron,” she echoed his own name right back at him as she met his gaze and held it. She wasn’t going to be the one to look away.

Apparently Ron wasn’t either because he continued to try and stare her down.

“JUST TELL ME!” she shouted when it became obvious that neither of them was going to give.

“I WAS RELIEVED, ALL RIGHT?” Ron shouted back angrily. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

But the anger was just a mask he was wearing to hide what he was really feeling. Not that it worked. The guilt that was eating away at him was instantly evident in his eyes.

“When I found out about the Creeveys and Dean, I was relieved,” he continued, trying to get it all out before she could interrupt him. “They’re all dead and I was glad. I’ve shared a room with Dean for five years and I was glad... glad that it was him and not you. What kind of a friend does that make me? What kind of person thinks something like that?” he asked miserably.

“Oh, Ron,” Hermione exclaimed, reaching for his hand. “That’s a normal response.”

“It’s not normal to wish your friends dead,” he protested, jerking his hand out of hers.

“You didn’t wish them dead,” she assured him. “You didn’t want this to happen.”

But Ron didn’t believe her. He wasn’t even looking at her anymore. He didn’t want to watch her
concern turn to loathing as she realized what kind of person he really was.

She still hasn’t figured it out, he thought miserably, dropping his head and staring morosely at his lap. *But it’s only a matter of time.*

“And what you thought--” Hermione continued. “That was normal. It’s normal to be relieved that it wasn’t someone you--”

She still doesn’t get it.

“They’re DEAD, Hermione,” Ron shouted without looking up. “Dean and Colin and those other people. They’re all dead. That monster killed them.”

“Yes, I know.”

“They were just kids. They never hurt anyone. They weren’t any kind of threat to him. And that’s why he went after them. Because he’s a fucking coward. He didn’t have the bollocks to go after anyone from a Wizarding family. He went after the Muggle-borns because he knew there was no way they’d be able to defend both themselves and their families. And that twisted bastard did it on purpose just to torture Harry. That sick fuck. I should have been horrified. I should have been ill. I should have been sad or angry, but all I felt was relief. All I could think of was how glad I was that it wasn’t you. Don’t you see, I’m as twisted as he is?”

“Don’t you EVER say anything like that again,” Hermione hissed as she leaned over and smacked him in the arm.

“OW!” Ron yelped, looking up at her in shock. “You hit me.”

“Well, I had to do something to get your attention, didn’t I?” she replied irritably. “Now you listen to me. You are nothing like that monster. You have more love and compassion in your little finger than Voldemort and all of his followers put together. You’re a good, decent, honorable person and I love you for it. The fact that you are this upset just goes to prove that I’m right. What you felt was perfectly normal. Just because you were relieved that it wasn’t someone you love, doesn’t make you a bad person. I was relieved too. Relieved that it wasn’t my parents, or Harry, or Ginny. Does that make me a monster?”

“It could have been you,” Ron moaned, ignoring her question.

“But it wasn’t.”

“But it could have been. It would have been if he’d been able to--”

“I’m right here, Ron,” Hermione said, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him down into a hug. “I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

“You don’t understand,” he whispered as he buried his face in her hair. “If it had been you... I would have done terrible things. When they had you. When I thought you were... dead.” He had to force the word out. “I spent the entire day thinking about what I was going to do to those bastards when I got my hands on them. I don’t want to become that man.”

“You won’t,” she assured him, holding him tightly with one hand while stroking his hair with the other. “I won’t let you. I promise.”

“What if you’re not here?” he asked desolately.
“I’ll always be here,” Hermione replied, brushing the tears from her eyes before they could spill down her cheeks. “Right here,” she said, placing her hand on his chest. “In your heart. I’ll always be with you here.”

“That’s not enough,” Ron replied, pulling back and looking down at her despondently.

“I know,” she admitted. “It’s not enough for me either. But it’s all I can promise you.”

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you,” Ron said, wrapping his arms around her and holding her to him tightly.

“I know,” she replied again.


“No,” Hermione replied, taking Ron completely by surprise.

“What do you mean, no?” he asked when he recovered enough to close his mouth and respond.

“Not now. Not like this,” she attempted to clarify. “This isn’t something you can rush or do on impulse.”

“Don’t give me that,” Ron shot back as he released her and sat back. “The whole thing was your idea. You’ve explained it all to me. I understand the consequences and I want to do it.”

“No,” Hermione repeated. “I’ve had a year to think about it and get used to the idea. You just found out about it today. You need to take some time and--”

“The hell with that. I don’t need to think about it anymore. It’ll work and I want to do it. Now.”

“Even if I agreed with you, we couldn’t,” she replied, crossing her arms in front of her chest as she did so. “The potion isn’t even brewed yet.”

“Bugger,” Ron swore under his breath. “Let me guess, it’ll take a bloody month for you to make it, right?”

“Once we’re back at school and I can get the rest of the ingredients I need out of the student supply cupboard.”

“Bloody Hell, Hermione. I’m not going to wait that long. I want you protected from that blasted curse right now. Not two bloody months from now. You tell me what you need and I’ll have Fred and George get it for you tomorrow.”

“Will you slow down a minute and think about this rationally,” Hermione implored. “Just because I told you about my plan, that doesn’t mean I’m ready to implement it. I don’t even know how to get the soul back in the body yet.”

“BUGGER!”

“Ron, please. Do you have to swear so much?”

“But... you are planning on brewing it once we’re back at school, right?”

“Brewing it, yes,” Hermione replied. “But I wasn’t planning on drinking it until...unless we actually needed to.”
“Wait, let me get this straight,” Ron somewhat sarcastically. “You’ve gone to all this trouble to get illegal ingredients...”

“Restricted ingredients,” she interrupted.

“... to brew a potion that you don’t even intend to take?” he continued. “What are you going to do, store it in your trunk on the off chance You-Know-Who decided to attack us at Hogwarts? Come on, Hermione. You know he isn’t that predictable and neither is Harry. If he gets it in his head to go running off after that maniac again, do you really think he’s going to wait around for us to nip back up to the tower and drink a potion he knows nothing about?”

As much as she hated to admit it, Ron did have a valid point. But she wasn’t going to admit it.

“This conversation is pointless,” Hermione said, sounding rather exasperated herself now. “It’s not ready and I’m not telling your brothers about it, so I can’t make it until we’re back at school. And even if it were ready, I still wouldn’t take it. Not until you’ve had some time to actually think things through.”

“Have you started taking those pill things yet?” Ron asked, switching tacks so fast it took Hermione a moment to realize what he was referring to.

“What?”

“That Muggle medication you had me get out of your room. You know the stuff to keep you from--”

“I know what you’re talking about,” she interrupted before he could finish.

“Are you taking them?” Ron asked again.

“Yes,” Hermione replied, unable to keep her cheeks from flushing.

“You are?” he said, clearly shocked by her reply. “Seriously?”

“Yes, Ron. Seriously.”

“So it’s not the ...you know...the sex part,” he said, lowering his voice, “that you aren’t ready for? Because if it is, then--”

“No,” Hermione said, her face becoming several shades darker. “That’s not it.”

“Are you sure?” Ron asked. “Because I’m not trying to pressure you or rush you or anything.”

“I just don’t want you to do something you’re going to regret on impulse,” she replied. “I think you should take some time and really consider all the consequences before you make a decision. I mean, we were talking about being connected all the time. You won’t be able to keep any secrets. You won’t have any privacy. I’ll know everything that you feel, when you feel it.”

Yeah, that’s what I’m counting on, Ron thought. I’ll sense what you’re feeling and the instant you’re in danger, I’ll know.

“How about we compromise?” he suggested. “I’ll think about the consequences for the next two months, if you promise me that you’ll consider taking it as soon as it’s ready.”

“All right,” she sighed. It was a reasonable request. Just because she said she’d consider it, didn’t mean she had to agree to do it.
“HARRY!” they heard Ginny’s voice bellow from the hallway. “WAIT! You can’t just--”

Ron and Hermione barely had time to pull away from each other when the door banged open and their very aggrivated best friend stormed into the room, followed by Ginny, who had obviously been running to catch up to him.

“...barge in there,” she finished weakly.

“What the hell is going on?” Harry barked the instant he spotted his friends on the sofa.

“What?” Ron cried, jumping to his feet and shooting a dirty look at his sister. “Nothing.”

“OH HARRY!” Hermione cried, throwing herself at him and pulling him into a hug. “No one told us you were coming. It’s sooo good to see you. We’ve been so worried and--”

“So there is something going on then,” Harry asked as he placed a hand on Hermione’s shoulder and gently shoved her away so he could see her face.

“Er,” Ron stammered.

“Well?” Harry asked impatiently. “Who was attacked?”

“Oh,” Ron replied as he realized Ginny hadn’t ratted them out after all. “Um... you know how Mum is,” he added, shooting a worried look Hermione’s way. “She won’t let us anywhere near the kitchen right now.”

“If we hadn’t been standing there when Hagrid showed up, we wouldn’t know anything,” Hermione said cautiously.

“WHO WAS IT?” Harry shouted.

“It was Dean, wasn’t it?” Ginny asked, her voice trembling ever so slightly. “Dad and the twins went to Lewisham and that’s where Dean lives. What happened? Is he--”

Hermione moved away from Harry and was immediately at Ginny’s side.

“Oh Ginny,” she said, wrapping her arms around her friend’s shoulder and hugging her gently. “I know you’ve been writing him. I’m so sorry.”

“He’s not... dead?” Ginny asked weakly, all the color draining from her face.

Hermione glanced over at Ron quickly before nodding her head. “I’m sorry,” she said again. It seemed like such a stupid response, but it was all she could think to say.

“And Colin?” Harry asked evenly, despite the fact his eyes were smoldering with suppressed rage.

“He was the one in Bristol, wasn’t he?”

“Hagrid came here from Bristol to get Bill and Tonks,” Ron replied, eyeing Harry apprehensively. His fists were clenched together so tightly, his knuckles had turned white. Harry still had control of his anger, but when he went off, Ron knew it was going to be bad. “He didn’t know we were in the kitchen when he started telling them about what happened.”

“And?” Harry prompted when Ron offered no further information. “What happened?”

“Hagrid said they went after Colin first because they didn’t want him to defend his family,” Hermione answered in a soft voice. “Then they killed his father and... Dennis.”
“Oh god,” Ginny moaned, plopping down on the sofa. “What about Emma?” she asked when Hermione sat down beside her.

“Their sister?” Ron said, starring down at his own sister with a pained expression.

“No,” Hermione replied. “Hagrid said she was all right.”

“Who else?” Harry growled out angrily.

“That’s all we know,” Ron offered weakly. “I told you, Mum won’t let us anywhere near the kitchen.”

“There were at least 3 more attacks,” Ginny said somewhat mechanically. “Moody mentioned Abberley, Mossley, and Lincoln.”

“I don’t know, Gin,” Hermione replied honestly. “We haven’t heard anything about that. The only reason we know anything is because Hagrid let it slip before he knew we were there.”

“That’s all you know?” Harry asked, glancing at Ron and then Hermione suspiciously.

The two of them shot a quick look at each other before meeting Harry’s blazing green eyes once more.

“Um--” Hermione mumbled, shifting uncomfortably. “Maybe you ought to sit down, Harry,” she suggested.

“JUST TELL ME!” he bellowed.

“Er... Hagrid said something about... about... them leaving a message for you at the Creeveys´,” Ron answered.

He had to force himself not to flinch as the words left his mouth. He was dead certain that undisclosed bit of information would finally push his best friend over the edge, but he was wrong.

“And what did Voldemort say?”

“I don’t know,” Ron admitted. “Mum stopped Hagrid before he could say anything else.”

“All we know,” Hermione interjected, “is that he chose today for a reason.”

“THAT SICK BASTARD!” Ron shouted as his own temper got the better of him. “He’s trying to push you around the bend, mate. That’s why he attacked the Muggle-borns today. He wants you to feel responsible.”

“RON!” Hermione shrieked.

“What?” Ron shouted back. “It’s the truth.”

“Sometimes you are such a tactless git.”

“I really don’t need to put up with your shit right now,” Harry said as he spun around and stalked out of the room, much to his friends’ amazement.

“That was smooth,” Ginny said. “You two just had to start bickering, didn’t you?”

“It went better then I thought it would anyway,” Ron muttered, more to himself than anyone else.
“At least he didn’t go off on us.”

“It would have been better if he had,” Ginny sighed.

So much for the progress she’d made with Harry at his party. In one fell swoop he was right back where he started.

Actually, she reflected, he’s probably worse off now than he was before.

“We weren’t bickering,” Hermione said out the blue. “Were we?” she asked Ron.

“One of us should probably go after him,” Ron said, looking at Hermione. “Before he realizes he can’t lock himself in our room and he sneaks off to sulk somewhere else.”

“I’ll go,” Hermione volunteered, rising up off the couch and moving towards the doorway Harry had just stormed though.

“No,” Ron said, grabbing her arm and stilling her before she could make it out of the room. “I better do it,” he added, catching her eye again and glancing over at Ginny. “You stay here.”

“Ok,” Hermione agreed.

Ron was right. Harry wasn’t the only one that needed someone to talk to and Ginny was more likely to open up to her than her brother right now.

“Ron?” she said, reaching out and grabbing his hand just as he crossed the threshold. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he replied, giving her a weak smile. “Really. How about you?

“I’m all right,” Hermione assured him. “I love you,” she whispered.

“Er... I better go,” he mumble, glancing at Ginny uncomfortably as he pulled away.

“All right,” Hermione said, standing in the doorway until Ron was out of sight. Only then did she turned around and marched back into the room to comfort Ginny.

When Ron entered his room, he found Harry standing in the middle of it, gaping in disbelief at the detached door that was leaning against the wall.

“What the hell happened to our door?” he said accusingly, spinning around and glaring at Ron as if he’d removed it on purpose just to spite him.

“I already tried the lock myself in my room bit,” Ron answered. “Only it didn’t go over to well with Hermione. When I wouldn’t let her in, she... um... sorta broke the door down.”

Ron watched one of Harry’s eyebrow arch as he processed this bit of information. Under different circumstances, he would have taken it as a sign of amusement, but he knew that Harry was anything but amused. He was angry. He was beyond angry. He was seething mad. It was evident in the way his jaw was clenched and his fists were balled. But he was trying to rein it in. Trying to stomp it down. Why, Ron didn’t really understand.

If it were him, he’d be shouting. Hell, he’d be breaking things as he shouted. But this was Harry, and he wasn’t nearly as predictable. That was one of the reasons Ron decided to go after Harry himself.
rather than let Hermione do it. Harry was too unpredictable. Hermione would push him until he exploded and when that happened there was no telling what he’d do or say. Ron understood this and unlike Hermione, he knew when to back off.

“Swear to God, mate,” Ron said, striving to lighten the mood in the room. “It was amazing. You should have seen her. She shocked the hell out of me.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Harry replied reflexively.

“Look,” Ron added, realizing that his jokes weren’t really helping. “I understand that you’re upset and I know that you want to be left alone right now. But, you know,” he said uncomfortably as he walked over to the wardrobe that was positioned against the wall between their twin beds, “if you want some company later... I’ll be around. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed without much conviction, making it fairly obvious that he wasn’t really listening.

“Come here, Pig,” Ron said, standing on his toes and swiping his tiny owl off the top of the wardrobe the instant he was within reach. As bothersome as the little git was, Ron didn’t want him caught in the crossfire should Harry loose control and decide to demolish their room or something. “I’ll just grab some of my stuff,” he added, snatching his pillow and a blanket off his bed, “and get out of your way then.”

“You don’t have to--”

“Don’t worry about it, mate,” Ron interrupt, stowing his pillow under his arm and moving towards the door. “This won’t be the first time I’ve kipped on that sofa in the drawing room. It’s not a problem. Oh and Harry,” he said, turning around to look back into the bedroom once he stepped into the hallway, “what happened today wasn’t your fault.”

“Your Mum brought some sandwiches upstairs for us,” Hermione said quietly when she opened the door leading into the small room opposite Mrs. Black’s portrait and spotted Ron sitting on the floor. “Why don’t you come back up?”

“I’m not hungry,” he replied, staring at the spot where the Boggart had assumed his form and played dead.

“You haven’t eaten all day,” Hermione said, taking a deep breath and forcing her legs to carry her into the room. As she did, she couldn’t help but wonder what Ron was doing hiding in here. He knew that she didn’t like this room; that she avoided it. Was he just looking for a quiet place to be alone or was he hiding from her specifically?

“I said I’m not hungry,” he said again.

“All right,” she responded, coming further into the room and kneeling on the blanket he’d spread out over the floor. “Do you want me to go?” she asked.

It took him a minute to respond, but when he did bring his eyes up off the floor and lock them on her, he shook his head.

“No, it’s ok,” he assured her. “I was just thinking about... everything,” he added. “You know, like you told me to do?”
It was partially true. He’d been thinking about her Coupling Potion and the similarities between what she was suggesting and the Lànain. It was remarkable really, considering she had no knowledge of the ancient bonding ritual or the sordid details surrounding its inception. And so Ron had spent the past 20 minutes arguing with himself about whether or not he ought to tell her that in the Wizarding World, when you bound yourself to another person in a manner in which she was suggesting, you were essentially married to them. Unfortunately, he was no closer to making a decision.

On the one hand, if he did tell her, she might freak out and postpone taking the potion even longer. On the other, if he didn’t tell her, he was no better than the pureblood fanatics that created the Lànain in the first place. Was there a difference between marrying someone without their knowledge and marrying them against their will? Okay, so there was a difference, but it was underhanded either way.

Then again, Hermione’s plan was based on love. The Lànain was about ownership and maintaining the purity of the bloodline. They were two completely different things in that respect. So what if the end results were similar, when the means and reasons behind the two, were worlds apart. It wasn’t as if he was going to force himself on her. He wasn’t trying to trick her into anything. It had been her idea in the first place. The only reason he was even considering it at all was because he was desperate to protect her and this was the best way to go about doing it.

Besides, it wasn’t as if it would be permanent. Hermione had told him that the potion would wear off if they didn’t maintain the link. When this whole mess was over they could just let the potion wear off and the bond between them would dissolve. They’d go back to normal and she need never know that technically speaking, she’d been his wife.

Wife?

It was just too unreal.

What Hermione doesn’t know, won’t hurt her, or me.

Still, he’d have to think about it some more. This was Hermione he was talking about, after all. She was bound to learn about the marriage aspects sooner or later and when she did, it wouldn’t be pretty. She’d forgive him, eventually. Ron had no doubt about that and her wrath would be nothing compared to his mother’s. If his mum ever found out about any of this, he wouldn’t have to worry about releasing Hermione from the bond, because she’d turn Hermione into a widow before he had the chance.

“That’s good,” Hermione muttered, completely unaware of the battle raging in Ron’s mind. “Don’t let me disturb you,” she added, scooting a bit closer and settling down beside him.

“What about Harry?” Ron asked when Hermione wrapped her arms around his chest let her head drop back against his shoulder.

“What about him?” she asked, slightly taken aback by his response.

“What if he sees us?”

“I can’t comfort a friend?”

“You’re hugging me,” Ron shot back.


“Ginny is a girl.”
“And?”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that,” she chuckled. “Good thing too, because if you were I certainly wouldn’t do this,” she added, leaning in to give him a quick, chaste kiss.

“You know what I mean,” Ron replied.

“Don’t worry about Harry,” Hermione sighed. “I checked on him before I came looking for you. He told me in so uncertain terms that he wanted to be left alone. I don’t think he’ll be looking for us.”

“So he managed to get the door back on, did he?” Ron asked.

“Apparently.”

“And he opened it for you?”

“I don’t suppose he wanted to watch me take it down again,” she joked. “Don’t worry,” she added, serious once more. “I didn’t pressure him or anything. I just wanted to check on him and leave something for him to eat.”

“Okay,” Ron replied, more than a little surprised by this turn of events. True, he’d asked her not to mother Harry quite so much, but he didn’t think she’d actually back off. Especially now, not given the circumstances. “So how’s Ginny?”

“About the same as you,” Hermione answered sadly. “She needed some time to herself. She went to our room.”

“Mmmh,” he mumbled and then went quiet again.

“What about you?” Hermione asked.

“What about me?”

“Do you want some time to yourself?”

“No,” Ron answered without really thinking about it.

“What’s with the pillow and the blanket, anyway?” Hermione inquired.

“Just giving Harry some space.”

“You aren’t going to sleep in here?” she asked curtly, blanching at the mere thought. This room in and of itself gave her nightmares.

“Hadn’t planned on it,” Ron admitted. “But I didn’t want to disturb you and Ginny while you were talking. I was going to sleeping on the sofa in the drawing room, but--”

“But what?”

“You’ll be needing it now. I mean... if you’re going to let Ginny have your room to herself.”

“I’d rather stay with you,” Hermione said truthfully. “If you don’t mind.”

“Here?” Ron asked, arching an eyebrow at her.
“If this is where you’re going to sleep.”

“No,” Ron said, climbing up on his knees. “Let’s go back up to the drawing room.”

“Harry might see us.”

“Then we’ll find someplace else.”

“No, Ron,” she said, reaching for his arm before he could stand up. “This is just a room,” she said to reassure herself. “The same as any other. I’ll be fine.” As long as you’re with me. “Besides,” she added, lying down on the blanket and pulling him down with her. “No one will think to look for us in here. Let’s create a few positive memories in here, shall we?”

“Mione,” Ron sighed as he settled down on the blanket beside her and felt her hand tangle in his hair.

“Huuuumnn?” she groaned a split second before her lips found their way to his neck.

“In case I don’t get to tell you later, what with Harry here and all,” he said, relaxing against her body. “I... love you.”

“I know,” Hermione whispered, her mouth right below his ear now. “Now shut up and show me how much.”
Chapter 13: Kiss and Tell

“Mione,” Ron sighed as he settled down on the blanket beside her and felt her hand tangle in his hair.

“Huummn?” she groaned a split second before her lips found their way to his neck.

“In case I don’t get to tell you later, what with Harry here and all,” he said, relaxing against her body. “I... love you.”

“I know,” Hermione whispered, her mouth right below his ear now. “Now shut up and show me how much.”

With pleasure, Ron thought, closing his eyes and relishing the sensation her hand made as it slipped under his shirt and tenderly explored his upper body. He could actually feel the heat from her fingers as she lightly ran them over his chest, before dropping them lower, and gliding them down his stomach. Then without warning, her pleasurable fingers abandoned his flesh and her warm body pulled away from his.

Shit! Ron silently cursed, opening his eyes to see why she had deserted him “All right, love?” he asked, relieved to see the same desire he was feeling burning in her bright brown eyes.

But rather than respond, Hermione kicked off her shoes and reached for her jumper, grasped the bottom if it and yanked it off over her head. “Well,” she said, laying back down beside him and propping herself up on her elbow when she was through. “You aren’t going to sleep in your shoes are you?” she asked with a mischievous smile.

“No, I suppose not,” he chuckled, using his toes to flip them off. “Anything else you’d like me to remove?” Ron asked with a smirk.

“I’ll leave that up to you,” Hermione replied, pushing him onto his back, before settling on top of him, and covering his mouth with her own.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a small, annoying voice kept trying to tell him that they shouldn’t be doing this. Dean and Colin were dead. Harry and Ginny were a mess. They’d locked themselves in their separate rooms and were each trying to deal with everything that had happened on their own. And where was he? Was he doing anything to help them? No, he was lying on the floor, snogging his girlfriend.

He was doing what he always did when something bothered him; he was trying to distract himself. He wanted to forget about the war. He wanted to forget about the deaths. He wanted to forget about everything and just focus on... something good. Something pleasurable. He wanted to focus on Hermione. But was that really so wrong?

Why couldn’t he shut the world out for a little while? Isn’t that what both Harry and Ginny were doing? If they could seek comfort in solitude, why couldn’t he find solace in his girlfriend’s arms?
He was offering her comfort as well, so it wasn’t a completely selfish act. Unlike his best mate or his sister, Hermione wanted to be with him. She’d searched him out because she needed him and by Merlin, he was going to take care of her.

And if she wants to snog, that’s what we’re going to do, Ron thought to himself as he wrapped his arms around Hermione’s waist and kissed her back enthusiastically.

All that mattered to him now was her. He wanted to lose himself in her and let her lose herself in him in return. The rest of the world, and everyone else in it, would just have to wait until tomorrow. Tonight, he belonged to her.

That decision made, Ron opened his mouth slightly, but before he could deepen the kiss, Hermione’s tongue plunged into the gap and brushed against his. With a soft groan, he rolled them both over on their sides and kissed her back enthusiastically.

Fighting the urge to rip her blouse open, Ron reached down and began unbuttoning it with trembling fingers. It took him far longer than he would have liked, but eventually he worked his way down to the final button. The instant he finished, he pushed her shirt open and placed both of his hands on her chest.

“Wait,” she whispered softly, placing her own hands on his chest to shove him away.

“Wha—”

“Shush,” she hissed, coming up on her knees and reaching over him to retrieve her jumper.

Ron could hear them now; voices in the hallway, and they were getting closer by the sounds of it. Praying that it was just the Order members leaving, and not his mother searching for them, he stared wide eyed at the door.

Hermione didn’t take the time to re-button her shirt. She simply crammed her jumper on over her head, as she rose to her feet and tiptoed to the door.

Ron breathed a silent sigh of relief when the muttering voices receded. Whoever it was must have walked right past the room they’d hidden themselves in and proceeded down the hall.

“What are you doing?” he whispered urgently, when Hermione cracked the door and peered outside.

“It’s Bill,” she mouthed, causing Ron to jump to his feet and scurry across the room until he was standing right beside her.

“Woah,” he exhaled when he caught sight of his oldest brother.

He was an absolute mess. Not only was his shirt ripped, it was covered in grime and a fair bit of blood as well from the looks of it. Even so, the shirt appeared to be in better condition than his skin. Even at this distance, Ron could make out the bruises and scratches running down his brother’s arms. He’d clearly been put through the ringer.

“Be sure you put more of that potion on after you shower,” Tonks said quietly, pointing at the green gob smeared across Bill’s forehead.

“Yes, Mum,” Bill replied, chuckling when Tonks’ cheeks flushed.

“Oh, that’s rich,” she retorted as they came to a stop beside the front door. “And I suppose if I came
back from a mission looking like I’d been chained to the back of the Knights Bus and dragged clear across Britain, you wouldn’t fuss?” she said, whipping her wand out and using it to unlock the door. “Funny,” she continued. “As I recall, you didn’t even want me to go on the mission in the first place. And I’m the one that’s mollycoddling you?”

Touché, Hermione thought with a smile as she watched Bill’s ears redden. Even with all the dirt covering him, his Weasley ears had given him away.

“Bill and Tonks?” Ron mouthed to her silently, a mischievous gleam in his eyes that reminded her of his twin brothers. “What happened to Fleur?” he asked in a whisper.

“Who cares?” Hermione whispered back, fighting the urge to scowl. As far as she was concerned that French tart wasn’t good enough for Bill, or any Weasley for that matter. She was arrogant, vain, and far too full of herself to put someone else's feelings or needs above her own.

“Right then,” Tonks said, patting Bill on the cheek when he didn’t reply. “I’ll just pop off to work now and act like I don’t know what the hell’s been going on,” she continued, walking out the door and then unexpectedly pausing on the worn steps. “Better hope I don’t get sacked,” she added, without bothering to turn around. “Because if I do, I’ll be back, and I’ll make what Dolohov did to you look like a--”

“Dolohov!” Ron repeated, much louder than he intended, causing his both his brother and Tonks to spin around and stare at the doorway he was standing in.

“Shush!” Hermione hissed, elbowing him in the ribs and pointing at the moth eaten curtains hiding Mrs. Black’s portrait, which mercifully hadn’t opened.

“What are you two doing in there?” Tonks asked quietly, coming back into the house, and closing the door behind her.

“I’d say it’s fairly obvious what they were doing,” Bill replied with a smirk as he took in Ron and Hermione’s disheveled appearance. “You two better be careful,” he warned. “Mum’s still in the kitchen.”

“We were sleeping,” Hermione lied with a straight face, doing a convincing job of sounding offended.

“Uh huh,” Bill chuckled when Ron’s ear reddened, much to his companions chagrin.

Damn those Weasley ears.

“It’s not our fault we’ve both been kicked out of our rooms,” Ron murmured defensively. “And don’t change the subject. How did Dolohov attack you when you were in Bristol and he’s stuck in Azkaban?”

Tonks shifted uncomfortably as Bill glanced at her and then shot a look at the landing leading down to the kitchen.

“Well?” Ron demanded. “That bastard attacked Hermione and...”

“Ron, calm down.”

“...if he’s loose, I... she has a right to know.”

“Oh all right,” Bill whispered, moving closer to the doorway his brother was standing in. “It’ll be all
over the morning paper anyway. Still,” he said, glancing towards the kitchen one more time just to make sure his mother wasn’t around, “you didn’t hear this from me.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Ron readily agreed.

“All those attacks,” Bill replied softly, “were just a diversion meant to throw the Ministry into chaos. While Fudge had his Aurors spread out all over the damn countryside, Voldemort and his little band of followers slipped off to Azkaban and had themselves a nice little jailbreak.”

“Bugger!” Ron growled. “Malfoy?”

Bill nodded and then continued, “Along with Dolohov, Macnair, Mulciber, and Rodolphus Lestrange. Most of them cleared off as soon as we arrived, but Lestrange stayed behind to try and free his brother. I would have had him too, if Dolohov hadn’t snuck up behind me and tried to nail me with a some sort of Severing Charm.”

“That never would have happened if you’d let me do my job,” Tonks muttered under her breath.

“Luckily Hagrid was there and he managed to take the brunt of the curse,” Bill said, ignoring her comment. “Don’t worry,” he added when Hermione gasped and covered her mouth. “He’s fine. Hagrid’s far too big for a Severing Charm, even one as nasty as what they used, to do any real damage. All it did was hack him off. You should have seen that little shit turn tail and run. Still, it bought Lestrange the time he needed to slip away. Had to leave his brother behind though.”

“Ron!” Hermione chided, when a muffled string of curse words issued from his mouth.

“This is just bloody great,” he continued, glancing at Hermione anxiously. “So,” he continued, trying to play his anxiety off as something else, “are you going to tell Harry, or am I?”

“I’ll do it,” Hermione sighed, knowing that Ron didn’t like to be the bearer of bad news.

“Well, come on,” he said, disregarding his brother and Tonks, as he linked his hand with Hermione’s and pulled her back into their makeshift bedroom. “Tomorrow is going to be a long day. We better some sleep.”

Hermione didn’t say a word as Ron steered her back to their blanket. She was afraid to speak; afraid her voice would betray her feelings. Under normal circumstances, she could hide her emotions, once she set her mind to it, that is. It was a simple matter of shoving them aside and erecting a mental wall around them to temporarily block them out. But this day had been anything but normal and her mind was literally spinning.

There were so many feelings trying to break through that she had no chance of stomping them all down. The instant she focused on one and tried to contain it, another one would rear its ugly head. The jealousy led to guilt, which led to shame, and anger at herself for harboring those types of feelings about Harry, when none of it was his fault. It was a never-ending vicious circle.

“Don’t worry,” Ron said when Hermione lay down on the blanket and turned her back to him as if she really did want to go to sleep. “I’ll go with you,” he added, positioning himself beside her. “We can tell him together.”

“All right,” she replied dully

“Mione?” Ron asked softly, placing his hand on her side. “Are you okay?”
“Fine,” she said, trying to keep her voice even. But it was a lie. She knew it and she suspected that Ron knew it as well. Although, mercifully, he didn’t call her on it.

Not only was she grateful for that, she was grateful for his strong arms which were now wrapped around her and the warmth of his body as he pressed himself against her. She was appreciative and miserable at the same time.

This was the last time he’d be free to hold her this way. This was the last night they’d spend together; the last time she’d fall asleep in his arms. In the morning everything would be different. She wouldn’t be able to touch him whenever she wanted. She wouldn’t be able to kiss him. She wouldn’t even be able to speak to him freely. If she had a nightmare, she couldn’t go to him. She’d have to watch herself every minute of every day and she hated it. For nearly a month she’d had Ron’s undivided attention, but that was all about to change. She was going to lose him; lose him to Harry, and there was nothing she could do but step back and let it happen.

“It’ll be all right, love,” he whispered, planting a soft kiss just below her ear. “I won’t let him hurt you again. I promise.”

“Who?” she asked, momentarily taken by surprise. But then she realized what he was taking about.

*He thinks I’m worried about Dolohov,* she realized. *I suppose I should be.*

“It’s all right to admit that you’re afraid,” Ron continued, holding her a little tighter.

“But I’m not,” she replied truthfully.

I should be, but I’m not. Maybe it just hasn’t hit me yet.


“It’s not like he was after me specifically,” she said, rolling over so she could face him. “He was after the prophecy. I just happened to get in his way,” she added, unsure of whether she was trying to reassure Ron or herself. “It could have just as easily been Neville.”

“He didn’t try and kill Neville.”

“He didn’t need to. When he broke Neville’s wand, he was no longer a threat.”

Ron studied Hermione intently as her words sank in. He’d never actually looked at it that way before. Neville really wasn’t much of a threat, even with his wand. He couldn’t even hit his target, half the time. Not that it really mattered. Why Dolohov tried to kill Hermione and not Neville wasn’t really important. What mattered was that he *did* try to kill her, and given the opportunity, he’d likely try it again. How could she not be afraid?

“If it isn’t Dolohov, then what is it?” Ron asked, knowing that something was bothering her.

“Nothing,” she replied, averting her eyes.

“Don’t give me that,” he fired back quickly.

“It’s... nothing,” Hermione insisted. “It’s silly.”

“You can tell me,” Ron said. “I won’t laugh. I promise.”

“It’s just that--” Hermione began and then she faltered.
Unable to finish, she let her head fall against his chest and tried to fight back the tears stinging her eyes. But Ron was so sweet, and her sense of loss was so strong now, that she just couldn’t hold them back any longer.

“Hermione?” he said anxiously when he felt the dampness on his shirt. “What is it?” he asked, embracing her protectively.

“I feel like... like this is our last night together,” she whispered between snuffles.

“What?” Ron asked, both shocked and concerned.

“It’ll be different tomorrow,” she moaned. “Everything will change. I knew it would happen. I mean, Harry needs you and I understand, but... I just didn’t expect it to happen so soon. I thought I... that we’d have a few more weeks before... and I wasn’t prepared. That’s all. I just wasn’t ready yet.”

“Ready for what?” he asked with mounting panic. “You’re talking as if we’re going back to the way things were...before.”

“No. No, it’s just that...your... our attention has been focused on each other...on us, as a couple, and now it won’t be. God that sounds so awful,” she exclaimed, after hearing the words spoken out loud. “I don’t mean to be selfish, it’s just that... I know Harry needs you, but it’s going to be different now. I won’t be able to touch you and we’ll have to watch ourselves all the time and--”

But she found herself unable to finish when Ron leaned forward and kissed her. It didn’t last long, just a few seconds, but it was enough to silence her. When he pulled back, she allowed her head fall against his chest again and let herself go. She could feel his hands stroking her back softly as she sobbed in his arms.

“Did you come down here to say goodbye to me tonight?” he asked sorrowfully, when her tears dried up and her trembling abated.

But rather than respond with words, Hermione simply nodded her head against his chest and tightened her grip on him

“Were you even going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?” she sniffed. “There was nothing to tell that you didn’t already know.”

“I didn’t know that you...that you felt like this,” Ron said, his voice sounding oddly strained. “That you think Harry is more important than you are.”

“He is,” Hermione replied definitively.

“Bollocks.”

“It’s always been the two of you Ron. It’s been that way since the very first day on the train. There’s a bond between the two of you that I can’t touch. I know that. I’ve always known it. And I understand. It’s just... sometimes it’s hard being the--”

“Third wheel?” He finishing the thought for her.

“This is why you didn’t want Harry to know about us,” Hermione whispered, her watery eyes going wide with sudden comprehension. “You don’t want him to feel like this.”

“I don’t want you to feel like this either,” he stated compassionately. “I expected it from Harry, but
not from you. Have you always felt like this and I just didn’t see it? Bloody Hell,” he murmured under his breath when Hermione didn’t answer. “It’s not true,” he assured her. “I mean sure, there are things we talk about together that we don’t talk about with you. Guy things. Just like you and Ginny talk about girl things. It’s just...easier. But there are things you and I talk about that I don’t share with Harry.”

Like my feelings, he thought.

“Don’t you see, just because we’re getting closer, that doesn’t mean things are going to change. I mean, our relationship,” Ron added, motioning between himself and Hermione, “will change, obviously. For the better. But not mine and Harry’s. He’s always been my best mate and he’ll always be my best mate. When he needs me, I’ll be there for him, just like I’ll be there for my other best mate, when she needs me,” he added with a grin. “It doesn’t have to be one or the other, love,” he explained, leaning forward and kissing her on the forehead. “There’s more than enough of me to go around. If you need something,” Ron informed her, “all you have to do is ask.”

“I’m sorry you’re caught in the middle,” Hermione replied.

“I’m not,” Ron chuckled. “It’s not like that. Not for me anyway. Actually it’s rather flattering. Still, that doesn’t mean I want to watch my two best friends fight over me. Although, it would be one spectacular duel,” he joked.

“I’m not going to fight Harry for you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Ron replied, becoming sober once more. “Anymore than Harry will fight you. He’ll step aside just like you’re trying to do. But you don’t need to. Neither of you does. I mean, yeah, Harry is in a bad place right now, and he’s going to need both of us to help bring him out of it, but it’s always been that way, hasn’t it? I mean we worked this out ages ago. It’s the same as it’s always been. You take care of me, I take care of you, and together, we take care of Harry.

“So it’s that simple, is it?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“The same as it’s always been?”

“Yup,” Ron agreed.

“We didn’t used to snog.”

“Yeah, okay, so that part is different.”

“And you’re not going to... miss it?”

“Miss it?” Ron cried, rolling over on his back and pulling her down on top of him. “Are you mental? There’s no way in hell that I’m going to stop doing this,” he declared, thrusting his hands in her hair and kissing her soundly.

There was nothing sweet or tender about his kiss this time around. It was intense and so full of passion that it actually made Hermione whimper. Unfortunately, her squeaks elicited unexpected results and rather than continue, Ron pulled away from her, chuckling softly.

“Liked that, did you?” he teased, gently pushing her off himself before sitting upright and shucking his trousers in one swift movement.
“What?” Hermione said, her eyes fluttering open and she tried to focus on him. “What are you doing?” she asked, when she realized he was only half dressed.

“Getting ready for bed,” Ron replied with a roguish grin. “It’s hot in here. You didn’t expect me to sleep in my trousers did you?”

“I suppose not.”

“You might want to take off that jumper,” Ron said, settling back down beside her. “Because it’s going to get much hotter in here before I’m though,” he added, his hand sliding gently up her arm.

“Is that so?” Hermione asked, biting her lower lip to keep herself from smiling.

“Merlin, Mione?” Ron groaned, his eyes glued to her bottom lip. “Do you have any idea how crazy that makes me?”

This time it was Hermione’s turn to chuckle.

“Really?” she asked, arching an eyebrow at him as she sat up and tugged her jumper over her head. She was unable to hold the smile back when Ron’s eyes dropped from her lips to her chest. She’d forgotten that she hadn’t bothered to re-button her shirt, but clearly Ron hadn’t. His eyes sought out her skin the instant she uncovered it. He was staring at her hungrily, licking his lips like a starving man anticipating the taste of a four-course meal laid out before him.

Without thinking, Hermione reached down, gathered the sides of her shirt together, and blocked his view.

“Mione?” Ron whined, his eyes jumping to her face as he plead with her.

“Stop staring at me like I’m a pork chop,” she scolded.

“Pork chop,” he laughed, grabbing her forearms and tugging her down on top of him. “Believe me, you’re anything but thin and flat,” he scoffed, just before he reclaimed her lips and administered a mind numbing kiss.

Rather than protest, Hermione seemed only too happy to participate. Her hands found their way into his already tousled hair at nearly the same moment her tongue met his. And with her lying on top the way she was, Ron was able to make quick work of her blouse. Before she even registered the fact it was missing, he sent it was flying across the room.

“Ron!” Hermione cried, sitting upright and straddling him when she realized she was topless. “What did you do that for?” she asked, scanning the floor for her discarded shirt. “What if one of your brothers walks in? I won’t be able to cover up?”

“No one will think to look in here, love,” he replied, sitting upright and pressing his lips to her neck.

“They will if they hear us.”

“Then we’ll have to be quiet,” he mumbled, pushing her hair aside to allow himself better access.

“That’s not the point,” Hermione protested, but her heart wasn’t really in it. Her heavy eyes had already shut and her head was starting to fall back in submission. “I’m the one that’s exposed here.”

“Not exposed enough,” Ron whispered, sliding the straps of her bra down her shoulders to ensure the path his mouth was taking would be unimpeded.
“Don’t leave a mark,” Hermione groaned, one hand falling to his head and entangling itself in his thick red hair once more.

“I know, love,” Ron muttered.

That wasn’t a mistake he was going to make again. Not on her neck anyway. But there was nothing to stop his mouth from going a bit lower and lingering in places that Harry and his brothers would never see. Nothing but the thin barrier of cotton covering the area he wanted to get at most.

It has to go, he decided as he blazed a trail of soft kisses across Hermione’s shoulder and worked his way down her collarbone.

Unfortunately, Ron still had no idea how to work a bra. Hermione had always done that part for him. It always seems so easy when she does it. She doesn’t even need to use both hands. There must be some sorta trick to it that I don’t know about, he lamented, because when he reached around her back and tried to unclasp her bra himself, the bloody thing refused to budge.

And rather than help him, Hermione started giggling, much to Ron’s annoyance.

“A little help would be appreciated,” he groaned.

“Not this time,” she teased. “You want it off; you’re going to have to do it on your own.”

Challenge accepted, Ron thought, prying his lips from her body so he could look at her.

The instant their eyes met, he smirked, then grabbed the front of the offending garment, and jerked it down until the tops of her breasts and both nipples were bared.

“That’s not exactly fair,” Hermione proclaimed as she watched Ron’s gaze drop down to her exposed flesh.

“The most brilliant witch I know once told me that all is fair in love and war,” he shot back, his voice husky with desire.

“Prat,” Hermione laughed, reaching around her back, releasing the clasp, and allowing her bra to drop in Ron’s lap.

His heart hammering wildly in his chest, Ron lay back on his elbows, and took a moment to appreciate the way Hermione’s messy brown hair was cascading around her breasts as if to accentuating them. Never taking his eyes off her, he reached up and cupped her with one hand. Almost instantly, he felt her nipple harden and press against his palm.

Hermione moaned softly as she reached down and gathered her long tresses up in her hands. As he watched, she lifted her arms above her head, giving Ron complete access to her.

Wrenching his eyes away from her chest, Ron glanced up at her face, looking for consent. Hermione’s eyes were shut tight, but her actions were enough for him to proceed with a modicum of confidence. His entire body now on fire, Ron sat up once more, buried his face between her breasts, and kissed the valley while he continues to stroke her ample peak with his fingertips.

Hermione whimpered when he finally removed his hand from her breast and replaced it with his mouth, stroking her nipple with his tongue. The sound was enough to spur him on, and soon she was moaning softly as he nibbled and sucked her sensitive flesh.
Without warning, he pulled his mouth away from her body and immediately replaced it with both of his hands. Glancing up at her face, Ron noticed her eyes were still shut and her head was tilted back with pleasure. Her slender neck beckoned to him, so he placed his lips on it again and kissed her lightly, while kneading her with his hands.

Not only did she groan loudly, she pulled her weight off his legs and arched against him, before shifting into a sitting position his lap. With a strangled moan of his own, Ron moved his mouth lower, kissing her collarbone, and lower still, until his head was between her breasts once more. Then he released her left breast and slowly brought his mouth down on it, raining soft kisses all around the outside edge, before working his way in to the center.

Ron had to pull away from her and suck in a deep breath when Hermione ground herself against him. It was so unexpected, and felt so good, that he nearly lost control of himself right there and then. Both of his hands immediately went to her waist to prevent her from doing it again.

“Liked that, did you?” Hermione cooed, as she put two fingers under Ron’s chin and raised his head upward so she could kiss him.

When she brought her mouth down on his, Ron kissed her back eagerly. Moving one hand to her shoulder, he pushed her backwards, forcing her to pull her weight up off him and move her legs so she could lie flat on her back. As she fell backwards, he moved with her, covering her small body with his own.

The weight of his masculine body pressed against her own felt so good that Hermione was unable to suppress her soft moans of pleasure. Refusing to abandon her mouth, Ron swallowed them all and even sent a few of his own back in her direction.

Shifting his legs to her sides, Ron broke the kiss and came up on his knees so he was straddling her. Breathing hard, his entire body aching for her, he sat back and tried to regain a measure of control. He was dangerously close to the edge now. If he didn’t take a step back and rein himself in, he knew he was likely to try something he’d regret later. For a brief moment, he wondered if she’d let him. The fire and desire he saw burning in her eyes when she opened them, hinted that she might.

“You are so amazing,” he muttered, placing his hands on her thighs and slowly sliding them, and her skirt, forward.

Oh, Merciful Bloody Merlin, Ron swore to himself as his blazing eyes raked over her lower body and locked on her knickers. Any doubts he had as to whether or not she was as aroused as he was, vanished the instant he saw the tell tale sign there.

“Oh, Merlin, Hermione,” he groaned, his voice raspy with desire. “Do you have any idea how much I want to--”

“To what,” she asked with a mischievous grin when he unexpectedly fell silent.

All’s fair in love and war, remember? You’re in sooo much trouble, Hermione thought, and you don’t even know it yet.

“Be with you,” he whispered, dragging his hands down her thighs and pushing them back up again.

“You are with me,” she replied coyly.

Not the way I want to be, Ron thought, moving his hands to her stomach and running them slowly up her body. When he reached her face, he cupped it in both hands, leaned forward, and kissed her energetically.
“Tell me what you want to do to me, Ron,” Hermione ordered, after rolling them over and winding up on top. “I want to hear you say it,” she added, coming up on her knees and running her hand down his chest. “Tell me while I touch you,” she said, slipping her hand under the waistband of his boxers and wrapping it around him.

“OH FUCK!” Ron cried much louder than he meant to. The room wasn’t shielded, and the last thing he wanted was to set Mrs. Black’s portrait off. It would be very, VERY bad if his mother catch them nearly starkers, on the floor, doing this.

“Is that it?” Hermione whispered, leaning forward and dropping her mouth to his neck.

Just do it, she scolded herself when she hesitated. They’re just words. Say them. You know what they’ll do to him, so say them.

“Is that what you want?” she asked in a voice that was altogether too seductive. “Do you want to...” Say it, you coward!

“...fuck me?”

BLOODY BUGGERING HELL!!! Ron’s mind screamed, as he bucked against her hand.

He tried to respond, but when he opened his mouth all that came out was a throaty moan.

Where the hell did this Hermione come from? She just cursed. Hermione cursed. She said fuck. She just asked me if I wanted to... fuck her, he thought, groaning again not only at her question, but the images it invoked.

“Is that what you want, Ron?” Hermione asked, her light caresses became more vigorous. “Because if it is, I’m ready.”

Those six little words were his undoing. They hit him like a ton of bricks and his release was so quick, and so intense, that he didn’t even have time to moan out a warning.

“Apparently you’re not,” Hermione muttered, withdrawing her hand.

“Not...funny!” Ron panted, his face red with exertion and embarrassment.

“Oh come on,” Hermione giggled as she lay down beside him. “Admit it. It’s a little funny.”

“No. It's. Not,” he hissed.

I can’t believe this. I completely ruin my pants and she thinks it’s funny?

“You were just saying that, right?” Ron asked, his heart still hammering in his chest. “To get me off, right?”

“No,” Hermione replied, dropping a feather light kiss on his neck. “I meant it. I’m ready.”

“But--”

BLOODY HELL!!

“You... we... you... You can’t be.”

“And why not?”
“Because.”

“I’m tired of waiting,” Hermione sighed, although strictly speaking that wasn’t the entire truth.

Yes, she was both aroused and curious, but more than that, she was once again feeling inexplicably insecure. Despite Ron’s reassurances, there was still part of her that was worried she might still lose him. Only she was no longer willing to let him go without putting up a fight. And she had weapons in her arsenal that Harry didn’t.

“You don’t want to?” she said uncomfortably.

“Are you kidding?” Ron replied in a voice much higher than he would have liked.

I’ve only been dreaming of this moment since I was thirteen and realized girls were different in a good way.

“Of course I do.”

“But?” Hermione pressed.

BUT NOTHING! his body screamed, instantly ready for round two.

“The... the potion,” Ron sputtered, gaping at her as if it ought to be obvious, because really it should have been. The whole bloody thing was her idea to begin with.

WHAT ARE YOUR DOING! the randy little voice in his head bellowed in protest. ARE YOU DAFT? That is a warm, WILLING, nearly naked girl sitting in front of you. You’re mad about her and you’re trying to talk her out of it? ARE YOU MENTAL?

“Oh that.”

“Yes, that,” Ron said, rolling over on his side and staring at her anxiously.

What the hell is she thinking, the more reasonable side of his brain wondered, suggesting something like that with those madmen on the loose. Bloody Hell, if I hadn’t been so shocked, I would have taken her up on her offer, he realized, and ruined any chance I had at keeping her safe.

“The potion will still work,” Hermione replied.

SEE! his libido screamed. STOP HOLDING US BACK!

“Wait... what? No, I read your notes,” Ron said uncertainly. “We can’t.”

“Yes, we can,” she argued. “It’ll be fine. We just have to save the blood.”

YES!! his libido cried triumphantly.

NO!! his rational side argued.

“No... wait. It’s not the same.”

Even a first year student could tell you that potions were more effective when the ingredients were fresh.

“Well, no,” Hermione admitted, “but it’ll still work. It’ll be strong enough.”
“Like hell,” Ron replied. “There is no bloody way I’m going to take a chance like that with those madmen on the loose. You-Know-Who and that bitch, Lestrange are bad enough on their own, but now there are five more of those maniacs running around and they’d like nothing better than to get their hands on you and Harry. Absolutely not. I won’t risk your life like that.”

“Ron.”

“No!” he said, shaking his head as he jumped up and retrieved his trousers. He had to get away from her. Now. Before his libido got the better of him and he lost his head.

“Where are you going?” Hermione asked, when he threw the trousers on and all but ran for the door.

“To change.”

“You can’t,” she shot back quickly. “How are you supposed to explain that to Harry?”

“Bugger,” Ron muttered under his breath. She was right. Harry needed time. He couldn’t know about them yet.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said, sounding truly remorseful. “Um... you can give them to me.”

“WHAT!”

“Give me your pants,” she said, averting her eyes to the floor as her face flushed, “and I’ll clean them. I need to go take a shower anyway. Just put your trousers back on,” she suggested, “and I’ll bring them back to you when I’m though.”

“A shower?” Ron asked. Now that was a brilliant idea. He could go take a shower. A cold one. Or maybe even a nice long hot one. It wouldn’t matter as long he remained behind a locked door until he had himself firmly under control. “I’ll go with you.”

“You will not. Someone might see us.”

“Who?”

“Your mum.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” he replied, shuddering at the mere thought. “What I meant was I’ll go upstairs with you,” he said, scooping Hermione’s clothing up off the floor and handing it back to her, “and take my own shower in my own bathroom. You go to yours, I’ll go to mine, and I’ll meet you in the drawing room afterwards.”

No more hiding out in unexpected places for them tonight. If he was going to sleep in the same room as Hermione, it had best be in a place anyone that was looking could find them. Fear of being caught in a compromising position was a good deterrent and he was liable to need one, even after the cold shower.

“All right,” Hermione agreed, throwing her clothes back on as Ron snatched both his pillow, and the blanket they’d been lying on, off the floor and tucked them under his arm. “Ron,” she added as they slipped into the hallways and headed towards the staircase together. “Try and find another blanket. It’ll get chilly in the morning.”

“Don’t worry,” he replied, wrapping his arm around her waist and planting a quick kiss on her cheek so she wouldn’t think he was being standoffish because he was irritated with her. “I’ll keep you warm.”
“I’m sure you will,” Hermione chuckled softly as they reached the first floor landing and she headed off towards the bathroom she shared with Ginny. “I’m sure you will.”
Harry Potter didn’t have any idea what time it was when he heard his bedroom door open. Time no longer held any real meaning for him. What did it matter if it had been a few hours or a few days? It would all just blended together in the end. Half his summer had passed already and he’d barely noticed. He’d eaten when his stomach growled. He’d slept when his eyes felt heavy. He’d woken up, whenever he’d woken up. Awake or asleep, it made little difference to him. He was tormented by the same images in either state. There was no escaping them, no matter how hard he tried. The only difference was that it wasn’t just Cedric and Sirius haunting him any longer. Dean and Colin had joined the cast of specters that besieged him, day and night. It didn’t matter that he hadn’t actually witnessed their deaths. They still played out clearly in his mind. The details varied with each reenactment, but it always ended the same way; with two little words and a blinding flash of green light.

“Harry?” he heard Ron’s voice ask uncertainly. “You awake?”

He was, but his back was to the door, and he didn’t want to talk to Ron. He didn’t want to talk to anyone, so he closed his eyes and focused on keeping his breathing deep and steady, hoping that Ron would be fooled.

It must have worked, because Ron didn’t speak to him again. Harry lay there and listened to his best mate move about their room. He heard the whoosh Ron’s blanket and pillow made when he tossed them at his bed. He heard the bureau drawers open and then close. This was followed by the sound of shifting fabric, presumably caused by Ron changing his clothes. Then there was silence. An uncomfortable, forced sort of silence, and the longer it lasted, the more unnerved Harry became.

He had no idea what Ron was doing, but whatever it was, it was making him uncomfortable. He knew that Ron was still in the room. The door hadn’t opened or closed again. So what the hell is he doing? Harry asked himself. Why is he so quiet? Is he just standing there, watching me? Is he waiting for me to move? Is he looking for signs that I might be faking? Am I really that obvious?

Apparently not, because even as Harry asked himself that final question, he heard the door open and then close again gently. He didn’t have to open his eyes or turn around to know that he was alone. The heavy weight of Ron’s stare had departed. With a sigh of relief, Harry rolled over on his back and resumed staring at the ceiling.

“He’s not still asleep is he?” Ginny asked when she opened her bedroom door and saw her brother standing there.

“No,” Ron said, brushing past her and entering the room. “He’s faking it,” he added, plopping down on the edge of his sister’s bed. “Where’s Hermione?”

“She’s down in the kitchen talking to Mum,” Ginny replied. “And I don’t recall inviting you in.”
“I knocked. You opened the door,” Ron said, as if that was all the invitation he needed. “What she talking to Mum about?” he asked, praying it didn’t have anything to do with where she’d slept.

“Well,” Ginny replied cautiously. “We’ve discussed it and we think it would be best if Harry got some undisturbed sleep before we,” she said, emphasizing the fact that she was included, “tell him about the prison break. That way he can come at it fresh and think about it rationally.”

“She already told you?” Ron said, despite the fact he already had an answer to his question. “That was quick.”

“Well you know, Hermione,” Ginny replied. “She doesn’t beat around the bush.”

“So what does this have to do with Mum?”

“Well Mum is the one that brews the special tea, see?” Ginny answered as if Ron were a very slow child.

“And how exactly does she plan on getting Harry to drink it?” he replied irritably.

“I would imagine she’s going to ask him.”

“Yeah, except he’s pretending that he’s already asleep.”

“As if she’ll fall for that,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

“All right,” Ron conceded. “You have a point there. But what if he refuses to take it?”

“Well that’s where you come in,” Ginny said, fighting the urge to smile.

“Me?”

“Yeah,” she replied as if it were obvious. “You’re bigger then he is. If he refuses, you get to hold him down while we force it down his throat.”

“Are you insane?” Ron cried.

“I’m kidding, you thick prat.”

“Oh. So,” Ron said, shifting uncomfortably. He knew his sister and he knew that she was trying to hide behind her humor. “Er... you ok?” he asked, averting his eyes.

“Yeah.”

“Look, Gin,” Ron persisted, despite her answer. “I know you and Dean were...um...well, I know and... if you want to talk about it or anything... um...”

“We weren’t,” Ginny admitted reluctantly. “We weren’t dating, I mean. We were... just friends. I only said that to...well it doesn’t really matter now.”

“It does too matter,” Ron insisted. “So what if you weren’t dating. I wasn’t dating Hermione when... when we all thought that... well... you know? But that didn’t change the way I felt.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Ginny replied, sounding a little guilty. “I really didn’t know him all that well. I was a lot closer to Colin.”

“Oh,” Ron replied. Guess that makes sense. They were in the same year. “Well, if you want to talk
“Who are you?” Ginny asked, staring at Ron as if he suddenly sprouted an extra head. “And what have you done with my brother?”

“Shut up,” he groaned, rolling his eyes at her.

“That’s more like it,” Ginny sighed contently. “There’s the insensitive git I’m used to. Now one more time, with feeling.”

“Shut up!” Ron shouted, with a smile that matched his sister’s.

“Thanks.”

“Any time.”

Hermione returned to her room with an empty mug and a copy of the *Daily Prophet* clenched in her hand.

“Mum, actually let you have that?” Ginny asked, pointing at the paper in astonishment.

“She didn’t try and wrestle it out of your hands and toss it in the bin?”

“She probably would have if your father hadn’t been in the kitchen when the delivery owl arrived.”

“Beat her to it, did he?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” Hermione replied, setting the mug down on her bedside table and opening the paper. “He looked it over and then passed it to me, despite her protests.”

“You didn’t let Harry see it, did you?” Ginny asked.

“No,” Hermione replied, prying her eyes off the print long enough to meet her young friend’s worried gaze. “I left it out in the hall before I went in. I thought it would be better if we looked it over first. So there won’t be any surprises.”

“What surprises?” Ron muttered to himself. “We all know how he’s going to react.”

“So he drank it? Voluntarily?” Ginny asked, motioning towards the empty cup. “Told you he would,” she added when Hermione nodded her head.

“How long did you take it?” Hermione asked, unable to stop herself.

“A couple months,” Ginny replied. “By then the nightmares weren’t as frequent and I was ready to handle them.”

“Well?” Ron asked, as his sister walked over and stood beside Hermione, so she could gaze down at the headlines on the front page herself. “Anything we don’t know?”

Death Eaters Escape From Azkaban

Hermione read the biggest headline out loud. “This one looks pretty much like the article they wrote after the first breakout.”
“They even used the same pictures,” Ginny agreed, staring at Antonin Dolohov pale, twisted face. “Except for Malfoy,” she added with a smirk. “That one’s new. Lucius Malfoy,” Ginny read the legend under his smug photograph.

Escaped justice after Voldemort’s downfall by claiming he was forced to act under the Imperius Curse. Reputed to be the leader of the band of Death Eaters captured in the Department of Mysteries this past June, but as of yet, this allegation has not been confirmed. The true extent of Mr. Malfoy’s involvement with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, is yet unknown. No sentence had been given, as his trial was still pending.

“What the hell is all that ‘reputed’ and ‘alleged’ rubbish about?” Ron snarled.

“I would imagine they’re being cautious because they don’t want to be sued for slander,” Hermione said, scanning the rest of the article and then proceeding on to the next.

“Uh huh. And Voldemort, being the nice guy that he is, freed him because he was innocent,” Ron retorted. “Please.”

Rather then respond, Hermione began reading the next article out loud.

Dark Marks Cloud the Sky

Muggle-borns Massacred

Late last night, a spokesman for the Minister of Magic, confirmed reports of Dark Marks materializing in at least five separate locations yesterday evening. Mr. Weasley would not...

“Percy,” Ron growled, screwing his face up in disgust. “I can’t believe he’s still siding with that power-hungry...

Ignoring him, Hermione backtracked and continued to read even louder, in hopes of drowning him out.

Mr. Weasley would not answer questions, but he did give a brief statement.

“Earlier this evening, Dark Marks were discovered hovering over the scenes of five separate homicides. Teams of Aurors were immediately dispatched and they have the situation well underhand. They have done a throughout search of all the areas in question and assure us that the Dark Wizards responsible for these heinous crimes are no longer in the area.

“Yeah, that’s because they were all off at Azkaban busting out their mates, you idiot.” Ron growled, under his breath.

“Does it list the names of the victims?” Ginny asked, staring down at the paper again while Hermione scanned the rest of the article.

“No,” she replied, when she had finished. “It just says that the victims were either Muggles or Muggle-born. That’s it. No names. It does list the locations though.”

“So there is nothing in there that we didn’t already know?” Ron asked, falling back on Ginny’s bed and staring up at the ceiling.

“Nope,” Ginny replied, sitting on the edge of Hermione’s desk. “So what are we going to tell Harry? That we read about the break out in the paper or that Bill told you?”
“That Bill told us, of course,” her brother replied. “The paper doesn’t say that the attacks were a diversion, but Bill did.”

“Any idiot could figure that out,” Ginny retorted. “Even you.”

“Thanks,” Ron groaned, when Hermione snorted.

“Huh?” she asked, dragging her eyes off the paper. “Did you say something to me?”

“What are you over there snickering about?” Ron asked.

“Oh,” she replied with a slight smile. “Apparently the *Prophet* has gone off Fudge a bit. It’s a lot like what they did to Harry last year, only the snide comments are a lot more obvious. I hope he enjoys a bit of his own medicine,” Hermione declared, flipping to the next page. “See, this is what I mean,” she continued, as if Ron and Ginny had read the articles with her and knew what she was talking about. “*One now wonders if the Minister’s generous benefactor was in fact dispensing brides*?”

“Um, Ok,” Ron said, shooting a quick look his sister’s way to see if she understood what that was supposed to mean.

“They’re suggesting that Malfoy, Fudge’s ‘generous benefactor’, was paying him to look the other way,” Hermione explained.

“You mean that Fudge is in Voldemort’s pocket?”

“Exactly.”

“So in other words, he knew about the attacks and the prison break, but didn’t do anything about it.” Ginny said.

“Essentially,” Hermione agreed. “In a subtle sort of way.”

“Think that’s true?” Ron asked, his brow furrowed as he contemplated the accusation.

“I hope not,” Hermione replied, “It’s more likely that he’s just an incompetent fool,” she continued, tossing the paper on the desk next to Ginny. “At least I hope so. For your brother’s sake.”

“Don’t worry about Percy,” Ron snarled, “He’s just like every other rat. He’ll abandon that ship the minute it starts to sink.”

Hermione noted that Ron wasn’t the only one that was scowling, his sister had joined him. One look at her face was all it took for Hermione to know that Ginny agreed with her brother’s assessment and was just as displeased by the thought as he was.

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It was a few hours later when Bill happened to catch his youngest brother walking down the second floor hallway. “Ron,” he said, coming up behind him, placing his hand on his brother’s shoulder, and steering him away from the stairs and back towards the bedrooms, “I need to have a word with you. In my room.”

“What?” Ron cried, warning bells chiming loudly in his head. *I knew I shouldn’t have come up here to check on Harry by myself.* “But... now?” he asked, shrugging his shoulder in an attempt to free himself from his brother’s grasp.

“Yes, now,” Bill insisted.
“But, Hermione and Ginny are waiting for me.”

“This will only take a few minutes,” Bill replied, opening the door to his own bedroom and pushing Ron inside.

Oh God, Ron moaned internally, as the door snapped shut behind him. Don’t let it be about what I think it’s about.

“So,” Bill said, positioning himself between his brother and the door. “You and Hermione spent the night together, did you?”

“Oh NO!” Ron cried, shaking his head as he lunged for the door. “There is no way in hell I’m having this conversation with you again. You fucked me up enough the first time.”

“Will you just hold on a minute?” Bill asked, grabbing Ron by the shoulders and shoving him back into the center of the room.

“No way!” Ron yelped. “Nuh uh! I’m not going to listen to this,” he protested adamantly. “She told me not to listen to you and she’s right. Now get out of my way.”

“Hermione told you not to listen to me?” Bill asked, arching one eyebrow in surprise. “You told her what I said?”

“Of course I told her. You buggered everything up. I had no choice but to tell her,” Ron admitted. “It was either that or let her go on thinking that I was so repulsed by her that I didn’t want to touch her.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Ron barked, throwing himself at the door again. “Things are fine. Things are great. Now get out of my way.”

“Am I going to have to use my wand on you, little brother?” Bill asked. “Because if that’s what it takes to shut you up and keep you still for five minutes I’ll do it.”

“Fine!” Ron cried, crossing his arms in front of his chest and glaring at his brother. “Just say whatever it is you have to say and get it over with.”

“Here,” Bill said, snatching a worn and very battered book off the top of his bureau and shoving it into his brother’s hand.

“What’s this?” Ron asked, looking at the nondescript cover, searching for a title and finding none.

“That,” Bill replied. “Is a Weasley legacy. I gave it to Charlie, who gave it to Percy, who believe it or not, actually passed it along to Fred. Fred was supposed to give it to you, but obviously he didn’t. He had some lame excuse about it being George’s turn to have it,” Bill explained. “As if George hasn’t already read it cover to cover. Besides, George doesn’t have a girlfriend and when he does, he can buy his own bloody book. That one is mine and I’ve decided that it’s your turn to borrow it.”

Ron didn’t know what possessed him to do it, but before he even registered the fact that he was doing it, he opened the book and stared down at the dog-eared pages. “BLOODY HELL!” he shouted, his eyes as wide as saucers. “This is a sex book,” he cried, slamming it shut again while blushing so deeply that his face resembled an over ripe turnip.

“Yes, I know,” his older brother replied calmly.
“With moving pictures,” Ron cried loudly.

“You’ll find them quite educational.”


“Of course not,” Bill retorted, smacking Ron upside the head. “What’s the matter with you? When you’re finished with it, you give it to Harry.”

“I’m not giving it to Harry either,” Ron declared, his face still beet red. “He’ll think I’m a pervert.”

“I’ve got news for you, Ron,” Bill chuckled, opening the door and walking out into the hall. “You are a pervert. So is Harry and every other bloke you know. Don’t waste your time fighting it. Just accept it. It’s much more fun that way. You’re only young once, you know?”

“I’m going to tell Mum you said that if I get caught with this,” Ron said, as his brother started to walk away. “I’ll blame it all on you and your dirty little book.”

“It’s your dirty little book now,” Bill laughed. “What you do or don’t do with it, is none of my concern.”

“We’ll see if Mum agrees with that.”

“There’s gratitude for you,” Bill chuckled, knowing that Ron was all bark and no bite. “A simple thank you, would have sufficed.”

What the hell and I supposed to do with this? Ron wondered, staring down at the book in his hand as if it were his own private version of Pandora’s Box. It was trouble. Pure and simple. The knowledge he could gleam from this small object in his hands could be very useful. But it was dangerous as well. If his mother found it, she’d go ballistic. And if Hermione caught him looking at it... well he didn’t even want to contemplate her reaction. She’d drop him so fast his head would spin. He’d need a pornographic book then. It would be the only action he’d get.

Even so, there was no way he was going to let this opportunity pass him by. He was tempted to sneak off somewhere private, somewhere no one would think to look for him, and study it to his hearts content. But he couldn’t. He was supposed to be downstairs. His sister and his girlfriend were waiting for him. If he didn’t show up one of them, or even worse, both of them, would come looking for him. Eventually they’d find him and when they did... well it could be quite embarrassing.

No, he had to get rid of it, and fast. But where do I put it? Ron wondered as he wandered down the hall. Harry’s still asleep, he reminded himself. I’ll just drop it in my trunk for now and find a place to hide it later.

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“Did you hear what I just said, Harry?” Hermione asked, glancing over at Ron and then back at their best friend, who still hadn’t reacted to the news of the escapes.

“The attacks were all a distraction,” Ron said, peering anxiously into his best mates face, searching for a sign of how he was taking it.
“So you said,” Harry replied, reaching over and snatching Hermione’s copy of the Daily Prophet right out of her hands. “It doesn’t say that here,” he said, after scanning the articles on the front page, and tossing the paper on his bed.

“Look, Harry,” Hermione began, after exchanging another look with Ron.

“We told you that Bill told us that part.”

“When he got back,” Ginny added. “He was there. He saw the whole thing with his own eyes. Professor Dumbledore told Fudge that the attacks were all a diversion after he talked to Colin’s mum. He told Fudge to send his Aurors to Azkaban, but you know how Fudge is? He doesn’t like being told what to do. He ignored Dumbledore, so the Order went instead. Bill will tell you all this himself if you ask him,” she added. “Just wait until Mum isn’t around.”

“No, I believe you,” Harry replied, much calmer then anyone else expected. What they failed to realize was that this was actually good news. If the attacks were a diversion then it wasn’t his fault. All those people hadn’t died because of him. Well, they had in a way, but mostly it was because Voldemort wanted to throw the Ministry into disarray and have the Aurors attention focused everywhere but where he was really going to be.

“You do?” Ron asked, gaping at Harry in disbelief.

“You’re taking it pretty well,” Hermione said candidly.

“You expected me to get angry?”


“Ron,” Hermione interrupted before he could get any further into his tirade.

“Well, I’m angry about it,” Ron murmured, “So it only stands to reason that you would be too.”

“Oh, I’m angry,” Harry replied, clenching his fists at his sides as he said the words.

It was then that Ron noticed the cold fury burning in Harry’s bright green eyes. He was fighting to contain his anger, but it was there, simmering just below the surface, trying to break loose. Only for whatever reason, Harry was holding it back. It was actually rather frightening to see that much ferocity locked up inside his best friend. Hermione could be quite intimidating when she was truly in a temper. She might be small, but she was fiery and prone to lash out in unexpected ways. Even so, Ron suspected that the sparks he’d seen fly out of her when she was hacked off, were nothing compared to the inferno Harry was trying to stomp down. He’d hate to be on the receiving end when that wrath if it were unleashed.

“But there’s not a lot I can do about it right now,” Harry continued.

“What do you mean, right now?” Hermione asked apprehensively. “You’re not planning on going after him are you?”

“That’s crazy!” Ginny cried.

“I don’t have to go after him,” Harry admitted, wondering how they’d react if they knew about the prophecy. “All I have to do is sit back and wait and he’ll come after me.”

“Don’t what?” Harry asked, even though he knew perfectly well what she meant. He just wanted to see if she’d say it.

“Sound so resigned,” Ron answered for her. “You almost sound as if you’re waiting for him to come and... kill you. Like you want him to or something?”

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” Harry admitted, deciding that it might not be the right time to share his secret with them, especially with Ginny there. Telling Ron and Hermione he had to become a murderer was going to be hard enough. But Ginny was different. He didn’t know her as well as he knew the other two, and he had no way of knowing how she’d react. The last thing he wanted was for her to be afraid of him. Voldemort had already put her through hell once. The less she knew about all of this, the better. “It’s going to happen regardless,” he sighed, finally resigned to his fate.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Hermione said tenaciously.

_I hope you do come after me, you bastard, Harry thought. Because I’m going to be waiting and I’m definitely going to be ready this time. I’m not going to let you hurt anyone else I care about._

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“What do you think?” Hermione asked Ginny as the two of them walked back down to their room.

“I don’t know,” the young redhead admitted. “I just don’t know. He didn’t react the way I expected him to.”

“Maybe Ron will be able to get more out of him.”

“Maybe,” Ginny replied. _But I doubt it._

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It had been three days since their conversation with Harry about the jail break, and in all that time, he’d barely left his room. The only time he ventured out at all was to use the loo. If he didn’t leave his room, he didn’t have to see the house without Sirius in it. Ron and Hermione seemed to understand and neither of them pressured him. In fact, Ron actually stayed in seclusion with him for the first couple days, just to make sure he had company.

It was blatantly obvious, to Harry anyway, that the two of them had discussed it at some point and agreed that Ron should be the one to mind him. And while he knew that their hearts were in the right place, he couldn’t help but find it bothersome. It was more then bothersome, it was down right annoying. In fact, Ron was getting on his last nerve. He was always there, underfoot, in the way. Even now when Harry wanted to sleep he couldn’t, because Ron kept flopping around restlessly in his bed.

Of course Harry wasn’t the only one that was frustrated by the current arrangement. Ron was just as perturbed as best mate was. It wasn’t his fault he couldn’t fall asleep. It wasn’t as if he wanted to spend half the night tossing and turning in a vain attempt to get comfortable. He couldn’t help it if he was used to sleeping with Hermione snuggled up against him. Hermione, his girlfriend, who he’d barely seen, or talked to, in days. But just because he couldn’t explain what his problem was to Harry, didn’t give him cause to throw an alarm clock at him. And it had nearly hit him too.

Ron needed a break. He had to get out of the room, before he went stark raving mad or before Harry found something even bigger to throw at him. His mind made up, Ron hoped out of bed, grabbed his pillow and a blanket, and made for the door. He’d almost reached it when he stopped and returned to the foot of his bed.
“What now?” Harry groaned in the dark.

“Shut up and drink your ruddy tea,” Ron growled back, popping the lid of his trunk and rummaging around inside. “It’ll put you to sleep.”

It took him a minute to find what he was searching for, but eventually his hands fumbled across the tattered cover of the book Bill had given him. Reading material in hand, Ron slammed his trunk shut, marched over to the door, and left the room.

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“Ron!” Hermione yelped in surprise, when she opened the bathroom door and saw him standing directly on the other side. “What are you doing here?” she asked quietly, poking her head into the hallway and peering back and forth as if she expected Harry to be with him. She knew that things had gotten tense between them the other night, and that Ron had kipped out on the sofa in the drawing room. He’d dragged her out of bed as soon as he left his room and told her about everything that had happened.

They’d decided that maybe it wasn’t such a good idea for Ron to spend so much time with Harry. They’d been taking it in shifts to sit with him ever since. Ron, who liked to sleep in, took the mornings and Hermione would pop in around lunch time and relieve him. She didn’t stay very long though. Harry obviously wanted some time to himself, so more often then not, she’d drop his lunch off, chat with him for a while, or attempt to, and then depart. Her shift didn’t really begin until the evenings anyway. Being the more persistent of the two or “the nag” as Ron had put it, she was in charge of trying to get Harry out of his room. And wonder of wonders, it actually worked. Maybe he was tried of staring at the same four walls, or maybe he was just tried of listening to her harp on, but it only took him a day to give in and follow her down to the drawing room.

That first night had been rather strained. Harry had spent most it staring at the tapestry hanging on the wall. Ron had tried to distract him with a game of chess, but even as they played, his eyes kept returning to the spot where Sirius’ name had been burnt off.

In the middle of their second game, Hermione lost her mind, at least that was Ron’s opinion at the time, and blurted out that she missed Sirius too. Ginny had immediately abandoned her homework and looked over at Harry to see what his reaction would be. Ron didn’t bother waiting for a reaction; he kicked Hermione under the table, trying to shut her up. But Hermione, as usual, ignored him. She simply shifted her legs so they were out of reach and continued to talk, despite the look of horror on Ron’s face. She didn’t press Harry to talk about his feelings, rather she told him about her own. She just wanted him to know that he wasn’t the only one that missed Sirius, or the only on that found it difficult to be in his house without thinking about him.

Ron’s mouth actually fell open in disbelief when Harry started asking Hermione questions and then nodding his head as if he agreed with her answers. Rather then put him on edge, or worse, send him running from the room, the conversation seemed to relax him a bit. He stopped staring at the Black family tree, anyway. He even came back on his own the next afternoon, which was a good sign. Things with Harry were improving; at least Hermione thought so, but maybe he’d backtracked. Maybe that was why Ron was here.

“Is it Harry?” she asked anxiously. “Did he have a vision or something? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Ron replied, forcing his way into the bathroom and locking the door behind him. “I just wanted to see you. It’s been ages since we’ve had any quality ‘alone time,’” he added, arching his eyebrows suggestively. Then without so much as another word, he pounced on her.
“Are you insane?” Hermione hissed, when she gathered enough of her wits to pull away from his hungry lips. “Someone might see us,” she moaned, not really even caring anymore. He was right; it had been so long since they had been alone together like this. She’d just been thinking about how much she missed it; how much she missed him, and here he was. His mouth on her neck and one of his hands was running down her back, and her body was tingling with waves of desire that only he could educe.

“In the bathroom?” he muttered, his breath hot in her ear.

“Mmmmn... no,” Hermione groaned as she fought for her sanity. “No, when we leave.”

“Oh, no they won’t,” he chuckled, holding up the hand that wasn’t roaming over her backside and showing her what was in it.

“Does Harry know you have that?”

“Yeah!” he laughed. “There’s a conversation I want to have. ‘Hey Harry, mind if I borrow your invisibility cloak for a while. I’m off to ravage Hermione and I don’t want Mum to see me.’ No, he drank his tea early tonight,” Ron confessed. “He’ll be out for hours.”

“What if I don’t want to be ravaged?” she teased.

“You will by the time I’m through,” he replied with a confident smirk.

“You smug prat,” she laughed, swatting him on the arm.

“You love it,” Ron stated, as he pushed her backwards and reached around her to turn the water on in the shower.

“Planning on taking a cold shower, are you?” Hermione asked, as she watched Ron tug his shirt off over his head.

“I may,” he informed her, shucking his pajama bottoms as well, “when I get through taking care of you.”

“I’ve already had a shower, thanks,” Hermione taunted, biting her lower lip and letting her eyes drop to his boxers. “I’ll just watch.”

“Watch?” Ron snorted, tugging on the knot holding her dressing gown closed, then opening it, and running his hands over her shoulders as he pushed it off. “Where’s the fun in that?” he asked, disappointed to discover that she was wearing a nightgown underneath.

“So you’ve never thought about what it would be like to watch me...take a shower?” she asked, choosing her words carefully. “To see me...wet, with my hands running over my own body?”

“OH GOD!” Ron groaned loudly. “Yes,” he admitted, his voice low and husky. “God, yes. Please,” he begged, his eyes smoldering with desire. “But... I don’t know if I can just watch,” he admitted.

“What exactly is it that you have in mind?” she asked coyly.

“How about if I watch you,” Ron growled, reaching for the bottom of her nightgown and slowly sliding it up her legs, “and when I can’t stand that anymore, we can replace your hands with mine?”

“In other words, you wash my back, I wash yours?”

“Something like that?”
“All right,” Hermione agreed, after thinking it over for a minute, “but turn the lights down first.”

“I’ve already seen you naked,” Ron replied, even as he walked over and pulled the glass shade off one of the gas lamps illuminating the room.

“I know,” she replied with a slight blush as Ron blew the flame out and replaced the shade. “But... just do it, ok?”

“Well, love,” Ron chuckled, moving to the lamp on the other side of the mirror and blowing it out too. “But I can still see you,” he added, motioning to the lamp still burning on the opposite wall. “Want me to get that one too?”

“No,” she replied, “If you do that I won’t be able to see you.”

“You can see me any time you want,” Ron informed her, placing his hands around her waist and crushing her body against his own. “All you have to do is ask.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Hermione giggled, throwing her arms around his neck. “Now shut up and kiss me.”

“You’re so bossy,” Ron teased, just before he covered her lips with his own.

You always have to get in the last word, don’t you? was the last thing Hermione thought before she allowed her sanity to ebb away.

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“There you are,” Ron said, popping his head in the girls’ bedroom and spying Hermione hunched over her desk, her nose shoved in a book and her quill flying over a sheet of parchment. “What are you doing?” he asked. It had been two days since their encounter in the bathroom and he was hoping he could convince her to sneak off with him for a while.

“Potions homework,” she replied, not even bothering to look up.

“But you finished your homework ages ago.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “but have you? We’re going back to school in two weeks. Don’t you think it’s time you actually get started?”

“I’ve started it,” Ron protested weakly.

“But you haven’t finished any of it,” Hermione shot back.

How she could read, write, and nag all at the same time, Ron would never understand.

“But you have,” he said, trying to change the subject, “so what are you really doing?”

“I told you. I’m working on the Potions homework.”

“But why? I mean you’re finished.”

“I’m finished, but Harry isn’t,” she responded, candidly.

“What!” Ron cried, unable to hide his indignation. “You’re not seriously doing Harry’s homework for him?”
“Just his Potions,” she answered calmly. “And stop looking at me like that,” she snapped, her eyes still glued on her book. “You know how Professor Snape is. The other teachers will understand why Harry didn’t get any of his homework done. They’ll let it slide and give him make up work once we’re back at school. But not Snape. He’ll…”

“Use it as an excuse to kick him out of class,” Ron finished for her. “The vindictive little son of a…”

“Ron!” she chided. “And we can’t let that happen, can we?” she continued. “Because if he gets tossed out of Potions he can’t become and Auror.”

“Hermione?” Ron said hopefully.

“Don’t even go there,” she snapped.

“But...fine,” he sighed. “I’ll just copy Harry’s when he’s through,” he teased.

“Do that and you’ll be tossed out right along with Harry.”

“But we always do out homework together,” Ron grumbled. “If our essays aren’t similar, Snape will know something’s up.”

Hermione’s quill froze in the center of the parchment and she finally brought her eyes up at looked at Ron. “All right,” she said, after studying him intently.

“Really?” Ron asked, his whole face lighting up.

“Go get your stuff,” she said, shoving her essay in the middle of the book she’d been reading and then closing it. “I’ll meet you in the drawing room and we’ll work on it together.”

“You mean I still have to write it myself?” he complained half heartedly. Writing an essay with Hermione wouldn’t be nearly as hard as writing it on his own. If he fumbled along and pretended that he didn’t understand what he was reading, she’d pretty much tell him what to write. With a little luck, he’d have it finished in an hour or two.

“Does Harry write your essay for you when you work with him?”

“No,” Ron chuckled.

“Well then?” she said, rising up out of her chair and snatching a bottle of ink and her quill off the desk.

“Mione?” Ron asked from the doorway. “Will you help me with my Transfiguration essay when we’re finished? I really have tried on that one you know, but the book is confusing and it makes a lot more sense when you explain it to me.”

“Where’s Harry?” she asked, rather then answer his question.

“We went up to feed Buckbeak.”

“Really?” Hermione asked, sounding more then a little shocked. “I wouldn’t think he’d want to go anywhere near that room. Buckbeak has to remind him of Sirius.”

“Yeah,” Ron admitted.

“Maybe he’s ready to confront it.”
“That or he was looking for a place to brood.”

“I thought he was doing better,” she replied. And it was true, he was doing better. Harry spent most evenings, and even some afternoons in the drawing room now. He’d stopped avoiding everyone and actually had conversations with every member of the Weasley family at one point or another. He still wouldn’t go down to the kitchen, but that wasn’t really a problem. Mrs. Weasley was now sending meals up for the trio and Ginny. They usually ate in the drawing room, or the Grimmauld Place Common Room, as Ginny liked to call it.

“Well, you know how he is?” Ron reminded her. “Some days are better then others.”

“All right,” Hermione sighed. “Well go get your stuff. And don’t forget to bring my Transfiguration book with you,” she added, gathering her book into her arm before shoving him into the hall.

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“It’s about time you showed up,” a soft voice said mere moments after Harry entered the room Sirius kept Buckbeak in and closed the door.

“What are you doing in here?” Harry asked, spinning around in alarm and staring into Ginny’s deep brown eyes.

“Waiting for you,” she replied, tossing another dead rat at the hippogriff. “I’ve been up here every day this week actually,” she continued. “I knew it was just a matter of time until you...”

“Until I what?” Harry asked resentfully. Was he that predictable?

“Until you revisited the scene of the crime.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” Ginny replied, casually tossing another rat on the floor. “You can’t go to the Department of Mysteries, so this is the next logical location. It was either here, or Sirius’ bedroom. I’ll admit I wasn’t sure which you’d choose, so I’ve been waiting for you in both.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry growled, turning away from her and moving towards the door.

“Don’t try and pull that ‘you don’t know what I’m feeling’ rubbish with me,” Ginny cried, jumping out of her chair and positioning herself between him and the door. “You know exactly what I’m talking about,” she shouted as she advanced on him. “And you know that I know that you know. I’ve been where you are, and I can read the signs well enough.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Harry grumbled, averting his eyes to the floor.

“I’m sure you don’t,” she replied, crossing her arms in front of her chest and preparing herself for battle, “but you’re going to.”

“Oh I am, am I?” Harry shouted, his anger mounting.

“Go ahead, yell all you want,” Ginny replied. “In fact, maybe you ought to throw something while you’re at it. It’ll make you feel better. Here,” she said, snatching the bag of rats up off the floor and tossing them at Harry. “Throw these at Buckbeak, one at a time. Don’t worry,” she added, when his eyes went wide. “It’s a game I play with him. He’ll snatch each and every one of them out of the air before you can hit him.”
“I’m not throwing things at a Buckbeak,” Harry replied, dropping the bag at his feet and kicking them towards the hippogriff. “He didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Neither did Ron or Hermione, but that hasn’t stopped you from taking it out on them.”

“I have not,” Harry protested loudly. “I haven’t shouted at them once.”

“What about the clock?”

_DAMN!_ he thought, his mouth dropping open in surprise. Ron told her about the clock. “That was only the one time,” he said, trying to justify his actions, “and he was driving me insane.”

“So you hurled a clock at him?”

“Ron throws things all the time. It was no big deal.”

“Uh huh.”

“I don’t care if you believe me.”

“The point is Harry, you don’t believe yourself. Stop fighting it and just let it happen.”

“What?”

“You’re almost there,” Ginny replied. “You’ve made it past the denial and the anger. You’ve done the whole bargaining thing and realized that will never work. You’ve been stuck in the depression stage for weeks. There’s only one stage left. Acceptance. You saw the light at the end of the tunnel and that’s why you came up here. Because you’re used to the anger and the depression and you feel guilty about letting go of all that and moving on. Deep down you still feel like you need to be punished. Like you don’t deserve to be happy after what you’ve done. Sirius is gone. He’ll never be happy again, and you shouldn’t be happy either. That is what you’re thinking isn’t it.”

“DON’T YOU TALK ABOUT HIM! YOU BARELY EVEN KNEW HIM!”

“Do you have any idea how many times I found myself standing outside Moaning Myrtle’s Bathroom?” Ginny asked, completely ignoring Harry’s outburst. “How many times I went down the dinner and winded up in the corridor where Justin and Nearly Headless Nick were attacked instead? Do you know how hard it was for me to look at Colin every day in class at the beginning of our second year? Or how guilty I felt every time I ran into Hermione in the library and she was nice to me? I nearly killed one of my brother’s best friends and she was nice to me afterwards. And the sickest part was that I wanted to feel guilty,” Ginny admitted sadly. “Everyone else acted as if I wasn’t responsible. No one else was going to punish me, so I decided to punish myself. Eventually I realized what the rest of you already knew. It really wasn’t my fault. I made a mistake. A silly, stupid, life shattering mistake. But that’s all it was. I didn’t do it on purpose. I’m not a bad person. I didn’t attack those people. Tom Riddle did. You made a mistake, Harry. That’s all it was. You didn’t do it on purpose. And you’re not a bad person either.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry moaned, struggling to keep the emotions welling up inside of him from bursting out. The anger he could handle, but not the overwhelming sadness and sense of loss. No, wouldn’t let that out in front of Ginny. He wasn’t going to let that out in front of anyone.

“You didn’t kill Sirius, or anyone else,” Ginny persisted. “Voldemort did. Deep down you know that he’d hate to see you like this. He’d hate that you were blaming yourself for something that Voldemort did. You’re punishing yourself for something that wasn’t your fault.”
“IT WAS MY FAULT!” Harry roared at the top of his lungs. Better to focus on the anger then the feel the pain.

“Even if it was,” Ginny said softly, “We both know that Sirius wouldn’t want you punishing yourself. He loved you Harry. He’d want you to be happy. He wants you to move on.”

“You don’t know what he wants,” Harry growled. “No one knows, because he’s dead.”

“Yes, he is. Bellatrix Lestrange killed him,” Ginny said bluntly. “She killed him because he was trying to prevent her and Voldemort from hurting you. You’re well-being was more important to him then his own,” she said, fighting back her own tears. “And this is how you thank him. You’re using his death as an excuse to wallow in self pity.”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

“I bet that felt good didn’t it?”

“You DON’T KNOW WHO I AM! YOU DON’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ME! ALL YOU SEE WHEN YOU LOOK AT ME IS SOME STUPID, TRAGIC MISUNDERSTOOD, HERO! THE GOD DAMNED BOY WHO LIVED! THE SAVIOR OF THE WIZARDING WORLD! WELL, THAT’S NOT WHO I AM!”

“Who are you then?”

“IT DOESN’T MATTER WHO I AM!” he bellowed. “ALL THAT MATTERS IS WHAT I HAVE TO BECOME!”

“Oh yeah?” she pressed, undaunted by his rage. “What’s that?”

“A FUCKING MURDERER! LORD VOLDEMORT’S TWISTED REPLACEMENT!”

“You’re out of your mind,” Ginny scoffed.

Harry didn’t know what to say. He actually couldn’t believe it. All he could do was stand there with his mouth open gaping at her like an idiot, while she laughed at him. He’d just told her that he was going to turn into a murderer and she had the gall to laugh at him.

“A murderer,” Ginny hooted. “Please. You’re going to have to do better then that, Harry.”

“That certainly got her attention, Harry thought when Ginny stopped laughing and looked at him oddly. Not so funny now is it?

“So you did hear it then? Before Neville broke it? You might have told him, you know? He felt horrible about that. He said that he’d let you down.”

“I’m glad he broke it,” Harry replied honestly. “So no one will ever hear it.”

“If you heard it why didn’t Neville?” Ginny asked, looking at him as if she wasn’t quite sure she believed his story.

“I didn’t hear it...” he started, but Ginny cut him off before he could finish.

“Then how do you know what it said?”

“Dumbledore told me, all right?”
“Wait a minute,” Ginny said, “Let me get this straight. Professor Dumbledore told you that all this time, he’s been training you to become a murderer so you can replace Lord Voldemort? Please.”

“It’s the truth.”

“No it’s not. You must have misunderstood him.”

“No, I didn’t,” Harry insisted.

“Yes, you did, “Ginny shot right back. “Despite what you may think, I do know you Harry, and I know Tom Riddle. And the two of you are as different as night and day. There is no way you’ll ever become anything like him. It’s just not possible.”

“That’s what the prophecy said.”

“What exactly did it say?” she challenged.

Harry studied Ginny closely for a moment and then figured what the hell; he’d already told her pretty much everything else. If he told her the exact words, she’d know he was telling the truth and probably run for the hills. At least then this conversation would be over. “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches....’ he began, reciting the words that were seared into his mind. “Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.”

“And where exactly is the part where it says you are going to become a murderer?” Ginny asked, her brow furrowed in concentration.

“Did you miss the whole ‘either must die at the hand of the other’ part?” he replied somewhat sarcastically.

“That’s not murder, you idiot.”

“WHAT!” Harry yelped in disbelief.

“That’s self defense, you thick prat. It’s not murder if you are defending your own life.”

“What?” Harry asked again.

“Come on Harry,” Ginny said, arching one eyebrow in surprise. “You didn’t seriously think that meant you were going to turn into some heartless killer did you? I mean, come on.”

“Well, yeah,” Harry admitted.

“It’s ridiculous,” Ginny laughed. “You must see that.”

“It is not,” he protested, feeling a bit stupid, but not wanting to let it show.

“But you’re the tragic hero, remember?” Ginny replied, using his own words against him. “If someone is in trouble, you have to save them. It’s what you do. It’s who you are. You’re the hero, not the villain.”

“I’m not the hero either,” he replied.

“That’s funny,” she shot back. “I seem to recall someone telling me that you once killed a basilisk with a sword and rescued a fair maiden. Don’t Muggles write fairy stories about things like that?”
“Fairy tales,” he corrected without really knowing why. It was official. He’d cracked his nut. He was turning into Hermione. “Um... look Ginny, I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t tell Ron or Hermione about that who prophecy thing. Or anyone else for that matter. You know,” he said uncomfortably. “I’d just rather do it myself.”

“Sure,” she agreed, much more readily then he would have suspected. “If that’s what you want. Lucky for you, I’m good at keeping secrets. But just so you know, they won’t buy the whole Dark Lord in training bit either. Although Fred and George will get a kick out of it when they hear about it. They may even start following you around, announcing you as a ‘seriously dark wizard’ every time you enter the room.”

“Shut up.”

“Oh come on, it was funny.”

“Only because it wasn’t you they were bothering.”

“Yeah well,” Ginny replied, “try putting up with them for 15 years and then we’ll talk about who has it bad.”

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Ron and Hermione had no idea about the conversation that had taken place between Harry and Ginny in Buckbeak’s room, but they definitely noticed the sudden change in his attitude. He wasn’t nearly as sullen or withdrawn as he had been previously. It was obvious to them both that something had happened while Harry was with the hippogriff. They could actually see a glimmer of the old Harry shinning through at times. He smiled at Ron’s jokes, and even laughed at a couple of them.

But the most encouraging development had occurred just yesterday when Harry sought out Professor Lupin and spent most of the afternoon with him. That was a great sign, in Hermione’s opinion. Professor Lupin was the closest thing Harry had left to a father and since he also happened to be Sirius’ best friend, he definitely knew what Harry was going though. If anyone could understand his grief and help him through it, it was Lupin. She just hopped that Harry wouldn’t try and keep him at arms length, for fear of something happening to him. Their old Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher needed Harry, just as much as Harry needed him.

Lost in her own thoughts, Hermione wasn’t really watching the chess match that was taking place in front of her. She didn’t really need to watch the game to know who would win. Ron might toy with his opponent from time to time, and let them think they had an advantage, but no one ever beat him. How Harry could play him again and again without getting frustrated by that fact, she’d never understand.

“Finished packing?” Mrs. Weasley asked, popping into the room and setting a tray of sandwiches down on the writing desk, beside Ginny’s nearly finished History of Magic paper.

“Yeah,” Ron replied as he studied the board.

“How’s your essay coming dear?” Mrs. Weasley asked her daughter.

“Almost done,” Ginny replied with a sigh of relief. “I just have to add the conclusion.”

“What about you Harry,” Mrs. Weasley inquired. “Finished with all your homework?”

“Yeah,” Ron answered before Harry even had time to register the question and reply. “Hermione helped us both with it. You know how she is,” he continued. “A regular homework Nazi,” he
“Excuse me,” Hermione cried as she slugged him in the arm. That would teach him to say something like that when she was sitting right beside him.

“Well, just make sure you really are all packed by the end of the night,” Mrs. Weasley said as she made for the door. “Because we’ll be leaving much earlier then normal. Anything that isn’t packed by tomorrow morning is just going to have to stay here. Including that chess set,” she added.

“Yes, Mum,” Ron moaned, rolling his eyes as she left the room. “You’ve only told us a hundred times,” he shouted after her. “Maybe I ought to let Pig out of his cage,” he said, leaning forward and moving his knight. “Leave the little git here just to annoy her.”

“I’m sure Hedwig would appreciate that,” Ginny chuckled. “Of course she’ll just send him back to you with a rude letter.”

“At least I won’t have to deal with him on the train,” Ron replied. “You know,” he continued as Harry made his move. “That might not be such a bad idea really. I could write myself a letter or something and send him on ahead.”

“Except he’ll deliver it to you on the train,” Hermione informed him with a smirk. She was just about to suggest he write to Hagrid instead when something large and black fell from the ceiling and landed on her thigh. She brushed it off on instinct, neither knowing nor caring what it was, as she jumped to her feet.

Unfortunately it landed on the couch right beside Ron, who did happen to see what it was. He leapt off the sofa so fast, he knocked the chessboard over as he quickly put some distance between himself and the spider. He was clear across the room, standing behind Harry’s chair by the time the chess pieces hit the carpeted floor.

“What did you do that for?” he shouted at Hermione, backing away even further, when Crookshanks sprang off the back of the sofa and batted the spider onto the floor.

“What?” Hermione asked, trying not to snicker. Unfortunately, Harry and Ginny were already laughing, which made it all the more difficult to hold herself back.

Ignoring the chess pieces, Crookshanks sprang onto the floor and pounced on the spider before it could scurry away. Ron watched in horror, as the cat pinned it with one paw, then picked it up in his mouth, and ate it.

“EEEEWWWWW!” he groaned with a shudder.

That was the final straw. She just couldn’t hold it back anymore. Even as Hermione started to laugh, she saw the emotions play across Ron’s face. He was hurt, disgusted and insulted, all at the same time. She really didn’t want to laugh at him, but she just couldn’t help it. Before she could reign herself in, he turned around and stalked out of the room.

“RON!” Hermione called after him, knowing that they had embarrassed him. “Don’t go,” she pleaded. “We’ll stop. Honest.”

This of course, caused Harry and Ginny laugh even harder.

“We should probably stop,” Ginny manages to get out. “Well, at least Crookshanks saved him from the big bad spider.”
“Ginny,” Hermione chuckled. “That’s not very nice.”

“I’ll go get him,” Harry said, forcing himself to sober up.

“No,” Hermione protests, “I should probably do it. He thinks I threw it at him on purpose. You set up the board,” she said, rising up off the couch. “I’ll go bring him back.”

“You sure?” Harry asked, looking at her doubtfully. “If you say so,” he added, shrugging his shoulders. “I’ll just play Ginny until you two are done rowing.”

“We’re not going to fight,” Hermione said, walking out of the room.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that,” Harry muttered under his breath. “What’s up with them?” he asked Ginny as she took Ron’s place on the couch. “How come they stopped bickering all the time? They’re holding it in because of me, aren’t they?”

“Something like that?” Ginny replied evasively. “You know, because they don’t want to upset you.”

“Can’t say I miss it all that much,” Harry replied as he set up the chessboard.

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Ron looked so miserable when Hermione found him sulking in his bedroom that she couldn’t help herself. She walked right up to him without saying a word and kissed him.

“You are absolutely adorable,” she said with a smile, when she pulled away.

“That wasn’t very nice, Hermione,” Ron moaned, obviously still embarrassed and rather hurt.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” she assured him. “I was startled. I slapped it away before I even knew what it was.”

Ron looked down at her doubtfully. It didn’t help that she was biting her lip to keep from laughing again.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help it,” she admitted, struggling to hold it back. “It’s sweet actually.”

“Oh that’s nice,” Ron cried. “The three of you laughing at me is sweet?”

“No, your reaction. The fact you didn’t try and hide that you were afraid. I find it charming that you can be...”

“I wasn’t afraid,” he cried out indignantly. “I just wasn’t expecting you to throw a great hairy spider at me, that’s all.”

“Ron, it’s all right. We all know you don’t like them. It isn’t anything to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed and I’m not afraid,” he said defensively, his voice getting louder. “I went into the Forbidden Forest and faced Hagrid’s man eating acromantulas didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did,” she says grabbing his hand, no longer laughing. “And don’t think I’ll ever forget it,” she added, giving him another kiss. “Why don’t we go back down?”

“So you can all laugh at me some more?”
“It’s not like that, Ron. We weren’t making fun of you, it was just...”

“Just what?”

“The situation. It was funny. I jumped up too. How do you know they weren’t laughing at me? Besides,” she added when he shot her a cynical look, “it’s good for Harry to laugh.”

“Yeah, right,” he mumbles, looking at his feet.

“Harry and I don’t care if you are.... if you don’t like spiders. We have our own phobias you know?”

“I saw your boggarts. They weren’t irrational fear.”

“I’m afraid of heights.”

“What?”

“I don’t like high places,” Hermione admitted. “I’m ok, as long as I don’t look down, but when I do it makes me dizzy and I’m afraid I’m going to fall.”

“I’ve never seen you get dizzy in the astronomy tower. You don’t hesitate to approach the telescopes and they are near the edge.”

“It’s dark and we are looking at the sky, not the ground.”

“It’s not dark when we watch a Quidditch match.”

“I know. That blasted game would have to be played 50 feet in the air, she thought. “And I cringe every time one of you leans over the side of the box.

“And you cover your eyes,” Ron said, picturing her in his mind.

“Yes.”

“I always thought you were just nervous about the game.”

“No,” Hermione replied, shaking her head. I’m afraid one of you will fall and break your neck, she thought, but didn’t voice that part.

“But... you got on the thestral. You flew to London.”

“And you faced Hagrid’s acromantulas. Sometimes we don’t have a choice. Come on,” she said, grabbing his hand and tugging him towards the door. “If we don’t go back down, Harry will come looking for us and there is no telling what we’ll be doing by then.”

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“Rubesco,” Tonks shouted, pointing her wand at the back of Hermione’s head and giving it a quick swish. “Well?” she asked, staring at the younger woman’s reflection in the mirror and watching her hair change from its normal mousy brown to a deep auburn color that was streaked with highlights as red as Ginny’s.

“Absolutely not,” Hermione cried, studying her own reflection with mounting trepidation.

“Actually, you look pretty good as a redhead,” Ginny replied, trying to soothe her friend’s nerves. She knew that Hermione wasn’t exactly keen on the idea of changing her appearance. Still, it was
“Well, that’s a bit harder,” the young Auror admitted. “Took me ages to get it down right. I accidentally used ‘Mina’ once,” she laughed. “I only realized it meant smooth, as in bald, when all my hair fell out. I was never so happy to be a Metamorphmagus,” she confessed. “Linare,” Tonks cried, following the incantation up with a complicated flick of her wrist. “Like that?” she asked, as Hermione’s bushy hair transformed into smooth, silky tresses before their eyes.

“Perfect,” Ginny cried with glee. “You’ll have to teach her how to do that one herself.”

“It does look pretty good,” Tonks added. “You’ll blend right in.”

“Ron will hate it,” Hermione lamented. “I look like his sister.”

“More like a cousin,” Ginny snickered. “One that wasn’t cursed with the Weasley freckles.”

“NO!” Hermione declared loudly, imagining the look of horror plastered across her boyfriend’s face.

“Oh, all right,” Tonks sighed. “What about this? Albesco,” she said, waving her wand again and causing Hermione’s hair to turn platinum blond.


“Well, at least you know Ron will like it,” Ginny snickered under her breath. Unfortunately, Hermione heard her.

“Shut up.”

“You just don’t like her because Ron asked her to the Yule Ball.”

“Ron asked Bill’s girlfriend out?” Tonks asked, lowering her wand in surprise. “What is it with the Weasley males and that snooty cow? Every time she walks into a room they make complete arses out of themselves.”

“She’s part Veela,” Hermione growled.

“And she obviously has bad aim. A few years ago, she was putting on the charm, trying to get this bloke at school to ask her to the ball, only she missed and hit my prat of a brother instead. So Ron asked to the ball and apparently Hermione still hasn’t forgiven her for it,” Ginny chuckled.

“That’s not true,” Hermione retorted. “I never liked her. Even before that. What’s to like? She spent all her time sauntering around Hogwarts like some princess, with her nose shoved in the air, moaning about how ‘orible’ our school is. ‘Zis ‘ogwarts food is so ‘eavy,” Hermione gripped in a rather impressive mock French accent. “I’ll get fat and zey boys will stop fawning all ovair me. Ze castle is too drafty. Ze armor is ugly and zat awful little poltergeist would nevair be allowed to entair into ze beautiful Palace du Beauxbatons. Where we ‘ave choirs of wood nymphs, oo serenade us while we eat ower superb cuisine. And zen zere are ze grand ice sculptures, zat sparkle like diamonds.”

“Hey, that’s pretty good,” Ginny laughed. “I didn’t know you could do impressions. Do Krum?”

“No,” Hermione replied crossly.

“Come on Herm-own-ninny, you know you want to,” Ginny teased, earning herself a contempuous glare. “You seriously hate her, don’t you?” she asked.

“I don’t hate her,” Hermione replied. “I just don’t trust her.”
“What do you mean?” Tonks asked, not even bothering to repress how amused she’d been at Hermione’s impression.

“It’s just always seemed rather convenient to me that she stayed behind to improve her ‘Eenglish’, when she speaks it perfectly well. It would be the ideal cover for a spy, wouldn’t it?”

“HAAAAAAA!” Ginny hooted, doubling over and clutching her sides. “You just accused Bill of fraternizing with the enemy. Bwahahaha! Wait till I tell Ron.”

“You know?” Tonks said thoughtfully. “That’s idea is not so far fetched, really. If she’s really a Veela.”

“She is.”

“Voldemort has always relied on informants and who better to spy on our side then a Veela. Bill never told me, but I should have guessed. It makes perfect sense now. That’s why he turns into a blithering idiot every time she walks into a room. That shameless hussy, she’s been enchanting him.”

“Exactly.” Hermione agreed.

“Are you two listening to yourselves?” Ginny cried though her laughter. “It’s ridiculous.”

“She certainly glommed onto Bill fast enough,” Hermione said under her breath.

“Well, he is the hottest bloke in Gringgots,” Tonks muttered.

“OH...STOP!” Ginny shrieked between bouts of laughter. “Bill... hot!”

“You just don’t see it because he’s your brother,” Hermione informed her.

“Not you too,” Ginny cried with mirth.

“Come on, Ginny,” Tonk replied. “You have to admit, he’s far better looking then the rest of his colleagues.”

“Plus she knows that he’s close to Harry,” Hermione muttered under her breath.

“That’s because they’re goblins,” Ginny hooted, in response to Tonks’ comment. “Unless you like em short, wrinkled and hairy...”

“Can we get back to my hair?” Hermione said tetchily.

“Oh right,” Tonks said, waving her wand again. “Auricoma,” she cried, turning Hermione’s hair a rich honey blond. “What about that?” she asked.

“It’s better, but it still looks odd. Do I have to do this? Isn’t it enough that you’ve already straightened it? Can’t I just...”

“You heard Moody,” Tonks said abruptly, cutting her off. “And I happen to agree with him for once. They had you long enough to procure a hair sample and we can’t take the risk of them planting a polyjuiced imposter on the train. The last thing we need is a Death Eater lurking around on the Hogwarts Express trying to get at Harry. Altering your appearance is the best was to assure that doesn’t happen. It’s for your own safety as well as everyone else’s. So it’s either this or red,” Tonks insisted. “Unless you want to try the black again?”
“No,” Hermione sighed. “I suppose this will be fine. It’s only for one day. I can live with it.” If I have to, she continued in her head.

“It’ll last roughly 5 hours,” Tonks informed her, pocketing her wand. “But that won’t matter. Just find me on the train and I’ll boost the charms before they wear off.”

“You’re going to ride the train with us?” Ginny asked, turning away from the mirror and staring at Tonks in surprise. “All the way to Hogwarts?”

“She won’t be the only one,” Bill said, walking through the open door and entering the girls bedroom. “Dumbledore asked for an entire security detail.”

“Are you going to be there?” Ginny asked her brother.

“Of course,” Bill replied offhandedly. “Wouldn’t trust anyone else to mind my baby sister now, would I?”

“BILL!” Ron’s voice echoed down the hallway, drawing everyone’s attention. “Mum says to hurry up with those trunks,” he added, his voice getting louder as he got nearer. “She told me to come and help you with the--” But the rest of the sentence died on Ron’s lips as he stopped short in the doorway and stood there, gaping at Hermione in dismay. “Bloody hell, Hermione!” he exclaimed loudly. “What did you do to your hair?”

“It looks nice, doesn’t it?” Bill asked pointedly, elbowing his youngest brother in the ribs.

“No,” Ron replied without thinking. He was so focused on Hermione’s silky golden locks that he didn’t even register the fact Bill was shaking his head sadly and moving away from him. “I liked it better the way it was,” Ron continued. “Put it back.”

“You are such a prat,” Ginny declared, rolling her eyes. “Don’t listen to him, Hermione,” she said turning away from Ron in disgust. “It looks nice. Even Bill thinks so. He’s just afraid the blokes on the train will take notice and he’ll have to compete with them for your attention. Although,” she added, as a warning to her idiot of a brother, “why you’d want to hang out with some git that insults you, is beyond me.”

“I didn’t insult her,” Ron cried out in protest. “I just said I liked it better before. Whatcha change it for?”

“IF YOU LOT DON’T GET DOWN HERE RIGHT NOW!” Mrs. Weasley’s voice bellowed up the stairs. “YOU’RE ALL GOING TO MISS THE TRAIN!!”

“COMING MUM!” Bill shouted back, pulling his wand and aiming it at Hermione’s trunk. “Locomotor Trunk.,” he said, causing it to rise up into the air and follow him out of the room. “Tonks, can you get...”

“Already on it,” she said, pointing her wand at Ginny’s trunk and following Bill out the door.

“You can carry Crookshanks,” Ginny said, scooping the cat carried up off Hermione’s bed and shoving it at her brother.

“Oh can I?” Ron asked sarcastically.

“Fine, be a prat. I’ll carry your girlfriend’s cat for her,” Ginny said, before exiting the room.

“Damn it, Ginny. Wait,” Ron said, but she was already gone. “Sorry,” Ron muttered, turning away
from the empty door and venturing a quick glance at Hermione.

“For what?” Hermione asked, moving into the hall and making for the staircase.

“For being a prat,” Ron replied, following after her.

“You were just being yourself,” Hermione said softly, taking his hand and giving it a quick squeeze before releasing it again. “And I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

Author’s Note:

Yeah, I know, this chapter was... well a bit choppy. It’s rather hard to cram an entire months worth of activities into one chapter and have it flow right. I know there wasn’t a whole lot of Harry, but... well, he wasn’t really doing an awful lot, expect brooding and thinking, and brooding some more. And since the story is mainly R/Hr centric, I just stuck with them and some of the occasions they had to be alone when Harry wasn’t otherwise engaged. That said, I’m not planning on making a habit out of this quick, broken up, story telling. It had to happen this time so I could get them out of Grimmauld Place and back to Hogwarts. Seriously, I don’t know how J.K. Rowling transitions from one part of the story to the next so smoothy. Guess that’s why she gets paid the big money, that and because she is brilliant.

A special shout out to Jen and Lana. Thanks so much for all the feedback and suggestions. They really helped improve the chapter. Although I still like the first version of the shower scene the best.

:-P
“Where are they?” Ron growled, pacing up and down the small train car he and Harry had been confined to the minute they set foot on Platform 9¾.

“Will you stop that?” Harry sighed from his seat. “You’re going to make me dizzy.”

“They should have been here by now,” Ron shot back, halting in front of the window to peer out at the crowd of students now assembled on the platform greeting their friends and saying goodbye to their parents. “Wait,” he cried, pointing at a flash of red hair he spotted off towards the barrier. “I think I see... bugger, it’s just Susan Bones.”

“It hasn’t been that long,” Remus Lupin informed them as he pulled Ginny’s trunk into the compartment and stowed it on top of the luggage racks next to Harry’s. “I’m sure they’re fine,” he added, giving Ron a knowing smile.

“Yeah, well... it’s nice to see their luggage made it in one piece,” Ron muttered under his breath as he collapsed into the seat closest to the window and continued to stare out at the crowd.

“Where’s Hermione’s?” Harry asked, retrieving Crookshank’s cat carrier off the floor outside the compartment door and noting that her trunk was missing.

“Not enough room in here,” Lupin replied, taking the seat opposite the grumbling redhead, “so we put it in the Prefect car. Relax Ron,” he added. “You know how girls are? They like to be fashionably late.”

“My sister is never late,” Ron argued just to vent his frustration. “And neither is my Mum.”

“I’m sure you’re sister is fine,” Lupin replied, knowing perfectly well that it wasn’t Ginny the he was worried about.

“Professor Lupin is right,” Harry chimed in. “I don’t know about you, but I’d rather face down Moody than your Mum, especially when she is in protective mode. Have you ever seen her actually curse anyone?” he asked Ron, genuinely curious.

“No,” Ron replied. “Well,” he amended, after thinking about it for a moment, “she put a body bind on Charlie once after he caught the twin reading the love letters he’d been getting from some girl he met at school. It was hilarious, actually. He chased them out of his room with a bludger bat. Of course that didn’t stop them from quoting back what they’d read and making kissing noises as they ran. That’s not exactly what you meant though, is it?”

“Hi Harry,” a voice said from the corridor outside their compartment. “Hi Ron. You guys get here early this year?” Neville asked, dropping the trunk he’d been dragging and struggling with his toad, which was trying to hop out of his hand. “Must have,” he answered himself quickly, “to get a compartment in the middle of the train. Mind if I...oh,” he said, looking up again and finally noticing that there was an adult sitting in the car. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to interrupt or anything. I should go find a place to store my stuff before it’s all full anyway,” he added, taking a deep breath and mentally preparing himself to drag his trunk down to the end of the train, where the only available compartments were. “Nice to see you again Professor Lupin. Hey!” he asked enthusiastically, taking a step backwards so he was standing in the doorway again. “Are you coming back to teach this year? That’s brilliant.”
“No,” Lupin replied quickly. “I’m afraid not.”

“Oh,” Neville said, his face falling a bit. “Okay, then. Well... I better go.”

“You can put your stuff in here, Neville,” Ron said, jumping out of his seat.

“But it’s full,” he replied uneasily.

“I can put my stuff in the prefect car,” Ron answered, grabbing Pigwidgeon’s cage and thrusting his twittering owl at Harry. “It’ll be a lot quieter in here without him anyway,” he added, turning around and heaving his own trunk off the rack. “Come on Harry, you can help me,” he said making for the doorway Neville was still standing in.

“Don’t get off the train,” Professor Lupin warned, as Neville stepped out of the way and Ron dragged his trunk into the narrow hallway. “You boys have fifteen minutes,” he added, knowing that Ron just wanted to get out of the car so he could look for the girls. “If you’re not back by then I’m going to send Mad Eye after you.”

“Right,” Ron cried over his shoulder as he and Harry started to carry his trunk towards the front of the train.

“Looks like you need some help with that trunk,” Lupin said, smiling at Neville, who was once again, fighting to maintain his hold on Trevor.

“Damn,” Ron muttered under his breath as they passed another doorway and he discovered that it too was being monitored by a member of Dumbledore’s security detail, which meant there was no way they’d be able to get off the train without being seen. “The train’s going to leave in 20 minutes,” he said, peering at the clock hanging over the platform.

“Well, look who it is,” Seamus Finnigan said as he stepped out of a nearby compartment and spotted Ron and Harry standing in the doorway, staring out at the platform. “What happened? Did your private transport to Hogwarts fall through? No flying car this year? No special arrangements for the exalted ones?”

Harry spun around and was just about to ask Seamus what the hell his problem was when Ron unexpectedly jumped off the train. Taken by surprise, Harry turned and glanced out the door just as Tonks walked through the barrier and join Mrs. Weasley and Bill on the platform. Her flamboyant purple spikes, clashed violently with the Weasley red she was surrounded by and Harry noted that he wasn’t the only one staring at her.

“Don’t even think about it, Potter,” a gruff voice growled the instant Harry tried to step off the train. He didn’t need to turn around to know that the voice, and the hand now resting on his shoulder, belonged to Mad-Eye Moody. Their fifteen minutes must have been up. “What part of stay on the train didn’t you understand?” he asked, watching Ron approach Bill, only to be grabbed by the arm and ushered back to the train.

“Damn it, Ron,” Bill said, shoving his brother through the doorway Harry had just vacated and following him onboard. “What did you think you were doing?”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, you idiot,” Ginny’s disembodied voice declared. “Will you shut up and get out of my way so I can get on the train already?”
“Oh yeah, sorry,” Ron said, stepping out of the doorway and feeling his sister brush by.

“Hermione?” Bill asked.

“Right here,” she replied, somewhere to his right, although it was hard to tell where exactly since she was still assuming the coloring and the texture of the object surrounding her like a human chameleon. Until she moved again, and the effect rippled as it readapted, it was all but impossible to see her.

“Right then,” Moody said, pulling his wand and tapping Ginny on the head, lifting the Disillusionment Charm that had been hiding her. “Come on Granger,” he said, as soon as Ginny reappeared and stepped aside. “I’ve got better things to than stand here ya know?”

“You’ve got all day to bark orders at the students Mad-Eye,” Tonks teased as she appeared in the doorway. “Why don’t you go spread the wealth among the masses,” she suggested, winking at Hermione as she reappeared. “I’ll look after this lot,” she said, pointing at Harry and Ron, “try and get off this train before we reach Hogwarts, use it on them.”

“Cool,” Ginny replied, whipping her wand out as soon as Tonks ducked out of the doorway and walked back over to Mrs. Weasley. “Have I mentioned that I love her? I get Ron.”

“Put that thing away,” her brother snarled, when Ginny jokingly pointed her wand at him.

“Must be nice knowing that you’ve got special protection,” Seamus said, casting a venomous look in Hermione’s direction.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, Finnigan?” Ron snapped, stepping in front of Hermione and obscuring her from Seamus’ view.

“I’d think it would be pretty self-explanatory, even to you, Weasley. What part of ‘special protection’ didn’t you understand? The part where she got to spend the summer in a Ministry run safe house. Or how about the part where the Aurors escorted her on the train?”

“Aurors,” Ginny scoffed. “That was my brother, you idiot. He works for Gringotts.”

“The Aurors are here to protect all of us,” Harry added, his own temper rising.

“That’s not what the papers said,” Seamus retorted. “Me mam, read all about it.”

“Not this again,” Harry sighed, rolling his eyes.

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” Ginny chimed in.

“Come off it, Potter. We all know she got preferential treatment because she’s close to you.”

“PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT!” Ron shouted at the top of his lungs, bearing down on Seamus who immediately took a step back. “If by preferential treatment you mean being attacked in the middle of Diagon Alley and taken prisoner...”

“Ron,” Ginny gasped when she noticed Hermione blanch. “Calm down,” she implored, placing her hand on his arm just in case she had to hold him back.

“...and then tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange,” he continued, ignoring his sister completely. “Do you
have any idea how many times that twisted bitch used the Cruciatus Curse on her? DO YOU?!”

“Don’t,” Hermione begged, wiping away the tears that were now rolling down her cheeks.

“WHERE WAS ALL THAT SPECIAL PROTECTION THEN? WHERE WERE THOSE AUROR BODYGUARDS WHEN SHE NEEDED HELP?”

“RON!” Ginny shouted.

“IF SHE HADN’T SAVED HERSELF—”

“STOP IT!!” Hermione screamed, finally getting Ron’s attention.

Hearing the pain in her voice, he spun around to check on her and then rounded on Seamus once more, glaring at him as if her distress were all his fault.

“Just stop. Please,” Hermione pleaded. “Don’t you see? This is what he wants. I’m sorry about what happened to Dean,” she said, stepping in front of Ron so she could look at Seamus as she spoke to him. “We all are,” she assured him. “I know he was your best friend and I can only imagine how hard this must be for you, but—”

“It isn’t her fault,” Ginny interrupted. “And it isn’t Harry’s either. They didn’t kill anyone. Voldemort did. If you want to blame someone, blame him. If you want to fight someone, fight him. Hermione’s right. This is exactly what he’d want. He’s trying to turn us against one another and you’re playing right into his hands,” she finished. “You’re doing exactly what he wants you to do.”

Ron at least had the good grace to look down at his feet uncomfortably as the truth of his sister’s words hit home. Seamus on the other hand, just continued to glower at the rest of them.

“Sorry,” Ron mumbled, purposely looking at Hermione and not Seamus as he apologized.

“Whatever,” Seamus said, before turning around and stalking off down the corridor towards the back of the train.

“I’m going to wash my face,” Hermione said softly, turning away from her friends and heading towards the front of the train where the toilets were.

“I’ll go with you,” Ginny said, glancing at Ron and Harry before taking a step towards Hermione.

“No,” Hermione replied. “It’s okay. You should probably put your robes on anyway. I’ll just meet you and Ron in the Prefect car.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, “Okay.”

“Come on Gin,” Ron said, even though his eyes were still glued to Hermione’s retreating form. “I’ll show you where your stuff is and you can change in our compartment.”

Just ignore them, Hermione chanted in her head as she ducked into the empty Prefect car and slid the door closed behind her. You should be used to it by now. It’s not the first time you’ve had people staring at you and talking about you behind your back. You’ve had plenty of practice dealing with it, thanks to that cow, Rita Skeeter. This is just like that. Just ignore them and eventually they’ll find something else to talk about.
Of course that was easier said than done. Just because she’d looked the other way and refused to react to all the pointing and whispering she’d encountered in the walkway, didn’t stop it from making her uncomfortable. But she wasn’t about to let it show. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. Let them talk. Their opinions of her didn’t matter anyway.

It wasn’t until Hermione had locked herself in the loo and glanced at her reflection in the mirror that she’d remembered that her appearance had been altered. Mad-Eye Moody had insisted upon it. She’d understood the logic behind his request. Paranoid or not, he had their best interests at heart and changing her hair was an effective means of preventing a Death Eater in a Polyjuice disguise from trying to take her place. Still, that didn’t mean she had to like it. In fact, she hated it. This girl with the sleek honey blond hair staring back at her was not the Hermione she knew. She looked more like Lavender Brown then she did herself.

Suppose I might as well go the rest of the way and curl my eyelashes with my wand, she’d thought, glaring at herself in disgust. I can practically hear them squealing now, she’d groaned, trying not to focus on the way her roommates were going to react. Won’t they be disappointed when it wears off and I’m back to normal in the morning.

Of course just because her hair would be normal in the morning, didn’t mean the whispering and the looks were likely to stop.

They’re not talking about my hair, Hermione reflected, spotting her trunk and retrieving her school uniform. It’s those damned attacks and the fact I’m not one of the victims. I wonder who the other victims were? she thought, sliding her skirt on over her jeans and securing it. I suppose it’s all over the train by now, she continued, slipping her jeans off and replacing her shirt. Harry and Ron probably know by now, and if not, Lavender and Parvati certainly do. I’m sure I’ll hear all about it later tonight.

Draco Malfoy stopped short when he opened the door of the Prefect’s carriage and spotted the lone girl struggling to retrieve something from her trunk. He glanced quickly down the hall, just to make sure none of the other Prefects were around, before he smiled, and slipped into the compartment.

She didn’t know he was there. She thought she was alone. It was a perfect opportunity, but he’d have to act quickly. They wouldn’t be alone for long. Pansy Parkinson was bound to show up soon. She was like a simpering little shadow that followed him everywhere. He’d managed to shake her for now, but she’d find him eventually.

But not until after I have a little fun, he thought, as he silently approached the girl from behind.

As he advanced, Draco took a moment to appreciate the view. Whoever the new 5th year Prefect was, she certainly filled her uniform out well. Of course the fact she was on the tips of her toes, rummaging through her tilted trunk, didn’t hurt matters any. She might be wearing knee socks, but he still had an excellent view of her legs. Her socks didn’t cover everything, not by any means. The position she was in had caused her skirt to ride up quite a bit, affording him the perfect opportunity to ogle the vast expanse of her lower thighs.

He was just beginning to wonder if she filled out the front of her uniform as well as she did the back, when he reached her.

Only one way to find out, he decided. I’ll just have to get her attention so she’d turn around.

If he’d been a gentleman, he might have offered to retrieve whatever it was she was looking for, as
he was taller than she was. But Draco Malfoy was not a gentleman and offering to help her never even crossed his mind. Where was the fun in that?

Hermione shrieked when she felt a hand plunge under her skirt and pinch her bum. She spun around so fast that her unbalanced trunk fell right off the luggage rack and crashed to the floor, spewing its contents everywhere.

“Granger!” Draco drawled, screwing his face up in a look of utmost disgust as he spat her name out as if it were a curse word. He was obviously as shocked and as horrified as Hermione was, the only difference was he’d tried to hide it. “Well if it isn’t the Mudblood slag herself,” he snarled, purposely moving in closer and forcing her to take a step backward.

“Excuse me?” Hermione hissed back in a tone of voice that would have had most Gryffindors stumbling all over themselves to get out of her way for fear of being cursed.

Of course Draco wasn’t worried about that, because he knew that she didn’t have her wand. He knew this because he’d seen it, resting on top of her robes, which she’d carelessly discarded out of reach. As long as he kept her cornered, she’d be unable to retrieve it.

“Don’t act so surprised,” he sneered. “Everyone knows.”

“Knows what?” Hermione asked, wondering if somehow people knew about what had happened between her and Ron over the summer. But they couldn’t. There was just no possible way. He was fishing for information.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she stated angrily. “Now get out of my way,” she demanded, trying to shove her way past him.

Unfortunately her words didn’t have the desired effect and rather than letting her pass, Malfoy simply shifted with her, blocking her retreat with his body at the same time he placed his hands on the wall on either side of her to pin her in.

“I wouldn’t admit this if there was anyone else around to hear it,” he said quietly, “but I can see why Potter keeps stringing you along,” he added, his eyes dropping to her chest. “Why else would he want a Mudblood whore?”

Draco actually staggered backwards when Hermione’s hand connected with the side of his face. It wasn’t the first time she’d slapped him, but she was older now and stronger. His eyes caught fire as he fingered the stinging welt on his cheek.

How dare she hit him? She was going to pay for that. And dearly. Maybe not today, but soon. When the time was right he’d be only too happy to help his Aunt Bellatrix teach her a few lessons.

“It’s too bad they didn’t manage to kill you when they had the chance;” he growled menacingly. “But it’s only a matter of time until--”

“Get out of my way,” Hermione snarled, almost hoping that he wouldn’t so she could knee him in the groin, “or I’ll give you something to really be sorry about.”

Before he could respond, Malfoy found himself moving, although it wasn’t of his own volition. As he felt himself falling into the center of the compartment, he wondered for a brief second if Granger could perform Wandless Magic. It wasn’t until he landed on his arse and looked up at the redhead standing beside her, positively seething with rage, that he realized it hadn’t been her.

“Oh look,” Draco sneered, rising up off the floor as if he didn’t have a care in the world. “Your
guard dog has returned. Pity. But then, he’ll end up just like Potter’s mangy mutt.”

“No, don’t,” Hermione cried, but by then it was already too late. Ron had lurched forward and tackled Malfoy to the floor. There was no way she could stop him now, because he wasn’t the only one swinging. If she tried to interfere or distract Ron, Malfoy might actually hurt him.

“Holy shit!” Anthony Goldstein cried, as he and Ernie Macmillan appeared in the doorway of the Prefect car and spotted the brawl taking place on the floor.

“Hannah,” Ernie yelled, as Pansy Parkinson shoved her way into the doorway, gasped, and then took off running. “Go find Harry and tell him he better get up here before Crabbe and Goyle show up.”

“You smarmy bastard,” Ron shouted, throwing a punch that connected squarely with Malfoy’s eye. “If you ever touch her again, I swear I’ll—”

But what exactly Ron would do, the crowd of students congregated at the door never discovered, because the room unexpectedly went silent. Ron was still shouting; his mouth was moving, even as his fists did. They simply couldn’t hear what he was saying. They couldn’t hear Malfoy’s response either, if he had one that is. He might have been a little too busy fending off punches to actually reply, but he had to be making some sort of noise. They simply couldn’t hear it.

It wasn’t until Crabbe and Goyle came barreling down the hallway and tried to cross the threshold that Ernie figured out what had happened.

“She shielded the Prefect Car,” he laughed, venturing a quick look at Crabbe and Goyle who were trying to untangle themselves on the floor, and then back at Hermione, who was holding her wand. “Looks like it’s an Imperturbable Charm.”

“Is it even possible to Imperturb an open doorway?” Padma Patil asked. “I thought it had to be cast on an object, like the door itself.”

“Whatever it was, it certainly repelled them,” Roger Davies snickered, motioning towards the glowering Slytherins rising up off the floor.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked as he forced his way through the crowd of students that had nipped out of their compartments to see what the ruckus was all about.

“No clue,” Anthony replied just as Ginny and Neville skidded to a halt behind Harry.

“They were already going at it when we got here,” Ernie explained, stumbling slightly as the train started moving.

“All right,” a familiar voice shouted up the hall. “Break it up. The train’s moving now. Everyone back to your compartments.”

“Bill,” Ginny said, before turning around and pushing her way down the corridor, hoping to head her brother off.

“It’s Imperturbed,” Ernie said, when Harry moved towards the doorway. “At least we think it is,” he added. “Does Hermione know how to do that?”

“Apparently,” Harry said, after reaching for the doorway and having his hand repelled.

“What the hell is going on up here?” Mad-Eye Moody barked loudly as he hobbled towards the
crowd of students. “Why aren’t you in your own compartment?” he snarled at Goyle, who was standing behind Anthony Goldstein pounding his fist into his hand. “I don’t see a Prefect badge on you,” he said, grabbing Goyle by the collar, then shoving him down the hall and away from the Prefects’ carriage, “so get back where you belong.”

“Uh oh,” Neville moaned, looking at Harry with wide eyes.

“Potter,” Moody growled the instant he spotted Harry standing in front of the open doorway. “I might have known you’d be in the center of all this. Not even five minutes out of the station and you’ve already found trouble.”

“I didn’t find trouble,” Harry started to object.

“Yeah. yeah. Trouble finds you,” Mad-Eye finished for him. “And where the blazes is Tonks? She’s supposed to be keeping an eye on you,” he said as he strolled up to the doorway. “When I find her I’m going to... OY!” he shouted, his magical eye spinning around to afford him a better view of the inside of the Prefect carriage. “That wouldn’t be Lucius Malfoy’s dirt bag of a son that Weasley’s thumping, would it?”

“Er...”

“Yes sir,” Hannah Abbott replied meekly.

“Well then, that changes everything.”

“Damn it, Ron,” Bill shouted, shoving his way through the students that were slowly backing away from Moody. “What the hell is the matter with him?” he muttered under his breath, glancing into the room just as Ron pulled his arm back and Hermione latched onto it. He didn’t need to hear her shouts to know what she was saying, his brother’s name was clearly visible on her lips.

“RON!!! RON STOP IT!!!! He’s not worth it.”

“He’s been asking for this for years,” Ron mumbled, but he stopped swinging. Hermione had a death grip on his arm and he knew if he swung it forward he’d likely drag her with it. “Fine,” he snarled, after glancing over his shoulder and seeing how worried she was. “But he better learn to keep his mouth shut,” he added for good measure as he stood up and backed away.

“You’re going to pay for this, Weasley,” Malfoy shouted, fingering his bleeding lip.

“You just don’t know when to shut up, do you?” Ron asked as Hermione latched onto him again. His point made, he relented, and allowed Hermione to pull him back. Only this time, rather than stay behind him, she made sure that she positioned herself between him and Malfoy.

“I’ll have you expelled for this,” Draco shouted, fingerling his bleeding lip.
“Oh no, you won’t,” Hermione said, her voice low and positively crackling with anger. “If he goes,” she hissed, taking a step towards Malfoy, who immediately glanced at the wand in her hand and backed away, “so do you.”

“He started the fight,” Draco retorted with a forced laugh. “I have all these witnesses to back me up.”

“Oh you do, do you?” Hermione asked, taking another step forward and repressing a smirk when she noticed Malfoy step away from her again. “I didn’t hear any of them shouting for Ron to let you go. In fact,” she said, pausing just long enough for the silence to sink in. “I don’t hear anything at all. Do you?”

It wasn’t until she actually said it that Draco realized how unnaturally quiet it was. With all the people standing outside in the hall there ought to be more noise. Where was the shouting? Where was the taunting? And where the hell were Crabbe and Goyle?

What the hell did that bitch do? he wondered, as he took another step backwards and collided with something solid that hurled him back into the room.

“I Imperturbed the doorway,” Hermione explained, holding up her wand to make her point.

“They might not have heard him, but they all saw him.”

“Yes,” Hermione sighed, “I suppose they did. But they saw you throwing punches as well,” she added with a smirk. “And before you say you were just defending yourself, you might want to ask them what they did hear,” she pressed on, “I believe it was something along the lines of, ‘If you ever touch her again, I’ll--’ A perfectly justifiable thing to shout at someone you’ve just discovered assaulting a fellow student.”

“What!” Draco cried indignantly. “As if I’d touch the likes of you on purpose.”

“You won’t be able to prove that you didn’t,” Hermione admitted.

“It will be your word against mine.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Who do you think they’ll believe? Of course the fact that my blouse has been torn open might be a little difficult for you to explain. Surely I wouldn’t have tried to rip it off myself. I wonder how long it will be before someone notices that?” she asked.

“You lying Mudblood bitch!” Draco shouted when he looked at her closer and realized that the sleeve on the left hand side of her shirt had been torn at the shoulder and she was holding the blasted thing closed because the buttons were missing.

“NO! RON!” Hermione shouted the instant he sprang forward.

“I told you if you ever called her that again I was--”

“It’s my turn,” she declared, bringing her wand up and pointing it at Malfoy’s chest.

He flinched and instinctually stumbled backward, only this time rather than collide with the force field she’d thrown up, he found himself colliding with Mad-Eye Moody, who was standing in the center of the doorway.

“Well, well,” Mad-Eye growled, his magical eye spinning in its socket before focusing on Ron. “What do we have here?” he asked. “I don’t suppose there is any point asking which one of you
started it, is there? Not that I really care, mind you. What I do care about is the fact that this little disturbance of yours is preventing me from doing my job. So it ends. Now!” he snarled. “If I have to come up here again,” he warned, both of his eyes now focused on Draco, “you are going to be very very sorry. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yeah,” Ron grumbled, looking down at his feet so he wouldn’t have to meet his brother’s disapproving stare.

“Well?” Moody barked at Malfoy, who still hadn’t replied. “Kneazle got your tongue, boy?”

“No,” Draco replied.

“No, what?” Mad-Eye growled, arching his eyebrow at Malfoy’s flippant reply. “You planning on picking another fight?”

“I didn’t—” Malfoy started to protest, but he stopped short when he saw the expression on Bill’s face change from disapproval to shock as he looked at Hermione. The instant Bill’s wide eyes narrowed and locked on him, Malfoy changed tactics. “No sir,” he said quickly, hoping his answer would pacify the adults and they’d leave. “It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t,” Mad-Eye said, poking Draco in the chest. “I’m going to keep my eye on you.”

“You two,” Bill said, pointing at Ron and Hermione as Moody stalked off. “I’d like a word with you before your meeting,” he added, entering the Prefect carriage. “This will only take a minute,” he said to Roger Davies, when he spotted the head boy badge pinned on his robes.

“What are you—” Bill started to protest when Ginny shoved Harry into the room. “Aw, to hell with it,” he acquiesced. “Just, make yourselves useful and pick up Hermione’s things,” he sighed, pulling the door closed.

“What did he say this time?” Harry asked Ron the instant the door closed.

“Here,” Bill said, scooping one of Hermione’s school jumpers up off the floor and handing it to her. “Do you want to tell me what happened?” he asked her, purposely averting his eyes as she threw the jumper on over her torn shirt.

“Nothing happened,” she insisted as she watched Bill wave his wand over the floor and send all of her displaced items flying back into the trunk Ginny had just righted.

“Ron?” he asked, studying his brother who had the makings of a nice black eye.

“What?” he replied, licking the blood off the corner of his lip.

“What happened?” Bill asked crossly.

“Nothing.”

“And I suppose if I ask Malfoy, he’ll give me the same answer?”

“I don’t know,” Ron shot back, his smoldering eyes now locked on his brother instead of the door he’d been glowering at. “Why don’t you go ask him and find out.”

“That’s all I’m going to get from you? That’s all you have to say?”

“Pretty much,” Ron admitted.
“What about you?” Bill asked, turning to Hermione once more, hoping that she at least would be reasonable.

“Sorry,” she replied, staring at the ground and fidgeting slightly as she nodded her head.

“Did he try and hurt you?” Bill asked, the concern evident in his voice.

“No,” Hermione replied quickly.

“He didn’t... take any liberties?”

“NO!” she cried, cutting him off before he could finish.

“I saw your shirt.”

“What’s wrong with her shirt?” Ginny asked, her brow creasing in confusion.

“Nothing is wrong with it,” Hermione lied. “I was just in the middle of getting dressed when Malfoy walked in, that’s all.”

“Uh huh,” Bill replied, clearly not buying her explanation.

“Just drop it, all right,” Ron snapped, stepping in front of Hermione. “She said nothing happened so stop harassing her.”

“You two better get your stories straight,” Bill warned, shaking his head as he gave up and approached the door. “Because I guarantee you Malfoy will have his all worked out by the time we reach Hogwarts.”

“Whatever,” Ron said, crossing his arms in front of his chest and watching his brother walk out of the room.

“Thank you,” Hermione said the instant he was gone, taking Ron, and nearly everyone within earshot by surprise.

“What?” Ron asked, spinning around and gaping at her along with everyone else. “Aren’t you going to tell me off?”

“Why would I yell at you?” Hermione asked.

“For... for... loosing my temper,” Ron replied. “For brawling on the train. Because I’m I Prefect and should set a better example.”

“Are you daft?” she retorted, deciding that it might not be such a bad idea to have a few witnesses to back up her story if she needed to use it. “What better example could there be? You caught that low life assaulting a fellow student and proceeded to beat the tar out of him for it. Yell at you? If I wasn’t afraid I’d hurt that bloody mess you call a mouth, I’d kiss you. Figuratively speaking of course,” she added, blushing as she noted the stunned expressions and raised eyebrows on the various Prefects trailing into the room.

“Come on,” Ginny said, grabbing Ron’s arm and pulling his towards the doorway. “Let’s get you cleaned up before the meeting starts,” she added, dragging him through the crowd and down the hall towards the loo.

“Hermione,” Ron asked, as his sister shoved him into the toilet compartment and turned the water on in the small sink. “He didn’t really...I mean... he wasn’t---” he stammered, “Ow, Ginny. Stop it. That
“hurts,” he cried, grabbing his sister’s hand and shoving the wet paper towel she was using on him away from his bloody lip.

“DID HE ATTACK YOU?” Harry bellowed, clearly enraged. “I’ll--”

“No,” Hermione replied quickly. “Well...sort of.”

“What?!!” Harry and Ron shouted in unison. Obviously on the same page, the two boys didn’t even have to look at one another. They simply spun around together and tried to shove their way past the girls so they could march down the hallway and drag Malfoy out of whatever compartment he was hiding in.

“STOP IT!” Hermione shouted, shoving Ron back into the toilet compartment. “RIGHT NOW!” she added, grabbing Harry by the arm to prevent him from going after Malfoy on his own. “Nothing happened.”

“But you just said--” Ron started.

“Wait,” Ginny interrupted, “if you didn’t see him...if you didn’t catch him in the act,” she asked her brother, clearly confused by the whole mess, “then why--”

“Because the slimy little tosser had her cornered and he was taunting her about the Death Eaters,” he replied. “If I’d known that he really had touched you. I’m going to kill that slimy--”

“Ron, watch your language,” Hermione admonished. “There are first years onboard. And he didn’t...he wasn’t...I tore it myself when you two were fighting.”

“Tore what?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“Her shirt,” Ron sighed, blushing crimson as he said it. “You’re sure you tore it open yourself?” he asked her seriously. “Malfoy didn’t--” he continued, no longer paying the slightest bit of attention to the other two people that happened to be standing there.

“No,” she replied briskly.

“He didn’t touch--”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” Ron asked, narrowing his angry eyes at her. “You can tell me if he did. I won’t kill him. I swear.” I’ll just make him rue the day he was ever born.

“No,” Hermione insisted. “He...well...okay,” she wavered. “He came up behind me and pinched me, but...that was before he knew who I was,” she added. “He was as shocked as I was when I turned around. Then he looked disgusted that he’d actually touched me and proceeded to sling the usual insults my way,” she admitted. “A little more venomous I suppose.”

“He was going on about how he wished the Death Eaters had killed you when I walked in,” Ron said angrily.

“Yeah well, it isn’t as if we haven’t heard him say that before,” Harry muttered under his breath.

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked, noting that she wasn’t the only one surprised by this news. Ginny was actually gaping at Harry in astonishment. Ron on the other hand, was staring at his feet and refused to meet her gaze.
“You know, that time we took the Pol--” Harry began to explain and then faltered. He glanced at Ginny uncomfortably for a moment and then continued. “That time in second year,” he said, hoping that Hermione would figure out what he was talking about, “when we had our private chat with him.”

“When you took the what?” Ginny asked, her eyes hoping around to all their faces before landing on Harry’s once more. “When you had a private chat about... oh,” she said softly as comprehension dawned on her. “That’s why you made that Polyjuice Potion,” she asked uneasily. “You thought he was the Heir of Slytherin.”

“He told you that he hoped I was the next victim?” Hermione asked calmly.

“No, he said that he hoped you were the first one to die,” Ron growled.

“And you never told me?”

“You had enough to worry about, being a cat and all.”

“Ron,” Ginny cried, smacking her brother in the arm.

“We didn’t want to worry you,” Harry said uncomfortably. “Besides, you know how Malfoy is. He’s all talk and no action.”

“Um hum,” Hermione muttered under her breath. “Well, we better get back to the Prefect car before they start the meeting without us,” she said, purposely changing the subject.

“We’ll come find you as soon as it’s over,” Ron said to Harry as Ginny shoved him out of the loo and into the hallway.

“Yeah, all right,” Harry sighed, watching the three of them walk away together.

Looks like it’s just me and Neville this year, he thought as he spun around and shuffled back to his own car.

Compared to the beginning of their journey, the rest of the train ride back to Hogwarts was fairly uneventful. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione returned to the compartment in the center of the train, not long after the food trolley had rolled by. Neville and Harry had just started in on their cauldron cakes and pumpkin pasties when Bill slid the door open and ushered the trio inside.

With the security detail on board, the three Prefects didn’t have to worry about patrolling the corridors, which suited Ron just fine. That is until he tried to leave the compartment in order to retrieve his chess set from the Prefect car.

“Where do ya think you’re going, Weasley?” Mad-Eye Moody barked, stepping forward and blocking the doorway the instant the door slid open.

“To the Prefect car,” Ron replied, rather taken aback by the gnarled wizard’s sudden appearance.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Moody said, shoving Ron back into the room before he managed to set one foot in the hallway.

“Why not?” Ron demanded. “Am I a bloody prisoner or something?”
“No one is leaving this compartment.”

“What if I have to use the loo?” Ron argued.

“Do you need to use the toilet, Weasley?”

“No.”

“Then shut up and sit back down,” Mad-Eye snarled at the startled red head.

But rather than do as instructed, Ron just stood there, gapping at the crotchety ex-Auror in disbelief. It wasn’t until Moody left the compartment and he was gawking at the closed door, that Ron found his voice again.

“What the hell was that?” he cried as his incredulity turned to anger. “He can’t tell me what to do.”

“I believe he just did,” Ginny chuckled.

“Yeah, well I don’t have to listen to him,” her brother retorted, trying to muster up the courage to open the door again. “I’m sick of this,” he grumbled. “First Mum and now Moody. They think they can lock me up just because—”

“Welcome to my world,” Harry cut in sarcastically.

“We could play exploding snaps,” Neville suggested, rummaging through his bag and pulling out a deck of cards. “Or gobstones,” he added, trying to be helpful. “I have a set in my trunk.”

“I wanna play chess,” Ron griped.

“You are,” Hermione muttered from behind her copy of Standard Book of Spells, Grade Six.

“What are you talking about?” Ron asked, turning away from the door and looking at Hermione as if she’d just sprouted an additional head.

“Well,” she said, lowering her spell book, “Moody just set himself up as your opponent, didn’t he? He placed himself in your path and blocked your move. The question is, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to go on the offensive and find a way around him, or are you going to admit defeat?”

“You’re mental” Ron replied, glancing at Harry and rolling his eyes. He couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. Was Hermione actually encouraging him to flout authority, in front of witnesses no less? What the hell?

“Am I?” Hermione responded. “If Harry’s knight was the only thing standing between you and his king, what would you do?” she asked.

“He’d take it,” Ginny answered when her brother didn’t reply. “With his queen,” she added with a knowing smirk.

“Why his queen?” Hermione questioned, sounding slightly defensive.

“Because she’s intimidating,” Ginny laughed, “and the other pieces are afraid of her.”

“Not all the pieces,” Hermione chuckled.
“Yeah, pretty much all of them,” Ginny retorted.

“Mental,” Ron said again, flopping back into his seat. “The pair of you,” he added, not quite sure what the two girls were really talking about, but suspecting it had very little to do with his ability to play chess.

“All right,” Hermione conceded. “She’s a little--”

“Merciless,” Ginny answered.

“Overzealous,” Hermione corrected. “So Gin, would you like to play the queen today or shall I?”

“Oh, I think you should do it,” Ginny replied eagerly. “Definitely you.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Hermione muttered under her breath as she set her book down and rose up out of her seat.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked when Hermione took a deep breath and approached the door.

“She’s going to take on the knight,” Ginny answered.

“Actually,” Hermione said, halting in the center of the compartment and turning away from the door to face Ginny again. “Now that I think about it, you should do it. He’ll expect me,” she added when Ginny looked like she was about to protest. “You said so yourself. But he might not expect you.”

“Damn,” Ginny muttered under her breath. Leave it to Hermione to logic her way out of it.

“Unless you don’t think you can do it,” she added, suppressing the smirk that threatened to burst forth when she saw the affronted look on her friend’s face. It was amazing really, how similar Ginny and Ron were at times. Which of course, is why she’d made the comment in the first place.

“Oh, I can do it,” Ginny replied, jumping to her feet and steeling herself. “You just watch me.”

“You’re not seriously going to--” Ron began to stammered as his sister pushed past Hermione and threw the door open.

“All right, you lot,” Moody’s gruff voice rang through the compartment. “I’ve had just about enough--”

“I need to use the loo,” Ginny said, cutting him off.

“Oh yes,” Mad-Eye scoffed, “I’m sure you do,” he added, his magical eye jumping from her to Hermione, who was still standing in the center of the compartment, and then moving on to Ron. “What do ya think, I was born yesterday? Don’t know a diversionary tactic when I see one? You think that I’ll just escort you to the toilet so your brother here, can sneak out?”

“No,” Ginny replied honestly. That particular strategy never even entered her mind. Why should they both get involved when it only took one of them to accomplish the task? “I just need to use the loo. And you don’t have to escort me. I know the way,” she added tetchily as she attempted to maneuver around him, “so you’re free to stay here and mind Ron.”

“Hold it.”

“Until we reach Hogwarts?” Ginny protested loudly, purposely trying to draw attention to herself. “You can’t seriously expect me to wait that long,” she added, silently assessing her options. She couldn’t back down now.
Might as well get it over with, she told herself, knowing that the best way to get past him was to embarrass him and throw him off his game. It was a strategy she’d learned from Fred and George. It worked wonders on most of her brothers, so it would probably work with Moody. Of course it might mean embarrassing herself as well, but so be it. Everyone in the car knew it was all an act. Even so, she was loathe to play the ‘female problem’ card in front of Harry and Neville. She’d save that for a last resort.

“I really need to go,” she said, fidgeting for effect.

“You kids are the most bothersome lot of--”

“Problem, Mad-Eye?” a dark haired witch with rosy cheeks asked as she strode up the hallway towards her comrade.

“There will be one in a few minutes if he doesn’t let me use the toilet,” Ginny muttered under her breath, but she made sure it was loud enough for the two adults to hear.

“Honestly, Alastor?” Hestia Jones said, while shaking her head disapprovingly. “The poor girl just needs to use the toilet.”

“Poor girl my arse,” Mad-Eye interrupted. “She’s just trying to distract me so her brother there,” he said, pointing at Ron, who was gaping at them with his mouth slightly open, “can sneak off.”

“I’ll watch the compartment for you,” Hestia volunteered, “and make sure no one tries to ‘sneak off’.”

It took moment for Mad-Eye to respond, but when he did, he seemed none too happy about it.

“Fine,” he growled, his good eye locked on Ginny while his magical eye scrutinized Ron. “But watch out for that one,” he added, grabbing Ginny by the arm as he pointed at Hermione.

“Me?” Hermione questioned. “I didn’t do anything, did I?” she asked, looking at the boys innocently.

“What?” Ginny cried anxiously, yanking her arm out of Moody’s grasp. “No way. I’m not going with you,” she continued. “There is no way in hell I’m going to have you watch me use the toilet with that magical eye of yours.”

It was all Hermione could do not to laugh as she saw the stunned expression that covered Mad-Eye’s face when Ginny accused him of being a Peeping Tom. It was even worse when she spun around so he wouldn’t see her smile, and she saw Neville and Harry. They were even more gobsmacked than Moody, if their slack jaws and wide eyes were any indication. Ron’s reaction was harder to gauge, because he was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, with his hands over his face. It was hard to tell if he was laughing or so mortified for his sister, that he simply couldn’t look at her any longer. Although Hermione suspected he was probably laughing.

“No way,” Ginny continued. “You’ll take me, won’t you?” she asked Hestia hopefully.

“Oh course, dear,” she replied, stepping around Moody and placing her hand on Ginny’s back. “We won’t be but a minute,” she called out over her shoulder as they walked away.

“Go ahead, Ron,” Hermione said as she reached for the door. “Say it. You know that you want to.”

“Checkmate.”
“You little shits,” Moody growled, as the door slid closed and the compartment erupted with laughter.
“Hello, Ronald,” Luna Lovegood said the instant Ron emerged in the doorway of the train with Pig’s cage in his hand. “I thought you might need someone to watch your owl again,” she added serenely, regarding him with her unusually protuberant eyes.

“Er...no, that’s okay,” he replied, not even bothering to look at her as he stepped onto the platform. “We’re just about done unloading everything,” he continued, scanning the crowd of students looking for Ginny’s long red hair. “You haven’t seen my sister, have you?”

“Oh yes,” Luna replied.

“Well?” Ron asked when she offered no further information. “If you’ve seen her, where is she?”

“Over there,” Luna responded, pointing to the left where Hagrid’s massive form was silhouetted against the dark blue of the lake.

“Fist’ Years. Over ‘ere!” Hagrid’s deep voice bellowed as Ron walked off in the direction Luna had pointed. “Firs’ Years. This way!”

“Aren’t you done yet?” Ron griped, the instant he spotted his sister standing behind a pile of trunks.

“We would have been if you’d actually stuck around long enough to help us,” Ginny fired back. “Nice of you to reappear now that the works almost done.”

“You didn’t expect me to leave Pig in the Prefect car, did you?” Ron said defensively, brandishing the cage he was holding in the air, which only served to increased the volume of Pig’s chirping.

“Oh will you shut up already?” he shouted at his tiny owl. “I didn’t forget about you. Although I’m starting to wish that I had.”

“Maybe if you stop waving his cage around like a maniac,” Hermione suggested as she appeared in the doorway with a small blond girl in tow. “A little help would be appreciated,” she added, motioning to the trunk she was dragging behind herself.

“Oh, right,” Ron said, setting Pig’s cage down as the two girls stepped off the train. When they were out of the way, he moved forward and quickly shifted the girl’s trunk from the doorway to the pile of luggage on the platform. “Anything else?”

“No, that ought to do it,” Hermione replied.

“Well then, let’s go,” Ron said. “Before all the carriages are full.”

“Firs’ Years! Over ‘ere!” Hagrid shouts were getting closer.

“Don’t worry,” Ginny said softly to the small blond girl when she backed away from the booming voice beckoning her forward. “I was scared to death of Hagrid when I first got here, but he’s actually rather sweet once you get to know him.”

“Hiya Hagrid,” Ron cried out over the hum of the departing crowd.

“Blimey,” Hagrid replied when he spun and the lantern he was holding illuminated the bruises on
Ron’s face. “What ‘appened teh you?”

“Oh, um,” Ron stammered. “Nothing.”

“Don’ look like nuthin’ teh me?”

“I seem to recall saying the same thing when ‘nothing’ happened to you last year,” Hermione replied.

“All righ’,” Hagrid said, holding a large hand out in front of himself to stop her. “I was just askin’ is all. Speakin’ o’ which. Grawpy’s bin askin’ bout yeh. I tol’ him yeh’d come visit once yeh got settled in an’ all.”

“Lovely,” Hermione muttered under her breath. “I can hardly wait.”

“Yeh better get goin’,” Hagrid suggested, glancing over the heads of the students meandering towards the carriages that were waiting to take them up to the castle. “Harry and Neville won’ be able teh save yeh’re seats forever.”

“Come on,” Ron said, snatching Pig’s cage up off the ground.

“See ya, Hagrid,” Ginny cried, as she disappeared into the crowd with Luna.

“You go with Hagrid,” Hermione said to the young girl she’d helped off the train. “He’ll see that you get to the castle safely.”

“Hurry up, Hermione,” Ron called back impatiently.

“Right,” Hagrid said, smiling down at the little girl who was staring up at him with her wide blue eyes. “Come on Emma,” he added, motioning for her to follow him back to the lake. “Nothin’ teh worry ‘bout. I promised yeh’re mum I’d take good care o’ yeh, didn’ I?”

“What are you waiting for?” Ron asked, when he came up behind his sister who was still standing outside the carriage Harry and Neville were sitting in. “Get in before they start moving,” he whined, giving her a light shove to speed her along.

“Don’t push me,” Ginny retorted, pushing her brother back.

“Honestly,” Hermione sighed, brushing past the squabbling siblings and climbing into the carriage herself. “You two are Prefects,” she reminded them. “You should set a better example for the younger students.”

“What younger students?” Ron asked, grabbing Ginny by her robes and dragging her away from the step so he could get in first and sit beside Hermione. “It’s just Harry and Neville and they don’t care what I say to my sister,” he added, handing Pig to Hermione, before climbing up himself.

“What was that?” Ginny asked Hermione as she climbed into the coach herself and heard her friend mumbling something unintelligible under her breath.

“Nothing,” Hermione replied crossly, but Ginny noticed that she continued to glower down at a cluster of fourth year girls that kept glancing at their carriage and giggling. “Trade me spots,” she said to Ron as Luna climbed into the carriage and sat down beside Ginny.

“What?” he asked in surprise? “Why?”

“Because I want to sit by the window,” Hermione shot back quickly, not bothering to tell him the real reason.
She’d been around Parvati and Lavender enough to know what it meant when groups of girls looked at a bloke, then put their heads together, and started giggling. Just because Ron and Harry didn’t realize the fourth and fifth years were smitten with them, that didn’t mean Hermione had missed it. She hadn’t missed the looks they’d given Bill on the train either.

Damn, she swore to herself, knowing what those girls were thinking. *Just give him a year or two to fill out and he’ll look just as good as his brother.*

“How get up,” she demanded, determined to obscure their view of her boyfriend.

Although technically speaking, Hermione reminded herself, *he isn’t your boyfriend. Because he never did ask you, did he? Which means he’s free to date any one of those twits if he really wants to.*

“Maybe I want to sit by the window,” Ron protested.

“Tough.”

“Oh that’s nice,” Ron cried.

“You can have my seat,” Harry said from the other side of her, hoping to avert the row he saw looming on the horizon. “I’ll sit in the middle.”

“No, Harry, that’s all right,” Hermione replied, placing her hand on his arm before he had a chance to stand up.

Damn it, she swore silently. *So much for the no bickering in front of Harry rule.*

“I know how you like to watch the castle come into view,” she said to Harry for good measure. “It’s fine. I’ll ride in the middle,” she added, elbowing Ron in the side as she did so.

“Hey! Stop that.”

“That looks painful,” Luna said, gazing at Ron’s split lip and completely ignoring Hermione failed attempt to get him to stand up.

“Not really,” he mumbled, before glancing at Hermione, who’d sunk back in her seat in resignation.

“Did you have a nice summer, Luna?” Neville inquired, hoping to distract Ron and Hermione from their quarrel.

“Oh yes,” she replied languorously. “Daddy and I had a wonderful time in Sweden.”

“Did you catch that Crumple-Horned Snorkack?” Ginny asked conversationally.

“No, but we did manage to get a Hippocampus,” she replied, pulling a picture out of her pocket and handing it to Ginny.

“Imagine that,” Hermione muttered under her breath.

The instant she said it, she felt a bit guilty. Luna hadn’t done anything, really. Besides talking to Ron, but that wasn’t a crime. Luna had put herself on the line for all of them last year and just because Hermione was irritated with those other girls, didn’t mean she could take it out on Luna. Deep down she suspected that the younger Ravenclaw had a crush on Ron, but she couldn’t be certain. Luna’s behavior was not exactly normal. It was possible that she was just misreading the signs. And if not, it didn’t really matter all that much. Luna wasn’t a threat, but those other girls were. Ron had always been craved by attention and if those girls started giving it to him, there was no telling what might
“You’ve changed you hair,” Luna said, her large eyes now focused on Hermione, who had her arms crossed in front of her chest. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“I think it looks nice,” Neville replied as Ron’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Uh oh, Harry thought when he saw Hermione purse her lips. This is going to get ugly.

“What do you think, Harry?” Luna asked.

“Um, yeah, it’s nice,” he replied uncertainly.

As soon as the words left his mouth, he ventured another quick look at Hermione to gauge her reaction. He knew her well enough to recognize when she was in a bad mood and he didn’t really want to be the one to set her off. The problem was, Hermione was unpredictable and there was no telling what would trigger a reaction. When she wanted to vent, she found a reason to vent, even if she had to fixate on an innocent comment to do it.

“Luna’s right,” Hermione said just as the carriages started moving, taking both Harry and Ron by surprise. “It looks ridiculous. But things will be back to normal in the morning.”

Harry didn’t pay attention to the conversations taking place around him once the carriages started to rattle and sway their way down the road leading from Hogsmeade Station to Hogwarts. He was far too busy looking out the window, waiting for the familiar stone columns topped with winged boars to come into view. His heart pounded with anticipation as they passed through the massive wrought iron gates those pillars flanked, because he knew as soon as they rounded the corner, he’d get his first glimpse of the school.

It didn’t matter how many times he’d done this in the past. It didn’t matter how many times he’d seen the castle. The feeling he got when the towering turrets and jumbled battlements came into view after his summer estrangement was always the same. He felt the same calm contentment. The familiar warmth spread over his body the instant he peered up at the blazing windows. He felt the same tranquility he always felt when the carriages wound their way up to the castle and stopped in front of the stone steps that lead to the huge oak doors.

Home, Harry thought as he followed his friends out of the carriage.

That’s what it was. It was the peace that you felt when you knew, deep down in your soul, that you’ve finally come home. Voldemort was still out there. The war was still looming. Harry knew that he’d have to face it all eventually.

But not tonight, he thought as he followed Ron and Hermione through the oak doors and into the cavernous Entrance Hall ablaze with torches. Tonight he was home and he could rest. He could heal. And more importantly, he could prepare himself for the coming battle.

“WEALEY! GRANGER!” a voice called over the drone of the crowd streaming through the double doors that lead into the Great Hall. “HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!” Professor McGonagall added as she marched down the marble staircase that led to the upper floors and weaved her way toward the two Prefects.

Ron barely had time to glance at Harry, before McGonagall was standing directly in front of them, a scowl plastered across her face. “You two will come with me,” she said curtly.
“But Professor,” Ron started to protest.

“Now, Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall said, pointing towards the stairs. “Move along Potter,” she added when Ron startled to shuffle away. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“I’ll save you seats,” Harry said to Hermione, who glanced at him anxiously before following McGonagall though the crowd.

“Mr. Weasley,” the Head of Gryffindor House called when she saw Ron start to mount the marble stairs that lead to her office. “This way,” she clarified, pointing to the narrow stone staircase that led down into the dungeon instead.

Bugger, Ron swore in his head, gulping loudly. This could only mean one thing. Snape.

“Don’t lose you temper,” Hermione warned quietly as she followed Ron down the cold passageway at the end of the staircase. “Let me do the talking.”

Rather than reply, Ron simply nodded his head. It seemed like a good plan to him. If he held his tongue and let Hermione do all the talking, they might even make it upstairs in time for pudding.

“In,” McGonagall said, opening the door to Professor Snape’s office and pointing inside. “Not you Miss Granger,” she added when Hermione made for the door first. “You will wait out here, for now.”

“All right,” Hermione replied, but she was looking into Ron’s wide eyes as she spoke.

This is not good, she thought, watching McGonagall usher Ron into the room and closed the door. *Not good at all. We should have taken Bill’s advice and at least discussed what we’d say if we were questioned separately. Damn! This is sooo not good. Please don’t lose your temper. Please. Please. Please.*

“So?” Professor Snape said the instant Ron was shoved into the room and the door closed behind him. “Care to explain yourself?” he asked, looking rather smug sitting behind his desk as if he were trying not to smile.

“Er...About what?” Ron replied uncomfortably.

“You know perfectly well what I’m talking about, Weasley,” Snape said, his calm facade crumbling quickly. “I’m talking about Mr. Malfoy here,” he said, pointing at the Slytherin Prefect who was sitting quietly in a chair to the right, “ended up in the hospital wing.”

“HOSPITAL WING!” Ron cried in outrage, rounding on Draco the instant he realized he was in the room. “There was nothing wrong with you, you lying little--”

“SILENCE!” Snape roared, rising up out of his seat and reclaiming Ron’s full attention.

“Have a seat, Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall said, pursing her lips and looking even sterner than usual.

“Professor, it wasn’t Hermione’s fa--” Ron tried to interject before he was cut off.

“Did I, or did I not just tell you to shut up, Weasley?”

Ron shut his mouth quickly, but he didn’t need to speak for Professor Snape to know what he was thinking. It was written all over his freckled face.
“Draco, here was just telling me what happened on the train,” the Potions Master informed Ron, who was now glaring daggers at him. “Would you care to explain yourself?”

“I’m allowed to speak now, am I?”

“Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall warned. “You’ll do well to remember who you are speaking to.”

Oh, I know who I’m speaking to, Ron fumed in his head. A vindictive, two-faced git.

“WELL!” Snape shouted.

Rather than reply however, Ron turned his glower on Draco, who surprised the angry red-head by shaking his head ever so slightly.

What the hell? Ron wondered. Surely Malfoy wasn’t trying to warn him off. It had to be a trick. Smarmy little Slytherin bastard.

“Mr. Weasley?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“What?”

“What happened?” Snape barked.

“He already told you his version,” Ron replied. “What’s the point of telling you mine?” You prejudice piece of dung.

“I, for one, am very interested in your version,” McGonagall interjected. “Did you or did you not, start the fight Mr. Weasley?”

“I guess that depends.”

“On what?” Snape snarled.

“On who you ask.”

“And I believe I just asked you,” McGonagall said tersely. “Did you start the fight?”

“No.”

I might have thrown the first punch, but he provoked me, so he started it, he continued in his head, justifying both his actions and his response.

“If you didn’t start the altercation and Mr. Malfoy didn’t start it,” Snape sneered, “that only leaves one other person. Perhaps we should ask Granger to join us and she can explain how it was that she started the fight.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Why don’t you just do that then.”

“That won’t be necessary sir,” Malfoy piped in, taking all three of them by surprise. “I did it. I started the fight.”

“Indeed?” McGonagall said, narrowing her eyes suspiciously. She had no doubt that the Slytherin Prefect probably provoked Ron. Goading Weasley seemed to be one of his favorite past times, but it was highly out of character for Malfoy to take responsibility for anything. There was obviously more going on than she realized. She’d have to talk to Mad-Eye about it when she got the chance.
“Somehow, I don’t quite believe that is the whole truth,” Snape replied, studying Malfoy carefully.

“It is, sir.”

“We’ll just see about that, shall we?” he asked, sweeping across the room and throwing the door open. “Granger. Inside. Now!” he barked.

Draco Malfoy felt his stomach plummet as he watched Professor Snape throw the door to his office open and order Hermione Granger to join them. The last thing he wanted was that Mudblood bitch getting involved. She’d told him flat out that she wouldn’t hesitate to lie if that’s what it took to protect Weasley. And the fact that Weasley hadn’t balked when Snape threatened to bring her in the room just clinched it for him. He was in deep shit.

He never should have gone to the hospital wing. All he’d wanted was to have his bruises healed. How was he supposed to know that Snape would come swooping in and demand to know what had happened.

Draco, of course, had said as little as possible, but it didn’t matter. Snape already seemed to know about the fight, as well as who was involved, and he was hell bent on pinning the entire thing on Potter’s little sidekick. Under different circumstances Draco would have been all for it. But Granger wasn’t one to make idle threats. There was no doubt in his mind about what she’d accuse him of if her back was to the wall. He had to admit to starting the fight. She’d left him no choice.

Fighting was a minor offense compared to sexual assault. And there was no way he’d be able to wiggle his way out of it with McGonagall in the room. Not if it was Saint Granger, teachers pet, making the accusations. She had a torn shirt and several Prefect witnesses to back up her side of the story. Not to mention Weasley’s brother and Mad-Eye Moody, who were obviously on her side.

What did he have?

Nothing. Nothing but the truth, for all the good it would do him.

Granger might be a Gryffindor, but that little bitch could lie as well as any Slytherin he’d met. He’d seen first hand how convincing she could be when she tricked Professor Umbridge the year before. Once she started in with her version of what happened and threw in a few of those fake tears, even Snape, as lenient as he was when it came to the members of his own house, wouldn’t be able to look the other way.

He’d probably wind up being expelled and Weasley would come off as the hero. There was no way Draco was going to let that happen. He had no choice but to take the blame, but he wasn’t going to forget this. Oh no. Weasley and Granger were at the top of his list, right along with Potter, who had put his father in prison.

You’re going to pay, Draco thought, narrowing his eyes at Hermione as she entered the room and followed Snape to his desk. All three of you. Just you wait. I’ll get you back for this eventually.

“Well, well, well,” Professor Snape said to Hermione as he slid back behind his desk and took his seat. “It would seem you three had a rather eventful trip. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy have given us their version of what happened. Now I’d like to hear yours.”

“I didn’t te--” Ron started to protest.

“SILENCE!” Snape cried loudly, effectively cutting him off. “You will keep your mouth shut,
Weasley. Is that understood?” he asked, his cold black eyes locked on Ron as if daring him to speak again. “IS IT?”

“Yes, sir,” Ron spat out angrily.

“Five point from Gryffindor for speaking, Weasley.”

“WHAT!” Ron bellowed, spinning around to appeal to McGonagall. “Professor, you can’t just let him--”

“I suggest you shut up,” Snape continued, despite McGonagall’s disapproving look, “before I make it ten points?!”

Ron’s mouth instantly snapped shut, but it didn’t stop him from growling as he spun back around to face the Potions Master.

One look at Ron was all it took for Hermione to know he was struggling to keep his temper under control. Not only was his face red with rage, his ears were starting to match. A sure sign of trouble. Snape was goading him on purpose and Ron was falling for it.

“What happen on the train, Miss Granger?” Professor McGonagall asked somberly. “Who started the fight?”

“I already told you that,” Draco tried to interject before Hermione could respond.

Unfortunately, Snape had no intentions of letting him finish his sentence. The resounding bang caused by the Potions Master slamming his hand down on his desk effectively cut Malfoy off and drew Hermione’s attention at the same time. “Professor McGonagall asked you a question, Granger,” Snape snarled while glowering at Draco. “Answer it. Now!”

However, rather than respond, Hermione turned to her left and glanced at Ron uncertainly.

“What? Ron thought as his mouth dropped open in surprise. He was so shocked that he couldn’t have spoken even if he’d wanted it. It was a lie. A bald-faced lie and they all knew it. All of them except Hermione, that is. Snape was trying to mislead her. He was trying to trick her into revealing something she normally wouldn’t and McGonagall was going along with it. That was probably the most shocking part of all.

“I’m sorry?” Hermione replied, almost as if she didn’t think she’d heard him correctly.

“You were there, were you not?” McGonagall asked. “You witnessed the entire encounter?”

“Yes.”

“Then, as a school Prefect you have a responsibility to--” Snape started, but the rest of his speech caught in this throat when Hermione unclasped her Prefect badge and tossed it on his desk.

If Ron thought he had been shocked before, it was nothing compared to what he was feeling now. He wasn’t the only one with his mouth hanging open either, Malfoy had joined him, and Snape wasn’t all that far behind.

“Miss Granger?” McGonagall whispered, clearly as stunned as everyone else in the room.

She knew the young woman in front of her was headstrong and loyal to her friends, but this was
taking things a bit far. Malfoy had already confessed. There was no need for her to give up her badge. “

Severus,” she said, snatching Hermione’s Prefect badge up off his desk. “May I have a word with you?” she asked, stalking over to the door and throwing it open, “In private?” she added, motioning for him to follow her out into the hall.

“Whatcha do that for?” Ron asked Hermione the instant Snape’s billowing black robes cleared the doorway and he shut the three Prefects inside his office. “Have you completely gone around the bend?” he continued, looking both awed and horrified at the same time.

“If he thinks he can use the fact that I’m a Prefect as a means of coercing me into turning on you,” she fumed. “Then he can go to hell and he can take that badge with him.”

“Hermione?” Ron cried, moving past horror into full-blown admiration. “You didn’t have to do that,” he said, still trying to wrap his head around what he’d just seen her do.

She’d just chucked her Prefect badge at Snape. She’d all but told him to sod off. Even if she didn’t say the words to his face, her intention was clear. But it wasn’t just her Prefect badge she was giving up, it was her shot at becoming Head Girl. She’d thrown it all away, just like that, for him. She’d given up her dream; the thing she’d spent the past five years working for and she hadn’t even hesitated.

“What have you done?” Ron wondered out loud as the enormity of it all hit them both.

“Oh god,” Hermione groaned, the color draining out of her face as she fell into one of the chairs in front of Snape’s desk.

“I’ll make this up to you,” Ron cried, sinking down on his knees in front of her and placing his hands on the arms of her chair. It was a feeble attempt at consolation and he knew it, but it was all he could think to say. “I swear, I will. I don’t know how, but I’ll find some way to--”

“A bit off your game tonight, Granger?” Malfoy drawled out.

“SHUT THE HELL UP!” Ron roared, turning on the smirking Slytherin the instant he remembered he was still in the room. “THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!”

“How’s that?” Malfoy asked, meeting the redhead’s angry eyes and glaring right back. “I took the blame, didn’t I? I told them that I started the fight. You heard me do it. It’s her own fault she was stupid enough to give up her badge.”

“RON! DON’T!” Hermione cried, jumping out of her chair and clutching his arm the instant he lunged for Malfoy. “This is exactly what got us into this mess in the first place,” she hissed as she pulled him backwards. “Do you seriously want to have another fight right here, in the middle of Snape’s office?”

“Sorry,” he muttered, but he continued to try and stare down Malfoy even as he apologized to Hermione.

“Oh for Heaven’s sake,” she sighed, pushing him into the chair she’d just vacated. “Just... calm down and let me think for a minute, will you?”

“Yeah,” Draco sniggered. “Let’s see you think your way out of this.”
“Mr. Malfoy,” Professor McGonagall’s harsh voice cut through the room, startling the blond Slytherin so much that he actually jumped as he spun around to face her “You are free to go.”

“WHAT!” Ron cried in outrage as Malfoy all but ran for the door. “Professor, you can’t seriously believe--”

“Mr. Weasley, please,” McGonagall said, closing the door the instant Draco was through it.

“But that’s not fair,” Ron whined. “You can’t just let him go. This is all his fault. He even said so.”

“Be that as it may,” McGonagall replied tartly as she approached them, “it’s up to Professor Snape to decide Mr. Malfoy’s punishment.”

“Meaning he gets off scot free while Hermione loses her Prefect badge?” Ron shouted, rising up out of his chair. “She didn’t even DO anything. It’s not fair, Professor. You can’t.”

“That will be quite enough Mr. Weasley.”

“Here,” Ron said, plucking the badge off his robe and offering it up to McGonagall. “Take mine instead. If one of us has to lose our badge, it ought to be me. I did it. I started the fight.”

“Ron,” Hermione hissed beside him.

“Well, I did.”

“No, you didn’t,” she protested, pleading with him to shut up with her eyes. “Malfoy started it.”

“He provoked me, but I threw the first punch.”

“Mr. Weasley,” Professor McGonagall said, coming around and leaning against Snape’s desk. “You are not a child any longer. It’s time you learn how to control your temper or it’s liable to get you, and your friends,” she added holding up Hermione’s Prefect badge as if to prove her point, “in serious trouble. Fortunately,” she added, handing the badge back to Hermione, “there was no lasting damage done today. But in the future, it might be wise to think about the consequences of your actions before you react. Miss Granger can’t be counted on to stop you every time someone like Draco Malfoy tried to goad you into acting rashly. If you truly have aspirations of becoming an Auror, you are going to have to learn to control those impulses yourself. You’ll never make it into the Auror Training Program, or the Order,” she added in a near whisper, “if you go running off half cocked every time someone provokes you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ron sighed, looking down at his shoes uncomfortably. “I’ll try.”

“See that you do. Now about your punishments.”

“PUNISHMENTS! Both of us? But Hermione didn’t even do anything.”

“Mr. Weasley?” McGonagall warned, pursing her already thin lips even further.

“Sorry, Professor.”

“You don’t think McGonagall would actually expel them do you?” Ginny leaned over and asked Harry softly as they watched Draco enter the Great Hall behind Snape and swagger over to the Slytherin table as if he didn’t have a care in the world.
“Doubt it,” Harry replied, glaring at Malfoy as he settled down on a bench between Crabbe and Goyle and proceeded to load his plate with food.

“Then where are they?” Ginny whispered.

“I don’t know,” Harry replied, trying not the let on that he was just as worried as Ginny.

“Maybe McGonagall isn’t through lecturing them yet.”

“But they’ve been gone for ages,” Ginny argued, “They’ve missed the sorting, Dumbledore’s speech and most of the feast.”

“Maybe McGonagall isn’t going to let them come back,” Harry replied, scanning the staff table again to see if she’d shown up herself. “Like that time Ron and I took your dad’s car. We had to stay in Snape’s office.”

“Reckon we ought to nick them some food?”

“Naw, she’ll feed them herself if that’s what happened. And if not, Ron can take my Invisibility Cloak and go down to the kitchens later.”

“Oh yeah,” Ginny said sarcastically. “There’s a brilliant idea. Ron’s already in trouble. The last thing he needs is to get caught roaming around the halls after hours.”

“I’ll go then. If I get caught,” Which I won’t, Harry added silently, “I’ll just say that I wanted to visit Dobby.”

“Or we could just bring some food back with us,” Ginny replied, grabbing one of the cloth napkins off the table and loading it up with chicken. “You’ll have to do it though,” she said, shoving the napkin in Harry’s direction, “because I have to escort the first years to the common room and I can’t exactly break the rules in front of them. Not on my first night as a Prefect. Hermione will kill me, even if the food is for her.”

“noticed she was in a foul mood, did you?” Harry asked, taking the napkin full of chicken out of Ginny’s hand.

“Are you kidding?” she chuckled. “It was kind of hard to miss the way she was snarling at Ron.”

“At least things are back to normal,” Harry replied with a slight smile. “I never would have thought I’d actually miss those two bickering, but it was just... strange the way they were going out of their way to be pleasant to each other all the time. Honestly, I’m surprised they made it as long as they did without having a row.”

“They had plenty of rows before...you got there,” Ginny said awkwardly. “Just ask Ron to tell you about the one they had after he jumped that reporter in the field. It was so bad Dad had to shield the kitchen.”

“George told me about that,” Harry replied. “He said she even yelled at him.”

“That she did. She actually told George to sod off,’ she laughed. “Although he deserved it. Waving that official warning she’d received from the Ministry under her nose like that.”

“He forgot to mention that part when he told me the story,” Harry chuckled.

“Figures. Look,” Ginny said, nodding her head towards the doorway her brother had just stormed
though. “Hermione’s not the only one in a bad mood now,” she whispered to Harry as the two
Prefects approached the table.

“That old bat,” Ron growled as he flopped down on the bench beside Harry and reached for a platter
of pork chops.

“Ron!” Hermione admonished, scowling at him as she sat down herself.

“Let me guess,” Harry sighed, turning to Hermione, who was sitting on his other side. “Malfoy went
straight to Snape?”

“Actually,” Hermione replied, rolling her eyes at Ron, who had loaded up his plate and was now
stabbing his potatoes viciously, “he went straight to the hospital wing.”

“Bloody baby,” Harry heard Ron mutter under his breath. “Who goes to the hospital wing for a
black eye?”

“Madame Pomfrey probably told Snape.”

“Well, you’re still here, so McGonagall obviously didn’t expel either of you,” Ginny said.

“No,” Ron grumbled. “She just gave me detention.”

“You’ve really got no one to blame but yourself,” Hermione chided.

“I can blame Malfoy.”

“Because he made you shout at McGonagall, did he?” Hermione asked sarcastically.

“Well, she had no right giving you detention too.”

“You got detention?” Ginny asked, looking at Hermione in shock.

“A bloody months worth,” Ron cried incredulously.

“Ron, don’t curse. What if the first years hear you and--”

“The first years are way down there,” Ron cut in, pointing down at the end of the table where the
newest Gryffindor were seated. “They can’t hear a word I’m saying.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Yes it is.”

“Here we go,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes at Harry.

“You got a month of detention?” Harry asked, his eyes jumping from Ron to Hermione. “Each?”

“Waste of breath, mate,” Ron replied. “She doesn’t even bloody care.”

“Of course I care,” Hermione shot back.

“Then why aren’t you upset?” he countered.

“Well, I deserved it, didn’t I?” she replied. “She shouldn’t have given me back my badge.”

“What?” Ginny asked, looking at Ron uncertainly. “McGonagall took away your Prefect badge?”
she asked, her eyes wide with shock.

“No,” Ron said, smiling for the first time since he’d entered the room. “Snape tried to remind Hermione that as a Prefect it was her duty to rat me out, so she chucked her badge at him. It was bloody brilliant,” he rhapsodized. “It was almost worth getting a months detention to see the look on his face. The only thing that would have made it any better would have been if you’d bounced it off his greasy forehead.”

“It’s not as bad as he’s making it sound,” Hermione assured their friends. “It isn’t a solid month. It’s just one night a week for a month.”

“Yeah, Saturday nights,” Ron grumbled. “The one night I have when I don’t have to worry about finishing my schoolwork.”

“You don’t do any schoolwork on Friday nights either.”

“That’s not the point. She’s ruined my weekends.”

“No, you ruined them,” Hermione argued. “You could have been expelled,” she scolded. “You got off easy.”

“Easy?” Ron moaned. “McGonagall is going to write my Mum tonight. I wouldn’t be surprised if she sends a couple howlers in the morning. Laugh it up,” he added when Hermione rolled her eyes at him. “She’ll send you one too. Just you wait and see.”

“Now who’s the baby?” Hermione muttered into her napkin.

“OY! I heard that.”

“Ever hear that saying about being sorry what you wish for?” Ginny asked Harry with a chuckle. “Tired of the bickering yet?”

“Nope,” Harry replied with a smile, leaning back and making it easier for his two best friends to see one another as they squabbled.

“You will be,” Ginny warned.

“Probably,” he agreed, “but still, it’s good to be back.”

“So what’d we miss?” Ron asked, turning away from Hermione and glancing down towards the new first years.”

“You missed the sorting, obviously,” Harry replied.

“And Dumbledore’s speech,” Ginny added.

“Wait. What?” Hermione asked, prying her eyes off the staff table and locking them on Ginny. “Dumbledore already gave his speech? Before the feast? But he always does it afterwards.”

“Not this year,” Harry replied.

“He said there was no point holding it off,” Ginny explained. “Since we all knew about ‘the events’ that occurred over the summer and had probably surmised who was missing by now.”

“What did he say about the attacks?” Ron asked, lowering his fork before it reached his mouth.
“Not much,” Harry replied. “Nothing we didn’t already know.”

“Except the names of the other victims,” Ginny replied.

“Euan Abercrombie?” Hermione asked, after a quick scan of their table. “They weren’t all Gryffindor, were they?”

“No,” Ginny replied sadly. “They got Orla Quirke from Ravenclaw. And Kevin Whitby. He was in Hufflepuff.”

“So every house except Slytherin?” Ron asked. “Imagine that?” he muttered, glaring at the Malfoy.

“He didn’t say anything else?” Hermione asked, her eyes glued to the staff table again. “About the attacks?”

“Nothing we didn’t already know,” Ginny repeated. “He had us stand and drink to their memories and then proceeded to the usual announcements. Oh yeah,” she added, turning to her brother. “Quidditch tryouts are in two weeks. You should probably be there, so you better talk to McGonagall and make sure it doesn’t interfere with your detention.”

“All right,” Ron said, glancing over at McGonagall, who was seated next to Dumbledore at the staff table. “What about the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?” he asked, scanning the rest of the table and realizing there were no unfamiliar faces. “Please tell me he didn’t give the job to Snape.”

“He didn’t,” Hermione replied as she picked at her food.

“How do you know?” Ron asked.

“Because I saw the new DADA teacher on the train,” she replied.

“When?” Harry asked, obviously as surprised by this news as Ron and Ginny were.

“When I went to the back of the train and had Tonks boost the charms she’d placed on my hair.”

“Where is he then?” Ron asked, looking at her skeptically.

“She,” Hermione corrected. “And I have no idea.”

“A witch?” Ron moaned.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ginny snapped.

“It means we’re going to learn everything from books, just like last year.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that if I were you,” Hermione chuckled.

“You know who it is, don’t you?” Harry asked.

“Well,” Ron demanded, when Hermione smiled. “Who is it?”

“I already told you,” she replied, dropping her voice to a near whisper. “It’s Tonks.”

“Seriously?” Ginny cried loudly. “That is so cool.”

“Wicked,” Ron said, smiling right along with Harry and his sister.

“Apparently Dumbledore thought it would be a good idea to have an Auror around,” Hermione
explained. “And since Fudge mucked things up so badly last year, he bent over backwards to accommodate him. But Tonks said we shouldn’t let on how well we know her, so try and curb your enthusiasm a bit,” she warned her ginger haired friends.

“Right,” Harry replied.

“Wish we had DADA with the Slytherins,” Ron said, glancing off into space and completely missing the bewildered looks Harry and Hermione shot his way. “I’d love to see her take on Malfoy.”
“I’m not hungry,” Ron protested as Harry shoved him out of their dormitory and towards the stairwell leading down to the common room.

“Yeah, right,” Harry retorted with a laugh.

“No, seriously. You and Hermione go on ahead. I’ll just meet you in class.”

“And how exactly do you plan on doing that,” Harry asked, “if you don’t come down to breakfast and pick up your timetable first?”

“I’ll meet you in the hallway then.”

“After the mail has been delivered?”

“Um ... yeah,” Ron admitted.

“Will you two hurry up?” Hermione’s voice resounded up the stone staircase. “We’re going to be late.”

“It’s only breakfast,” Ron shouted back as Harry gave him another shove and forced him to descend to the stairs. “It doesn’t matter if you’re a few minutes late. The food isn’t going anywhere. Well, that’s not exactly true,” he added as he entered the common room. “It’s not like it sits there on those platters all day. You two better get going.”

“What’s he talking about?” Hermione asked Harry after giving Ron an odd look.

“Apparently Ron isn’t hungry this morning,” he replied.

“Oh please,” Hermione scoffed.

“That’s his excuse anyway,” Harry chuckled. “He said the two of us should go down to breakfast without him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Hermione replied, snatching her bag up off the floor. “Come on,” she demanded, grabbing Ron by the arm and pulling him towards the portrait hole.

“No,” he protested, yanking himself free. “I said I’m not hungry.”

“Oh for Heaven’s sake,” she cried, spinning around to face the two boys once more. “And I suppose that is Harry’s stomach that just growled?”

Bugger.

“He’s worried about the mail,” Harry explained, when Ron didn’t answer.

“You can’t hide from the mail,” Hermione said as she rolled her eyes at him. “Errol will find you wherever you are. When he finally gets here, that is. He’s bound to be late,” she added. “He won’t even show up until lunchtime.”

“Don’t say it,” Ron said to Harry, who was just about to tell him that Hermione was probably right.
“Fine,” he snapped, willing to miss one meal, but not two. “I’ll come down to breakfast,” he continued as he marched over the portrait hole, “but I’m skipping lunch.”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Hermione said as she followed Harry thought the portrait hole and into the hallway.

Here we go, Harry thought as he watched the tall redhead bristle. *They’re going to spend the entire day rowing. Either that or they won’t even be speaking to each other by the time we reach the Great Hall.*

“You’ll be singing a different tune when yours goes off in front of the entire school,” Ron retorted with a smirk.

Or not, Harry amended when Ron failed to take the bait and Hermione chuckled at his reply.

“Your mother is not going to send me a howler,” she assured him. “And she isn’t going to send you one either.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Ron replied as he led his friends down the corridor and towards the flight of stair that would take them to the lower levels of the castle.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I got detention, didn’t I?” *We haven’t even had a bloody class yet and I’m already in trouble.*

“Well, yes,” Hermione agreed quietly, “but that was going to happen anyway. It doesn’t have anything to do with what happened on the train. Our detention was prearranged.”

“What?” Ron and Harry asked in unison as they both froze in the center of the staircase and spun around to stare at Hermione in disbelief.

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked.

“Tonks mentioned it to me on the train,” Hermione admitted in a near whisper.

“You knew and you didn’t tell me?” Ron asked crossly.

“I couldn’t,” Hermione insisted. “Not with Neville and Ginny sitting there. And it wasn’t supposed to happen so soon. Tonks asked me to...er... to pick a fight with you during Potions.”

“Oh that’s brilliant,” Ron muttered. “I’m not that thick you know?”

“I would have told you beforehand,” Hermione shot back, looking as if she was fighting the urge to roll her eyes at him again. “I would have told you last night, but you two went to bed before the common room cleared out,” she added.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Why what?” Hermione replied.

“Why did she want you to provoke Snape into giving you both detentions?”

“Um,” Hermione answered somewhat awkwardly. “She said something about using that time to give us a few extra defense lessons.”

“Oh,” Harry replied impassively. “Just the two of you?” he added as an afterthought.
“She...uh.. said it was something you already knew how to do,” Hermione responded, glancing at Ron uncomfortable before meeting Harry’s gaze once more. “And that you’d be busy practicing your Occlumency.”

“So Snape is going to give Harry detention too,” Ron asked.

“I am NOT going to practice Occlumency or anything else with him,” Harry snarled. Sitting in his class was going to be hard enough. There was no way in hell he was going to give the Potions Master an opportunity to rummage through his memories of what happened in the Department of Mysteries. And he wasn’t going to listen to any more snide comments about Sirius or his father either. The next time Snape insulted the memory of someone Harry cared about, he was going to find himself on the receiving end of one of a Bat Bogey Hexes.

“But Harry,” Hermione argued. “You have to keep practicing. It’s really important. You have to keep up with it. You know that you do. It’s the only way you’ll be able to block Voldemort out.”

“The dreams have stopped,” Harry retorted angrily.

“But,” Hermione persisted, looking over at Ron who was fidgeting and staring at them both nervously, “you haven’t exactly been... dreaming about anything, have you? I mean... you’ve been drinking Mrs. Weasley’s tea every night before bed.”

“Not every night,” Harry protested.

“Most nights,” Ron interjected, choosing a side and drawing the weight of his best mate’s glare. “Not that I blame you,” he added, shifting a bit. “But what if they do come back? You want to be able to block them, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” Harry snapped, even as he wondered if he really did. He definitely didn’t want to be possessed again, but the dreams weren’t so bad.

Ok, so they are unpleasant, but they can be useful. One of those dreams saved Mr. Weasley’s life after all, Harry reminded himself. And one of them cost Sirius his, he thought immediately after. They’re only useful if they’re real.

“It doesn’t matter,” he argued. “I’m not working with Snape.”

“But--” Hermione began and then cut off when Ron caught her eye and shook his head.

It wasn’t the right time to have this argument. She knew he was right, but it was still very hard for her to hold her tongue. She wasn’t finished with this conversation, but she’d go along with Ron and drop it for now. It was their first day back after all and the dreams hadn’t returned yet. It could wait.

“All right mate,” Ron said, clasping Harry on the shoulder before proceeding down the staircase. “He’s a git and the less time we have to spend with him the better. If only we didn’t have to take Potions to become Aurors.”

Despite the fact Ron was fairly certain Errol wouldn’t be able to make it to Hogwarts in time for the morning mail, he continued to gaze up at the windows of the Great Hall apprehensively throughout the entire meal. He barely even heard the conversations taking place around him. It wasn’t until his sister walloped him on the arm that he turned around to see what she was yammering about.

“What?” he hissed.
“Your timetable,” she said, waving a sheet of parchment with his classes under his nose before shoving it at his chest. “I’ve only told you four times.”

“Whatever,” Ron replied, yanking the schedule out of his sister’s hand and scanning it quickly.

Double Transfigurations, followed by Charms after lunch. That wasn’t so bad. In fact, upon closer inspection, Ron realized he had several blocks of free time scheduled throughout the week.

Wicked!

“Hey, we don’t have Defense Against the Dark Arts until Wednesday,” he complained, dragging his eyes off the parchment and glanced up at the staff table again, looking for Tonks, who still hadn’t show up for a meal.

“Yeah well,” Harry replied, “it will give us something to look forward to after a double dose of Snape in the morning.”

“You’re sure she’s our DADA teacher?” Ron asked Hermione, who was still studying her timetable.

“Yes, Ron,” she replied without bringing her eyes up.

“Let me see your timetable,” Ron said, reaching around Harry who was seated between them and trying to snatch her course list out of her hand. Unfortunately Hermione was faster than he was.

“Why?” she asked, jerking it out of reach.

“I want to see what you’re taking,” he admitted, leaning in further and taking another swipe. The fact that she didn’t want to show it to him, only made him more determined to see it.

“I’m taking the same things you are,” she informed him, folding her schedule up and shoving it in her bag where he wouldn’t be able to get at it.

“Is that so?” Ron asked, eyeing her suspiciously. “Then why can’t I see it?”

“Because you don’t need to.”

“That’s what I thought,” Ron muttered, his suspicions confirmed. She was purposely hiding it from him and he knew why.

The sixth years had been encouraged to drop some of their previous courses and fine tune their schedules. They were supposed to give up their electives and focus on the specialized courses designed to help them pass the N.E.W.T.s required for their chosen professions. Ron and Harry, who wanted to be Aurors, had been only too happy to drop Care of Magical Creatures, Astronomy, and Divinations. They would have dropped History of Magic too, expect it was a core course and still required. Hermione on the other hand wasn’t sure what she wanted to do once she graduated and she was liable to pull a stunt like she did in their third year and keep every class she had.

We’ll just see about that, Ron though as he whipped his wand out of the inside pocket of his robes, leaned back in his chair and pointed it at Hermione’s book bag.

“**Accio Timetable.**”

“RON!” Hermione cried in outrage as she watched her schedule zoom into his outstretched hand. “Give that back,” she demanded, jumping to her feet at the exact same instant he did and lunging for it.
“You didn’t drop anything,” Ron said, holding the open sheet of parchment up in the air above his head as he continued to scan it.

“Yes, I did,” Hermione argued, making another grab for it.

“What?” he asked holding it out of reach.

“Care of Magical Creatures,” she snapped. “Now give it back or I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” Ron scoffed.

“I’ll make you,” she declared, lunging at him again, only this time rather than trying to grab her timetable, she latched on to his side, dug her fingers into his robes, and tickled him. The effect was immediate. Not only did he double over to protect his stomach, he jerked the hand he was using to hold the parchment out of the air and used it to shove her away.

“HAAA,” Ginny cried as she watched Hermione stepped away from her brother with her timetable clenched firmly in her own hand.

“I didn’t know you were ticklish,” Harry stated, looking at Hermione oddly. *Ginny must have told Hermione. How else would she know?*

“I’m not,” Ron insisted, flopping back down on his bench. “I just don’t like being poked, is all.”

“Liar,” Ginny muttered as she caught Harry’s eye and nodded her head. She was sorely tempted to ‘poke’ her brother in the side until he admitted the truth, but she knew from experience how stubborn he was, even in the throes of a laughing fit. Charlie had once used a Tickle Charm on him for a full 15 minutes before Ron cracked and confessed that he’d been flying on his brother’s broom without permission.

“You’re not seriously going to keep all those courses, are you?” Ron asked, his attention focused on Hermione once more. “It’s too much. You’ll make yourself batty like you did third year. You don’t need that Rune rubbish anymore.”

“It is not rubbish,” Hermione cried, sounding seriously affronted. “It happens to be one of my most fascinating courses.”

“Surely there must be something you can drop?” Ron shot back, rolling his eyes at Harry as he did so. “What about Astronomy?”

“What about Quidditch?” she replied taking him completely by surprise.

“What about it?”

“I’ll drop Ancient Runes and Astronomy when you two drop Quidditch.”

“What!” Ron yelped. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Yes it is.”

“No, it’s not. It’s not even close. Quidditch is fun. Schoolwork isn’t.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

“You can’t possibly take nine N.E.W.T. level courses.”
“Well, I’m going to,” Hermione declared, grabbing her book bag off the floor and flinging it over her shoulder.

“You’ll drive yourself, and more importantly us, mad when exams roll around,” Ron snapped before she had a chance to walk away.

“Is that so?” she cried, spinning around to face him again. “And how many hours a week do you waste on Quidditch?”

“WASTE!” Ron shouted. “Did you hear that, Harry?” he asked, turning to his best friend for support. “You aren’t just going to sit there and let her get away with that, are you?”

Apparently he was because he didn’t reply. He’d learned along time ago not to get in the middle of their arguments. It didn’t matter that Ron was right. Harry still wasn’t going to go there.

“Did you or did you not just tell me that my Ancient Runes course was a waste of my time?”

“No, I said you must know enough of it by now and you didn’t need to wear yourself out trying to learn more.”

“I’ll remind you of that the next time we have a paper due and you go off to practice instead. We’ll see who wears themselves out when I refuse to help you and you have to sit up all night working on it by yourself.”

“I won’t be working on it by myself. Harry will have practice too, so he’ll be right there with me.”

“At least you’ll have company then,” Hermione snapped. “I’ll see you in class, Harry,” she added, spinning around and marching towards the double doors on the other side of the room.

“What’s her problem?” Ron wondered out loud as he watched her go.

As if you don’t know, Ginny thought. It’s the same problem you have.

Everyone else at the table might be fooled, but Ginny knew the truth. They weren’t angry with each other, they were frustrated. They hadn’t been alone together in days and it was starting to take its toll. The longer they went without snogging, the more they were likely to bicker. If it got any worse she’d have to do something drastic, like distract Harry and lock the two of them in a broom cupboard or something.

“Come on,” Ron said, jumping up and grabbing his own stuff up off the floor. “Let’s go. If we’re late to McGonagall’s class I’m liable to get another detention.

All and all, as far as first days went, Harry couldn’t complain. In fact, the day actually flew by. They spent the whole of their double Transfigurations class reviewing spells they had learned the previous year and then forgotten over the summer holiday. The last half-hour of the class had been devoted to practicing Vanishing Spells because they was the opposite of Conjuring, which McGonagall informed them they were due to start next week.

Fortunately, Harry had Vanishing Spells down and it only took Ron one botched attempt to get back in the swing of things. At the end of the lesson, Neville was the only one that receives any homework. It was ironic really, when you considered the fact he had once accidentally vanished the leg clean off McGonagall’s desk, and yet he couldn’t successfully vanish a rat when he wanted to. It didn’t matter how many times he tried to do it, he always left the tail behind.
Ron, of course, refused to accompany his classmates to the Great Hall for lunch after their lesson. Not that Harry didn’t understand. He’d rather be in a nearly deserted Gryffindor common room than a bustling Great Hall should he ever receive a howler. Hermione muttered something about him being ridiculous under her breath, but she waited until he was out of earshot before she did it.

Lunch was peaceful and rather quick considering they didn’t have class again until one. Hermione was finished before Harry even really had a chance to begin, but as luck would have it the fifth years showed up as she was loading a napkin full of food, which meant he’d have Ginny to talk to.

“Let me guess,” the feisty redhead teased as she plopped down at the table just as her bushy haired friend stood up. “You’re going to the library.”

“I want to review my Charms notes before class.”

“You can’t eat in the library,” Ginny reminded her, eyeing the bulging napkin in her hand.

“It’s not for me,” she replied, hauling her bag up off the floor, dropping it on the table top, and stowing the napkin full of food inside. “It’s for Ron. I have to go up and get my notes anyway,” she explained when Harry arched an eyebrow in surprise. “I might as well feed him while I’m up there. There’s no use having him get all hungry and cranky.”

Harry couldn’t argue with that. He’d have taken some food up himself for that exact reason, if Hermione hadn’t beaten him to it.

“See you in Charms,” she said.

As soon as Harry nodded his head she was off, but she never made it to the library. She was seated beside Ron on the couch in the common room perusing her notes when Harry arrived.

“Well,” he asked, falling into a chair opposite Ron.

“Nothing,” the redhead replied, dropping the copy of the Daily Prophet he’d absent-mindedly been flipping through back on the table where he’d found it. “Not even a regular letter.”

Hermione snorted into her notes, but refrained from saying ‘I told you so’ out loud.

“We better go,” she said, closing her notebook and shoving it into the bag at her feet.

“We have a half-hour,” Harry replied, glancing at his watch.

“Fine,” she replied, rising to her feet. “I’ll meet you downstairs then,” she added, before walking off towards the portrait hole by herself.

“Not much we can do in a half-hour though,” Harry said, after she’d gone.

“We can review the Quidditch Stats,” Ron answered, snatching the paper up again and quickly flipping to the back.

“Now that she’s gone?” Harry chuckled.

“Yup.”

“Because that would be a waste of time?”

“Shut up.”
“So what were you looking at before?” Harry asked, rising up out of his chair and sitting beside Ron on the couch so they could look at the sports section together.

“Nothing really,” he admitted. “HA! Look, the Tornados lost to the Harpies.”

“The Cannons lost too, I see,” Harry pointed out.

“What else is new,” Ron sighed, “At least they didn’t lose to a bunch of girls,” he snickered, taking comfort in the knowledge that the Tornados had been beaten by the only team in the league that limited its roster to witches. The gender restriction was purported to exist only as a means of uphold the image of the teams name. Although Ron had always suspected that even without it, they’d have a hard time recruiting any decent male players. No self-respecting wizard wanted to be known as a Harpy. It would just be humiliating. “We’ll see how many people are still wearing their badges after a loss like that.”

“You know how to do it,” Hermione said to Neville, waving her wand at a quill lying on the table in front of them and turning it into a mouse. “You’re just not concentrating hard enough. You have to envision the entire mouse in your head, tail and all,” she instructed. “You’re only focusing on the body. Try again.”

“All right,” Neville replied, closing his eyes and trying to picture the mouse in his mind as he waved his wand. “Damn,” he muttered when he opened them again and realized he’d left the ears behind this time.

“But you got the tail,” Harry said, trying to sound encouraging. “That’s something.”

“One more go and you’ll have it,” Hermione assured him as she transfigured another quill. “But you better get rid of those ears first,” she added. “Harry will help you,” she said, glancing over at Ron who was hunched over a jar containing a Bluebell flame trying to master the Flame Freezing Charm Professor Flitwick had showed them earlier in the day. “I have to go to a Prefect meeting.”


“Anytime,” Hermione replied, rising out of her seat and walking over to Ron. “Ready?” she asked.

“For what?” he replied, waving his wand over the jar of flames, then touching the glass to see if it was still hot.

“The meeting.”

“Oh, uh yeah. Okay. Just give me a minute. I almost have this,” he said, waving his wand over the flames again.

“You’re doing it wrong,” Hermione said, trying not to smirk when the small piece of parchment he dropped into the jar burst into flames.

“No, really?”

“You need to flick your wrist at the end, like this,” she instructed, miming the proper hand movement despite the fact she wasn’t holding her wand. “Go ahead, give it a try.”

“You might have told me that a half-hour ago,” he said, mimicking her actions.
“I wasn’t exactly expecting you to sit down and seriously start on your homework tonight,” Hermione replied, as she watched Ron drop another bit of parchment into the jar and smile when nothing happened to it. “We don’t have Charms again until Thursday.”

“I have my reasons for getting it done early,” he whispered, shooting her one of his lopsided smiles.

“Oh you do, do you?” she chuckled. “And what would that be?”

“I suppose I could tell you,” Ron said, standing up and shoving his wand in his back pocket, before retrieving his robes off the back of the couch. “But I’d rather show you. Of course I can’t do that here.”

“Which is why I asked you if you were ready to go to a meeting that doesn’t really start for another 45 minutes,” Hermione admitted quietly.

“Indeed?” Ron asked with a grin. “Oy, Harry,” he shouted while walking over to the portrait hole. “Prefect meeting,” he said, explaining where they were going.

“Right,” Harry replied as he watched his two best friends duck out of the common room. “Aren’t you going?” he asked Ginny, who had remained in her chair.

“Not yet,” she said, her eyes glued to the notebook in her hand. “I want to finish reading this first. I have Potions first thing tomorrow,” she explained, “and Hermione leant me her notes from last year. Just let him try and stump me once I’ve read his entire first lesson.”

“Aw.”

“Don’t let me forget to go though,” she added as an afterthought. “Remind me again in 15 minutes, if I’m not finished will ya?”

“Sure thing.”

Unlike their first day of classes, the second dragged on ad nauseam. Starting the day off with a double dose of History of Magic was pure torture as far as Harry and Ron were concerned. Most of the 6th years, with the exception of Hermione and Ernie Macmillan, were practically comatose by the time the bell sounded for lunch.

The next day was even worse, but for an altogether different reason.

“Well that was fun,” Ron said quietly to his friends as they followed the rest of the class, comprised solely of Slytherins, out of the dungeon their Potions classes were held in. “Honestly, I don’t know what’s worse. Being bored stiff for an hour and a half like yesterday or having that twisted git pick on us all morning.”

“It might help if you double-check the instructions before you start adding the ingredients,” Hermione suggested.

“Please,” Ron retorted with a snort. “He’d find a reason to criticize us even if we were bloody perfect. Or didn’t you fail to notice that Harry is his new favorite student, now that Neville is gone.”

“Oh I noticed all right,” Hermione replied, narrowing her eyes and pursing her lips together in a way
that reminded the two boys very strongly of McGonagall. “Don’t you rise to his bait, Harry,” she added. “He’s just looking for a reason to throw you out of his class.”

“She’s right,” Ron agreed. “Did you see the look on his pasty face when you handed in your essay? HAA!”

“Thanks for that,” Harry said looking at Hermione gratefully. He’d completely forgotten about the essay he was supposed to write over the summer until Ron handed him a finished version, written in Hermione’s neat script, the night before and instructed him to copy it over in his own writing. “You really saved my butt. He’d have given me a detention at the very least.”

“That’s what friends are for mate,” Ron replied.

“Don’t go getting used to it,” Hermione added. “I expect you can do you own homework from now on.”

“Yes Mum,” Ron retorted. “Is it just me,” he leaned over and whispered to Harry as they followed Hermione through the double doors of the Great Hall and over to the Gryffindor table, “or is it a little scary the way she can channel my mum like that?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replied, remembering the way Ginny had yelled at him during his own birthday party. “I think your sister’s impression might be a spot better.”

“You’re telling me,” Ron chuckled. “She’s got the body language and the glare down pat.”

“Wotcher Harry,” Nymphadora Tonks said, looking up from a textbook lying open on her desk when the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom opened and a young man with disheveled black hair and glasses peered in somewhat hesitantly. “Well, don’t just stand there. Come in.”

“Er... I know we’re a bit early,” Harry replied as Ron pushed past him and tried to enter the room, only to be thwarted by Hermione who grabbed the back of his robes.

“We didn’t mean to disturb you,” she said, jerking Ron to a standstill. “We know class doesn’t start for another 10 minutes and you’re still getting ready.”

“I’m as ready as I’m liable to get,” she sighed, coming around from behind her desk, then leaning back and hopping up to sit on the edge. “Remus warned me it would take a while to get used to, but it’s not so bad. Well, except for the Slytherins. Those cheeky little—” she began and then caught herself. “So what do you think of the new look?” she asked, holding her arms out at her side so they could take in her modest robes. “Respectable enough?”

“Is that your normal color?” Ron asked, pushing Harry into the room and coming up behind him while staring at her hair, which was no longer a flamboyant hue, but a mousy brown.

“Ron!” Hermione cried, smacking him in the arm.

“What?”

“You don’t ask women questions like that?”

“Why not?”
“Because it’s rude, that’s why.”

“It wasn’t rude. It was just a question. I was curious, that’s all. So is it?” he asked, focusing on Tonks’ shoulder length hair once more.

“For Heaven’s sake. Just ignore him,” Hermione sighed, but it was clear from the look of amusement on her face, that Tonks didn’t really mind.

“I suppose it is,” she chuckled. “I’ve been changing it for so long, I’m not entirely sure anymore to tell you the truth. It’s a bit... plain, but necessary I’m afraid. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t let on about my...er... special ability,” she said, lowering her voice.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “Hermione already told us.”

“She told us about the detentions too,” Ron added. “So what exactly are we going to--”

“Not here, and definitely not now,” Tonks said quickly, cutting him off before he could get any further. “We’ll discuss that on Saturday.”

“But--”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Weasley,” Tonks replied, shifting into teacher mode when the bell rang, signaling the beginning of class. “If you’d kindly take your seats,” she added with a subtle wink just as the door opened again and the rest of Gryffindor shuffled into the classroom, silently assessing their new professor as they moved towards their desks, not quite sure what to expect this year.

“Good afternoon,” the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor said, once all her students were seated. “You may address me as Professor Tonks or just plain Tonks if you prefer. Any student foolish enough to address me by my first name, will find themselves on the receive end of the most ghastly detention I can come up with. If you don’t believe me, I suggest you ask my cousin and his mates, who spent the better part of last night scrubbing the floors in the owlry with toothbrushes.

“Seriously?” Ron hooted, before dissolving into a fit of laughter.

“Mr. Weasley.”

“Sorry, Professor,” he apologized, trying to get himself under control despite the fact he had a crystal clear image of Draco Malfoy knee deep in owl droppings clouding his mind.

“No doubt some of you have heard the rumors circulating around the school by now, so I will take this opportunity to put them to rest. Yes, it’s true; I am a fully qualified Auror. No, I have not been sacked, suspended, or dismissed from my position. I did however take a leave of absence at Professor Dumbledore’s request. He is of the opinion that you lot are in desperate need of some hands on training and I tend to agree.”

“I’ve reviewed the O.W.L. scores from last year and I have to say they were appalling. Although, you Gryffindors did exceedingly well over all. You beat the other houses out at least two to one. In fact, everyone in this class passed, which is quite an accomplishment, considering the... er... Professor... you were shackled with. We all know, of course, who the real teacher was, so Mr. Potter, what exactly did you cover in your D.A. sessions, if you don’t mind telling me?”

“Er--” Harry stammered, caught more than a little off guard. “Um... mostly just Stunning, Disarming and some random Jinxes.”

“And the Patronus Charm,” Hermione added, trying to be helpful.
“Other than Mr. Potter here, how many of you can actually produce a corporeal Patronus?” Tonks asked, her eyes scanning the group of students assembled in front of her. “Only one?” she added, noting that Hermione’s hand was the only one in the air. “Well, it is rather advanced magic, so I suppose that is to be expected. What about the rest of you?” she continued. “Anything at all? Any non-corporeal vapor? Any silver mist?”

“Well done, Mr. Potter,” she chimed when the rest of the group, save Neville, put their hands in the air. “I might actually get something accomplished with you lot yet. So you’ve covered the basics. I know Professor Lupin tackled dark creatures. What else have you covered, in class,” she added.

“Curses,” Seamus replied promptly.

“I suppose it’s somewhat fitting that a crazed Death Eater taught you those,” Tonks retorted. “Now you know what you’re up against. Although I wager he kept most of the really powerful dark stuff to himself.”

“Except for the Unforgivables,” Neville muttered.

“Yes,” Tonks agreed, “but he didn’t teach you how to cast those spells, did he? He just showed you what they did. All right then, what do you say we get started?” she asked, sliding off her desk. “You won’t need your notebooks, just your wands,” she instructed.

“Everyone up front please,” Tonks said, waiting for the students to rise up out of their seats before whipping her wand out of her inside pocket and waving it at the desks, causing them to part down the center of the room and shoot to the sides, where they landed in two jumbled piles against the walls.

“Best way for you to survive a duel with a Death Eater,” Professor Tonks informed her students, “is to avoid it altogether. That’s something this group in particular needs to work on,” she added, giving Harry and his friends a pointed look. “Duck. Run. Do whatever the hell you have to do to get out of their line of fire. The last thing you want to do is stand there like some noble fool and try and fight them if you don’t have to, because I promise you, they won’t fight fair.

A Death Eater NEVER takes on an opponent alone if he can help it. That’s not to say he won’t fight you, because he most certainly will. And he’ll throw some very nasty stuff your way as he does it. If he can take you down on his own, so much the better. But you can’t fight him and watch your own back at the same time, which is what he is counting on. He’ll want you focused completely on him, so he’ll hit you with anything and everything he can think of. And while you are busy warding off curses and throwing a few of your own, one of his mates will sneak up and nail you from behind. That’s why Aurors work in teams; so we can watch each other’s backs.”

“That’s something a friend of mine learned the hard way during the prison break last month,” Tonks added, staring directly at Ron as she spoke. “It was a nasty lesson, but you can bet he won’t be running off half cocked without back up again.”

“But for the sake of argument, let’s say you find yourself face to face with a single Death Eater, like my friend did; only this one has no mates around. It’s just you and him and you have no choice but to stand and fight. What’s the first spell you’re going to use, Mr.... Finnigan?” Tonks asked, glancing down at a sheet of parchment lying on her desk with a list of the Gryffindor student’s names written on it.


“You guess?” Tonks questioned. “You don’t have time to hesitate. Mr. Weasley, partner up with
Finnigan. On the count of three I want you two to duel. Last one standing wins.”

Rather than reply, Ron simply nodded his head and took a deep breath as the rest of the class backed away and left him and Seamus alone in the center of the classroom.

“Ready,” Tonks asked, when Seamus had put some distance between them and turned to face Ron. “Know what you’re going to do?”

“Yup,” Seamus replied.

“Mr. Weasley?” Tonks asked, glancing at Ron who nodded his head again. “On the count of three then? 1... 2... 3.”

“PROTEGO!” Ron shouted the instant he saw Seamus open his mouth. He didn’t even bother to listen to what curse was being sent his way; he was so intent of deflecting it.

“Interesting strategy,” Tonks remarked, giving Ron an appraising look. “I expected you to respond like your brothers and react offensively rather than defensively.”

“I’m the one still standing, aren’t I?” Ron asked, smirking at Seamus who had been knocked to the ground when the Tripping Jinx he’d sent at Ron rebound on him instead.

“You are indeed,” Tonks agreed with a smile. “Well done.”

“In a dual your first order of business should always be to protect yourself if you can. A strong Shield Charm can be more effective than a curse in the right situation. Time to see what you’ve got,” she insisted. “Take your robes off and partner up. We’ve got twenty minutes to practice. Shield Charms and Disarming spell only. We don’t want random curses being deflected all over the room.”

“Mr. Weasley,” she added, noting that there were an odd number of students, “Why don’t we let Mr. Potter partner up with Miss Granger for the first 10 minutes and then you two can switch.”

“Right,” Ron replied, stepping away from his two best friends and moving off to the side where he could stand beside Tonks out of the lines of fire.

“I have to admit I’m rather curious to see which one of them will loose their wand first,” she whispered to Ron as the partners rounded on each other and raised their wands. “Ready? On three,” she added much louder.

“It’ll be Harry,” Ron informed her quietly.

“Really?” she asked. “ONE!”

“Yeah well, Harry might be more powerful, but Hermione’s quicker,” he whispered back. “Besides, she won’t hesitate.”

“Like you do?” Tonks asked with a knowing smirk. “TWO!”

“Yeah okay,” he admitted as his ears darkened. “I might hesitate a bit too, but it’s Hermione. We can’t seriously curse her.”

“THREE!”

“Looks like you were right,” Tonks whispered, noting that Hermione had managed to get her shield up before Harry could disarm her. He was a bit quicker with his own Shield Charms when they switched roles, but by the forth go, she managed to disarm him.
“You aren’t doing her any favors holding yourself back, you know?” Tonks whispered to Ron several minutes later as wands were handed back and partners prepared to square off again. “All you’re doing is lulling her into a false sense of security. You don’t get any real practice and she comes away thinking she’s better than she actually is. That kind of thinking could get her hurt, or worse. You might want to consider that when it’s your turn to take her on. Potter!” she shouted, “Time for you to switch with Weasley.”

“What got into you?” Harry asked Ron after the trio had retrieved their book bags at the end of the lesson and started making their way up to Gryffindor Tower. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you’d been practicing over the summer.”

“Just motivated, I reckon,” Ron replied, hoping Harry would drop it if he brushed it all aside.

“Neville did really well too,” Hermione added. “Did you notice?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “His aim has really improved.”

“I wonder,” Hermione muttered under her breath. “You don’t suppose it has anything to do with the fact he has a new wand, do you? Was it different for you,” she asked Ron, “when you got a new wand?”

“As opposed to using a broken one? Gee, let me think.”

“No,” Hermione groaned, “I mean was it different from using Charlie’s wand when it did work? Is it easier when the wand is attuned to you as opposed to someone else, even if they are a close family member?”

“Maybe a little,” Ron replied. “Here,” he added, whipping his wand out of the inside pocket of his robes and handing it to Hermione. “Give it a try and then you tell me if it makes a difference.”

“We’re in the middle of the corridor.”

“So.”

“We’re Prefects.”

“And?” Ron asked, failing to see what that had to do with anything. “Prefects do cast spells you know?”

“Not in the corridors they don’t,” Hermione snapped. “Because it is forbidden.”

“Oh, right,” he replied somewhat guiltily. “I forgot.”

“You forgot.”

“Well I did. It’s a stupid rule. The only one that cares about it besides you, is Filch. Isn’t that right, Harry?”

“Sorry,” Harry replied glancing at Hermione somewhat apprehensively before turning back to Ron. “You’re on your own mate;” he muttered, taking a step back and watching Ron to see what he’d do next.

The sensible thing to do would be to shut up and let Hermione get to her Runes class. But then, Ron wasn’t always the most sensible bloke and Harry wouldn’t put it past him to start an argument on purpose. He’d been on Hermione for the past three days about her course load and it seemed like one
of those illogical moves Ron sometimes made. If he started a row, she’d tell him off for making her late and he could twist it around and use it as further evidence of why she ought to drop the course. It was hard to predict how Ron would respond at times. Just when you thought you had him pegged, he was liable to do or say something totally unexpected.

Case in point, rather than start a fight, as Harry suspected he might, Ron let the matter drop and jumped onto a different matter altogether.

“Harry and I will meet you in the common room when you’re finished,” he said to Hermione, “and then the three of us can go down to dinner. And don’t even bother telling us to start on our Potions homework, because we don’t have the foggiest notion what happens when you add Hellebore to a Memory Potion and it will take us at least an hour to find anything useful in the library, so what’s the point? You’ll be finished with your class before we even find the right book.”

“Maybe we ought to meet up in the library then.”

“Naw, dinner first,” Ron chuckled. “You know I work better on a full stomach.”

“Fine,” Hermione acquiesced, turning her back and hurrying down the third floor corridor towards the classroom her Ancient Runes course was held in just as Seamus and Neville reached the top of the third floor staircase.

“So what do you make of the new DADA prof?” Seamus asked as the four boys made for the tower. “Bit early to tell really, but she seemed pretty cool.”

“Tonks?” Ron said, without really thinking about what he was saying “Oh yeah, she’s cool.”

“So you do know her?”

“What?” Ron replied. “Oh uh, sorta. She was at Hogwarts with Bill and Charlie. Not sure what year she was in though.”

“Don’t happen to know what her first name is do ya?” Seamus inquired.

“You could always ask Malfoy,” Harry replied with a smirk. “I’m sure he’d love to loan you his toothbrush.”

“Malfoy?” Neville snorted, as Ron started laughing. “No way?”

“So she’s a Slytherin?” Seamus asked, sounding a bit wary.

“No,” Harry replied quickly. “Well,” he corrected when he realized he really didn’t know what house she’d been in. “I suppose she might have been. Do you know Ron?”

“No,” the tall redhead admitted, sobering up considerably. “But Bill must to know. I can ask him if ya want.”
Chapter 18: Blindside

“What about the Room of Requirement?” Ron asked softly as he walked down the second floor corridor with Hermione who was checking empty classrooms to make sure there were no unauthorized students out after curfew.

“Too many people know about it,” she replied, entering the Charms classroom and holding her wand over her head as a torch, illuminating the darkened space. “Including Malfoy.”

“A fair point,” Ron conceded.

He was anxious to get started on the Coupling Potion, but he understood why Hermione was being so cautious. If someone stumbled upon it before it was finished; if they tossed it out or altered it in some way, it would be disastrous. They weren’t going to get any second chances. The ingredients needed to brew that particular potion were just too difficult to get. They simply couldn’t brew it until they found someplace private to do it; the problem was they were running out of options.

“Moaning Myrtle’s Bathroom?” Ron suggested, despite the fact he already knew what she was going to say.

“Same problem,” Hermione answered as they approached yet another doorway and she peered inside the deserted classroom. “And we can’t get in the Chamber of Secrets without Harry,” she reminded him.

“This is ridiculous,” Ron sighed, slumping back against the wall, not even bothering to try and hide his frustration anymore. “This castle is huge. There must be tons of secret places that no one else can find. Besides the Shrieking Shack,” he added before Hermione could propose it again.

He’d already vetoed that suggestion once, claiming that it would be too difficult. He didn’t bother telling her that it also made him uneasy. Not just because she’d have to pass under the Whomping Willow to get to the entrance every time she wanted to check on the potion or add a new ingredient, but because she’d have to cross the grounds late at night to do it. What if someone saw her from the window? What if they decided to follow her, or worse, wait for her? She could be attacked, or abducted, or dragged into the Forbidden Forest and no one would even realize she was missing until morning.

There was no way in hell he was going to let that happen. The Shrieking Shack was out. Period. End of discussion. Of course Hermione didn’t exactly realize that yet. She didn’t take kindly to having her ideas shot down and Ron knew that she’d continue to argue her point if he couldn’t come up with a better suggestion.

“I never thought I’d say this,” he sighed while running the fingers of one hand through his hair in aggravation, “but I wish Fred and George were here. Bet they know loads of places we could use. I could write them,” he suggested, perking up a bit, “and ask. I’ll just tell them that we need a private place to snog. Somewhere no one else can find us, because we’re Prefects and all. They’ll take the mickey out on me something fierce, but I bet they’d help. Yeah,” he said, brightening even further. “I bet they’d love it actually. It’s perfect. They get to corrupt two ickle Prefects and help them to break the rules and we get a private place to snog.”

“Brew the potion,” Hermione corrected him.
“That too,” Ron agreed. “The point is it’ll be a place that only we know about. I’ll write them as soon as we get back to the common room.”

“What about Harry?”

“What about him?” Ron asked, failing to see what the problem could be. “It’s not like he reads my letters or anything, but I can wait until he goes to sleep if you’re worried.”

“No, that isn’t what I meant,” Hermione attempted to clarify. “It’s just that...he has that map. If he looks at it and sees the two of us alone together, especially in a place he doesn’t know about himself, he’ll be more than suspicious. He’ll furious, Ron. I think we should tell him.”

“About the potion?” he asked, dropping his voice to a hushed whisper. “What about his Occlumency? I thought you wanted to wait until he was better with it because--”

“No, about us.”

“You saw the way he reacted when you told me why we got detention,” Ron stated, looking at her as if he thought she might be slightly unhinged. “He tried to pretend that it didn’t bother him, but we both saw the look on his face when he made that comment about it being just the two of us. He didn’t just feel left out,” Ron reminded her, “he was angry about it, only he directed it at Snape instead of us.”

“If we don’t tell him, he’ll figure it out on his own,” Hermione argued, “and then he’ll have even more reason to be angry.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“He’s already getting suspicious,” Hermione insisted.

“Did he say something to you?”

“No,” she replied. “To Ginny. He’s been asking her about us. Why we stopped fighting over the summer and stuff like that. She’s been covering for us, but it’s not fair to put her in the middle. And it isn’t going to work. He knows something is different, he just hasn’t figured out what it is yet. It’s only going to get worse. He’s bound to figure it out eventually. We have to tell him.”

“No we don’t,” Ron replied with a surprising amount of confidence. “I’ve been thinking about it. No wait,” he said when Hermione looked like she was about to object. “Just hear me out. I really think this might work.”

“All right,” she sighed, crossing her arms in front of her chest and looking at him skeptically.

“What’s this brilliant plan of yours?”

“Well,” Ron began, pulling away from the wall and standing upright again, “I’m sure Harry knows that I fancy you.”

Him and everyone else that sleeps in my dorm, he thought silently.

“And if he doesn’t, he suspects. So I was thinking, what if I stopped trying to hide it. You know, stare at you and stuff when we’re in class? Like I did before, only make it obvious on purpose. Even if he doesn’t notice it, Seamus will and he’ll bring it up, believe me.”

“And I’m supposed to just sit there while you moon over me and pretend I don’t notice?” Hermione questioned.
“You can notice,” Ron shot back. “And you’re missing my point.”

“Which is?”

“If Harry doesn’t bring it up, Seamus or Neville will. Hell, you can bring it up if you want. Just ask Harry what’s the matter with me when I’m not around.”

“And you’ll just admit it?”

“Not right away,” Ron replied. “And not in front of anyone else. I’ll admit it later when it’s just me and Harry. I can ask him what he thinks I ought to do and he can’t be angry if we get together after that, because it will be his idea or at least he’ll think that it was.”

“And what happens when he finds out that it wasn’t? He’ll know that we tricked him on purpose. He’ll feel like we deceived him and he’ll be right. He’ll have a legitimate reason to be angry with us then.”

“I didn’t think about it like that,” Ron admitted. “I was just trying to--”

“Make it easier for him,” Hermione finished.

“Yeah.”

“I think the truth would be easier,” she replied, “For all of us. I’ll tell him if you want me to. You don’t even have to be there.”

“I’m not going to let you face that alone,” Ron retorted. “Besides, it’s me he’s going to be angry at, not you.”

“Why you?”

“Because I’m the bloke.”

“What’s that got to do with anything? We’re both keeping it from him.”

“Have you ever seen me go off on Ginny for going on a date?” Ron asked. “No,” he replied before Hermione had a chance to answer. “I might fuss a bit and question her. I might even flat out tell her I don’t trust the guy, but I’m not going to shout at her about it. What’s the point? She’s going to do what she wants regardless of what I think. I might not be able to intimidate her, but I can intimidate the hell out of the guy she’s dating.”

“You shouted at me,” Hermione pointed out.

“That was different,” Ron informed her. “And I still say Krum was trying to take advantage of you.”

“Oh for Heaven’s sake,” she sighed, rolling her eyes at the ceiling. “He was a perfect gentleman.”

“See, that just proves my point,” he retorted. “You don’t see it and neither does Ginny. Just because a bloke keeps his hands to himself when other people are around, doesn’t mean he isn’t thinking about taking advantage of you. Just because he acts like a gentleman, that doesn’t mean he won’t take liberties if he gets the slightest bit of encouragement.”

“You haven’t.”

“Yes I have,” Ron admitted. “I’ve pressured you. Merlin knows I try not to, but sometimes I just can’t help it. I’m a randy dog just like every other bloke in this school. The only difference is I know
my intentions are honorable, so it’s okay. But just because I haven’t shoved you in one of these empty classrooms and attacked you yet, doesn’t mean I haven’t been thinking about it ALL NIGHT or that I wasn’t planning on doing it as soon as we finished our rounds, because I was. I still am as a matter of fact,” he admitted without the slightest bit of shame, “because I’m a lecherous prat and Harry knows it.”

“And it doesn’t matter that I told you what I was planning,” Ron continued quickly, for fear Hermione would try and butt in. “Because I wasn’t trying to be noble or warn you as some roundabout way of asking your permission. I wouldn’t have told you at all except I wanted you to see what I’m talking about. We’ve been alone together for over an hour and I haven’t tried to touch you once. Not because we’re Prefects and we have a job to do or any of that other rubbish, but because I knew you wouldn’t let me. I knew my chances were better if I waited, so that’s what I’ve been doing; biding my time and waiting for the right moment. You might think I was acting like a ‘perfect gentleman’ but I wasn’t and I’m not. None of us are. We’re all randy dogs. Some are just worse than others.”

Like me, Ron thought, trying to push down the guilt building deep within the pit of his stomach. I rank right up there at the top with those slimy Slytherin bastards. Not only haven’t I told you we’ll essentially be married if we drink that potion of yours, I went and nicked that talisman from Grimmauld Place because I didn’t want to wait a month for you to brew it. I’m despicable.

“If some other bloke tried to do the things that I’ve done—” he continued, “I’d bloody well kill him. Hell, I’d beat him senseless for even considering it. I don’t want anyone thinking things like that about you or my sister and neither does Harry. It won’t matter that it’s me or that my intentions are good. I’m still a randy bugger and Harry knows it.”

“Are you trying to tell me that I shouldn’t trust you?” Hermione asked, “Because I do.”

“Sometimes you’re a little too trusting,” Ron replied. “Just because you’re a good person doesn’t mean everyone else is.”

“You are,” she said, looking him dead in the eye as she stepped forward and reached for his hand. No, I’m not, he thought, shifting his eyes to the ground as he attempted to stomp down the shame welling up within him.

“You are,” Hermione insisted, placing her fingers under his chin and lifting his face up until he was looking at her again. “And you haven’t tried to take advantage of me,” she informed him. “Not once. You haven’t done anything that I haven’t wanted you to do. If anything, you’re the one that stops us when we get carried away.”

“I love you, Hermione,” Ron said, with a somber expression that instantly put her on edge. “I need you to know that. The things I do...” even the things you won’t like. I’m doing them for you. “I just want to... take care of you.”

“You do,” she replied, more than a little confused by his sudden change of mood. “You always have.”

“And I always will,” Ron assured her. “I’ll spend the rest of my life taking care of you if you’ll let me. You might not always like the way I go about doing it, but you have to know that I’d never intentionally hurt you.”

“Is that what this is about?” she asked, looking at him with mounting concerned. “It doesn’t matter how angry Harry gets. He isn’t going to think that about you. He knows as well as I do that you’d
never do anything to hurt me.”

You’re wrong, he thought miserably. *Stand up blokes don’t go around binding girls to them. They don’t force them into marriage, although it’s more like tricking you into it than forcing you, not that it really matters. It’s still a low down, dirty thing to do. It’s vile and underhanded and I know it, but I’m going to do it anyway. Harry’ll bloody kill me when he finds out, if you or my mum doesn’t beat him to the punch. It won’t matter why I did it. All that will matter is that I did do it. I’ll deserve every harsh word and every ounce of pain he inflicts.*

“I just... I...” Ron stammered, “I don’t want...” *anyone else to hurt you “...to lose you.”

“You won’t,” Hermione replied, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him into a hug.

Ron looked so despondent it actually tore at her heart. It didn’t matter that they were on Prefect rounds or that they were standing in the middle of a corridor where anyone could see them. It no longer mattered that she didn’t understand why he was upset. All that mattered was that he was in pain and at that moment all she wanted to do was wrap her arms around him and make that pain go away.

“Promise?” he whispered, pulling her closer and burying his face in her bushy hair.

“I promise,” Hermione answered, listening to the rapid tempo his heart set as it pounded against his chest. “I love you too,” she said, pulling away from him just long enough to come up on her toes and pressing her lips to his. It was the only thing she could think to do that would make him feel better and show him how much he meant to her at the same time.

She had intended the kiss to be gentle and loving, but it quickly became something else entirely. Hermione’s lips had barely brushed against his when Ron took her face in both hands and kissed her back so forcefully, her knees nearly buckled. There was nothing sweet or tender about it. It was hot and deep and all consuming. Before she even had time to register what was happening, Hermione found herself pinned against the wall by Ron’s body as he crushed himself against her.

It wasn’t just passion or lust that was fueling him now, there was desperation as well. A kind of desperation she hadn’t experienced since the night she apparated into Ron’s bedroom and they shared their first kiss. She’d spent the entire day before that convinced that she’d never see him again; that she’d never get the chance to tell him how much he meant to her. Once they were face to face; once she had her arms wrapped around him, she’d been afraid he’d vanish if she let go. That was the way he was kissing her now, as if he were afraid she’d disappear the instant he pulled away and opened his eyes.

Fortunately for Ron, Hermione had no intentions of abandoning him and she was only too happy to meet his hungry kisses with her own, even if they were standing in the middle of the corridor. It wasn’t just about what he needed anymore, but about what she needed as well. She wanted to devour him whole right where he stood and nothing and no one was going to get in her way.

Except herself that is. Because for some odd reason she kept imagining what they must look like grunting and groaning as they pushed and pawed at one another trying to work their hands underneath each others clothes. Anyone that was unfortunately enough to stumble upon them would likely be stunned speechless. And that was what finally did it; the mental picture of Filch standing there with his mouth open in shock, gaping a pair of Prefects who were trying to undress each other in the hallway.

I’ll have to modify his memory, Hermione thought an instant before she started to giggle.
She could have kicked herself for it afterwards, because it caught Ron off guard and he pulled away to look at her, which seemed to break the spell that had been cast over them.

“What?” he asked while looking down at his left hand, which had ended up crammed in the gap that had been created when one of the central buttons on her shirt had come undone. “Sorry,” he muttered, his cheeks flushing a bit as he attempted to jerk it free.

“If we’d caught someone else doing what we were just doing,” Hermione chuckled, “they’d be receiving detention right about now.”

“Yeah well, it’s not someone else, is it?” Ron asked, relieved to see she was smiling. “And as luck would have it, you can’t give yourself detention.”

“I can give you one,” she retorted with a smirk, playfully squeezed his bum when she realized her right hand was still resting there.

“You’re the one still feeling me up,” he shot back with one of his enticing lopsided smiles.

“Yes,” Hermione sighed, intentionally biting her lower lip because she knew it would tempt him. “I suppose that is a bit naughty, isn’t it?” she asked, giving him another squeeze before removing her hand. “I guess we’ll just have to punish each other.”

“Bloody Hell, Hermione,” Ron groaned, his eyes going wide with astonishment. “Are you purposely trying to kill me? Wait,” he added as a new thought occurred to him. “That’s not my punishment is it? Because it would be cruel to tease me like that. Can’t I just do lines or something?” he leaned forward and whispered into her ear. “I’ll have them to you first thing in the morning,” he promised just before his lips brushed against the sensitive area on her neck. “I will not snog my girlfriend while on rounds,” he whispered before pushing her hair aside and blazing a trail of light kisses down her neck. “I will not snog my girlfriend while on rounds.”

“Is that what I am?” Hermione asked, quivering when she felt his tongue slide over her tingling flesh. “Your girlfriend?”

“No,” Ron replied, pulling away from her and looking at her very seriously. “You’re much more than that. You’re the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning. That last thing I think about at night when I fall asleep. The one I want to spend my time with in between. You’re my heart. And soon you’ll be my soul and I’ll be yours. For as long as you will have me, anyway.”

“Oh Ron,” Hermione sighed before throwing herself against him and crushing her lips to his.

“Does this mean that you’ll have me?” he asked, when they were forced to surface for air.

“You better believe it does,” Hermione replied just before she launched herself at him again.

“What about our rounds?” he asked, albeit very reluctantly.

“We’re finished with our rounds,” she informed him, taking his hand and pulling him towards the nearest classroom.

“What about the ground floor?”

“Forget the ground floor,” she replied, shoving him into the room they took their Charms classes in and kicking the door shut behind them.

“Merlin, I love you,” Ron groaned as he watched Hermione whip her wand out and use it to
Imperturb the doorway so they wouldn’t be interrupted.

“That’s good,” she said playfully, shoving her wand back in her pocket before removing her robes. “I’d guess we have about 40 minutes or so before Harry starts wondering what happened to us. Think you can show me how much you love me in that amount of time?”

“Most definitely,” Ron replied with a smirk as he tore his own robes off and threw them at the nearest chair. “Maybe even twice,” he added, removing his tie.

“A bit ambitious, aren’t we?” Hermione teased as she leaned back against one of the desks. “I like that. That kind of thinking should be rewarded. So why don’t you come over here,” she said while beckoning him forward with the tip of her index finger, “and claim your prize?”

“If you don’t stop smiling like that,” Hermione warned Ron as they walked hand in hand back up to Gryffindor tower a short time later, “Harry is going to know something is up. No one enjoys Prefect rounds that much.”

“I can’t help it,” Ron replied as they reached the top of the staircase and started down the corridor that would lead them to the Fat Lady’s portrait. “That was bloody brilliant. I think we should do that every Thursday night.”

“Er... not just that,” he amended, his ears turning a bright shade of red when he realized that he’d just suggested she go down on him on a weekly basis. “I mean, it was...er... really great... brilliant even, but you ...ah... don’t have to do it again if you don’t want to. I mean... I really, really, really enjoyed it,” he continued to ramble.

Understatement of the century there, Weasley.

“Obviously. But...uh... well, you don’t have to do it again... if you think it’s disgusting or something. Aw hell,” Ron muttered when Hermione turned her head so he couldn’t see her laugh. “I should probably just say thanks and shut up, right?”

“That might be a good idea,” Hermione replied with a chuckle. “It’s rather flattering though. Knowing that I can turn you into a blithering idiot.”

“Shut up,” Ron moaned, his blush becoming even more pronounced, if that were possible. “I am not blithering. So... uh... did you think it was disgusting?”

This time it was Hermione’s turn to blush.

“Um... not exactly,” she replied, caught off guard and unsure how to respond. “No, disgusting isn’t the term I’d use.”

“And what term would you use?”

“I can think of several actually.”

“What’s the first one that springs to mind?”

“Interesting,” Hermione lied.

The first word that sprang to mind was hot, she just wasn’t sure if she ought to admit that. It seemed like something a scarlet woman would say and frankly the whole experience had taken her a by
surprise. She’d expected him to enjoy it, but she never thought that she would. Not in that way. True, it had been awkward at first and she’d been worried that she’d do it wrong, despite the fact she’d read all about the proper technique. But the books hadn’t warned her that she’d become that aroused herself. They hadn’t mentioned how reducing your boyfriend to a quivering mass could stimulate your own body as well. A few throaty groans and her anxiety had been all but forgotten; replaced by a desire to do whatever it took to elicit more of those sexy sounds. Yes, it had been hot. Hot and intoxicating and weird and a little scary, all at the same time, but interesting seems as good a word as any to describe it.

“Interesting?” Ron said, regarding her attentively while attempting to interpret her response. “In a good way or a bad way?” he finally asked.

“In a good way,” Hermione replied, her cheeks flushing again. Definitely a good way.

“Oh,” he said, dropping his eyes down to the ground for some unknown reason. “Um... well that’s good then. So about next Thursday?”

“RON!” Hermione cried, smacking him on the arm. “We are not going to skive off our rounds and mess around EVERY Thursday night.”

“Every other Thursday?” he asked hopefully while shooting her his best version of puppy dog eyes. “One Thursday a month?” he continued when she didn’t reply straight away. “Oh come on,” Ron cried when she released his hand and stalked off towards the portrait hole without him. “You’ve got to give me at least one Thursday a month,” he said, catching up to her quickly. “They’re the only nights we have to be completely alone together. I’ll work like a dog the other three, I promise. I’ll be a model Prefect; give detentions and everything. Just one Thursday a month. You know that you want to.”

“No, I don’t,” Hermione informed him as they came to a halt in front of the fat lady.

“Password.”

“I want to give you every Thursday night,” she admitted quickly, ignoring the Fat Lady who looked slightly put out when she got no response to her request, “but I can’t. I have a job to do. We both do. And like it or not, we have to do it.”

“Hermione,” Ron whined. “You’re killing me here.”

“We have a job to do,” Hermione reiterated, “and we are going to do it. Of course that doesn’t mean we can’t find other ways to occupy ourselves if we finish early,” she added with a coy smile. “If you can figure out a way to make that happen, that is.”

“Ton-Tongue Toffee” she said, giving the Fat lady the password before he had a chance to reply. The instant the portrait swung open, she pushed through the opening, leaving Ron standing alone in the hallway, trying to sort out the best way to accomplish that task.

Hermione of course already knew the answer. They needed to borrow the Marauder’s Map on Thursday nights. Not only would it show them who was out after curfew and where they were hiding, having it in their possession would prevent Harry from discovering what they were up to accidentally, should they decide to do a little hiding of their own. It would probably take Ron a while to figure that out on his own, but he’d get there eventually and until then, it would keep his mind occupied and ensure that Harry didn’t catch him grinning about his Prefect rounds like a daft fool.
“OH! Those two...” Hermione shouted angrily as she stormed into the 5th year girls' dormitory, slammed the door shut, and locked it behind her.

“What has my idiot of a brother done now?” Ginny asked nonchalantly.

“Not them,” Hermione hissed, scanning the room quickly to make sure they were completely alone. Fortunately it was a Saturday evening and all of Ginny’s roommates were down in the Common Room. “Parvati and Lavender... do you know what they... they’re... OH!!! They have some nerve!”

“Calm down,” Ginny replied, trying to make sense of her friend’s rant. “You aren’t making any sense. What exactly did they do? They’re not still pestering you about your hair are they?”

“Ron and Harry insisted on playing exploding snaps, despite the fact I was trying to finish my DADA essay, so I came upstairs to work,” Hermione explained as she paced back and forth in front of Ginny’s bed. “Only when I got to my room I found Lavender and Parvati with their heads together, talking in hushed voices and giggling.”

“Nothing new there,” Ginny cut in, causing Hermione to stop pacing and scowl.

“No, that isn’t anything new,” the bushy haired girl agreed irritably. “The new part was that they stopped doing it when I entered the room. At first I thought they were talking about me, but it turns out it was--”

“Harry,” Ginny finished the sentence for her.

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“You’d have to be blind to not notice the looks Parvati has been giving him since we got back.”

“What looks? I haven’t noticed any looks.”

“Well, you’re a bit preoccupied with my git of a brother at the moment,” Ginny retorted, laughing when Hermione’s cheeks flushed. “Okay, so they were.... talking about Harry,” she continued, trying not to let on that she found that news unsettling.

You’re over him, remember? Now focus on Hermione’s problem.

“And that bothered you?”

“No,” Hermione admitted. “And I told them as much as soon as I realized who they were giggling about. I mean honestly, I must have told them a hundred times that Harry and I are just friends. Only for some reason this time when I said it they perked up and acted as if they believed me.”

“That’s because they wanted it to be true this time,” Ginny sighed. “Go on. What happened next?”

“Well you know how they are,” Hermione answered. “They both started talking at the same time and it took me a minute to figure out what they were so excited about. It didn’t really sink in until Lavender mentioned something about me being their best friend and how if anyone knew what they looked for in girls it would be me. And then she started rattling on about how much fun it would be... ‘best friends dating best friends’,“ Hermione growled, forcing herself to say the last few words.

“She didn’t?” Ginny cried, trying hard not to laugh.

“Oh, but she did.”

“Lavender is interested in Ron?”
“That complete and utter cow!” Hermione cried furiously.

“What did you say?” Ginny asked, unable to keep herself from laughing this time.

“Nothing,” her angry friend admitted, her face becoming even redder. “I just stood there gapping at them in horror.”

“Why didn’t you just tell them that Ron already has a girlfriend?”

“ARE YOU INSANE?” Hermione shrieked. “I can’t do that. They’d want to know who and even if I refused to tell them there would be rumors about who it might be flying all over school by morning and then Harry would find out and it would be a nightmare. DAMN IT! I told Ron that we couldn’t go on like this. I told him we had to tell Harry. I HATE THIS!”

“All right, I see your point,” Ginny said, holding her hands out in front of herself in a vain attempt to calm Hermione down.

“Ginny!” Hermione yelped. “What am I supposed to do? If she asks me about him again I’m liable to whip my wand out and curse her right where she stands.”

“You can always volunteer to partner up with her in your next DADA lesson. Then you can curse her to your heart’s content.”

“GINNY!” Hermione moaned miserably.

“Oh, all right. What about this then? If she asks you about him again, just tell her the truth,” the young redhead suggested. “That she could dance naked through the Common Room and Ron wouldn’t notice her. All right, he’d notice,” she conceded, when her friend’s smoldering brown eyes narrowed and shot her a skeptical look, “but he still wouldn’t ask her out. I’m sure a few of the other blokes would though. In which case, she’d be out of your hair.”

“Not unless they happen to have an available best friend for Parvati,” Hermione jeered. “Best friends dating best friends, remember?” she added, looking as if she wanted to retch.

“That sounds like a plan to me,” Ginny muttered. “They’ll just have to find themselves another set of best friends. The set they’re after is spoken for.”

“Oh really?” Hermione asked, arching an eyebrow and studying her friend closely. “Something you’d like to tell me, Gin?”

“No,” the young redhead replied rapidly, her cheeks flushing a bright pink. “I just meant your half, that’s all.”

“Um hum,” Hermione agreed, using a tone that made it obvious that she didn’t buy a word of what Ginny was saying. “And I suppose that’s the reason your face currently matches your hair.”

“Shut up,” Ginny groaned in mortification.

“Harry is a daft git when it comes to girls Ginny, so you’ll have to be patient with him,” Hermione said as she plopped down on the bed beside her friend. “He’s almost as clueless as your brother. Truly. I’m not exaggerating. You’ve got your work cut out for you, but I’d much rather help you than Parvati.

At least you won’t parade him around and show him off like some grand prize you’ve just won.
“She doesn’t stand a chance against the two of us,” Hermione insisted. “Only when the actual fighting does start, Lavender is mine.”

“I can see it now,” Ginny chuckled. “Lavender with the word ‘slag’ written across her forehead in spots.”

“I wouldn’t do anything that drastic,” Hermione protested.

“Hermione? Are you in there?” a soft voice asked just before there was a knock on the door. “If you are you ought to know that Ron has been shouting up the stairs trying to get your attention for the past ten minutes. Something about you making him late for detention.”

Hermione muttered something unintelligible under her breath before turning away from the door and looking at Ginny apologetically. “I completely forgot,” she said with a sigh.

“You can plot your revenge later,” Ginny said quietly. “You better go or he’s liable to try and come up and get you.”

“He’s already tried that once,” Hermione reminded her friend as she rose up off the bed and crossed the room to the door. “He’s not thick enough to try it again.”

“Oh please,” Ginny laughed as Hermione threw the door open and came face to face with Parvati. “Of course he’s thick enough.”

“Thanks,” Hermione said, barely even looking at Parvati as she moved into the hallway and made for the staircase leading down the to common room.

“No problem,” Parvati answered.

“If you don’t mind,” Ginny said politely, grabbing the book she’d been reading before Hermione barged in up off her bed and looking at it instead of Parvati. “Could you shut that door. I need to have this entire book finished by Wednesday,” she added.

“Right,” Parvati said, giving Ginny a sympathetic smile as she shut the door. Having just completed fifth year herself, Parvati knew what a struggle it was, particularly at the end. But this was the first week of school, for Merlin’s sake. It seemed a bit extreme to expect anyone to read an entire textbook in five days. “Thank Merlin, I didn’t take whatever course she’s taking.”

“I’m going to give her five more minutes,” Hermione heard Ron’s voice echo up the stone staircase as she approached it. “And then I’m going to get my broom and fly up there and find her myself.”

Hermione froze the instant she heard Lavender Brown speak, “I’m sure she’ll be down in a minute. Why don’t we come sit on the sofa and I’ll keep you company while you wait?”

“HER-MI-OOOOO-NEEEEEE!” Ron bellowed up the stairwell impatiently.

Oh no you won’t, Hermione thought, inching her way to the staircase and leaning around the corner just enough so she could glare down and see what Lavender was doing.

“I still can’t believe you got all those detentions,” she heard Lavender say as she positioned herself on the second stair so Ron would be forced to look at her, as she was blocking his view of the stairwell. “And on Saturday nights too. It’s just not fair. I heard Malfoy gloating about it this morning in the Great Hall. Is it true you almost lost your Prefect badge?” Lavender asked, reaching over and touching the red and gold pin attached to his jumper.
“No,” Ron replied brusquely, reaching up and brushing her hand away before looking down at his watch. “HER-MIIII-OOOO--” he started to shout, but stopped the instant she stepped around the corner and came into view. “It’s about bloody time you show up. We’re going to be late,” he said as she quickly descended the stairs.

“Not if we hurry,” Hermione replied, latching onto his arm and hauling him away from Lavender the instant she hit the common room. “We’ll have to run though.”

“We’ve got three minutes to make it to the second level,” Ron shot back as he followed her out of the portrait hole. “Just remember whose fault it is when McGonagall starts lecturing us.”

“IMPERIO!”

It happened so fast, Ron didn’t even have time to react. One second he’d been following Hermione into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and the next thing he knew, the door sprung shut of its own accord, a distinctly male voice shouted out a forbidden spell, and the Unforgivable Curse hit Hermione square in the chest. He didn’t even have time to try and jerk her out of the way. By the time Ron actually registered what the word meant, it was already too late.

Not sure what was going on, he did the first thing that popped into his head, he grabbed Hermione by the arm, threw her back against the locked door, and positioning himself between her and their attacker as he pulled his own wand. Unfortunately for Ron, their assailant wasn’t working alone.

“Expelliarimus!” a female voice cried from the other side of the room the instant Ron’s wand left his pocket.

“Tut, tut,” Tonks scolded as she emerged from the shadows on his left holding his wand in her hand. “I think someone needs to practice his Shield Charms a bit more,” she added, brandishing Ron’s wand in the air before shoving it into her back pocket.

“What the hell is--” Ron started to shout, only to find the rest of his rant cut off.

“Silencio,” Mad-Eye Moody said casually as he appeared on Ron’s right.

Unable to speak, all Ron could do was narrow his eyes and glare at the gnarled ex-Auror that was holding him at wand point.

“What the hell is going on, he thought, trying to make sense of the situation.

You’re locked in a room with two Aurors who have just attacked you, that’s what, he answered himself. But why?

Maybe it’s not really them. Maybe they’re Death Eaters in Polyjuice disguises. This is bad. REALLY, REALLY bad.

“I’ll take your wand now, Granger,” Moody said, holding his free hand out in front of himself for her to set it in.

No, Ron cried internally when he felt her stir behind him. You can’t.

The instant she came around from behind him and tried to walk past, Ron wrapped both arms around her shoulders and physically restrained her. He couldn’t let her relinquish her wand to Moody. He had to get it away from her himself. That wand was the only chance they had.
“Now wait just a minute,” Tonks said to Moody while shielding the room with a wave of her wand. “We’ve barely even started and you’re already trying to change the rules. No one will hear anything now.”

“Fine,” Moody growled, bringing his arm up and pointing his wand at the two Gryffindors.

Oh shit, Ron thought, pulling Hermione, who was still struggling to get loose, up off the floor and spin around so they were both facing the door. He tried to brace himself for whatever curse Moody was about to hit him with, but he still wasn’t prepared for what happened.

“Finite Incantatum.”

Ron felt the spell hit him right between the shoulder blades before the words and their meaning actually sank in. “What the hell?” he muttered, now more confused than ever.

“Satisfied?” Mad-Eye asked Tonks, who nodded her head. “Now then, Granger. Why don’t you give me your wand?”

“NO!” Ron shouted as Hermione continued to fight him, trying to break free so she could comply with Moody’s demand.

“GIVE IT TO ME!” Moody barked. “NOW!”

“No, Hermione,” Ron pleaded when she momentarily slipped free and tried to approach Moody again. She made it all of two steps before Ron latched onto her arm and yanked her back against him.

“Let go,” Tonks ordered, pointing her wand at Ron.

He barely had time to glare at her and think, Go to hell, before her wand jumped to Hermione. A flick of Tonks’ wrist was all it took. Ron had no idea what she’d done, but the electric charge that surged from Hermione’s arm into his hands forced him to release her.

“This one has a problem following directions,” Tonks said, pointing at Ron with her wand as she addressed Moody. “I think you should have her curse him now,” she added casually.

Her who? Ron thought, his blue eyes going wide as he felt the panic he’d been trying to stomp down claw its way up his stomach. The only female Death Eater he knew of that was currently at large was Bellatrix Lestrange. But they couldn’t be talking about her. It had to be someone else. It couldn’t be Tonks, or whoever that was pretending to be Tonks, because she was the one that made the comment in the first place. The only other ‘her’ in the room was... Hermione.

“You can’t,” Ron said, without even really realizing it. “She won’t.”

The hell she won’t, a little voice shouted inside Ron’s head. She’s under their control, remember. Bugger! I can’t fight Hermione. Not like this. She doesn’t even know what she’s doing. But you can’t just stand here and let her curse you either. SHIT!

“Not yet,” Moody replied, both of his eyes glued on Ron, scrutinizing his every move. “I want to see how this little game plays out first. Now then, Granger,” he snarled, his magical eye spinning in its socket before focusing on Hermione once more. “Give me your wand.”

“DON’T DO IT!” Ron shouted in horror as he watched Hermione reach inside her robes and pull out her wand. “Hermione, you can’t.”
“HAND IT OVER, GRANGER!”

“NO!” Ron cried, lunging forward and grabbing her shoulder.

“Locomotor Mortis,” Tonks said, pointing her wand at Ron’s legs, which instantly snapped together. If he hadn’t been holding onto Hermione’s shoulder when the Leg Locker Curse hit, he would have fallen flat on his face. As it was, he swayed a good deal, and he had to flail his arms a bit, but he managed to stay upright.

“Trying to hold her back isn’t going to help her,” Tonks explained to Ron. “If I were you, I’d keep trying to reach her here,” she added, tapping her forehead with her own wand.

“You are in serious need of some wand safety lessons, missy,” Mad-Eye Moody shouted, his magical eye whirling around in its socket again.

“Spare me the lecture, will ya?” Tonks retorted. “I still have both my buttocks and my head, thank you very much.”

This can’t be for real, Ron thought, gaping at the pair of Aurors in front of him in disbelief. It’s a nightmare. It has to be. I fell asleep in the common room waiting for Hermione and this is all just a bad dream. Just wake up. Wake up.

“I’m getting tired of waiting, Granger,” Moody snarled. “You have about five seconds to hand that wand over before I get really angry.”

“HERMIONE! NO!” Ron shouted, unable to keep the panic out of his voice when he saw her hold her wand out for Moody to take. “Don’t give it to him. Give it to me.”

“Atta girl,” Tonks muttered under her breath as she noticed Hermione’s fist tightened around her wand.

“GIVE IT TO ME!” Moody’s voice boomed.

“NO!” Ron shrieked, so focused on trying to stop her that he failed to notice her arm was starting to shake.

“What’s that?” Moody asked with a smirk. “You trying ta tell me something, Granger?”

“No,” Hermione said weakly as her eyes started to clear.

“Excellent,” Moody said with a broad smile that made Ron’s blood run cold. “Hope you were paying attention Weasley, because you’re next.”

“Next for what?” Hermione asked, glancing at Mad-Eye and then focusing on Tonks who still had her wand pointed at Ron. “What’s going on here?” she inquired, taking two steps backwards and raising her wand into a defensive position as she collided with Ron.

The two adults glanced at one another, but neither of them responded, which was answer enough.

“PROTEGO!” Hermione shouted, throwing a Shield Charm up the instant she saw Tonks move. It wasn’t until the spell hit the invisible barrier and had been deflected that Hermione realized it hadn’t been a curse at all.

“Will someone please tell me what is going on here,” she said, now more confused then ever. Tonks had been trying to lift the Leg Locker Curse off Ron. The question was who had cursed him to begin
“You could hear him, couldn’t you?” Tonks asked, lowering her wand slightly. “When Mad-Eye was asking for your wand. You could hear Ron?”

“What?” Hermione thought out loud. None of this made any sense and yet at the same time, it did.

Someone had asked for her wand and she had wanted to give it to them. She’d tried to do it, but she hadn’t been able to. Someone else had held her back. And Tonks was right, there had been another voice; a voice that had cut through the fog in her mind like a knife. But it hadn’t been the voice itself or the familiarity of it that drew her attention. It was the tone. It was the panic and desperation that made her stop and listen. She’d wanted to do as the first voice commanded, but not if it was going to hurt someone else. That’s when she started to question herself. That’s when she started to fight her own desire to do as ordered. Tonks was right, she had heard him. The other voice had belonged to Ron. His voice had been the lifeline she’d used to draw herself out. But out of what?

“Careful,” Moody warned, both of his eyes trained on the pair of Gryffindors as he spoke.

“Right,” Tonks agreed following Moody’s lead and lowering her wand completely. She was getting ahead of herself. Bill had warned them that Hermione had been reading up on some rather dodgy spells over the summer. This was no time to get lackadaisical. If Hermione felt her back was to the wall there as no telling what she might throw at them. It would be better to explain first and ask questions second.

“I suppose you’ll be wanting an explanation now,” Mad-Eye said, leaning back against Tonks’s desk and managing to look extremely put out by the prospect of talking.

“You bloody well better believe I do,” Ron snapped.

“All right,” Tonks said, setting her own wand down on one of the student desks, then slowly drawing Ron’s out of her pocket, and motioning toward him with her empty hand. “I’m just going to toss this one back to him,” she said to Hermione as she held Ron’s wand up in the air for them both to see. “He can lift the jinx himself.”

“What happened?” Hermione asked, eyeing the two adults apprehensively as Ron snatched his wand out of the air. “Who did that to you?”

“You wanna know what happened?” Ron snarled after he had lifted the curse holding his legs together. “I’LL TELL YOU WHAT BLOODY HAPPENED! HE FUCKING CURSED YOU!” he roared, pointing at Moody in outrage. “BLINDSIDED YOU WITH A BLOODY UNFORGIVABLE AS SOON AS YOU WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR!”

“The Imperious Curse?” Hermione asked.

That explains the eerie calm feeling and why I was so willing to give up my wand. Mind control. I should have realized.

“What the hell was that?” Ron bellowed at the top of his lungs, ignoring Hermione’s question entirely. “Some kind of warped lesson on the value of constant vigilance?”

“If we had been Death Eaters you two would be dead,” Moody replied, seemingly unaffected by the anger being directed at him.

“We’d all be fucking dead then, wouldn’t we?” Ron growled. “Because that would mean Voldemort
and his twisted band of followers were inside the bloody castle, which would mean they’d beaten Dumbledore.”

“Not necessarily,” Moody replied evenly.

“Mad-Eye,” Tonks interrupted, “I think you’re getting a little side tracked from the lesson we are supposed to be teaching.”

“YOU CAN TAKE YOUR BLOODY LESSON AND SHOVE IT UP YOUR ARSE!”

“RON!” Hermione shrieked in horror, her deep brown eyes as wide as saucers. “Tonks is a professor.”

“Not for long,” he retorted angrily. “They used a blood Unforgivable on you.”

“But--” Hermione started to protest and then stopped short. Frankly, she didn’t really know what to say, or how she ought to feel.

On the one hand, Tonks was a teacher. Not only that, she was a member of the Order and Hermione had come to think of her as a friend. But if what Ron was saying was true, and it obviously was, then her friend and teacher had ambushed them. And after they incapacitated her, they apparently attacked Ron.

“We had to do it that way,” Tonks explained, directing her comments toward Hermione rather than the seething redhead standing beside her. “It wouldn’t have worked if you’d been warned before hand. If you’d known what we were going to do, you would have had those partitions up before you even walked through the door. A surprise attack was the only way to make sure you were completely under the influence of the spell. It was the only way to make sure you could throw off a full-blown version.”

“That’s what this is about?” Hermione asked uncertainly. “You’re going to teach us how to throw off the Imperious Curse?”

“Bet those partitions are up in full force now though, aren’t they?” Mad-Eye asked, studying the young woman standing in front of him closely. “If I hit you again, you could throw it off on your own now, couldn’t you? Wouldn’t need Weasley to pull you out of it now. I’m curious though,” he said, turning his magical eye on Ron who was still glaring at him. “How did you know that would work?”

“What you’re talking about?” Ron snarled.

“Talking to her,” Tonks clarified. “Telling her to do the opposite of what Mad-Eye was asking. Forcing her to decide which one of you she was going to listen to. That was a risky gamble. If we’d been Death Eaters we would have had to shut you up.”

“And it wouldn’t have been with a Silencing Charm,” Mad-Eye cut in.

“Of course that was bending the rules a bit,” Tonks reminded her colleague.

“And a Leg Locker curse wasn’t?” Moody muttered.

“You know as well as I do that having him physically restrain her wasn’t going to help.”

“So Weasley,” Mad-Eye asked, “why go to all that hassle? Why not simply grab her wand right out of her hand and save yourself the trouble?”
“Because I didn’t think of that,” Ron admitted, mentally slapping himself upside the head for his own stupidity.

Of course I could have taken her wand. She was so out of it she wouldn’t have even noticed. But I had to try and reason with her like a bloody idiot.

“Fortunately, your risk paid off,” Tonks stated.

“But it cost you precious time,” Moody interjected.

“Still,” Tonks argued, “it wasn’t bad for a first attempt. Especially when you consider the fact they had no idea what we were doing,” she added when Moody grunted as if he didn’t agree with her assessment.

“Well, they know now,” he replied, both of his eyes locked on Ron, “so let’s get on with it already,” he added, snatching his wand back up and pointing it at the tall redhead.

“Hold on a minute,” Tonks chimed in before Moody could unleash the curse. “This will go a lot quicker if you explain what you want him to do first.”

“I’d think that was rather obvious,” Mad-Eye scoffed. “But just so we’re clear, I wanna see you throw off the curse,” he said to Ron matter-of-factly as he aimed at his chest.

“Oh for Merlin’s sake. Is that how they taught you when you had your Auror training?”

“They know the theory,” Moody groaned with irritation. “They studied it in their fourth year.”

“There’s a difference between theory and practice and you know it,” Tonks argued. “What works for one, doesn’t necessary work for another.”

“Stop yapping at me then,” he growled, lowering his wand, “and just get it over with.”

“One of these days Mad-Eye,” Tonks threatened lightheartedly, “I’m going to hit you with a Cheering Charm, just to see what it does to your disposition.”

“I’d love to see you try.”

Dear god, Hermione thought as she watched the scene unfolding in front of her. It was like some warped magical version of a Muggle police drama with Tonks cast as the good cop and Moody as the bad cop. It was so ludicrous, it was practically laughable.

“All right Ron,” Tonks said, “I already know that you don’t have a problem questioning authority and that will work in your favor. It takes a strong will to throw the Imperious Curse off, but your entire family has got that in spades, so I know you’re up to the task. What you need to do is find a way to tune Mad-Eye out when he starts making demands. Of course that will be a lot harder than it sounds, because you’re going to want to obey him. It’s the nature of the curse after all. No one expects you to be able to do it on your own, especially on your first try. It’s something you have to build up to. We’ll start you out easy, so you can get used to how it feels, and go from there. Just do your best to tune him out.”

“Yeah, right,” Ron replied sarcastically. “I’ll just do that then.”

“Do you trust me, Weasley?” Mad-Eye asked.

“No.”
“Good,” Moody replied with a chuckle. “Do you trust her?” he asked, pointing at Hermione. “Right, then,” he continued when Ron nodded his head. “Use that. Use her to get out the same way she used you. She’s the one you trust, so she’s the one you ought to be listening to. That’s all you need for now. Ready?” he asked, bringing his wand back up and pointing it at the young man’s chest.

“Wait,” Ron cried, putting both of his arms out in front of himself. “What if I can’t?”

“Can’t isn’t an option here, Weasley. You can and will learn how to do this,” the crotchety ex-Auror insisted.

“This is something you’ve got to learn for Harry’s sake as well as your own,” Tonks explained. “You’re too close to him not to. They might try and get to him through you, so we have to make sure they can’t control you. Either of you,” she amended, her bright blue eyes falling on Hermione.

“Ready?”

“No.”

“You can do this,” Hermione said softly as she slowly backed away from him. “You’re too stubborn to be controlled. You question everything I say. It’s the same thing really,” she told him. “Instead of questioning me, question him.

“She’s right,” Tonks assured him. “All you have to do is question whatever Mad-Eye tells you to do. Once you learn how to do that, you can decide if it’s what you want to do or not. When you’ve had some practice, you’ll get to the point where you recognize the curse by the way it makes you feel and you’ll be conditioned to automatically question anything anyone tells you while in that state. Not tonight of course. Tonight just learn to recognize the sensations of the curse and try and find a way to tune Mad-Eye out.”

“IMPERIO!” Moody cried, before Ron had a chance to object again.

“Keep it simple,” Tonks sighed as she watched Ron’s face go slack.

“After the stunt he pulled on the train, he’s lucky I don’t have him strip down to his skivvies and skip through the Great Hall.”

“Except no one is supposed to know that we’re teaching them this.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sit down Weasley,” Moody demanded, causing Ron to immediately plop down on the floor. “Not there, your idiot. Stand back up and go sit in that chair over there,” he said, pointing the seat behind Tonks’s desk.

“Try talking to him,” Tonks said to Hermione as they watched Ron walk over and sit in her chair.

“What do I say?” Hermione asked.

“Stand up, Weasley,” Mad-Eye ordered.

“Tell him to sit back down,” Tonks suggested.

“Ron, can you hear me?” Hermione asked, feeling rather foolish. “If you can hear me, sit back down.”

If he did hear her, he didn’t respond. He simply stood there staring off into space with a blank expression.
“Now what?” Hermione asked.

“He didn’t give up on you,” the young Auror replied. “So try again.”

“Ron, you have to sit down,” she said, but still there was no response.

“Sit down, Weasley,” Moody barked. “You aren’t getting through to him,” he added as they watched Ron sink back down in the chair. “There is no emotion behind your requests. You might as well be a fly buzzing in his ear for all the good you’re doing. How about we try something a little more interesting,” Moody asked with a smirk. “Stand up, Weasley. See that book sitting on Tonks’s desk. Yeah the great big one. I want you to tear it apart.”

“Wait,” Hermione cried, when Ron snatched the leather bound book off the desk and flipped it open. “STOP! Ron, you can’t.”

“Sure he can,” Moody replied. “That’s it Weasley. Rip the pages out.”

“NO!” Hermione moaned as she watched him grasp several pages in his hand and wrench them from the binding. “RON, STOP IT! STOP IT RIGHT NOW!”

“What are you hesitating for?” Mad-Eye growled. “I told you to tear up that book. So do it. NOW!”

“DON’T YOU DO IT!” Hermione shrieked. “DON’T YOU DARE!”

“DO IT!” Moody’s voice thundered.

“DROP THAT BOOK RIGHT NOW!” Hermione countered.

“RIP IT!”

“DROP IT!”

“RIP! IT!”

“RONALD WEASLEY! YOU DROP THAT BOOK THIS INSTANT!”

“Well,” Moody snorted when Ron tried to grasp another hand full of pages just as Hermione shrieked at him and wound up fumbling the book and accidentally dropping it to the ground, “I suppose that’s a start. You confused him anyway. Well, Weasley?” Mad-Eye asked as he lifted the curse. “Could you hear her?”

“Huh?” Ron asked, as he felt the fog start to evaporate. “What’d I do?” he asked, turning to Hermione. “Wait. Don’t tell me if it was humiliating. I don’t want to know.”

“Did you hear her?” Tonks asked him again, gesturing towards Hermione as she did so.

“Er... I think,” Ron replied. “Towards the end there,” he said, his cheeks flushing a deep crimson. “Only...um... I sorta thought she was my...er... mum,” he reluctantly admitted. “Sorry,” he muttered, shifting his eyes away from Hermione’s red face and focusing on his trainers instead.

“You aren’t the first person I’ve heard make that comparison,” Mad-Eye sniggered. “You’re one sick puppy, you know that Weasley?”

“I think it’s sweet,” Tonks interjected.

“Bloody hell,” Ron groaned, his ears outshining his face. “You can put me back under anytime now.
I’d rather take an Unforgivable than listen to anymore of this.”

“If you insist,” Moody retorted, pointing his wand at Ron and placing him under his control once more. “What do you say Tonks? Ready to take it up a notch?”

“Yeah, all right,” she agreed, taking a deep breath and shaking her hands at her side before raising them up and holding them out in front of herself.

“Play up the mother angle,” Moody said to Hermione as he lowered his wand and glanced at Tonks to make sure she was ready. “I’m going to tell him to do something he wouldn’t normally do. Something against his nature. It’ll make it easier for him to question the command and decide not to follow it,” he explained when Hermione opened her mouth to object.

“He seems to respond better to anger than reason,” Tonks cut in, “so try and sound like you’ll be angry if he does what Mad-Eye tell him to do.”

“Somehow I don’t think she’ll have to pretend,” Moody replied with a smirk. “Oy, Weasley. I want you to attack Tonks.”

“What!” Hermione cried out in horror.

“I want you to try and hit her,” Moody continued as if she hadn’t even spoken.

“No!”

“Hit her hard,” Mad-Eye commanded. “Hard enough to knock her to the ground. And if she gets up, I want you to hit her again. Got it?”

“Yes,” Ron replied listlessly. “Hit her. Knock her down.”

“That’s right Weasley. Hit her. Do it. Now!”

“No!” Hermione shrieked, lunging forward when he started to move towards Tonks and grabbing the back of his jumper. “No, you can’t. Ron please. Don’t.”

“Don’t try and reason with him,” Tonks snapped at Hermione as she waited patiently for Ron to come at her, ready and willing to fend him off should he actually try and strike her. “Get angry. Yell at him.”

“RONALD WEASLEY!” Hermione screamed loudly. “YOU DO NOT BEAT UP ON GIRLS! YOU WERE RAISED BETTER THAN THAT! YOUR MOTHER WOULD BE APPALLED! I’M APPALLED! YOU STOP RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE AND TURN AROUND!”

“HIT HER!” Moody cried when Ron stopped walking.

“LOOK AT ME WHEN I’M TALKING TO YOU!” Hermione bellowed.

“HIT HER NOW!” Moody ordered.

“YOU! WILL! NOT!” Hermione roared. “If you so much as touch her,” she said, forcing her voice to become low and menacing. “I swear to God, you’re going to regret it.”

“Regret what?” Ron asked, reaching up and rubbing his eyes as the room came back into focus. “What did I do? Oh... wait,” he said, as Moody’s request came flooding back with shocking clarity. “Are you mad?” he asked, turning his stunned face to Tonks. “What if I had actually hit you?”
“Not a chance,” Tonks replied with a cocky grin. “If you had tried that, you would have been the one sprawled out on the floor, not me. But you didn’t, did you? You threw it off.”

“I don’t hit girls,” Ron muttered under his breath as if he were trying to affirm it to himself.

“Which is why I told you to do it,” Mad-Eye replied. “That was a definite improvement. One more go apiece and we ought to be able to call it a night. So which one of you wants to go first?”

“I’ll do it,” Ron sighed. “May as well get it over with,” he added.

“A glutton for punishment, eh?” Moody asked as he brought his wand up. “IMPERIO!”

“HEY!” Ron shouted when the spell hit Hermione instead of him.

“Let’s see if she has those partitions up, shall we?” Moody responded. “No help from you Weasley, is that clear? I wanna see if she can throw it off on her own”

“Uh huh,” Ron muttered, as he crossed his arms in front of his chest and narrowed his eyes. He’d watch for now, but if Moody asked her to do something he knew she wouldn’t like, he was going to intervene.

“Listen up, Granger. I have a few questions for you. Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I want you to tell me what Weasley was after that day on the train.”

“Which Weasley?” Hermione asked, her voice a dull monotone.

“Does it matter?” Moody replied.

“Yes.”

“What was Ron Weasley after?”

“His chess set.”

“And what was his sister after?”

“Ginny wanted to use the toilet.”

“Is that so?” he asked when Ron snorted.

“Yes.”

“You wouldn’t be lying to me, would you?”

“No.”

“Well,” Harry asked, lowering the Occlumency book Hermione had found for him in the library the instant his best friend stalked into the 6th year boy’s dormitory. “What did she have you do.”

“I’m knackered,” Ron replied, flopping face fist into his bed without even bothering to get undressed
first. “Ask me again in the morning,” he muttered, burying his face in his pillow and kicking off his shoes. “I’ll tell you anything you wanna know, but I need sleep first.”

“What about Hermione?”

“What about her?” Ron muttered, so tired he’d let his guard slip.

“Have you two been together this whole time?”

“No. Just since—”

He was about to say since July, but managed to catch himself just in time.

“Then where has she been?”

“What?” Ron asked, now completely alert.

“If Hermione wasn’t with you in detention all night, where was she?”

“She was with me in detention.”

“You just said that she wasn’t.”

“That’s because I wasn’t listening to you,” Ron shot back defensively. “I have a splitting headache and all I want to do right now is sleep it off. I’ll tell you all about my detention in the morning,” he groaned, turning on his side and burrowing even further into his pillow.

“Harry?” Ron muttered after a few moments of silence had elapsed.

“What?”

“Hermione is probably still down in the common room, if you want to talk about it now.”

“Naw, I can wait until tomorrow.”

“Ok. Night.”

“Goodnight,” Harry sighed, shaking his head and refocusing his attention on his book.
“Let me get this straight.” Ginny asked as she landed on the Quidditch pitch beside her brother and his best friend and the three of them dismounted their broom. “Hermione admitted you were after your chess set and then lied to him about me?”

“Pretty much,” Ron stated, slinging his broom over his shoulder and marching off the pitch, anxious to get back to the castle before they missed lunch entirely. They’d been out practicing most of the morning and he was famished.

Even so, he’d been reluctant to abandon his broom until the last possible moment. It had been far too long since he’d been flying and he definitely needed to bone up on his Keeper skills. Tryouts for the House teams were slated to take place the following Saturday and while he didn’t need to try out himself, he was going to have to face off against everyone that went out for the two available Chaser positions. Fortunately one of those people happened to be his sister, which meant they could help out one another. They’d already agreed to spend the next week practicing together whenever they could both find the time.

“But why?” Ginny asked.

“Because she could,” her brother chuckled.

“I’m serious, Ron,” she insisted. “Why tell the truth about you and then lie to him about me? Why not just lie about both of us?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“It was obvious that Ron was after something.” Harry chimed in. “He all but admitted it himself when Moody asked him if he needed to use the loo. So really, what would be the point? He would have known that she was lying about Ron. But he wasn’t sure when it came to you.”

“You think she was toying with him?” Ginny asked with a slight smirk.

“No. Well, maybe a little,” Harry admitted. “But I suspect it had more to do with testing herself. You know how she is,” he continued, running his fingers through his wind swept hair hoping to get it to flatten out a bit, “Moody puts her under to see whether or not she could throw the blasted thing off, only she had a plan of her own...”

“Yeah, there’s a surprise,” Ron chuckled. “Who’d ever suspect that?”

“...and she stayed under to see if she could lie and be convincingly enough to fool him. So what do you think?” Harry asked, turning to question Ron. “Do you think he would have bought it if you hadn’t started laughing?”

“I didn’t laugh,” Ron shot back defensively. “I just snorted a bit.”

“But you did give her away.”

“Not intentionally.”

“So what did she do when you ‘snorted’?” Ginny asked as they slowly made their way to back to the
castle.

“Nothing,” Ron replied. “She just stood there with that blank look on her face and lied about lying,” he continued, using a hushed tone despite the fact they were still out on the grounds and no one else was close enough to overhear them.

“What did Moody do?” Ginny pressed.

“What could he do?” Ron chortled. “He studied her face really close for a minute, then he muttered something about bloody partitions, and lifted the curse off her himself.”

“Remind me to ask her to teach me that trick.”

“You don’t need any lessons,” Ron came back quickly. “You can lie like a rug. I’ve seen you.”

“Me?” Ginny asked innocently.

“Yeah, just like that,” her brother replied, pointing at her as he did so. “She’s a right little actress, this one,” he said to Harry. “First she puts on that innocent act, then she looks all shocked, and the next thing you know she’s giving Mum some song and dance about how it wasn’t her fault, and just like that... I’m the one out de-gnoming the garden.”

“I don’t blame things on you,” Ginny replied, sounding seriously affronted. “That’s what the twins are for.”

“Taught you well, didn’t they?”

“Better than they did you, obviously. You can always tell when you’ve been up to something. It’s written all over your face. You’re just like Dad. Maybe you and Harry ought to ask Hermione for lessons.”

“Me?” Harry said, turning his stunned face to Ginny’s.

“What?” she asked, “You’re just as pathetic as he is,” she said, pointing at her brother.

“Excuse me!” Ron cried resentfully. “Maybe we just don’t want to be great dirty liars.”

“My ears don’t turn red do they?”

“HEY!” Ron yelped, covering his ears with his hands as he stared at his best friend. “Whose side are you on anyway?”

“Well, they do give you away.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Don’t you tell him to shut up,” Ginny shot back.

“He’s my friend. I’ll tell him whatever I want.”

“He’s my friend too so you’d be wise to watch what you say.”

“I’m still standing here you know?” Harry cut in, trying unsuccessfully to suppress his smile. He just couldn’t help but find their petty bickering amusing.

It was different than the rows Ron had with Hermione. There was no true venom behind their words;
they were said with humor. There wouldn’t be any hurt feelings this time. Ginny wasn’t going to storm off and refuse to speak to them. If anything, she seemed to be enjoying their little game. And it only took Harry a few moments to realize that it truly was a game.

Must be one of those sibling things.

“He was my friend first,” Ron argued.

“Big damn deal,” his sister retorted, causing Harry to laugh.

“Go get your own ruddy friends.”

“I’d rather steal yours.”

“Oh, so you admit it then? Not only are you a liar, you’re a thief as well. Won’t Mum be proud?”

“Like Dad always says, ‘what Mum doesn’t know won’t hurt her.’”

“Or you.”

“Yup. But seriously Harry,” Ginny said, becoming sober with record speed. “You ought to see if Hermione can teach you how to do that thing with the partitions. It might help you with your Occulmency.”

“How the hell do you know about that?” Ron asked, becoming serious himself and eyeing his sister suspiciously.

“Well, there’s this ingenious little gadget our brother’s invented called Extendable Ears,” she shot back sarcastically.

“So we can add spying and eavesdropping to your wrap sheet.”

“As if you don’t.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s me.”

“Well, in that case, since it is me, I reckon I’m allowed to do it as well.”

“Ginny,” Ron groaned as the three of them strode up the stairs and through the huge oak doors leading into the Entrance Hall. “Seriously, how did you find out?”

“I heard Harry telling you and Hermione about it at Grimmauld Place,” she admitted in a hushed voice.

“Wait... you... When?”

“That night at dinner, right after Snape’s visit during Christmas break. Just because you forgot I was sitting at the table,” she told to her brother, “doesn’t mean I had vanished.”

“We were whispering.”

“Yeah and I was sitting directly across from you. Did you think I wasn’t going to notice you three
“You didn’t tell anyone did you?” Ron asked as they approached the nearly deserted Gryffindor table and sat down to have their lunch.

“Of course not. What kind of idiot do you take me for? I know how to keep a secret,” Ginny said pointedly.

“Yeah, all right,” her brother relented. “I reckon you do. Just don’t nag him about it okay. He gets enough of that from Hermione.”

“Speaking of which,” Harry muttered. “We’re in for it you know? She’s not going to be happy that we spent the entire morning playing Quidditch.”

“Don’t remind me,” Ron groaned as he piled his plate full. “At least you worked on your D.A.D.A. paper last night while I was stuck in detention,” he added just before attacking a piece of chicken. “I haven’t even started it yet.”

“Hermione?” Ron said as he shoved his completed Transfigurations homework into his book, rose up off the couch, and gingerly sat down on the arm of the overstuffed chair she was curled up in.

“No,” she replied firmly, cutting him off before he could finish.

“But—”

“No!”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to ask.”

“Oh please,” Hermione sighed, not even bothering to look up from her book. “You want help with your Defense Against the Dark Arts essay.”

“No,” Ron shot back, despite the fact she was right. “I was going to ask what you were reading.”

“Oh huh.”

“I was.”

“Well, in that case, I’m reading a book.”

“I can see that. But why? You are finished with all your homework, right?”

“Yes. Unlike some people.”

“Well, since you brought it up, will you help me?”

“No.”

“Please,” he begged, rising up off her chair and kneeling on the floor in front of her.

“Absolutely not,” she replied, determined not to look at him because she knew the instant she did she’d give in.

“Come on, Mione,” Ron pleaded softly. It was late and the common room was nearly empty, but he
still didn’t want anyone, like Harry, who was working at a nearby table, to catch him using a pet name.

“Don’t you Mione me,” she whispered back sternly. “You’re the one that spent all day on your broom,” she added in an irritated tone of voice.

“We were helping Ginny,” Ron protested, sounding rather insulted. “What kind of brother would I be if I refused to help my sister?”

HA! Let’s see you get around that.

“Did she specifically ask you to help her practice?”

DAMN!

“Or was it your idea?”

“I think it was Harry’s idea actually.”

“Oh thanks,” Harry muttered under his breath as he continued to scribble on the sheet of parchment spread out on in front of him.

“Yes well, Harry was practically finished with his essay. You hadn’t even started.”

“It’s not my fault we had detention,” Ron whined. “Well, it wasn’t,” he insisted when he got no reply. “I only need a little help,” he pressed. “Just tell me what spell you used.”

“I’m not giving you any answers,” Hermione replied tersely, snapping her book shut and finally meeting his gaze. “The assignment was to write about the spell you think is most useful in a fight, not what spell I think is the most useful.”

“Just pick anything,” Harry advised from across the room. “I don’t think there is a right or wrong answer as long as you explain why you feel it is effective.”

“What spell did you choose?” Ron asked Harry, rising up off the ground, only to throw himself back on the couch.

“Here,” Harry said, swiping the parchment he’d just been writing on off the table, leaning back in his chair, and holding his essay out in the air for Ron to take. “I’m finished. You can read mine.”

“He will not!” Hermione screeched. “He needs to come up with his own spell and use his own experiences to back it up. Tonks will know straight away if he copies you.”

“How am I supposed to choose just one?” Ron railed. “There are too bloody many of them and it depends on the situation. Aw to hell with it. It’s not due until Wednesday. I’ll do it tomorrow,” he said, snatching his bag up off the floor so he could pack up his things.

“We have a Prefect meetings tomorrow night,” Hermione informed him.

“Fine, I’ll do it on Tuesday then.”

“Except you agreed to help Ginny practice again on Tuesday,” Harry reminded him.

“Thanks a lot, Potter,” Ron groaned when Hermione bristled and narrowed her eyes at him. “She asked me,” he said the instant he saw her lips purse together.
“She did,” Harry agreed, withdrawing his essay and shoving it in his book before stowing it away in his bag. “I heard her.”

Bloody hell, Ron groaned to himself. *The second week of school hasn’t even started yet and I’m already behind.*

“How m inpered, “he whined miserably, “I really need your help here. You’re not seriously going to sit there and watch me struggle are you?”

“It would serve you right,” she shot back, waging an internal battle within her own mind. The irritated, rational side of her kept insisting that she do just that. Letting him struggle was the only way he’d ever learn to take responsibility for his own decisions.

If you bail him out now, the little voice persisted; *he’ll just do it again. And he’ll keep doing it as long as he knows that you’ll help him pick up the slack.*

“A w come on. I’m begging here. What more do you want?” Ron asked.

He’ll do it again anyway, a different voice chimed in. *And you want to help him pick up the slack. You know that you do. Look at him, the voice demanded. He’s so cute when he begs. Help him.*

“No wait,” Ron cut in before Hermione had a chance to respond to his question, “don’t answer that, because I can’t do what you want. Not this week. I need the practice as much as Ginny does. But it’s just this one week, I swear. Once tryouts are over we’ll be back to regular, scheduled practices once a week and things will be back to normal.”

“Well, I think I am going to call it a night,” Harry said, jumping out of his chair and making for the stairwell leading up to the boy’s dormitories before Hermione could launch into her Quidditch lecture. “See you two in the morning.”

“Night, mate.”

“Goodnight, Harry,” Hermione replied, crossing her arms in front of her chest and pretending to be more annoyed than she was as she gave into Ron’s request. “Fine,” she said, refocusing her attention on him.

“Seriously?” he cried in surprise. “You’ll help me? Thanks, love. You’re the best.”

“What did you just say?” Harry exclaimed from the middle of the staircase as he froze in mid step and spun around to gape down at his friends.

“What?” Ron asked, twisting around on the couch and wrinkling his brow in confusion as he encountered his best friends disbelieving stare.

“What did you just say?” Harry repeated, gawking at Ron as if he’d just admitted that he was secretly in love with Draco Malfoy.

“You’re the best” Ron responded, arching one eyebrow at Harry before glancing over at Hermione to see what she made of Harry’s odd behavior. Unfortunately her deadpan expression was no help whatsoever.

“No, before that?” Harry demanded.

“Thanks,” Ron replied somewhat sarcastically. “Are you all right, Harry?”
“What did he just say to you?” Harry asked Hermione, who was sitting in her chair, quietly watching the exchange taking place between the two boys.

“Just that,” she replied calmly. “Thanks and then you’re the best.”

“What did you think I said?” he asked, narrowing his eyes and looking at Ron again suspiciously.

“Seeing as how I’m the one that said it,” Ron shot back, without the slightest sign of embarrassment. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure. What did you think I said?” he asked.

“Never mind,” Harry replied, studying Ron’s ears closely.

I must have imagined it, he decided. *If he’d said what I thought he said, he’d be blushing up a storm right about now.*

“No, seriously,” Ron persisted, curiosity getting the better of him. “What did you think I said?”

“Nothing,” Harry answered with a sigh. “For a second there I just thought you called Hermione a name, is all.”

“Why would I call Hermione names?” Ron wondered out loud. “Especially after she’s just agreed to help me? That would sorta defeat the purpose, wouldn’t it?”

“I must just be tired,” Harry replied as he spun around and started up the stairs again.

“Are you sure you’re all right, mate?” Ron shouted as he disappeared from view.

“Fine,” Harry’s voice sounded back.

“What?” Ron asked when Hermione started to shake her head and leaned forward to cover her eyes with one hand. “You don’t think something’s wrong with him do you? Maybe I ought to go check on him,” he added, shifting his position on the couch again and staring at the empty staircase. “I mean if he’s hearing things--”

“He’s not,” she said softly.

“What?”

“He’s not hearing things,” she whispered. “You did call me a name.”

“No, I didn’t,” Ron insisted.

“Yes you--” Hermione started to argue, but then she stopped short and glancing over at the staircase. “Forget it,” she said softly, deciding it might be better if Ron didn’t know what he’d said. At least that way if Harry questioned him about it again later, he wouldn’t be able to give himself away. “Let’s just get started on your essay.”

“No, what did I call you.”

“Not now,” she hissed softly, glancing at the staircase again before refocusing her attention on Ron. “We can talk about that later,” she whispered. “After you paper is finished.”

“You’re acting like you think he’s skulking around in the stairwell spying on us or something. Don’t be ridiculous,” Ron added when Hermione subtly nodded her head. “He is not.”

“We’ll discuss it later,” she insisted. “So what spell are you going to use for your essay?”
“I already told you that I don’t know,” Ron replied, more than a little frustrated at being put off.

“Well, I can’t help you until you pick one.”

“But you’re supposed to help me pick one.”

“I told you that I wasn’t going to do that,” Hermione scolded. “This is your essay, Ron. Not mine. You choose the spell you feel is the most useful in a fight and once you’ve done that I’ll help you with the supporting evidence.”

“Just tell me what spell you used first.”

“No.”

“Hermione,” he whined.

“No!”

“Please.”

“NO!”

“This is going to take all bloody night,” Ron sighed, throwing his hands up into the air and letting his head fall against the back of the couch.

“Not if you’d just chose a spell already.”

Harry spent the next couple days watching his best friends very closely, searching for signs of anything out of the ordinary, but as far as he could tell they were treating each other the same way they always had. In fact, the only truly odd thing that happened didn’t even involve Hermione. At least not directly. It involved a letter that Ron received from George over breakfast, or more precisely Ron’s reaction to the letter. He didn’t scowl, swear, or blush once while he read it. If anything, he looked downright pleased by whatever his brother had to say.

Being curious, and bored out of his skull due to the very tedious double History of Magic lesson they had first that morning, Harry asked about the letter in the notes he and Ron were passing back and forth to while away the time. And it was a good thing too, because it wasn’t until Ron explained that his brothers had agreed to pick up Hermione’s birthday gift and forward it to him, that Harry realized he hadn’t had a chance to get her anything either. Fortunately Hermione’s birthday was a little more than a week away, which meant he still had time to send Hedwig to Flourish and Blotts with a rush order, once he figured out what to get her that is.

“What book did you get?” Harry asked Ron the next day during lunch, when he realized Hermione was caught up in her conversation with Ginny and not paying any attention to them.

“What?”Ron asked, clearly confused by the question.

“For Hermione,” Harry whispered. “You know, for her birthday? I don’t want to accidentally get the same one.”

“Oh,” Ron said, finally cottoning on and lowering his own voice. “Er... I didn’t exactly get her a book.”

“What did you get her?”
“Er,” Ron whispered, turning his head and glancing at Hermione uncomfortably. “Can we talk about this later?”

“She’s not going to hear us. She’s not even paying any attention.”

“What makes you so sure? She can read, write, and nag all at the same time. I wouldn’t put it past her to be able to listen to two separate conversations.”

“Ron?”

“What?” he cried in alarm, spinning around and staring into Hermione’s deep brown eyes.

“What were you doing?” Ginny asked when she saw the guilty expression plastered on her brother’s face.

“Nothing,” he protested.

“Uh huh.”

“Aren’t you finished?” Hermione asked.

“Finished what?” Ron replied.

“Finished stuffing you face,” retorted Ginny. “What is that, your third helping? How do you expect to dodge curses if you’re so bloated you can’t move?”

“That just shows what you know,” Ron shot back. “We’re not dodging curses, we’re blocking them. There’s a difference. What’s it to you anyway?”

“This is going to be fun,” Ginny said rising up from the table and turning to Hermione. “I call dibs on Ron.”

“What are you talking about?” Ron asked his sister, who blatantly ignored the question.

“Well, we better get going,” Hermione said, standing up herself and retrieving her book bag off the floor. “We need to get there early if we want to get seats up front.”

“Right,” Harry agreed as he and Ron followed Hermione’s lead and stood up.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Ron asked his sister when they exited the Great Hall and it became obvious that Ginny was following them.

“To class,” she replied lightly.

“What class?”

“Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“You don’t have that now,” Ron informed her. “We do.”

“Yes, I know,” his sister replied as she pushed past him and marched up the marble steps leading up to the first floor. “And so do I.”

“Tonks has reshuffled the classes a bit,” Hermione explained to boys as they followed Ginny up the stairs and down the corridor that lead to the D.A.D.A. classroom.
“And you’re just telling us this now?” Ron asked, looking at Hermione accusingly.

“I just found out about it,” she replied. “Ginny only told me about it at lunch.”

“Reshuffled how?” Harry inquired.

“She took me aside last week and told me she was going to combine the 6th year Ravenclaws and the 6th year Hufflepuffs together and then separate them into two different classes based on their skill level rather than their Houses.”

“What for?” Ron asked.

“Because the D.A. members are ahead of the rest of their classmates and this way she won’t have to hold them back while the others catch up. All the 6th year Gryffindors were in the D.A. so you don’t need to be separated into intermediate or advanced classes,” Ginny explained. “She just separated the other Houses and offered to bump Luna and me up into her advanced courses.”

“What about Seamus?” Ron questioned. “He only came to one meeting.”

“How am I supposed to know?” Ginny shot back.

“So that’s why you spent all weekend reading your D.A.D.A. text book?” Harry said, more to himself than to Ginny.

“Yeah” she admitted, “it was one of the conditions. I had to finish reading the fifth year book and pass a test of sorts, but it was fairly easy.”

“And the Slytherins?” Ron muttered. “We aren’t going to be paired with them are we?”

“No, Tonks mentioned something about them staying at the intermediate level,” Ginny laughed, as she pushed the door open and entered the D.A.D.A. classroom. “I wish I could see Malfoy’s face when he find out.”

“It looked something like this,” Tonks chuckled from behind her desk as she scrunched her heart shaped face up in concentration, causing it to elongate and sharpen into a perfect duplicate of her cousin, complete with white blond hair and a very prominent scowl.

“Merlin’s Beard, Tonks,” Ron cried, squeezing his eyes shut and quickly covering them with his hand, “I hope you’re happy. You’ve just scared me for life.”

Malfoy with breasts, he groaned inside his own head, his entire body shuddering at he tried to force the image out of his mind.

“EEEWWWW! That’s just... wrong.”

“It could have been worse,” Tonks chuckled, morphing back into herself. “I was going to show you Goyle with his Neanderthal brow creased in confusion next. But I don’t suppose that’s such a good idea, is it? Not with class about to start.”

“So what are we doing today?” Harry asked as he and his friends took the desks in the front row. “Ginny mentioned something about curses.”

“Funny you should ask,” Tonks replied, “because I’m going to need your help with this lesson. You up for it?” she asked as the bell rang signaling the end of the lunch period.

“What exactly is it you want me to do?” Harry asked warily.
“Relax. I’m not going to curse you or anything,” she explained. “I just want you to work with Finnigan and Longbottom. I’m hoping a little one on one attention will help them catch up with everyone else.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed, clearly relieved. “Er... work with them on what exactly?”

“Their Patronus Charms.”

“We’re doing Patronuses today?” Ron asked, obviously pleased by this news. “Wicked.”

“All 6th and 7th year students will be required to learn how to produce a full born, corporeal Patronus. They might be shiny and pretty, but there’s nothing cool about what they’re used for,” Tonks reminded him as Seamus and Neville entered the room. “Somewhere down the line that Patronus may very well be the only thing standing between you and Voldemort’s Dementors. Get used to it Longbottom,” Tonks added when Neville sucked in a huge breath. “Because I guarantee you’re going to hear me say that name again in this class and I don’t want to see you flinch every time I do it.”

“Y..yes, Professor,” Neville replied unevenly as he took his seat.

The rest of the lesson progressed fairly smoothly. Harry had barely begun working with Seamus and Neville when Hermione’s shout drew their attention away from him.

“Expecto Patronum!”

The two boys immediately turned away from Harry and watched the iridescent silver otter spring to life in the center of the room and bound around it’s mistress.

“Wonder what mine will be,” Neville whispered to Seamus.

“You need to focus on coming up with a good strong memory first Neville,” Harry instructed. “Whatever you’ve been using isn’t strong enough.”

“What memory do you use?” Seamus asked, either not realizing or not caring that it was a rather personal question.

“I’ve tried loads of different ones,” Harry replied. “The day I found out I was a wizard; the first time I played Quidditch; winning the house cup first year. Maybe you could try that one,” Harry suggested to Neville. “Your points were the ones that pushed us into the lead. That must be a happy memory for you.”

“Yeah,” Neville agreed with a broad smile. “That was brilliant.”

“Well, try that one then,” Harry instructed. “What about you Seamus? Have you got a memory picked out?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Well, let’s give it another go then,” Harry instructed. “Just remember to focus on the memory and the way it made you feel as you utter the incantation.”

“What is that?” Parvati asked nearly half an hour later when Professor Tonks dragged a large leather
suitcase out from under her desk and deposited it in the center of the classroom, where it immediately started to wobble and shake.

“That,” Tonks replied as everyone in the room eyed the suitcase apprehensively, “is a Boggart.”

“We’ve already done Boggarts,” Lavender informed the Professor, breathing a silent sigh of relief.

“Yes, I know,” Tonks responded, “but other than Mr. Potter here, none of you has actually had to repel a real Dementor. Mastering the charm is one thing. Using it effectively and successfully while you are under attack is quite another.”

“You’re going to have that thing attack us?” Seamus asked, his attention now focused completely on the rattling suitcase.

“Yes, Mr. Finnigan, I am,” Professor Tonks replied straightforwardly. “I can’t exactly bring a real Dementor into the classroom for you to practice on, but this Boggart should do the trick. All we’ll need is a little help from Mr. Potter.”

“You’re going to have Harry open the suitcase so the Boggart inside will become a Dementor?” Ginny asked.

“Exactly,” Tonks agreed. “What do you say Granger? Your Patronus looked pretty solid to me. Do you think you’re ready to give it a try against something that will fight back?”

“NO!” Hermione replied much louder than she meant to. “I... I can’t,” she admitted, her heart hammering so hard in her chest she was sure everyone in the class could hear it. All her happy thoughts were gone. Replaced with the image of Ron’s lifeless body lying on the ground.

That’s what that thing will turn into if I get anywhere near it, she reminded herself.

Watching him die once had been bad enough; she couldn’t bare the idea of watching it happen again. There was no way she was going anywhere near that suitcase.

“All right,” Tonks acquiesced when she saw the panic in Hermione’s eyes, “But you are going to have to face it eventually. All of you will,” she added, looking around at the rest of the students assembled in the room. “But not today. Class dismissed. You may leave your essays on my desk as you go,” she added, turning her back on her students and shoving the suitcase back out of sight.

“It’ll be all right,” Ron said to Hermione quietly as he snatched his bag up off the floor, plopped it down on his desk and rummaged through it until he found his homework.

“Ron’s right,” Ginny chimed in as she watched her brother grab Hermione’s bag and retrieve her homework as well. “It’ll react to Harry, not you.”

“I can’t,” Hermione said softly.

“Sure you can,” Harry insisted, following closely behind Ginny as she led Hermione out of the room and into the hallway. “It might take one or two tries, but I’m sure you can do it. You just have to be confident about it and stay focused on your memory,” he continued. “What?” he asked when he noticed the looks Ginny and Ron were giving each other.

“Er,” Ron muttered, glancing over at Hermione and avoiding Harry’s stare.

“It’s nothing really,” Hermione stated quickly. “It’s just... I had an unpleasant encounter with a Boggart this summer,” she admitted with a sigh as she reached out and took her bag from Ron, “and
I guess I’m still a little gun-shy.”

“Gun-shy?” Ginny asked, glancing at her brother who seemed to be just as baffled as she was.

“It’s a Muggle term,” Harry explained. “It means she’s—”

“Apprehensive,” Hermione said before he had a chance to say afraid. “It’s really not a big deal.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me about it?” Harry shot back, clearly irritated by the fact Ron and Ginny both knew about it and they hadn’t bothered to tell him either.

“You had more than enough to deal with this summer,” Hermione explained. “And I didn’t want to add to it. Besides, it’s not like you could have done anything anyway. It happened before you joined us.”

“You still should have told me,” Harry said, not completely buying her excuse.

He didn’t doubt that she hadn’t wanted to burden him, but he suspected there was a good deal more to it than just that. He couldn’t help but wonder what shape her Boggart had taken. It must have had something to do with him. Why else would she hide what happened from him, unless she was afraid he’d feel guilty about it?

“What was it? What did you see?”

“I’m going to be late to class,” Hermione said, glancing over at Ron as she sidestepped Harry’s questions. “I’m sorry Harry,” she added. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know when I get back from my Runes class,” she assured him, “but I can’t get into it right now. Ron and Ginny can tell you what happened if you can’t wait. Sorry,” she said again, only this time to Ron as she pushed past him and started down to the corridor alone.

“Hermione?” Ron asked, his voice thick and groggy as he opened his eyes and discovered his girlfriend kneeling on his bed tugging the curtains closed so none of his roommates would see her. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she whispered after pointing her wand at the draperies surrounding the bed and casting an Imperturbable Charm on them so they wouldn’t be overheard or interrupted. “I just needed to...be with you for a little while,” she admitted and she lay down and snuggled up beside him. “I didn’t mean to wake you. I’m sorry. I won’t stay long, I promise.”

“You can stay... as long as you want,” Ron said, trying and failing to stifle a yawn as she placed her head on his chest. “Did you have a bad dream?” he asked, snaking his arm around her shoulders and gently moving his hand up and down her back.

“Yes,” she admitted weakly, closing her eyes and listening to the rhythmic beat of his heart.

“They’re just dreams,” he muttered after a few moments of silence.

“I know,” Hermione whispered, tightening her hold on him. “But it could happen and I don’t know what I’ll do if—”

“Shush,” he said, trying to soothe her when he felt her warm tears soak into his shirt. “They’re just dreams, love. They aren’t real.”
“Aren’t you afraid?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” he answered, knowing full well that it was a lie. He’d spent the last three months terrified something was going to happen to her. He wasn’t going to admit it though. “I won’t let anything happen to you,” Ron whispered, as much to reassure himself as her. “I promise.”

“Sometimes I just feel like... like I’m living on borrowed time; like it’s just a matter of time before something terrible happens and I loose you. But I can’t... I can’t do this without you.”

“It was just a Boggart, Hermione,” Ron said sympathetically. “It isn’t real. That’s not going to happen.”

“Promise me that it won’t,” she beseeched, even though she knew it was beyond his control. “Please.”

“Shush,” he replied, rolling them both on their side so they were facing one another and reaching up to wipe the tears from her eyes. “It’ll be all right,” he whispered as he caressed her cheek. “You’ll feel better once we take the potion,” he assured her. “And so will I,” he admitted. “It won’t be long now. I looked over that passageway on the fourth floor that George mentioned today while you were in your Runes class. Part of it has collapsed just like he said, but there’s still a good sized space between the rubble and the mirror. It’s perfect. If anyone else does know about it, they’re bound to know that it has caved in, so there is no point trying to use it to get to Hogsmeade. No one will bother us there. You can start on the potion tomorrow night when we have rounds. I’ll do them by myself and that will give you three whole hours to work on it.”

“I won’t need that long,” Hermione replied with a yawn. “Not to get started anyway. There’s only so much I can do until the next full moon. The hardest part will be sneaking a cauldron in there before we have rounds.”

“Harry and I are supposed to practice with Ginny tomorrow afternoon when we get done with Care of Magical Creatures. You can do it while we’re out on the pitch.”

“All right,” Hermione agreed. “Ron?”

“Hum?”

“Don’t let me fall asleep.”

“Right.”

When Hermione opened her eyes again, she found that the room around her was no longer dark. The curtains surrounding the bed she slept in were closed, but even they weren’t enough to keep the sunlight at bay any longer. All they did was dilute it down to a deep crimson haze.

It only took her a moment to realize the precarious situation she was in. She had fallen asleep in Ron’s bed. She had spent the entire night in the boys’ dormitory. It was light outside. It was morning. That meant Ron’s roommates would be waking up. Her own roommates would be waking up. They’d see that she wasn’t in her bed. Worse, they might actually see her exit the boys’ dorm in her dressing gown.

“Not yet,” Ron mumbled, tightening his grip when she tried to slip out from under his arm. “Just five more minutes,” he added, pulling her body back against his and drifting off to sleep again almost instantly.
“What time is it?” Hermione asked, shoving his arm off her side before whirling around to shove his pillow, and his head, out of the way in an attempt to see his watch.

“Whatimeizit?” Ron groaned, opening one eye and looking at her for just a moment before closing it again and rolling over until he was lying flat on his back. “That’s what I was trying to figure out.”

“Mione?” he asked, opening his tired eyes and blinking a few times, before lifting his arm and squinting at his wrist. “BLOODY HELL!” Ron shouted, sitting bolt upright and turning his now wide eyes on Hermione. “It’s 8:13.”

“I told you not to let me fall asleep,” Hermione reproached him. “Classes start in 45 minutes. That means everyone is up. What are we going to do?”

“I’m sure Neville and Seamus have gone down to breakfast by now,” Ron said, parting the curtain just enough to peek out and confirm that the room was indeed empty. “It’s all right,” he said with a sigh of relief. “We’re alone.”

“And what about Harry?” Hermione asked as she lifted his sheets and started looking for her wand. “Do you think he went to breakfast too,” she asked, scooping her wand up and lifting the shield that had been surrounding his bed.

“Either that or he’s waiting in the common room,” Ron said, climbing out of bed, walking over to the door, and opening it to peer down the hall. “Come on,” he said, when he turned around and saw she was still hiding behind his curtains. “There’s no one around.”

“Just because there is no one up here,” Hermione said as she pushed the curtains back and stepped down onto the floor, “doesn’t mean that there aren’t people in the common room. Oh God,” she moaned. “I’m a Prefect. I can’t be seen leaving the boys’ dorm first thing in the morning.”

“Just borrow Harry’s Invisibility Cloak,” Ron suggested, glancing over at the trunk under his best friend’s abandoned bed. “I’m sure he won’t mind.”

“It would probably be better if I just wait until classes start and nip back over to the girls’ side when no one else is around.”

“Am I hearing things?” Ron chuckled, “or did Hermione Granger just suggest skiving off a class? I think I’m a bad influence on you. Not that I’m complaining, mind you. It’s a ruddy brilliant idea actually,” he added with a smile. “I’ll stay and keep you company.”

“Oh no, you won’t,” Hermione shot back quickly. “You can’t afford to miss Charms. If I stay, I’ll only be late. If you stay with me we’ll miss class altogether.”

“That’s the general idea.”

“Harry will be worried if neither of us shows up.”

“Fine,” Ron sighed as he walked over to Harry’s bed. “I’ll go to class then,” he said, surrendering to the inevitable. “But I’m not going to suffer alone. You have to go too,” he insisted, popping the lid on Harry’s trunk and dropping on his knees to dig through it. “Which means you get to borrow the... Hey, it’s not in here.”

“Looking for this?” a disembodied voice asked off to Ron’s left. He barely had time to jerk his head in that direction when there was a swooshing sound and Harry appeared out of thin air, his
Invisibility Cloak clenched in his hand and an angry scowl etched across his face.

“HARRY!!!” Hermione shrieked, spinning around to stare at the spot where he materialized and meeting his smoldering green eyes.

“I can explain,” Ron cried as the color drained from his face, causing his freckles to stand out in stark comparison.

“You can explain why I saw Hermione come into our dorm last night and get in bed with you?” Harry asked, his voice low and trembling with suppressed rage. “You can explain why she never left? Why she shielded your bed so I couldn’t open the curtains and wake you up this morning? How long has this been going on? How long have you two been... sleeping together?” he demanded, directing the question and his glower at Ron.

“Harry, please--”

“It’s not what you think,” Ron insisted. “We didn’t do anything last night.”

“I had a nightmare,” Hermione tried to clarify. “About the Boggart.”

“I have nightmares all the time,” Harry shot back as he rounded on Hermione. “You don’t see me climbing in bed with Ron.”

“I know it doesn’t make sense,” she replied, sounding more than a little defensive, “but I had to see him. I had to see that he was all right with my own eyes. It’s the only way to make them stop.”

“Yeah, right,” Harry mumbled, clearly not buying her explanation.

“You know what Harry,” Ron snapped, the color flooding back into his face as he started to become annoyed himself. “It doesn’t matter if you believe it or not. It’s the truth.”

“Uh huh. And I suppose you’re going to tell me that this is the first time it’s happened next? Don’t bother,” he said as he jabbed his finger at his friends in turn. “You two were far too comfortable together for me to buy that.”

“It wasn’t the first time,” Hermione admitted before Ron had a chance to reply. “We’ve been doing it all summer.”

“Not all summer,” Ron insisted, catching Hermione’s eye and shooting her a look that practically screamed, Are you completely mental?

“So you two have been sneaking around behind my back and sleeping together all summer?”

“No,” Ron answered, despite the fact Harry’s accusation was more accurate than he realized. “It was mostly just at the beginning of summer, when she was having nightmares every night. You weren’t even there yet.”

“Well, that explains why you were so grumpy every night. Having me bunk in the same room as you must have really cut into your action,” he fired back at Ron, causing Hermione to gasp loudly.

“EXCUSE ME?” she cried out in indignation. “I don’t think I like what you are implying.”

“No,” Ron answered, despite the fact Harry’s accusation was more accurate than he realized. “It was mostly just at the beginning of summer, when she was having nightmares every night. You weren’t even there yet.”

“Well, that explains why you were so grumpy every night. Having me bunk in the same room as you must have really cut into your action,” he fired back at Ron, causing Hermione to gasp loudly.

“EXCUSE ME?” she cried out in indignation. “I don’t think I like what you are implying.”

“Neither do I,” Ron said, narrowing his eyes and locking them on Harry. “Hermione, I think you should leave now.”

“I will not.”
“Classes are going to start soon,” Ron reminded her, “and you still need to get dressed.”

“Ron’s right,” Harry said, holding his Invisibility Cloak out for her to take. “If Seamus or Neville come back up and catch you in here dressed like that everyone in school will know about it by second period. Go get dressed,” he instructed while still attempting to stare down his best friend. “We’ll meet you in the common room in a few minutes.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Hermione insisted, crossing her arms in front of her chest defiantly.

“Hermione,” Ron growled in frustration, finally breaking eye contact with Harry and looking at her directly. “I need you to leave,” he said, snatching the Invisibility Cloak out of Harry’s outstretched hand and shoving it into hers. “Just for a few minutes,” he added, “so I can get dressed myself.”

“So you can get dressed?” she asked, knowing full well that it was an excuse he was using to try and get rid of her. He didn’t want her to leave so he could get dressed, he wanted her to go so he could give Harry the fight he was looking for.

“I need you to leave,” he repeated, grabbing her by the arm and leading her over to the door. “This is something we need to work out on our own,” he whispered, “and we can’t do it with you here.”

“Fine,” Hermione replied tersely, yanking her arm free and glancing at Harry who was watching them intently. “I’ll go,” she said, unfurling the Invisibility Cloak and throwing it over her head, “but I’ll be back as soon as I’m dressed.”

“Right,” Ron agreed, opening the door for her and glancing down the hall so it wouldn’t appear as if it had opened by itself. He waited until he felt her brush past him, then shut the door, stalked past Harry to retrieve his wand off his bedside table, and used it to lock the door and shield the room.

That won’t keep her out for long, he thought as he stripped off his pajama bottoms and threw on the trousers he’d discarded the night before, but that’s all right. Harry isn’t likely to beat around the bush now that we’re alone. We’ll only need a few minutes.

“All right,” Harry snarled, as he watched Ron grab a fresh pair of socks and sit down on the corner of his bed. “Now that she’s gone I want the truth. How long have you been shagging Hermione?”

Then again, Ron thought as he laced up his trainers, maybe he’s going to try and evade the issue a bit.

Not that he was fooled. He knew Harry well enough to know what was really bothering him, even if he did try and mask it with something else. It wasn’t the fact they were together, so much as it was the fact they’d hidden it from him. If there was one thing Harry couldn’t stand it was for people close to him to keep secrets, even if it was for his own good.

“We don’t have all that much time, you know?” Ron replied as he stood upright again. “So why don’t you stop playing games and ask me what you really want to know.”

“You randy bastard!” Harry shouted as he quickly closed the distance between them.

“Stop trying to turn this into some type of sordid affair,” Ron yelled back, completely undeterred by the furious expression plastered on his friend’s face or the fact he was clenching his fists at his side.

“So you admit it then? There is something going on with you two?”

“Yeah, I admit it.” Ron replied calmly. “We’ve been together since July. Hermione wanted to tell you straight away, but I talked her out of it.”
“Oh really, and why’s that?”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?” Ron asked in a rhetorical manner. “It doesn’t matter that we were trying to make things easy for you. All that matters to you is that we didn’t tell you.”

“Easy for me?” Harry snapped. “Don’t you mean easy for you? If you think I’m going to sit back and let you mess with one of my best friends--”

“She’s one of my best friends too, incase you’ve forgotten,” Ron interrupted.

“You sure have a warped way of showing it. Is this how you comfort your friend? You wait until she’s vulnerable and use it as an opportunity to take advantage of her. Since when does comfort a friend include shagging her?”

If it had been anyone other than Harry, Ron would have answered that question with his fist. But as it was Harry, he struggled to maintain control of his own anger and resist the urge to punch him right in his big fat mouth. Deep down he knew that Harry didn’t mean what he was saying. Still, he hadn’t expected him to hit below the belt like that. At least not so viciously. It was only upon reflection that Ron realized that Harry was purposely trying to goad him into throwing the first punch.

“You don’t actually believe that,” Ron replied, unclenching his fists. If Harry wanted a physical fight he was going to have to take the first swing and come off looking like the bad guy.

“Did you shag her?”

“Sod off, Harry.”

“DID! YOU! SHAG! HER!” the incensed young man screamed at the top of his lungs as he grabbed Ron by the collar and pulled him in closer.

“That’s none of your bloody business,” Ron retorted, staring Harry straight in the eye as he grabbed his fists, jerked them off his shirt, and shoved him away while taking a step backwards himself.

“So it’s ok then? I can just go out and shag your sister and you’ll be fine with it?”

“Hermione isn’t your sister.”

“She might as well be.”

“Are you in love with my sister?” Ron snarled furiously. “Are you going to marry my sister?”

“No.”

"THEN KEEP YOUR BLOOD HANDS OFF OF HER!” he roared. “If you hurt Ginny I swear to God, I’ll--”

“But it’s all right for you to hurt Hermione?” Harry shot back quickly. “Don’t you think she’s been through enough?”

“I know what she’s fucking been through,” Ron shouted as the tether holding his own rage back threatened to snap. “I’m the one that was there,” he yelled. “I’m the one that watched her sacrifice herself. I’m the one that had to carry her down the bloody stairs when she got away because she was so fucked up she could barely walk. I’m the one that stood beside her and held her hand while she shared her memories with Dumbledore. You only saw flashes of what they did,” he cried, his face red with rage. “I had to watch every twisted second of it. I had to watch that bitch torture her. I had
to see her smile and laugh and take pleasure in it and it made me fucking sick. I’m the one that had to
watch Hermione relive every agonizing second of what they did. I’m the one that was there for her,
Harry. Not you. You were too caught up in your own shit as usual.”

“That’s not fair,” Harry protested, staggered by the intensity of Ron’s attack. “I was stuck on Privet
Drive. It’s not my fault I wasn’t there.”

“It never is, is it?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Even with everything that she was going through, she still put you and your needs first. The first
thing she did when she got away was write you so you’d know that she was all right. Even before
she’d let Mum heal her. Your pain was more important than her own. She put you first because she’s
your friend and that’s what friends do. All you did was write her a couple letters, but did you talk to
her about it in person? Did you ask her about how she was doing even once after you joined us at
Headquarters? Did you talk to her about the attacks on the Muggle-borns? Did you even know how
afraid she was or how guilty she felt?”

“No, you locked yourself in your room so you could brood and feel sorry for yourself, because it’s
always about you and what you need. Well, maybe it’s time you realize that you aren’t the only one
with scars,” Ron said as he yanked the shirt he’d slept in over his head and tossed it on the bed
before brandishing the welts on his arms for Harry to see. “You aren’t the only one that monster has
hurt. And you certainly don’t have the market cornered on pain,” he said, snatching a clean shirt out
of his trunk and slipping it on. “You know I’d never intentionally do anything to hurt Hermione, so
stop using that as an excuse and admit what’s really bothering you.”

“The fact that my best friends have been lying to me.”

“We didn’t lie,” Ron replied, grabbing his robes off the chair they were draped over and throwing
them on. “We just didn’t tell you. It wasn’t as if we didn’t want to. It just never seemed like the right
time. It wasn’t something we wanted to tell you in a letter, especially while you were stuck with
those awful Muggles. And when we were finally all together there was that mess with the attacks
and the prison break and you were a wreck and it just didn’t seem all that important, only the longer
we waited the harder it became to find a way to tell you.”

“Look,” he said, retrieving one of his school ties out of a drawer, and tossing it over his shoulder. “I
am sorry you had to find out like this, but it’s done. You know that Hermione and I are together and
you’re just going to have to get used to it. We’ve been together for months and it hasn’t changed
anything with us,” he added, pointing at Harry and then himself as he approached the door. “And
just so we’re perfectly clear, we’re not shagging. Any other questions?” Ron asked, pointing his
wand at the door and lifting the spells he’d cast on it.

“Is there anything else you’re keeping from me?”

“Yeah,” Ron admitted with a sigh, “but not because I want to. I don’t have a choice.”

“Sure you do.”

“No, I don’t. I’m sorry Harry, but I really can’t tell you. Not until you’ve master that whole
Occlumency thing. That connection you have going with You-Know-Who isn’t just one sided, you
know? He could be listening to us right now and you wouldn’t even know it. Look, maybe you
ought to talk to Hermione about this. I’m sure she can explain it better than I can. Maybe you don’t
need Occlumency. Maybe Ginny is right and those partitions will work. I don’t know. You’ll have
to ask Hermione. You coming?” Ron asked as he opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

“No,” Harry replied as he stalked over to his bed and disappeared behind the curtains.

“Right then,” Ron said, seeing no reason to press the issue. It would probably be better if he let his friend cool off and reflect on everything anyway. “I’ll keep Hermione away as long as I can,” he said, before spinning around and walking down to the common room.
Chapter 20: Sulking & Self-Reflection

As Ron descended the stairs and entered the common room, he quickly spotted his girlfriend, who was standing with his sister by one of the many windows that looked out of Gryffindor Tower. The fact that the two girls were huddled together and the furious pace of their whispering left no doubt in his mind about what they were discussing.

Oh well, he thought, sighing to himself as he made his way across the room. At least it kept her occupied and now Ginny’s up to speed.

“What happened?” Hermione asked, when she caught a flash of red hair out of the corner of her eye and looked up to see him approaching. “Where’s Harry?”

“He’s not coming down,” Ron admitted.

“Why not,” his sister demanded. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing.”

“You didn’t hit him did you?” Ginny hissed, her voice low and accusatory.

“I came close.”

“Oh Ron,” Hermione cried before catching herself and lowering her voice again. “You didn’t?”

“He deserved it after the things he said about you,” Ron snapped, his brow knittin together in irritation.

“Me?”

“Well, about us,” he corrected.

“What did you expect?” Ginny asked, looking away from her brother just long enough to glance at the staircase leading up to the boys’ dorm.

“You stay away from him,” Ron insisted.

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

“The hell I can’t,” he cried, taking a step to the left and positioning himself between her and the staircase as if he were afraid she might try and sprint up it.

“Ron,” Hermione started to protest.

“I mean it Ginny,” he continued, ignoring his girlfriend’s obvious objection while remaining completely focused on his sister. “I want you to stay away from Harry. He needs time to cool down.”

“I don’t care what you want.”

“What’s wrong with Harry?” an unexpected female voice asked behind Ron’s back, causing him to spin around. “Why does he need to cool off?” Parvatti continued as Ron gaped at her in shock. “Did something happen?”
“I wasn’t talking to you,” Ron snapped, taking all three of the girls by surprise. “So mind your own bloody business.”

“RON!” Hermione shouted in horror.

“You’re not going to get any gossip here,” he continued as if he hadn’t heard her, “so you can sod off. Go on,” he said, flapping his hands at Parvatti, who was standing in front of him with her mouth hanging open. “Go pester someone else.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Hermione asked in disbelief once Parvatti had turned around and wandered back over to Lavender.

“I got rid of her, didn’t I?” he replied, reaching down and grabbing Ginny’s rucksack up off the floor.

“You didn’t have to be so rude,” Hermione scolded.

“Come on,” Ron said, ignoring her remark and latching onto his sister’s arm.

“What are you doing?” Ginny protested, when he started dragging her towards the portrait hole.

“Walking you to class.”

“I’m perfectly capable of getting to class on my own, thank you very much.”

“Uh huh,” Ron said, tightening his grip when Ginny tried to shrug him off. “You’re also capable of finding your way up to the boys’ dorm, so let’s go.”

“Let go of me, you prat.”

“If you don’t come with us I’ll have no choice but to skive off my classes so I can sit here and guard the stairs,” Ron warned as he released his sister. “Your choice. Of course Hermione won’t like that and as it will be your fault...”

“It’s not my fault you’re an overprotective git?”

“You’re in the same boat we are, you know?” Ron retorted. “He’s been mulling this over all night. Do you think he hasn’t figured out that you knew and didn’t tell him? If you go up there now, he’ll go off on you the same way he did on me and all that will do is make the situation worse. He isn’t going to listen to what you have to say. Not now anyway. Just give him a chance to cool off first.”

“We can’t just leave him up there all day by himself,” Hermione objected.

“Yeah, we can.”

“Ron,” she cried in shock.

“What?”

“How can you say something like that?” Hermione asked. “He’s your best friend.”

“So?” he replied. “That doesn’t mean I have to put up with him every time he wants to be a sullen prat.”

“But it’s our fault.”
“I know,” Ron admitted. “And I already apologized for it. If he wants to sit up there and sulk, let him.”

“We can’t,” Hermione protested. “Don’t you see, that’s part of the problem. He’s afraid that we won’t be there for him the same way we used to be now that things have changed.”

“That’s a load of rubbish and he knows it.”

“But if we leave him up there—”

“Why don’t you let me copy your homework?” Ron asked, cutting her off midstream.

“What?” Ginny said, goggling at her brother in disbelief. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Why won’t you let me copy you?” he persisted. “Is it because I won’t learn anything on my own if I do? Or maybe it’s because you know that I’ll slack off even more and become dependent on you to do all the hard stuff for me.”

“A little too late to be worried about that, isn’t it?” Ginny muttered under her breath.

“If you go up there now Hermione, it’ll be like doing Harry’s homework for him. If you come running every time he pitches a fit, he’ll just keep doing it.”

“But... it’s not the same thing,” Hermione objected. “He needs to know that he can still count on us.”

“He does. Just like I know I can ask you to help me with my homework. You’re the one that is always telling me there is a difference between helping someone and doing it for them. I explained it all to him and apologized. Whether he accepts my apology or not, is up to him. But this isn’t something you can do for him, he has to sort it out on his own.”

“What if he can’t?”

“Can’t or won’t?” Ron asked. “I don’t know,” he admitted with a sigh. “If he really can’t, then I suppose we’ll have to figure out a way to help him. But as inflexible as he is, I’d say it’s more likely that he won’t try. We better go,” he said when the silence started to become awkward. It wasn’t that he really wanted to go to class, he simply didn’t want to talk about this particular subject anymore.

“You coming?” Ron asked his sister as he gently pushed Hermione towards the portrait hole.

“Yeah,” she replied, taking one last look at the staircase before following them. You’ve got until lunch to straighten yourself out Potter. If you’re not down by then I’m coming up to get you.

To Ron it seemed as if their morning lessons would drag on forever. Of course it didn’t help that they had Charms first thing because the bedlam that went along with practicing their spells afforded Parvatti a perfect opportunity to discuss what she’d overheard with Lavender, who immediately turned to Seamus to see if he knew anything they didn’t. It didn’t take long for them to drag Neville into the conversation as well and soon all four of the Gryffindors were taking it in turns to glance in Ron’s direction.

The situation improved a bit when they moved on to their Transfiguration lesson. Even Parvatti and Lavender knew better than to continue whispering when McGonagall was trying to explain how they should go about Conjuring toothpicks out of thin air. And as understanding the theory behind
Conjuring was much easier than the actual Conjuring itself, the entire class, with the possible exception of Hermione, who produced a flawless toothpick on her fourth try, was too preoccupied with what they were doing to think about gossip.

Unfortunately, things took a definite turn for the worst when lunch rolled around. As soon as Ron and Hermione entered the Great Hall it became evident that Parvatti’s story had spread to the other houses. The Gryffindors weren’t the only ones whispering and shooting odd looks in his direction now. Various students from the other tables had joined in as well, including Malfoy, who made no effort whatsoever to hide his smirk as he pointed at Ron and sniggered.

“Just ignore them,” Hermione whispered sympathetically as she picked at the plate of food set in front of her. “It’ll blow over in a couple days.”

Easier said than done, Ron thought, deciding that the best course of action he could take would be to keep his head down and eat as quickly as possible.

“You’re going to choke if you don’t slow down,” Hermione said, watching him with mounting disgust as he continued to shovel food into his mouth.

“No, I’m not,” he protested after forcing it all down with a half a glass of pumpkin juice.

“Well, stop it anyway. You’re making me sick.”

“Then don’t watch,” he replied as he took another heaping spoon full of mashed potatoes and crammed them into his mouth.

“Oh for Heaven’s sake,” Hermione groaned, shaking her head sorrowfully. “If you keep that up, you’ll have everyone in the room staring at you soon. You need to learn how to tune them out.”

“How do you do that?” Ron asked, looking up with genuine interest. People had been stealing glances at her and whispering behind her back ever since she set foot on the Hogwarts Express and it never seemed to faze her. He’d heard some of the rumors that had circulated around the school about her abduction and how she’d managed to escape. Frankly most of them were so outlandish that he didn’t see how anyone in their right mind could possibly believe them.

“Do what?”

“Just ignore it all like that? How can it not bother you?”

“Practice,” Hermione replied dispassionately. “Why should I care what those idiots think?” she asked, dropping her voice even though they were seated at the end of the table and were a good distance away from everyone else. “I’m not going to waste my breath trying to reason with people that can’t form their own opinions without conferring with someone else first. The fact that they actually believe those ludicrous stories just proves that they’re mindless twits and not worth my time. So why is it that it bothers you so much? Why do you care what those kind of people think?”

“I don’t know,” Ron muttered, dropping his eyes down to his nearly empty plate. “It just does.”

“It shouldn’t. They’re not worth--”

“So are the rumors about Potter and your sister true, Weasel? Did you really catch them--”

“Shove off, Malfoy,” Ron growled, pushing his plate away and jumping to his feet in order to confront the blond Slytherin who had snuck up behind him. It didn’t matter that his thuggish friends flanked him. If Malfoy wanted to get into it this morning, Ron would happily oblige him.
“Don’t,” Hermione hissed as she stood up herself and latched onto his arm just in case she needed to hold him back.

“What’s the matter?” Malfoy asked with a smug look of satisfaction, “Afraid you’ll land yourself another detention.”

“One more word about my sister and you’ll see first hand just how afraid I am.”

“Come on,” Hermione said, tugging on Ron’s arm in an attempt to get him to follow her. “Let’s go.”

“You’re pathetic, you know that Weasley?” Draco laughed when Ron gave in and allow Hermione to drag him towards the door. “It’s disgraceful the way you let that Mudblood tell you what to do.”

“Don’t! You! Dare!” Hermione growled in warning when Ron froze in mid step and reached for his wand. “You’re the one that made me promise I wouldn’t provoke his father,” she whispered. “What good is that promise going to be if you allow him to provoke you? Don’t you give him what he wants. Just ignore it.”

It took every ounce of strength Ron had to let go of his wand and start walking again, but somehow he managed to do it. It helped that he was slightly afraid of what Hermione would do to him if he failed to heed her advice. The tone of voice she’d used when she hissed her warning left no doubt in his mind about her intentions. If she had to curse him to keep him out of trouble that is precisely what she’d do.

“Off to search for your sister?” Draco cried with glee as he watched Ron and Hermione retreat. “Finally noticed that she didn’t showed up for lunch, did you? So much for her staying away from Potter. Apparently she doesn’t want things to ‘cool off’.”

“Damn it, Ginny,” Ron muttered under his breath as they cleared the double doors and found themselves in the Entrance Hall. “Come on,” he said, urging Hermione to increase her pace as they mounted the stairs and he all but dragged her back up to Gryffindor Tower.

If the rumbling in Harry’s stomach was any indication, it had to be close to noon. Of course looking at his watch would have been a more effective means of determining the time, but that required too much effort and he was perfectly comfortable in the position he was in. He didn’t want to move, so he estimated the passage of time by his hunger pangs instead. Not that it really mattered all that much. He knew that he still had a few hours left before the afternoon classes would end and his roommates would return and interrupt his solitude. He didn’t have to get up and find a new place to hide just yet.

Not much had changed since he’d climbed back into bed that morning and tried to block the world out by drawing the curtains around himself. He could hold back the morning sunlight, but not his feelings. The guilt was still there gnawing away at him. As was the pain of knowing that Ron’s accusations weren’t completely groundless. As much as he hated to admit it to himself, he knew the truth.

You really haven’t been a very good friend lately, the little voice he’d been trying to ignore all day insisted. You’re moody and short with them, not to mention withdrawn. You’re the one that has been pushing them away and now you’re actually worried that they might just give you the space that you wanted. Only it isn’t what you really wanted, is it? Well, if that happens, you’ve got no one to blame but yourself.
Except I’m not the one that lied, Harry argued with himself. *They should have told me, but they
didn’t.* In fact, *they went out of their way to hide it from me.* That’s as good as a lie, he maintained,
preferring the anger and resentment that went along with being deceived to the guilt that
accompanied self-reflection.

You knew this would happen eventually. You’ve always known on some level. You knew it was
just a matter of time before they figured it out themselves and acted on their feelings. Don’t pretend
this has taken you completely by surprise.

But it wasn’t supposed to happen now.

Because it is inconvenient for you?

That’s not the point. The problem isn’t that they are together, it’s that fact they tried to hide it from
me. They deceived me on purpose. And it isn’t just their relationship they’re hiding. There are other
things as well, like that whole mess with the Boggart.

Hermione explained that, the little voice insisted. *She didn’t want to burden you with her problems.*

Is that really the reason though? Maybe she just didn’t want to admit that I’m a shitty friend.

Or maybe she didn’t want you to know what her biggest fear was, because if it does happen, you’ll blame
yourself. Not just for Ron’s death, but for what it will do to her.

Yeah, well, it would be my fault, wouldn’t it? Just like what happened to her was my fault. Look
what this has done to her. She’s so freaked out by the mere thought, she has to sneak in here in the
middle of the night just to make sure he’s still alive. What happened really messed her up and I had
no idea, because I didn’t ask. Ron’s right. I should have asked. I should have have asked. I should have been there for her. I
know how Hermione is. She isn’t like me. She wants to talk about every little thing that happens. Of
course she’d wanted to talk about it. I should have realized that. I should have been there for her.

The guilt that Harry had been trying to mask with hurt feelings and anger unexpectedly clawed its
way to the surface and was back in full force.

But you were so wrapped up in yourself that it never even occurred to you that she might need you
to comfort her for a change, the little voice reminded him.

I’m not the one she wanted. I’m not the one she’d turn to. Even if I had been there, she still would
have gone to Ron. He’s the one she wants. He’s the one she needs.

That’s an excuse and you know it. She’d turn to him first because he’s the one that’s always been
there when she needs someone to lean on. He’s the one that takes care of her and that’s the way you
wanted it to be, isn’t it? You’re uncomfortable with crying girls and feelings, so you hang back and
let him deal with it. And now that you’re feeling left out, you’re trying to blame them for getting
closer, when you’re the one that pushed them together in the first place. You know Ron’s crazy
about her and you tried to use that against him. You couldn’t be angry at him for loving her or for
taking care of her, so you twisted it all around and accused him of using her. You wanted him to get
angry and fight back so you could validate what you were feeling. But you aren’t really angry with
them.

They lied to me, Harry answered himself, falling back on the same excuse he’d been trying to use all
day.

They are your best friends. Don’t you want them to be happy? They deserve it and you knew this
was going to happen eventually, so why are you so upset?
Because it wasn’t supposed to happen now, he admitted to himself. _It’s not the right time._

You mean it isn’t the right time for you, the little voice insisted, _but it’s obviously the right time for them or they wouldn’t be together._ You just don’t like the fact that there’s something going on between them that you can’t be a part of. You feel left out and you’re afraid you’re going to lose them.

I am losing them.

You’ve tried to push them away before and it never worked, what makes you think it’s suddenly going to happen now?

Things will be different now. Ron’s taking care of her...

...and you’re afraid he won’t be there to take care of you anymore. You’re afraid when push comes to shove, he’ll choose her over you.

Why shouldn’t he? What do I have to offer that can compare to that? I’m the one that led them into that trap last summer. I nearly got them all killed. They’re my best friends and I’ve turned them into targets. That’s what I have to offer. They’d be better off without me anyway.

“Harry? Can I come in?” Ginny asked, as she slipped into the room and ended his ruminations.

“Go away.”

“Not until I’ve had a chance to explain things to you.”

“Don’t bother,” Harry snapped from behind the thick red curtains hiding him from view. “It won’t change the fact that everyone I know has been lying to me.”

“There’s a difference between lying to someone and not volunteering information.”

“Rubbish!” Harry shouted as he sat up and turned to face the direction her voice had come from. “You went out of your way to hide the truth from me. That’s lying.”

Damn you, Ron! Ginny swore to herself as she realized that her brother had actually been right for once. Harry didn’t want an explanation, he wanted someone to blame. _Well it’s not going to be me,_ she decided, altering her strategy.

“And you’ve never hidden the truth about anything, right?” she asked, going on the defensive. “You didn’t look your friends in the eye and tell them a bald face lie when they asked you about that prophecy last year? I didn’t realize you were such a hypocrite when I agreed to keep that secret for you.”

“That’s not the same thing,” Harry argued.

“No, it’s not,” Ginny shot back, angry that she’d landed herself in this predicament. “Ron and Hermione were trying to do what they thought was best for you. Their intentions were right, even if their methods were a little questionable. Do you think it was easy for them? Do you think they wanted to hold themselves back and pretend all the time? They did it for you, because they know that you don’t deal with change very well. They didn’t want to upset you.”

“Well, it’s a little late for that now, isn’t it?”

“This self-righteous crap you’re trying to pull isn’t going to work on me,” Ginny snapped as she
realized arguing with him was just as pointless as her explanations were. “If you want to lie in bed all day and feel wronged,” she said as she marched over to the door, “go ahead. Just remember, you’re keeping secrets too. The difference is that we were trying to protect you; you’re trying to protect yourself.”

“It’s nice to know you and your brother both think I’m self absorbed.” Harry cried as he wrenched the drapery back, only to find his dorm room empty. “At least he called me selfish to my face,” he yelled at his open door.

“You don’t know that she’s up there,” Hermione said to Ron as he ushered her through the portrait hole and into the Gryffindor common room.

“Yeah, right,” he replied, halting beside her.

“Well, you don’t. She could be down in the kitchen asking Dobby to bring him something to eat for all you know.”

“Expect she’s not,” Ron shot back, pointing towards the staircase his sister was storming down.

“You just couldn’t leave it alone, could you?” he shouted at Ginny, earning himself a contemptuous glare for his efforts. “You just had to go up there and push him? Let me guess, he threw you out, right?”

“Sod off you great prat,” Ginny snarled as she grabbed her rucksack off the floor where she’d left it and trudged past him to get out the portrait hole.

“This is just bloody great.”

“Don’t swear.”

“I was right though,” he said, ignoring Hermione’s reprimand.

“I wouldn’t get used to that if I were you.”

“But you admit I was right.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Actually you said it. Twice.”

“But you agreed.”

“I didn’t disagree.”

“Hermione,” Ron groaned.

“Yes?”

“I was right.”

“If you say so.”
“Come on,” he said, grabbing her hand and dragging her back into the hallway they’d just come from.

“You are not going to follow your sister so you can finish telling her off,” Hermione declared as she stopped walking abruptly.

“Of course not.”

“Then where are we going?”

“To the kitchen,” Ron said, giving her hand a light tug to get her moving again.

“But you just ate,” she exclaimed while following after him.

“Harry didn’t,” he reminded her, “And it was your idea to talk to Dobby. Only ... don’t mention spew or they’re liable to chuck us out before I can find him.”

“It’s S.P.E.W, not spew and you know it.”

“You wouldn’t have that problem if you’d called it the Elf Liberation Front,” Ron muttered, “At least those initials spell out a word that actually makes sense. Don’t go mentioning that either, because we’ll still wind up being tossed out on our ears. In fact, maybe you ought to wait out in the hall when we get there.”

“I will not.”

“Fine, you can come in then, but you have to promise you won’t use the words ‘wages’ or ‘free’ around Winky. In fact, don’t use them at all. If you get me banned from the kitchen I may never forgive you.”

“HA-HA!” Hermione said sarcastically.

“I’m not kidding,” Ron said with a lopsided smile that belied his words. “If you upset the House-Elves, I’ll side with them throw you out myself.”

Hermione had it all worked out in her head well before her Arithmancy class let out and she hurried back to the common room. She knew that she wouldn’t have to worry about Ron, because he was down on the pitch helping his sister practice for the upcoming Quidditch tryouts. The only thing that was liable to drive him off the field now, besides the Slytherin team showing up to mock him, was hunger, which meant she ought to have at least an hour to accomplish her task.

Of course things very rarely work out exactly the way you plan them, which is why Hermione had spent the past 45 minutes, coming up with contingency plans to fall back on rather than listening to Professor Vector’s lesson.

Knowing that she didn’t have any time to waste, she dropped her book bag in the common room as soon as she cleared the portrait hole and headed straight for Harry’s dorm room.

“Er... Hermione?” Neville sputtered, when he opened the door she’d just knocked on. “Um... Ron told me to tell you to ... ah...”

“Leave Harry alone,” Seamus called from somewhere inside the room.

“Er... sorry,” Neville said, glancing down at his feet uncomfortably.
“He’s not here anyway,” Seamus shouted from behind the barely opened door. “He was gone when we got back from Care of Magical Creatures.”

“Then you won’t mind if I come in and check for myself?” Hermione said to Neville, who was standing in her way.

“Not at all,” Seamus replied, coming up behind him and throwing the door open for her to enter. “And as long as you’re here, you wouldn’t by chance happen to know what Ron and Harry are fighting about, would you?”

Hermione arched one eyebrow and gave him a condescending look as she entered the room, but that was the only answer he got to his question.

“I don’t suppose there is any chance you’ll tell us?” he continued. “No?” he said, when Hermione rolled her eyes. “As you can see,” he said, pointing at Harry’s empty bed, “he’s not here.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Hermione replied. “All I really wanted was my Transfiguration notes,” she said, walking over to Harry’s trunk, popping the lid, and stooping down to rummage through it. “If you see Harry before I do, will you tell him that I took them back?” she asked, waving the folded piece of parchment she’d retrieved at the two boys, before turning around and retreating. “Thanks,” she called back over her shoulder once she’d made it safely into the hallway.

“He just had to find the highest place in Hogwarts to hide, didn’t he?” Hermione mumbled, forcing herself to scale the last four steps that stood between her and the doorway leading to the Astronomy Tower.

And in broad daylight, she groaned to herself. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear Ron told him I didn’t like heights and he came up here on purpose. This wasn’t one of your contingencies, was it? Well, you’re here now so suck it up. He’s not going to put you off that easy, she told herself as she pushed open the door and marched onto the vast platform.

“I know you’re here,” she said, glancing down at the parchment in her hand and then over at the wall, where the dot labeled Harry Potter was standing. “The next time you want to hide, it would probably be a good idea to take this with you,” Hermione said, pulling her wand from the inside pocket of her robes and pointed it at the Marauder’s Map. “Mischief managed,” she muttered as she approached Harry and held the map out for him to take.

“I’m not in the mood for another lecture,” his disembodied voice stated.

“What about some company?” Hermione asked.

What the hell? Harry thought as he stared at his friend warily. It definitely wasn’t the response he’d anticipated. It was so unexpected and so un-Hermione-like that he honestly had no idea how to respond. Is she trying to tick me or something? he wondered.

“How did you get this back?” Hermione asked, as she reached out and pulled the Invisibility Cloak off Harry’s head. “I left it in my dorm room this morning.”

“Summoning Charm,” Harry replied, allowing the cloak to fall down and pool around his feet.

“Oh well, that would explain it.”
“How’d you get my map?”

“I took it from your trunk,” she replied candidly. “I fed Seamus and Neville a story about it being my Transfiguration notes just so you know.”

“So,” Harry said, dragging his eyes away from the bushy haired girl standing in front of him and locked them on the Quidditch pitch, “you waited until Ron was distracted and then slipped off to find me?”

“More or less,” Hermione admitted.

“And?”

“And what?”

“Just say whatever it is you want to say and get it over with,” Harry replied, steeling himself against the inevitable.

“As shocking as it may be, I didn’t come up here to lecture you,” Hermione informed him. “I just thought you might like some company.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Okay, so I don’t really understand this whole suffer in silence thing you two do,” Hermione admitted as she dropped the Marauder’s Map on top of Harry’s cloak and leaned against the wall beside him. “It makes no sense whatsoever, but that’s beside the point. I might not like it, but I think I know how to deal with it now. I had plenty of practice with Ron over the summer. Getting him to talk about something that’s bothering him is like pulling teeth. It took me a while, but I finally realize that he’ll open up when he was ready and until then all he really wants is for me to sit there with him while he works it all out in his head. I figure you two are a lot a like in that respect, so here I am. I’m not going to pester you about it. You don’t even have to talk if you don’t want to. It’s fine. I’ll just stand here with you so you’ll know that you aren’t alone, even though you might feel like you are.”

Harry had no idea what to say in return, so he took her advice and remained silent. Not only was he shocked by her unprecedented behavior, he was touched as well. He knew that she had to be itching to talk about it herself.

She probably spent half the day coming up with logical explanations, he reflected.

It was inconceivable that she’d just stand there quietly and not try and use them, but that’s exactly what she did. The longer the silence lasted, the more certain he became that she really meant what she said. She was actually going to stand there with him and say nothing, just because they were friends. That’s when the guilt set it. It came crashing down on him so hard and so fast, he thought he might actually choke on it this time.

“We started Conjuring today,” Hermione said out of the blue after roughly ten minutes of silence had passed. “It was a really good lesson. None of the others managed to produce a toothpick though,” she said rather smugly. “You can read my notes later and I’ll help you with it over the weekend if you like, so you don’t fall behind.”

“We have Quidditch tryouts on Saturday,” Harry answered, praying that she wouldn’t be able to hear what he was feeling in his voice.

“Which explains why you chose this particular spot,” she replied as they both stared out at the impromptu game taking place on the pitch. “Trying to scope out the competition, are you?”
“Something like that,” Harry mumbled. “We could see better if we used the telescopes.”

“No, that’s okay,” Hermione said uncomfortably. “I can see fine from here, but you go ahead,” she said, sliding down the wall and sitting with her knees crossed on the ground as Harry approached the closest telescope.

“You still bicker,” he said after a few minutes of silence. “With Ron, I mean,” he added, still watching the game.

“Oh,” Hermione replied, a guilty smile flashing across her face. “I don’t think that’s something that’s liable to change.”

“But you’re happy?” Harry asked. “I mean, he’s treating you right and looking out for you and everything?”

“He’s been amazing.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t ...you know, there for you and all.”

“Oh Harry,” Hermione cried, rising to her feet quickly. “You shouldn’t feel bad about that. You had more than enough to deal with. The last thing you needed was me blubbering on your shoulder.”

“What about what you needed?” he asked, abandoning the telescope and turning to face her instead.

“I got what I needed.”

“From Ron.”

“I know you think what happened was your fault,” Hermione said. “But it wasn’t. I knew what I was getting myself into when I grabbed that Portkey. I chose to do it.”

“You never would have been in that situation if it wasn’t for me,” Harry said miserably.

“Bellatrix Lestrange tried to use the Killing Curse on me,” Hermione stated bluntly.

This is what Ron was talking about, Harry groaned to himself as he gaped at her in horror.

Frankly he didn’t know what was worse, knowing that they’d tried to kill her or the fact she was so detached that she could just blurt it out as if she were talking about someone else.

“I did goad her into it,” Hermione continued, “but that’s beside the point. The point is, she would have done it if Voldemort hadn’t stopped her. He stopped her, Harry. Because of you. Our friendship is what saved me.”

Whoa. Wait a minute, his mind screamed.

“What?”

“He must have wanted me alive, because I’m important to you,” she explained. “If we weren’t friends, I probably would have ended up just like Dean and Colin and all the others he killed this summer. It isn’t because of you, Harry. I’m a target because I’m Muggle-born. And Ron is a target too. Not just because he’s friends with you, but because of who he is and what he believes in. His entire family is in the Order,” she continued, “and even if they weren’t, sooner or later they’d still be targeted because of all the animosity that exists between them and the Malfoys. Even if we’d never met you, Harry, we’d still be caught up in the middle of this war. I don’t regret being close to you, and neither does Ron. We’re stronger together than we could ever be apart. I know what I’m saying...
probably doesn’t make all that much sense to you right now, but it’s the truth.”

“You have some sort of plan, don’t you?”

“What?” Hermione yelped in surprise. “What makes you think that?”

“Just something Ron mentioned about things you two couldn’t tell me until I mastered Occlumency. He told me I should ask you about it.”

“Did he now?”

“I guess that means he didn’t warn you.”

“It’s just something I’ve been working on,” Hermione muttered uncomfortably. “Something I’ve been researching for a while now. There are still some kinks to work out and even then, I can’t be certain it’ll work. But on the off chance that it will...”

“You don’t want Voldemort finding out through me.”

“I’m sorry Harry.”

“Me too,” he sighed, repulsed by the mere thought of all the groveling he’d have to do to Snape if he wanted to start up his lessons again. “What about that partition thing you do?” he asked. “Think you could teach me how to do that?”

“I don’t see why not,” she replied. “I’d have to research it first. Figure out exactly what it is and how I do it. I should probably do that anyway,” she signed. “But I don’t think it will be enough. Professor Dumbledore told me that it’s possible to break through partitions. I’m sorry. I know that’s not what you wanted to hear.”

“So I have to grovel to Snape?”

“I’d finish reading that book I gave you first. Who knows, you might be able to work it out on your own.”

Life is never that easy, Harry thought as he gazed down at the grounds. “Looks like practice is over,” he said, pointing at the small group of students making their way back to the castle with their brooms slung over their shoulders.

“Is that your subtle way of asking me to leave you alone?”

“Ron told you not to come after me, didn’t he?”

“What Ron says and what I choose to do are two completely different things,” Hermione said with a soft chuckle. “Are you coming down for dinner?” she asked as she started to walk towards the door.

“No.”

“You’re going to have to talk to him eventually.”

“I know.”

“We have rounds tonight,” Hermione reminded him. “At nine. So if you get hungry and want to go down to the kitchen or something, it won’t be a problem.”

“It never is,” Harry replied, pointing at the Invisibility Cloak lying in a heap by the wall.
“Mind if I borrow this?” Hermione asked, stooping over and picking the Marauder’s map up again. “It’ll help with our rounds.”

“Fred and George might try and repossess it,” Harry said with a small smile.

“I won’t tell if you don’t. Although it might be worth it just to see the look on their faces. It’s all right if you don’t want me to,” she said when Harry became sober again.

“Naw, it’s okay.”

“I’ll have Ron put it back before he goes to bed,” Hermione said as she reached out and opened the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning then,” she added, letting him know that she wasn’t going to allow him to skive off any more classes.

“Right,” he muttered, leaning back against the wall as she disappeared through the doorway.
A Lesson in the Nature of Bonding Rituals

Chapter 21: A Lesson in the Nature of Bonding- Rituals

When Ron finally made it back up to Gryffindor Tower after his practice, he was hot, tired, and hungry enough to eat a Hippogriff. What he really needed however, was a shower. Unfortunately his sister had gotten to the Prefects’ bathroom first, so he had to settle for using the one located in his dorm instead.

Luckily Hermione wasn’t in the common room when he showed up dripping with sweat and stinking to high heaven. It wasn’t until he’d showered and was back in his dorm getting dressed that he realized her absence might not have been such a good thing. Especially when he considered the fact that his other best friend was missing as well.

Of course she went after him, Ron thought, as he hastily threw his school uniform back on. She was bound to do it eventually. It’s amazing that she held off as long as she did.

Oh well, he sighed to himself, as he sat down on the edge of his bed and retrieved a fresh pair of socks out of the bottom drawer of the small chest of drawers beside his bed. She can’t say that you didn’t warn her. Still, she’s just going to make things worse.

Ron was just about to reach for his trainers, when he noticed that the small wooden box he’d buried in his sock drawer had come dislodged and was no longer hidden.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, as he stooped over and snatched the box out of the drawer.

I need to find a better place to hide these, he thought, glancing at the door just to make sure it was still closed, before refocusing his attention on the object in his hand. I can’t have anyone else finding them, especially Harry, he thought, as he ran his index finger over the words ‘Toujours pur’, which were carved in the decorative lid. Just knowing that they belonged to Sirius would set him off and then he’d want to know what they are and why I have them. What a pleasant conversation that would be.

I found them in Sirius’ Mum’s room when I was looking for a safe place to hide the dirty little sex book Bill gave me, he explained in his head. I knew that Mum wasn’t liable to ‘decontaminate’ that room, since Buckbeak is living in it, and I knew you’d never go in there, since he reminds you of Sirius, so it seemed fairly safe. It wasn’t like I was rummaging around through the drawers or anything. I just opened the first one I saw and there they were.

Maybe I should have left them there, he reflected, as he opened the lid of the box and stared down at the pair of identical silver pendants pinned to the black velvet lining on the inside of the box, but I think Sirius would understand.

In fact, he’d probably get a huge kick out of it, Ron thought, as he reached down and touched one of the intricately wrought Celtic knots. He’d definitely love the irony; one of the Black Family talismans being used to protect a Muggle-born. Even if it wasn’t Hermione, he’d be all for it, if for no other reason than because it flies in the face of everything his family believed in.

The question is, can I really do it? I’ll have to tell her something. She’s not going to just sit there and let me cut our hands without some type of explanation first.

Telling her that it’s a Protection Charm wouldn’t be a lie, because it will protect her, Ron reasoned. None of those bloody Death Eaters will be able to touch her once I perform the Lànain.
I can just leave out the part about what being bonded really means, but if I do that, I’m no better than they are. And she will find out eventually, he reminded himself, and when she does... he left off the thought with a shudder. At least Mum will kill me outright when she finds out. And Harry? He’d bloody dig me up and bring me back to life, just so he could kill me again.

I have to tell her. Before we take the potion. If I don’t, I’ll make everything Harry said about me true.

“She’s not in there either,” Ron muttered to himself as he left the Library after a through search and made his way down the fourth floor corridor towards to mirror George had told him about in his letter.

He figured that it was a long shot, as Hermione was most likely with Harry and the last place she was going to take him was the secret passageway that she was going to use to brew her secret potion. Still, the hidden chamber was on the same floor as the Library, so he figured he might as well check it out before moving on to other locations. Although truth be told, he had no idea where to look next.

If she’s not in there, he reasoned, looking over his shoulder to make sure he was alone, before pointing his wand at the mirror, there isn’t much more I can do. Other than wait for her in the common room and tell her about it when we’re on our Prefect rounds.

“You are in here,” Ron said, sounding more than a little surprised when he pushed the mirrored door open and spotted Hermione sitting on the floor of the small chamber all by herself. “I thought you might be with Harry,” he added, slipping into the room and closing the door behind him.

“In here?” Hermione questioned, looking up from the blanket on which she was sitting.

“Well, neither of you were at dinner, so I thought I’d check the Library on my way back up to the common room,” Ron explained, stepping up behind her and staring down at the book in her lap. “Only you weren’t in there either and since this chamber is just down the hall, I figured I might as well check for you here before I went back up,” he continued. “So,” he said rather ineptly, “you’re obviously not with Harry.

“And you were hoping that I was?” Hermione asked, as she reached into her rucksack and started pulling out the ingredients she was going to need when she started brewing the Coupling Potion.

“Sorta,” Ron admitted, as he sat down beside her. “He’s not in the dorm, or the common room, or the Great Hall, or even the Library,” he said, trying not to sound as concerned as he felt. “At least if you were with him, I’d know that he didn’t run off or do something stupid.”

“The last time I checked, Harry was still in the Astronomy Tower,” Hermione replied, pulling the Marauder’s Map out of her bag and depositing it in Ron’s lap, before turning her attention back her book.

“I can’t believe you,” Ron said, sounding more than a little impressed as he snatched the map up, flipped it open and started searching for the dot labeled ‘Harry Potter’. “You actually snuck into our dorm and nicked his map. Why didn’t I think of that?” he asked as he watched the representation of his best friend pace back and forth in the Astronomy Tower.

“I didn’t...” Hermione started to object and then caught herself. “Well, all right, I did,” she amended, purposely keeping her eyes on the potion ingredients in front of her, hoping he wouldn’t notice her face flush in the dimly lit room. “But only because he was hiding from us and I wanted to find him. I gave it back as soon as I found him,” she added, as if that made it all right. “Only I asked him if I
could borrow it again so we could use it on our rounds tonight.”

“So you could keep and eye on him, you mean?”

“That too,” Hermione admitted. “And because I needed to get some things out of the student store cupboard and then get everything down here without being seen.”

“So you went after Harry?”

“Yes.”

“While I was out on the pitch?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re not the least bit sorry?”

“Why should I be?” Hermione asked frankly.

“You went behind my back,” Ron replied.

“No, I didn’t,” she argued, her ingredients all but forgotten now. “You knew that I was going to go after him,” she countered, as she shifted the book that had been resting in her lap to the ground. “I had to wait until I finished all of my classes and by then you just happened to be out on the pitch.”

“Bollocks,” he retorted. “Even if you hadn’t had Arithmancy today, you still would have waited until I went down to the pitch.”

“So?” she shot back quickly. “You still knew that I was going to do it, so it wasn’t behind your back. Besides,” she added, “you’re the one that just got done telling me that you hoped I was with him, so I know you aren’t upset that I did it.”

She’s got you there, Ron thought to himself. You’re just trying to pick a fight so she’ll get angry and storm off, because that way you won’t have to tell her about the Lânain.

“And?” he finally asked.

“And what?” Hermione replied.

“What happened?”

“I didn’t try and lecture him if that’s what you’re worried about,” she stated quickly. “Yelling at him obviously wasn’t going to work and neither was trying to explain, so I just...sat there with him so he’d know that he wasn’t alone.”

“You just sat there?” Ron asked skeptically. “And you didn’t say anything? The entire time? No way. That’s impossible,” he teased. “You couldn’t just sit there and not say anything. It would drive you mad.”

“I’ve sat with you plenty of times and not said anything.”

“Yeah,” Ron laughed, “when we’re snogging.”

“There’ve been other times.”

“You mean like when you have your head shoved in a book?”
“Do you want me to give you the silent treatment?” Hermione asked, narrowing her eyes and giving him a contemptuous look even though she knew he was just playing around. “Is that it?” she asked, pretending to be more offended than she really was. “Keep it up and I’ll be only too happy to oblige you.”

“No, don’t,” Ron begged. “If you do that I won’t have anyone to talk to.”

“It would serve you right.”

“You’re not really mad at me, are you, love?” he asked as Hermione refocused her attention on her book. “No, you’re not,” he added with more confidence, when she clucked at him and started comparing the ingredients set out in front of her to the itemized list that proceeded the recipe for the Coupling Potion.

But you will be shortly, Ron thought, as he took a deep breath and tried to mentally prepare himself for what was about to come.

Just do it you coward. If you don’t, she’ll find out on her own and then you’ll really be in trouble. Just tell her now and get it over with. You have to do it before she starts the potion, or she’ll know that you were hiding it on purpose. DO IT!

“You haven’t actually started on that yet, have you?” Ron asked, pointing down at her copy of *Most Potente Potions*.

“No,” Hermione replied, without looking up. “I wanted to make sure that I had everything that I’d need first. I wasn’t going to start it until later tonight, when we were on our rounds.”

“Um,” Ron muttered uncomfortably, “there’s something that I... uh... sorta need to tell you first.”

That certainly got her attention, he thought when Hermione’s head snapped up and she locked her questioning eyes on his.

“You’ve changed your mind?” she said, setting her book aside again and studying him closely.

“No,” he replied anxiously. “I definitely want to do it. Only...um... you might not want to... once I tell you what I need to tell you.”

“Well?” Hermione asked when Ron didn’t say anything else. “Are you going to tell me or not?”

“It’s not that easy,” he responded as he stood up, averted his eyes, and began to fidget uncomfortably.

“Why not?” Hermione demanded.

“Because it isn’t.”

“I know it’s going to be... strange,” she said, standing up herself and crossing the small space until she was right in front of him, “being connected all the time. It’s only natural you’d be concerned that I’ll know everything you’re feelings. There are some things we just naturally want to keep private. I understand that. I’ll try not to get... jealous or anything when I sense that you’re... attracted to other girls. It’s a natural response and it doesn’t really mean anything so...”

“Bloody Hell!” Ron swore loudly, cutting her off before she had a chance to finish. “I never even thought about that. You’re not attracted to anyone else in our year, are you?” he asked in a booming voice.
“Who is it?” he demanded, when she didn’t reply to his question fast enough. “Seamus? No wait, it’d be someone smart. One of those posh Ravenclaw wankers. Boot? He’s a bit of a pretty boy. Or Goldstein? He’s a Prefect.”

“So are you,” Hermione reminded him in a sardonic voice.

“Wait,” he cried, ignoring her comment completely. “I know who it is. It’s that swotty brown-noser, Macmillian. He’s totally your type. The haughty Head-Boy wannabe.”

“Ron.”

“Just let him try and make a move. I’ll bloody kill him. If he thinks he can just--”

“Oh for Heaven’s sake,” Hermione cried, grabbing Ron’s tie, yanking him forward, and cutting off the rest of his rant with a rather forceful kiss.

“For some reason I don’t quite understand at the moment,” she whispered, once she had disengaged her lips from his, “I’m attracted to very thick redheads with jealous streaks a mile long. The last time I checked, Ernie Macmillian didn’t fall into that category,” she added, releasing her hold on his tie. “Besides, if I had wanted a haughty Head-Boy wannabe, I could have set my sights on one of your brothers.”

“HERMIONE!” Ron cried in horror. “Don’t even joke about things like that. The thought of you and Percy--”

“I was talking about Bill,” she replied, sounding somewhat sickened herself.

“BILL!” Ron shrieked. “He’s way too old for you.”

“Yes, he is,” Hermione agreed, realizing she’d made a mistake and that she needed to change the subject before he had a chance to misconstrue what she’d said and convince himself that she was seriously comparing him to his brothers. “And he’s not the Weasley I want,” she added for good measure. “He just happens to be the one that reminds me the most of you.”

And I compare them to you, not the other way around, she thought.

“You’re the one that I want, Ron,” she said, pressing herself against him again and weaving her fingers into his thick red hair. “Not your brothers,” she added, dropping her mouth to his neck and giving it a feather light kiss, “or Terry Boot, or Ernie Macmillian, or anyone else. Just you,” she said, while looking straight into his deep blue eyes. “It’s always been you,” she insisted, just before she pulled his head down and reclaimed his lips.

In that split second Ron was lost and everything that he’d wanted to say was forgotten. All that mattered to him now was this. He wanted to loose himself in her kiss; surrender everything and offer himself up to her. She wanted him and in that instant he was hers, completely, and it felt wonderful. It felt right.

This is the way it’s supposed to be, he thought, running one hand down her back and pulling her closer as he plunged his tongue between her parted lips. This is what I want. This is all I need. As long as I have her, I have everything.

Hermione must have come to a similar conclusion because even as the words formed in Ron’s head, she gave them voice.

“I love you,” she sighed happily, but her declaration elicited surprising results. Without warning, Ron
abruptly abandoned her mouth, removed his hands from her body, and took a step away from her.

“What is it?” Hermione asked, alarmed when she felt him withdraw. “What’s wrong?”

“We... um... still need to talk,” Ron replied dolefully.

“You want to talk now?” she asked, not only shocked by his unexpected response, but also highly concerned. “We have rounds soon, can’t it wait until then?”

“No.”

This is not good, Hermione thought, as she unconsciously bit her bottom lip and tried to figure out what to do. She could feel her heart hammering against her chest and it had nothing to do with their heated kiss. Ron needed to tell her something and it was obvious from his behavior that he didn’t want to say whatever it was, which scared her. “All right,” she agreed, almost before she realized she’d even spoken. The chamber they were standing in suddenly seemed very tight and stuffy. She had an overwhelming feeling that the walls were about to come tumbling down and all she wanted to do was bolt before it could happen, but somehow she forced herself to stand her ground. “What is it?” she asked as she took a deep breath and tried not to let her concern show.

“Well...er.... you see...”

“Just say it,” Hermione said, with the air of someone who wanted to get the worst over with.

“I... I don’t know how.”

“Just say it,” she repeated, her head bent and her eyes locked on the ground.

Ron had always worn his heart on his sleeves. Most of the time his emotions were right out there for everyone to see. She didn’t need a Coupling Potion to know what he was feeling; she’d seen the guilt etched across his face. She just didn’t understand why it was there. Why would he feel guilty about snogging her unless he was about to end things between them. But that didn’t make any sense. He still wanted to take to potion. He’d said so and not five minutes ago and he’d been shouting about Ernie Macmillian. Maybe he just thought they should cool things off a bit until Harry was more comfortable with the idea. Whatever it was, Hermione was now certain that she didn’t want to be looking at him when he said it.

“Um... here,” Ron said, shoving his hand into one of the inside pockets of his robes, producing an intricately carved wooden box, and plopping it into her hands.

“What’s this?” Hermione asked, glancing at the box briefly before snapping her head up and giving him a questioningly look. “My birthday isn’t until next week.”

“I know that,” he said, reaching down and flipping the lid open to reveal a pair of intricately wrought silver charms.

“They’re beautiful,” Hermione said softly, as she stared at the pair of Celtic knots, “but you shouldn’t have. You can’t aff--”

“I didn’t buy them,” Ron interjected quickly. “I took them from Grimmauld Place.”

“You stole my birthday present?” she asked, looking at him reproachfully.
“Those aren’t your birthday present,” he said somewhat defensively, “but I did nick them. It’s not like there are any Blacks left to use them,” he added when she pursed her lips together in disapproval. “If I’d left them there, sooner or later Mum would have found them and when she did, she would have tossed them in the bin just like she did everything else.

“You can’t keep these,” Hermione said, closing the box and handing it back to Ron. “They aren’t yours. You should give them to Tonks. She’s related to Sirius. These belong to her.”

“Tonks wouldn’t touch those things with a ten-foot pole,” Ron said, crossing his arms in front of his chest and refusing to reclaim the box.

“Why not?” Hermione asked. “They’re just Celtic Shield Knots; a symbol of protection.”

“No Hermione, they’re not.”

“All right,” she conceded, after popping the lid open and taking a closer look. “They’ve been inverted, but other than that, they’re the same. Protection charms don’t really work, you know? It doesn’t matter how intricate the knot is, or how many times the lines cross, they’re not going to ward off evil.”

“These will work,” he insisted. “Once we perform the ritual.”

“What ritual?” Hermione asked, wrinkling her brow up in confusion. “I’ve never heard of a protection ritual.”

“You see the hearts?” Ron asked, tracing a pattern in the center of one of the knots with his index finger. “Conjoined here in the center? That’s the symbol for the Lànain,” he said, withdrawing his hand. “These are Lànain talismans.”

“The what? Wait a minute. You’ve mentioned that to me once before. What’s the Lànain and why haven’t I ever heard of it?”

“It’s... um... not exactly something that decent people talk about,” Ron admitted, his face and ears flushing significantly. “If Mum knew I was having this discussion with you she’d kill me. I’m only doing it because...well... the Lànain is a bonding ritual and it’s similar to what you want to do with that potion.”

“Similar how?” Hermione asked, staring at the charms suspiciously. “Are you telling me that those things will bind our souls together?”

“Not our souls, no.”

“Then what?” she demanded, her eyes focusing on the intersecting hearts in the center. “Our hearts?”

“The Lànain isn’t about love,” Ron replied, averting his eyes and picking at one of the buttons on his shirt so he wouldn’t have to see her face when he said it. “It’s about... er.... well, it’s not exactly...um... Oh hell, it’s about ownership.”

“EXCUSE ME!” Hermione shouted angrily. “Ownership of what?”


“You mean those things... that ritual... it’s used to create *slaves*?” she shrieked, looking down at the box in her hands with disgust before dropping it on the ground.
“No wait,” Ron cried, realizing that he’d just made a huge mistake. “This isn’t going right.”

“Is it or is it not about slavery?” Hermione hissed.

“Not the way you mean. You’re getting me all twisted up. Just stop screeching at me for a minute and let me explain, will ya?”

“You’ve got exactly one minute,” she replied, crossing her arms in front of her chest, leaning back against the hard stone wall, and glowering at him.

“It’s not like I created the ritual, you know?” Ron cried defensively. “You don’t see the name Weasley carved on the top of that box, so stop looking at me like that. I’m not trying to turn you into my bloody slave or anything. Besides, this whole bond thing was your idea. I’m just trying to explain what it means.”

“What what means?”

“In the Wizarding World when two people create a lasting magical bond, like you’re trying to do with that potion,” he said, pointing down at her copy of *Most Potente Potions*, “you...um...you’re sorta... well... married,” he finished, forcing the last word out so quickly that it was all but impossible for her to understand him.

“You’re what?”

“Married,” Ron repeated with a loud sigh.

“That’s absurd,” Hermione exclaimed, rolling her eyes at the ceiling.

“I’m dead serious,” he cried resentfully. Not only had she dismiss what he’d told her, she had the gall to roll her eyes at him as if he were the one that was the idiot. “As far as anyone in the Wizarding World is concerned, if we drink that potion and maintain the connection instead of letting it wear off, we will be married.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Hermione scoffed. “We’re not old enough to get married.”

“Yes we are,” Ron insisted. “The Lànain is an ancient ritual. It was created by pure-blood fanatics hundreds of years ago to maintain the purity of their bloodline. People got married when they were younger back then. As long as we’re old enough to produce an heir, it’s legal.”

“But... no it’s not,” she said dismissively. “You need witnesses for a marriage to be legal for one thing.”

“In the Muggle World maybe.”

“Are you telling me that you don’t have witnesses at a magical wedding?”

“I’m not talking about a wedding,” he snapped. “I’m talking about a binding ceremony. It’s not the same thing, Hermione. It’s... different. People come to your wedding to help you celebrate your love. They’re not there to make it legal. It’s the vows that are important; the commitment you make when you promise to share your life with someone else. It doesn’t matter if anyone else hears that promise or not. It’s the intent behind the vows that matters. But that’s not what I’m talking about. The Lànain is different. It has nothing to do with love. It’s about maintaining the purity of your bloodline. The Wizards that created it were pure-blood fanatics. They weren’t looking for life partners; they were looking for brood mares.”
“EXCUSE ME!” Hermione shouted resentfully.

“Our kind would have died out if we hadn’t started marrying Muggles. Only families like the Malfoys and the Blacks, with their pure-blood mania, didn’t see it that way. They view Muggles as a different race; an inferior race, and anyone that didn’t believe what they believed was labeled a ‘blood-traitor’. But with more and more Wizards marrying Muggles, the ancient bloodlines became ‘tainted.’ That’s their word by the way, not mine. And it got harder and harder for them to find suitable pure-blood wives.”

“A lot of pure-blood families had arranged marriages back then, so most of the desirable girls were spoken for almost as soon as they were born. And those that weren’t, had families that you had to deal with. What with suitable girls being so hard to come by, you could bet that there were other blokes negotiating with those girls’ fathers at the same time you were, so there were no guarantees. In the end, the bloke with the most money was usually the one that got the girl.”

“Rather than go through all that hassle and come away with nothing, some sick sod came up with the Lânain instead. Mostly it was used on ‘blood-traitor’, who were technically suitable, but didn’t care about ‘maintaining their purity’. Those girls were targeted first, because it was easier for them to justify it. They could claim that they were saving her from and unsuitable marriage and that they were saving the Wizarding Race by keeping the bloodlines pure.”

“So someone came up with this nasty little spell and if you saw a girl with the right pedigree, who was unspoken for or about to be given to someone you viewed as inferior, you could just take her; against her will; without her parents permission, and use the Lânain to bind her to you magically. Once the ritual was performed, there wasn’t a lot the girl’s family could do about it. I mean, they could protest and force the smarmy bugger to release her, but by then the damage was already done. Even if the creep released her from the bond, her reputation was ruined. No one wanted a girl that had been married and divorced back then, even if it had been against her will.”

“That was hundreds of years ago,” Hermione said, her voice dripping with disgust. “Women aren’t viewed as property anymore. We have rights. They can’t possibly do something like that now. It can’t be legal.”

“What do you think Sirius’s Mum had these for?” Ron asked, as he bent over and snatched the discarded box up off the ground. “They’re not just pretty antique relics. Some of the ancient families still use them. I’d wager Malfoy’s got himself one. His mates too, not that they’ll ever find anyone to use them on. But the practice has evolved a bit since it was created. I mean, Crabbe and Goyle can’t exactly go out and steal girls away from their families anymore. Like you said, women have rights now and the pure-blood maniacs aren’t in control of the Ministry. They’d never be able to get away with something like that unless...”

“Unless what?” Hermione asked, despite the fact she knew exactly what he was talking about. Unless Voldemort’s in control, she finished for him in her head. “That’s why you’re so protective of Ginny,” she said, her eyes going wide as the pieces started to come together in her mind.

“You’re damn right it is,” Ron growled. “If anyone tries to do something like that to my baby sister, I’ll bloody kill him. And I’ll have five VERY angry brothers backing me up. I don’t care who’s in power. Anyone stupid enough to try that is dead. Although knowing Ginny, she’s likely to finish the bugger off herself before the rest of us even have a go. She definitely wouldn’t submit without a fight, but that’s the thing. Not all girls fight it. From what I’ve heard, some of the old families still perform the Lânain in front of other people as part of a more traditional wedding ceremony.”

“No woman in her right mind would willingly submit herself to something so... barbaric?”
"I never said that they were in her right minds," Ron retorted. "I’m talking about girls that have had this rubbish ingrained into them from birth. They’ve been taught to accept this; to want it. They believe that it’s their duty to maintain the purity of their bloodlines. The Lànain is one way to make sure that happens. Once the ritual is performed and the woman is bound to her husband she...er... Well, it’s basically impossible for her to cheat on her husband."

“When you perform the ritual, you tie a portion of yourself; a portion of your own magic into your partner,” Ron explained. “Once that’s been done, it’s virtually impossible for her to sleep around. If she were with another man, her husband would know. Not only that, he’d be able to prevent it. I’m not exactly sure how it works. I think it’s sorta like wandless magic. But it does work. If you don’t want another bloke to touch your wife, he can’t. It’s as simple as that.”

“Are you telling me that no man will EVER be able to touch her again?”

“No. No, it’s not like that. She doesn’t have a permanent shield that repels men or anything. Other blokes can touch her unless her husband prevents it. It’s has to be a conscious decision on his part. He has to use his magic, which is embedded in the charm, to repel them.”

“Then a smart woman would take the charm off before she was unfaithful.”

“She can’t. The talisman is enchanted. Only the person that put it on can take it off. It’s the magic in the talisman that maintains the link between them. If you take it off, the bond is broken and the woman is free. So they went to great lengths to make sure that she couldn’t get it off by herself. There are only two ways to get the talisman off once the ritual has been performed. Her husband can take it off himself,” Ron said, holding up one finger, “or you can kill the smarmy bastard, in which case it falls off all on its own,” he added, holding up another finger. “Option number two is actually the preferred method used by ‘blood traitors’ of old. Go figure.”

“That’s appalling,” Hermione snapped, horrified that such a tyrannical and demeaning practice was not only allowed, but still used in the modern world. “Why on earth did you take those things and why are you telling me all this?” she asked, narrowing her eyes and glaring at him warily.

“Well...um.... no wait,” Ron said, holding his hands out in front of himself the instant he saw her bristle. “Hear me out first.”

“ARE YOU INSANE!!??”

“We’re going to be married anyway,” Ron said, unconsciously taking a step away from her. “Just think of it as a protection charm.”

Hermione could probably count the number of times that Ron had rendered her speechless on one hand and still have fingers left over, but this was definitely one of those times. Her mind actually went blank for a moment and all she could do was stand there and stare at him, her mouth open in stunned disbelief.

The first word to actually pop into her staggered mind was ‘what.’ It just kept playing over and over and over again in a vicious loop. Finally she realized that it wasn’t going to do any good if she kept asking herself that question, so she turned it on Ron.

“WHAT!”

“Well, we will be,” he said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, “once we take that potion.”

“Ron,” she whispered, “you’re really starting to scare me now. You can’t seriously believe that.”
“I’m telling you Hermione, as far as anyone in the Wizarding World is concerned, if we drink that potion we will be married.”

“No. We. Won’t.”

“Yes, we will.”

“We’re not old enough.”

“In the Muggle World, but in the Wizarding World, technically we are. I already told you, none of that other stuff matters. All that will matters is that we’ve bound ourselves together magically, by blood, and intent, and er... you know, the uh... sex part.”

“Is that so?” she snapped, unwilling to accept what he was telling her. “You show me where it says we’ll be married if we drink this potion,” she demanded, snatching her copy of *Most Potente Potions* up of the ground and shoving it under his nose.

“You’re not going to find that in your bloody book,” Ron shot back. “If it were just this potion,” he said, pointing down at the open page, “without the other stuff you’re going to add, it wouldn’t count. I read your notes remember and we’re not talking about a basic Coupling Potion, are we? You’ll change the nature of the spell when you add your blood and my... er... well, you know what I’m talking about. I’m telling you, that changes everything. This,” he said, pointing at her book again, “is a temporary bond. What you are suggesting is more permanent. Not only that, we’ll be maintaining it by being... er... you know... intimate. Love... lasting magical bond...intimacy. It might not be legal in the Muggle World, but I am telling you that in ours that is considered a legally binding marriage.”

“YOU’VE KNOWN ABOUT THIS FOR A MONTH AND YOU’RE JUST TELLING ME ABOUT IT NOW!”

“When I first read your notes I assumed that you knew,” he tried to explain. “I mean you know everything. And when I figured out that you didn’t, I realized I’d have to tell you, but before I could work out how to go about doing it, Mum came bursting in, and we found out about the attacks, and then Harry showed up, and well, you know the rest. The point is, I did tell you.”

“Right before I’m about to brew the potion,” she reminded him.

“So?” Ron shot back quickly. “There’s no reason you can’t still brew it. It’s only the basic potion, after all. I mean you don’t have to add all the other stuff unless you want to. It’s not like I’m going to force you or anything,” he added, sounding more than a little offended.

“I know you need to think about it from like a million different angles before you actually make a decision. I didn’t expect you to agree to it right away or anything. And if you decide that you don’t want to, that’s fine too. We’ll just save the basic potion and use it when we need it. It’ll wear off, but it’s better than nothing, right?” he said, dropping his head a bit and staring down at his feet so she wouldn’t be able to see the disappointment he was feeling.

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?” she asked, still taken aback by the entire conversation. “You’re actually okay with this? You still want to do it, even if it means we’ll be... married.”

“Well, yeah,” he replied, shuffling his feet uncomfortably.

“How can you possibly be okay with it?” Hermione demanded.

“What do you mean?” Ron asked, managing to sound both irritated and defensive. “Why shouldn’t I be?”
“Oh gee, I don’t know,” Hermione retorted. “How about the fact that we’ve only been together for a couple months.”

“We’ve been together for six years, Hermione.”

“WHAT!” she cried in shock.

There’s that word again. Can’t you think of anything better to say? she scolded herself.

“No we haven’t,” she insisted.

“All right,” Ron conceded, “I suppose first year doesn’t really count, but it’s still been five. That’s way longer than most couples.”

“You’re mad.”

“Mad am I?” Ron asked, hurt by her flippant response. “You’re the one that told me that it’s always been me, or was that a lie?”

“Of course it wasn’t,” she assured him. “How can you even ask me that?”

“So when did you... first realize it?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione answered with a sigh.

“Second year,” Ron shot back, “when you were attacked by the Basilisk.”

“What?” she asked, looking up at him in surprise.

“I didn’t really recognize it for what it was then, but that was when I first knew. Only I didn’t know that I knew. Back then I just knew that I’d almost lost you and it hurt. But when I look back on it now and remember how I felt... it was the same way I felt last year when they lifted that spell off of me in the Department of Mysteries, and saw you, and I thought that you were.... gone. It was the same feeling, only it was worse. It was so much worse.”

“It was first year,” Hermione said in a near whisper, brushing away the tears that had formed in her eyes. “The chess game,” she continued, “when you sacrifice yourself. That was the first time I felt it,” she admitted. “And when Sirius pulled you into the Shrieking Shack, only I didn’t know what it was either. This is crazy, Ron. You know that it is.”

“And trying to block the Killing Curse isn’t?”

“That’s different.”

“It doesn’t have to be real,” Ron sighed, purposely avoiding her eyes, but unable to keep the pain he was feeling out of his voice. “Not if you don’t want it to be. It’s not like things will suddenly change between us or anything,” he continued, trying to rationalize it to himself as well as her. “We’ll just go on as we are now and no one else will ever know. We can just pretend that were not... until the war is over and when the threat is gone, we’ll just let the bond dissolve, and...”

“And what?” she asked sorrowfully. *Why does the thought of doing it and then pretending that we didn’t hurt so much?* she wondered.

“We’ll just take it from there, I guess.”

“In other words, we’ll end our secret marriage and continue to date?”
“If it’s what you want,” Ron said, looking down at his feet again. “It’s not like you have to decide now or anything. It’ll take a month to brew the potion and if you’re still undecided after that, we’ll just save it in its basic form. So um...,” he said, picking at his robes as he tried to change the subject. “It’s almost time for our rounds and I told you that I’d do them by myself, that is if you’re still planning on getting started on this tonight. You don’t have to, of course. So uh... do you know what you want to do?” he asked. “I mean are you coming with me or staying here?”

“Here,” Hermione replied, retrieving the Marauder’s Map from the floor and handing it to Ron. “You better take this? That way you can keep an eye out and avoid Filch,” she explained when he gave her a puzzled look. “If he sees that I’m not with you it could lead to some awkward questions.”

“What about you?” Ron asked, taking the map from her outstretched hand.

“I’ll be in here working on the potion,” she replied as if it ought to be obvious.

“No, I mean how are you going to know when it’s safe to leave if I have the map?”

“Oh,” Hermione said. “Just come back for me in about an hour or so,” she replied, settling back down on the blanket in front of her cauldron. “I should be done adding the initial ingredients by then.”

“All right,” Ron agreed, scooping the box containing the Lânain talismans off the ground and shoving it back into his pocket, before turning around, and moving towards the back of the mirrored door he’d entered through. “Hey,” he said in surprise, as he stared down at the map in his hand and did a quick scan of the fourth floor corridors just to make sure no one was outside the chamber he was about to exit. “There are words here,” he added, as he watched a minute figure labeled ‘Ronald Weasley’ tap the backside of the mirror with his wand just before a tiny speech bubble appeared.

“Percludulum Specularis,” Ron said, pulling out his wand and reading the spell off the map as he mimicked the sketch.

“Wicked,” he cried, when the backside of the mirror suddenly became transparent and he realized that he could see into the deserted hallway. “That’s convenient, isn’t it?”

“As long as it’s still mirrored on the other side and you didn’t turn it into a window,” Hermione replied, peering at the doorway over her shoulder and scanning the corridor herself.

“What would be the point of that?” Ron asked, glancing down at the map again just to make sure no one was about to walk around the corner or anything, then shoving the mirrored door open, and checking the other side. “Yeah it’s still mirrored on this side,” he said, as he slipped out into the hallway. “You can see me though, right?”

“Yes,” Hermione called back just loud enough for him to hear.

“Good,” Ron replied, sticking his head back inside the small room she was hiding in. “Now you’ll be able to see me when I come back and you can unlock the door. You are going to Imperturb the mirror once I’m gone, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Ron replied. “So I’ll see you in about an hour then,” he said, pulling his head back before she had a chance to reply and pushing the mirrored door closed.
Author’s Notes:

Anyone that wants to see what the actual Lànain talisman looks like can find a pic of it here.

http://roguesugah.homestead.com/files/lanain.gif

It’s basically a symbol of protection that the ancient Celts used to decorate their warrior’s shields with, hence the term... “sheild knot”. All I’ve done is flip it upside down so that the single point is at the top instead of the bottom.
Chapter 22: Shortcomings

“Hermione?” Ginny called out softly, as she walked down the aisle between the book stacks in the Library searching for her friend. “Are you in here?” she asked, but received no answer. “Hermione?” she called a little louder. It was early morning and classes were set to start soon, which meant the room was pretty much deserted. Even Madam Pince was absent.

She’s probably down at breakfast, she thought, explaining away the Librarian’s lack of attendance as she moved out of the stacks to check the more secluded tables located in the back of the Library.

“There you are,” Ginny said, when she spotted the bushy head buried behind a small mountain of books. “What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like I’m doing?” Hermione snapped, slamming the book she’d been skimming closed with a sigh of exasperation.

There’s nothing about Bonding Rituals in this one either, she thought as she heaved the useless tome into the pile to her left and selected a new one from the stack on her right.

“It looks like you’re trying to read your way through the Library before classes start,” Ginny shot back, eyeing the huge stack of books scattered across the desk. “How long have you been down here?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione replied, flipping through the text in front of her. “What time is it now?”

“Half past eight,” Ginny said, glancing down at her watch and missing the startled expression on her friend’s face. “You missed breakfast. Ron was worried. Not that he’d admit it. He did ask me to look for you in here though. Don’t know why he didn’t just do it himself. Did you two have a fight or something?”

“No,” her brother answered from behind her as he emerged from the stacks himself. “There was just somewhere else I thought I’d look first.”

“Was Harry at breakfast,” Hermione asked, abandoning her pile of books and rising to her feet.

“Nope,” Ron replied causally as Hermione approached him. “He must have gone down early,” he continued, “because he wasn’t in our room when I woke up.”

“I was in the common room until six. I never saw him,” Hermione replied.

“Until six?” Ginny asked, “Meaning you were up before that?”

“You did at least go to bed, didn’t you?” Ron asked.

“Of course I did,” Hermione replied.

Not that I got much sleep, she continued in her head. If only I could ask Ginny about this Bonding Ritual rubbish without rousing her suspicions. Damned Weasley tenacity. She’s just like her brother. Once she gets it in her head that she wants to know something, she’s relentless. If I ask her about the Lânain, I’ll have to tell her about the potion, and then she’ll want to protect Harry, and Ron will go ballistic. Guess I’m just going to have to figure this out on my own.
“We should probably get going, or we’re liable to be late.” Ginny said, studying to pair closely as she spoke. There was more going on than what she saw on the surface and she knew it. The problem was that her brother and his girlfriend were so astute at reading each other, they could practically communicate without speaking when they wanted to. All they were doing was looking at one another, but that look carried a message Ginny couldn’t decipher and she found it highly annoying.

“Right,” Ron agreed, grabbing Hermione’s hand as they followed Ginny through the stacks and holding her back just enough to ensure his sister was out of ear shot.

“You aren’t going to find what you’re looking for in here,” he whispered as they approached the door together. “What you want is most likely in there,” he added, nodding his head towards the Restricted Section. “And I doubt Madam Pince will just hand something like that over, not even to you.”

DAMN IT! Hermione swore to herself, hating the fact that he was probably right.

“So I guess you’re just going to have to take my word on it.”

“Oh, I believe you,” she whispered back. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to research it anyway.”

“Planning to sneak into the Restricted Section, are you?”

“No,” Hermione replied, as an even better idea suddenly occurred to her.

I’ll just have to pay the Room of Requirement a little visit.

As the three Gryffindors entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, the first thing Ginny noticed was that Harry was already seated in the back row. This struck her as odd, not just because he’d actually showed up for class, which did surprise her, but because he normally sat up front. The fact that he’d gone out of his way to sit by himself, as far away from his normal spot as possible, said far more about his state of mind than his crossed arms and silent stare. Obviously he wasn’t ready to forgive them yet.

Stubborn prat, she thought, flopping down in her seat with a sigh and turning her back to him. Go ahead and be that way then.

Her brother evidently agreed with her, because he didn’t even bother to look at Harry as he slid into the seat beside her. His eyes were glued on Hermione, who oddly enough remained standing.

Ginny watched Hermione glanced up at Harry briefly before locking her eyes on Ron once more. That’s when she realized they were doing that silent communication thing again, only this time she noticed the subtle way her brother cocked his head in Harry’s direction and realized what he wanted. Hermione obviously got the message as well, because she dipped her head once in agreement, gave Ginny a quick smile, then pushed past them both, moved towards the back of the room, and sat down next to Harry.

“All right, I think that’s enough practice,” Tonks called out loudly nearly forty minutes later. She waited until the students that were dispersed across the D.A.D.A. classroom had both heard her and had stopped Conjuring Patroni, before she motioned for them to join her in the center of the room.
“You all seem to have a fairly good handle on it now,” she added, using her wand to Summon the suitcase that had been hidden under her desk as they gathered around. “Let’s see how well you lot do against something that will fight back,” she suggested, lowering the case to the ground. “Who wants to go first?” she asked, stepping back and taking in the startled expressions on most of her students’ faces. “Anyone? Oh come on, where’s that infamous Gryffindor courage?”

“I’ll do it,” Harry said, taking a step forward and separating himself from the rest of the group.

“Not exactly going to be much of a challenge for you now, is it?” Tonks replied, as she stepped behind the suitcase and held up her wand. “But I suppose it might be good for them to see how it works on something that’s moving.”

“Pay close attention, you lot,” she instructed, as she brandished her wand at the suitcase and the lock keeping it closed fell to the ground, “because each and every one of you is going to have a go before we’re through today. Ready?” she asked Harry, who was now standing directly in front of the rattling piece of luggage.

“Yup,” he replied, fixing his eyes on the lid and holding his wand out in front of himself with a steady hand.

“Do try and remember that it’s not the real thing, won’t you, Potter?” Tonks added with a smirk as she crouched down and grasped the lid. “I don’t have time traipse all over the castle hunting for another Boggart if you dispatch this one,” she said, just before she flung the lid back.

The temperature in the room immediately dropped a good ten degrees as a huge figure covered head to toe in billowing black robes rose out of the suitcase and hovered in the air before them. The only noise that could be heard in the room, other than very audible gasp that came from Lavender Brown, was the raspy sucking sounds the Dementor was making.

“Expecto Patronum!” Harry cried, just as a slimy looking hand covered in scabby grayish skin slipped out of its robes and reached out for him. The instant the incantation left Harry’s mouth, an enormous silver stag shot out of the tip of his wand, but rather than advance, it simply lowered it’s head, pointed it’s antlers at the creature in warning, a stood it’s ground.

“It’s as easy as that,” Tonks said encouragingly. “So, who’s next? What about you, Hermione?”

“Me?” Hermione moaned, unconsciously shrinking back and stepping on Neville’s foot in the process. “No...I ... I can’t.”

“Just focus on your happy thought,” Tonks instructed.

“I can’t,” Hermione said again, staring at the hovering form with trepidation. “That’s the problem,” she added, knowing that she didn’t have to explain herself any further, because her professor already knew why she was so distracted.

“If you can’t hold on to your happy thought when faced with a Boggart, you’ll never be able to do it with a real Dementor,” Tonks replied. “I know it’s not easy, but you have to put your fear aside.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” Ron said, nudging Neville out of the way so he could step up beside her.

“No, I can’t,” she whispered. “I don’t want to see it again.”

“As long as Harry stays where he is, the Boggart will react to him,” Tonks reminded her.
“I’m right here,” Ron whispered, placing one hand on her shoulder and giving her a light shove. “All you have to do is turn around and I’ll be right here,” he said softly as he followed her into the center of the room.

“Harry, move to the side just a bit,” Tonks instructed, “and get rid of your stag. As long as it has a clear path, it’ll go for Hermione.”

“Are you sure?” Harry asked Tonks, stepping to the side, but making sure that his patronus remained between Hermione and the Boggart-Dementor.

“Hermione?” he asked, his striking green eyes seeking out hers for a sign of reassurance.

“Just... give me a second,” Hermione replied, closing her eyes and concentrating on the memory she’d been using to Conjure her own Patronus.

She was kneeling on the floor in Ron’s bedroom. The room was pitch black, but it didn’t matter. She’d just escaped. She was safe. She was in his arms and everything was going to be all right. Ron’s hands were intertwined with hers and she finally found the courage she needed to tell him her deepest secret. When she started to ramble on about it, he told her to shut up and then he kissed her.

“All right,” Hermione said, pulling her wand up in front of herself as she tried to remember exactly how she’d felt when he pulled away and whispered, ‘I love you too.’

Harry studied Hermione closely for a moment, obviously still concerned, then turned his gaze to Tonks, who simply nodded. He glanced at Hermione one last time, then lowered his wand with a sigh, and watched as his shimmering stag vanished.

The hooded figure hovering over the suitcase turned its head and seemed to consider Harry for a moment, but when he made no move to intercede, it disregarded him and refocused its attention on Hermione. She was the one that was afraid. She was the one it wanted.

“Expecto....Expecto Patronum!” she shouted, when the vile creature started gliding towards her.

A silver wisp of smoke shot from the tip of her wand, but the spell didn’t work properly. The silver otter she’d been able to Conjure ever since Harry taught her how to cast a Patronus Charm in their D.A. meetings had abandoned her.

“No,” Hermione moaned, closing her eyes and stumbling backwards as the Dementor bore down on her. She collided with Ron, who was still standing behind her, at the exact same moment the loud cracking sound resonated around the room. “No. Please,” she whimpered, spinning around, latching on to Ron’s robes, and burying her face in his shoulder.

“HARRY, LOOK OUT!” a familiar voice screamed behind her.

“No. No, it’s not real,” she mumbled into Ron’s shoulder, her eyes shut tightly in an effort to block out the ominous green light that momentarily lit up the room.

Parvati gasped and Lavender covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a cry when the Boggart Ron fell to the ground in a lifeless heap.

“Ron?” Hermione moaned, when she felt his arm wrap around her shoulder and pull her closer.

“Don’t look,” he replied, averting his own eyes as the rest of the class gaped down at the Boggart in horror. Without even thinking about it, his eyes shifted to Harry, who appeared to be just as horrified as everyone else.
Harry didn’t move. He didn’t speak. He just stood there, frozen in place like everyone else, unable to do anything but stare down at his best friend’s lifeless corpse. It wasn’t until Hermione started to sob that the spell holding him in place was broken.

Harry’s head immediately snapped up and locked on his friends, who were still standing together in the center of the room.

“Take her outside,” Tonks said softly to Ron, as she came up behind him. “Help her calm down. Not you,” she said to Harry, when the two boys exchanged a look and both started moving towards the door at the same time. “You stay here. Ron can handle it.”

“To hell with that.”

“I need you here,” Tonks insisted.

“And she needs me out there,” he shot back angrily.

“No, it’s all right. I’m all right,” Hermione protested, but even as she did, Ron was steering her closer to the door. “Stop shoving me,” she said louder, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “I don’t need to leave. I said I was fine.”

“You are not fine,” Ron leaned forward and whispered, just as Tonks addressed the class.

“Well, who’s next?” she asked loudly, successfully drawing the attention of most of the students. “What about you, Finnigan?”

“Um....”

“I’ll do it,” Ginny piped in, rushing forward and latching on to Harry’s arm before he could follow Ron and Hermione into the hall. “Let Ron talk to her,” she whispered as she dragged him back towards the center of the room. “He knows how to deal with her when she gets like this.”

“For someone who claims to be fine, you’ve got a mighty firm grip,” Ron whispered to Hermione, who still had her arms wrapped firmly around his back.

“Shut up,” she groaned against his chest as she continued to hug him.

“Someone might see us,” Ron informed her. They were standing in the hallway after all. Anyone that rounded the corner or ducked out of class was bound to notice the two of them locked in an embrace.

“I don’t care.”

“I don’t really care either, but you’re going to cut off my circulation if you don’t ease up a bit.”

“Prat,” Hermione groaned, but she did loosen her grip a little.

“It’s Friday,” Ron said out of the blue.

“I’m not so traumatized that I’ve forgotten the days of the week.”

“We don’t have classes tomorrow.”

“And your point is?”
“We don’t have to get up early, which means you can...uh... sleep with me. I think you should.”

“All right,” Hermione agreed, keeping her eyes closed and her ear pressed against Ron’s chest so she could listen to his heartbeat.

“Just like that?” he asked, taking a step back and looking down at her in astonishment. “You’re not even going to try and argue with me about it first?”

But rather than speak, she simply looked up at him and shook her head.

“Tonks shouldn’t have made you do that,” Ron snapped, closing his arms around her shoulders and pulling her back against him. “You said you couldn’t do it. She should have listened. I should have listened. I’m sorry.”

“What would yours be?”

“My what? My patronus?” Ron asked uncertainly. “You’ve seen it, it’s a...”

“No,” Hermione cut him off. “Your Boggart.”

“Er... you’ve seen that too,” he replied. “It’s a great hairy spider, remember?”

“You were thirteen then,” she reminded him. “What would it be now?”

“The same thing.”

“You made sure that I stayed between you and the Boggart, even after it... turned into you. It wasn’t a spider you were afraid of. It was something else. Something you didn’t want me to see.”

“You don’t...really want to know,” he whispered as a few moments of strained silence had passed.

“I wouldn’t have asked you if I didn’t want to know.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Is it me?”

“Hermione, please...”

“Is that why you’re so willing to take the potion, even though you know it’ll ...you know that we’ll be... I’m not going to let those bastards hurt you, he thought, just before he answered her.

“That’s not the only reason,” he replied with a sigh.

“All right,” Hermione said, pulling her head off his chest and looking him in the eye. “I’ll do it.”

“What?” Ron asked, his mouth falling open in shock as he realized what she was agreeing to. “No. Not like this.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you either.”

“NO!” he said again, releasing her and stepping away. “This isn’t you,” he said, unwilling to let her make a decision now, only to have her regret it later. “You’re just scared right now, that’s all. Once you’ve calm down, things will be different and--”
“You said that it didn’t have to be real,” Hermione said, studying his face closely as she spoke. “You said when the war was over, we could just let the bond dissolve and no one else need ever know about it. But that isn’t what you want?” she asked, noting the pained expression he tried to hide by diverting his eyes to the ground. “Is it?”

“Is it?” she repeated, when he didn’t reply. “Ron?”

Ron brought his head back up with a sigh, but refused to meet her gaze. “If it’s what you want,” he said to the wall just behind her shoulder.

“I want to know what you want,” Hermione replied as Ron continued to dart his eyes around searching for something to focus on other than her. “What do you want, Ron?”

“I... I want you to be... to be...”

“What?” she pressed. “Happy? Safe? You want me to be what?”

Mine, he thought, but he wasn’t about to say it out loud.

“You want it to be real, don’t you? Don’t you?” she repeated even louder. “Just say it. Admit that I’m--”

“ALL RIGHT!” he shouted, just to shut her up. “You’re right. You’re always bloody right. Is that what you wanted to hear? Are you happy now?”

“This is insane,” she muttered to herself, but Ron obviously heard her, because his head immediately fell in resignation.

“We’re too young,” she continued. “We have two years of school left, and then we have to find jobs, and a place to live, and ... I don’t care.”

“What?” Ron nearly shouted, his head snapping back up in surprise.

“I don’t care,” Hermione repeated. “I don’t care about any of it, because you’re right, I am happy and--”

“You mean...you want it to be...to be--” he stammered, his entire face lighting up.

“I want it to be real too.”

“Really?”

“But you’re going to have to ask me first.”

“What!” he shouted again, this time in horror.

“You didn’t ask me to be your girlfriend, but you are going to ask me this.”

“I already did,” he protested.

“Not properly.”

“What do you mean properly? What do you want me to do, get down on my bloody knee?”

“Just the words will suffice.”
“Hermione!” he moaned.

“Ask me.”

“No.”

“DO IT!”

“I’m not doing *that* in a bloody hallway.”

I’m not doing it at all.

“I won’t do it unless you ask me properly.”

“I think you will.”

“I will not, you smug prat.”

“Will.”

“Not.”

“We’ll see.”

“Ron,” Hermione whined, switching tactics and launching herself at him. “Please,” she whispered, her arms snaking around his neck as she came up on her toes to kiss him. “I want to hear you say it,” she pleaded. “It’s only four little words,” she added, kissing him again. “Just say them for me.”

“Not here. Not like this,” he protested.

I fell for that once, she thought. I’m not falling for it again.

“Please,” she said again, stepping back and beseeching him with her eyes.

“Hermione,” Ron sighed, glancing down the empty hallway and then back at her.

DAMN IT!

“Oh HELL. As long as you’re doing it, you may as well do it right. Go on, make a bloody pillock out of yourself.

“I love you,” he said, reaching down and taking her hands in his. “I want to... uh... I’ll spend the rest of my life taking care of you, if you’ll have me. Will you please ...Will you do me the honor of... of... Oh hell, will you be my wife?”

“Yes,” she cried, not even bothering to wipe away the tears that were streaming down her cheeks before she crushed her lips against his. “Yes. Yes. Yes,” she repeated, between kisses.

“I’ll understand if you change your mind later.”

Way to ruin the mood, idiot, the little voice inside his head berated, when Hermione pulled away and glowered at him.

“I won’t.”
“But if you do.... I mean you haven’t really had all that much time to think about it and--”

“Stop it,” she insisted, “or you’re going to ruin it.”

“I just... I want you to--”

“I know what you’re doing,” Hermione replied, a little harsher than she meant to, “and I know why. Just stop. I’m not going to change my mind. I said yes, because I love you and I want this.”

“I thought about it all last night,” she said rambled on, not giving him a chance to butt in, “but that wasn’t the first time. I’ve thought about it before. I thought about it when I was locked up in that cell and last year when we were in the hospital wing. You were lying there asleep, with that goop spread all over your arms, and I realized that I could barely remember what it was like before you were part of my life. It was like... I didn’t really even start to live until I got here.”

“I don’t know what I want to do after we graduate. There are so many different options to choose from and I’m just not sure yet. I am sure about one thing though, and that’s you. I can’t imagine my life without you, Ron. I don’t want to. You’re part of me. You’re in my heart; you’re in my soul and we haven’t even taken the potion yet.”

“I’m not naive. I know this is crazy. I know that my parents will never understand and that yours will probably kill us both, but I don’t care. As long as I have you, it doesn’t matter. None of it matters.”

“It’s going to be brutal,” Ron said with a shudder. “When Mum finds out. She’ll go stark raving mad. She’ll probably try and make us... you know...”

“Sever the bond?” she finished for him.

“Yeah.”

“That’s not her choice to make.”

“Bloody hell, Hermione,” Ron groaned. “Whatever you do, don’t tell her that.”

“You won’t let her force you into it, will you?” she asked, suddenly feeling vulnerable.

“No!” he said adamantly. “I’ll be of age in March. She can’t force me to do anything after that. Not that it’ll stop her from trying, but legally she can’t.”

“I don’t want her to think badly of me,” Hermione admitted, leaning against him and resting her head on his shoulder. “This whole plan was my idea. What if she thinks I tricked you into it?”

“Don’t worry about that, love,” Ron chuckled. “I’m the one that will bear the brunt of her...eh... displeasure. And like you said, it’s not really her decision to make.”

“Er... sorry,” Ginny said as she popped her head outside the door of the D.A.D.A.’s classroom and spotted them standing together with their arms around one another. “Didn’t mean to interrupt, but just so you know, class is about to end and...”

Before she had a chance to say anything else, Harry shoved her into the hallway and followed after, making sure he closed the door behind himself. He glanced at Hermione briefly and then at Ron, who immediately removed his arm from around her shoulder and took a small step backward.

“All right, Hermione?” Harry asked, focusing his attention on her once more.
“Yes,” she replied with a smile, reaching down and grasping Ron’s hand.

Harry’s eyes darted over and locked on Ron again as he waited to see how he would react. He watched as his friend’s face flooded with color, but despite the fact he was uncomfortable, Ron didn’t let go.

“OW!” Harry cried, when Ginny elbowed him in the ribs and gave him a pointed look. “Look, I’m...er... sorry,” he said quickly, glancing down at the ground.

“It wasn’t your fault, Harry,” Hermione replied, releasing Ron’s hand and taking a step towards him. “I just couldn’t concentrate on my happy thought. Not when I knew what that thing was going to become.”

“Er...” Harry muttered uncomfortably. “That’s not exactly what I meant,” he added, looking directly at Ron.

“Oh,” Hermione replied, glancing over at Ron herself in order to gauge his reaction.

“It’s all right,” Ron replied rather stiffly. “Hermione is probably going to sleep in our dorm tonight,” he added impassively. “Unless you have a problem with that, in which case we’ll stay down in the common room.”

“No, it’s okay,” Harry replied, shifting his eyes to the floor and shuffling a little. “Just... um... make sure I can’t hear anything.”

“You honestly think she’d snog him in the middle of the your dorm with all of you in there?” Ginny asked with a smirk. “This is Hermione we’re talking about, not one of her roommates,” she added, glaring at Parvati and Lavender as they exited the D.A.D.A. classroom, followed by Seamus and Neville.

“That was awful,” Parvati said as she came up beside them and gave Hermione a sympathetic look. “You’re lucky you didn’t have to do it,” she said to Ron.

“It was sweet of you to come out here and keep Hermione company,” Lavender added as she slid up beside her friend and locked her eyes on Ron. “You’re a really good friend.”

“You knew what that Boggart was going to become,” Seamus said, glancing at Ron and then Hermione. “Didn’t you?”

“Oh, I...er...” Hermione stammered. “I sorta had a run in with a Boggart over the summer.”

“In that Government run Safe House,” Ron muttered. He hadn’t been able to protect Hermione from the Boggart, but he was bound and determined to protect her from Seamus, who obviously wanted to be shirty.

“Shut up, Ron,” Hermione scolded.

“He’s the one that believes everything he reads.”

“So where did you stay then?” Lavender asked.

“With us of course,” Ginny answered swiftly.

“Oh,” Lavender replied unenthusiastically. “That must have been... nice. Having another girl around, I mean,” she amended.
“Nice, yeah,” Ginny replied, narrowing her eyes a bit. “I’m starved,” she added, looking at Harry and then her brother. “Let’s go. I have History of Magic after lunch and there is no way I am going to suffer through that on an empty stomach. What do you lot have next,” she asked, as she started shoving Ron down the hallway.

“How about Potions, huh?” he answered, wrinkling his nose up in disgust.

“Rotten luck,” Ginny replied.

“Did anyone else do it?” Hermione asked Harry as they followed along behind the pair of redheads.

“Nope. Neville actually came the closest, if you believe that,” he said with a chuckle. “But he waited too long. His Patronus practically mowed down Snape.”

“So,” Ginny leaned over and whispered to Hermione as the two of them ate their lunch. “What’s with you?”

“Huh?” Hermione replied, so lost in her own thoughts that she hadn’t really even heard the question.

“You’ve been smiling for the past ten minutes,” Ginny informed her. “What’s that about?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh please,” the young redhead scoffed. “Something happened while you two were in the hall. Tell me.”

“Maybe I’m just happy that Harry has come around and things are better between him and Ron.”

“No,” Ginny said, studying her friend closely. “That’s not it. It’s something else. You’ve been staring off into space since we sat down and you didn’t even react to Lavender’s snide comment. Why is that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Maybe I ought to ask Ron then,” she replied. “He’s damn near as bad off as you are. If he doesn’t stop staring at you like a daft fool, people are going to notice.”

“They’ll just think he’s worried about me,” Hermione said, continuing on with her meal totally unconcerned.

“But he’s not,” Ginny insisted, “so what gives.”

“It’s nothing,” Hermione replied, despite the fact she was dying to divulge this particular secret. Now that the decision had been made and she knew for certain it was what Ron wanted, she was so happy about it, she was practically giddy.

If only I could tell you, she thought, both disappointed and a little frustrated.

“He just... he made it official, all right?” Hermione finally whispered.

“So he actually asked you to be his girlfriend?” Ginny whispered back with a smile.

“Something like that.”
“I don’t know what took him so bloody long. What the hell was he waiting for anyway? You’ve been together for months.”

“Shush!” Hermione hissed.

“You’re not still keeping it a secret?” Ginny asked quietly.

“No... well, yes, I suppose,” Hermione replied, “but just until we’re sure Harry is really okay with it. When people find out, they’ll start asking Harry questions, and I don’t want them putting him on the spot and making him uncomfortable. Not yet. I think it would be better if we held off and let him get used to the situation first.”

“I see your point,” Ginny whispered. “So how long do you think that will be?”

“I have no idea,” Hermione admitted with a sigh. “I guess I should probably tell Ron, shouldn’t I? Do me a favor Gin and distract Harry for a minute.”

“All right,” she replied, turning away from Hermione and focusing her attention on the young man sitting directly across from her. “Oy Harry,” she said, effectively drawing his attention. “Can I ask you a favor? Quidditch tryouts are tomorrow.” she continued, before he even had a chance to reply, “and Ron and I are going down to the pitch to practice this afternoon. Everyone that’s planning on trying out will probably be down there,” she said, lowering her voice and glancing down the table. “So...uh... I was wondering, if you’re not doing anything else, if maybe you’d come with us and sorta scope out the competition for me and then maybe let me know what you think my chances are, honestly.”

“All right.” Harry replied. “As long as Ron is okay with it.”

“Okay with what?” Ron asked, turning away from Hermione as she resumed eating her lunch.

“Harry coming down to the pitch with us this afternoon.”

“Why wouldn’t I have a problem with that?”

“Then it’s all set,” Ginny said happily. “Thanks, Harry. I really appreciate it.”

“Appreciate what?” her brother piped in.

“Never mind.”

“No, what?”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Then why won’t you tell me?”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, will you just drop it.”

“Not until one of you tells me.”
Chapter 23: Undercover of Night

It was well past midnight when the curtains of Ron’s four poster bed were drawn back and Hermione clambered inside. Even so, Ron was wide awake and more than a little surprised to see that she was fully dressed, covered by a pair of faded jeans and an oversized jumper, rather than her dressing gown as he would have suspected.

“I was starting to think you weren’t coming,” he said, once she had Impeturbed the bed and lowered her wand.

“Oh,” Hermione cried, whipping her head around in surprise and staring at Ron, who was just lying there with one arm tucked behind his head. “I wanted to make sure Parvati and Lavender were really asleep first. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were going to wait up for me.”

“I wasn’t,” he replied as he continued to take in her unconventional sleeping attire. “All right, I was,” he admitted, when she gave him a pointed look. “But that’s not the only reason. I can’t sleep. Guess I have a lot on my mind.”

“Like what?” Hermione asked, reaching down to unbutton her jeans.

“Like why you’re dressed like that for starters.”

“I couldn’t exactly bring a change of clothes with me,” she explained, as she shimmied out of her jeans. “Leaving my shoes under your bed is bad enough. But this way if anyone catches me up here in the morning, I’ll be fully dressed and we can avoid a lot of embarrassing questions.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” Ron replied with a smirk, “only there’s one flaw.”

“What that?” Hermione asked, reaching down to unbutton her jeans.

“Like why you’re dressed like that for starters.”

“You don’t have anything to sleep in.”

“Yes, I do. That shirt,” she retorted, pointing at the navy blue t-shirt he was currently wearing. “Hand it over.”

“And if I don’t,” he asked playfully, “are you going to sleep topless? Because I think if one of us has to, I’d prefer it to be you.”

“Oh, you’d just love that, wouldn’t you?”

“Don’t worry, love. I’ll keep you warm,” he retorted with a cheeky grin.

“I just bet you will. Maybe I ought to go back to my own room.”

“No, don’t,” Ron protested, latching on to her arm and pulling her up the bed until she was laying on her stomach beside him. “I’ll be good. Promise. You can even have my shirt,” he said, tugging it
over his head quickly and holding it out for her to take.

“No, that’s ok,” Hermione replied, coming up on her knees and grasping the bottom of her jumper with both hands. “I already have one, thanks,” she added as she tugged the jumper over her head to reveal his Chudley Cannon’s t-shirt, which she had knotted around her waist in an effort to keep it at a normal length. “I just wanted to see if I could get you topless.”

“You little minx,” he laughed, watching her work the knot with the fingers. “Oh well,” he sighed with disappointment, when the knot came loose and the end of his shirt fell down to cover her stomach and thighs. “So I guess you won’t be needing this one then” he said, tossing the shirt he’d been wearing to the foot of his bed, where her folded jeans were resting. “Or this,” he added, grabbing her jumper and flinging it into the pile.

“So what were you really up thinking about?” Hermione asked as she slid under the covers, snuggled up against him, and rested her head on the edge of his pillow. “Because I know it wasn’t what I was going to be wearing.”

“Oh, you know,” Ron replied evasively. “Just stuff.”

Yeah stuff, he thought.

It was as good a word as any to describe what he’d been mulling over. It hadn’t been just one thing in particular, he’d been thinking about the day as a whole. He’d thought about everything that had happened in Defense Against the Dark Arts that morning and wondered if any of their classmates had picked up on anything. Hermione didn’t seem to think they had. She said they were probably too shocked, and too focused on the Boggart to pay much attention to what the two of them were muttering to each other.

Although he couldn’t help but wonder if that was wishful thinking on her part. Seamus, at least, had realized that they both knew what shape her Boggart was going to take. Hopefully he hadn’t noticed anything more telling, because Hermione thought they should try and keep their relationship a secret until they were sure that Harry was really okay with it.

He’d spent a good deal of time thinking about Harry as well. He finally seemed to be coming around, although Ron suspected that had more to do with the shock he’d received when he’d seen Hermione’s Boggart first hand, rather than the fact he was really comfortable with the idea of the two of them as a couple. That was going to take a while. Harry didn’t exactly deal with change very well and the fact that he was now dating Hermione pretty much changed everything.

Of course he wasn’t just dating her anymore. They were engaged. Ron still couldn’t really wrap his head around that one. He was going to be married to Hermione in just a few short weeks and it wasn’t simply because they had to do it for her protection spell to work. They were doing it because they wanted to and it was going to be for real.

He still couldn’t believe that he’d actually proposed to her; that he’d actually said the words out loud. He’d said them in his head a few times just to test them out, but he sounded like such a prat that he never thought he’d actually have the nerve to say them to her face. Of course she had forced him to do it, but now that it was done, he was glad that she had. If he’d known that Hermione was going to have such a strong reaction he would have asked her a long time ago.

He’d been completely bowled over when he came back from Quidditch practice with Harry and his sister, to find Hermione waiting for him in the common room. She hadn’t even bothered coming up with an excuse to feed Harry. She’d simply said that now that they were done with their ‘male bonding’, she wanted some time with him and before Ron knew what had happened, she’d led him
to the Room of Requirement, shoved him inside, and attacked him.

Who knew that being engaged would actually turn her on? Ron thought with a smile.

Not that he was complaining by any means. He’d had a damn good time. So good in fact, he hadn’t wanted to stop and go down to dinner. Unfortunately she had insisted.

Now that she’s here, maybe we can pick up where we left off.

“Stuff?” Hermione asked skeptically.

“Yeah,” Ron replied.

“It’s just another practice,” Hermione said, shifting her head from his pillow to his chest. “For you anyway. You aren’t the one trying out. You’re already on the team.”

“But I still have to square off against everyone that is trying out,” he replied, when he realized that she thought he was worried about the Quidditch trials that were set to take place the next afternoon. And she was right, of course. His anxiety about Quidditch had been mixed up with all the other ‘stuff’ he’d been contemplating. “How is it going to look if they all score on me?” Ron asked, unconsciously reaching for her hair and running his fingers through it gently.

Only after the question had left his mouth, he wished he could take it back, because Hermione was lying in his bed right beside him and the word ‘score’ invoked images that had absolutely nothing to do with his Keeper abilities.

Get your mind out of the gutter, he scolded himself.

“Some of them have to score,” Hermione replied, oblivious to the implied meaning of the word she’d just used. “How else will you be able to tell if they’re any good?”

Oh God!

“If you block every possible shot, they’ll all be the same and no one will stand out,” she continued, genuinely trying to be helpful.

“There are other things to take into consideration,” Ron replied, trying to keep his mind on the conversation at hand and failing miserably.

“Like what?”

“Speed, agility, how much control they have over their broom.”

BLOODY HELL! he groaned loudly in his own head as those skills suddenly took on a whole new meaning. *You’ve completely lost control of your ‘broomstick’, you randy tosser.*

“Especially when they’re in control of the Quaffle,” he continued, trying to sound as normal as possible, “and don’t have the use of both hands.”

Shit!

“And that’s just for scoring.”

Well, it’s official. She’s ruined Quidditch. I can’t even bloody talk about it without thinking about sex. How the hell am I supposed to play tomorrow? Every time I see the Quaffle, I’ll start thinking about breasts. This is just bloody great. I’ll probably miss every shot.
“And there is also their ability to work with their teammates to consider,” Ron continued, still trying to play it off as if nothing was wrong. “Passing, guarding, intercepting, and... you don’t really care about any of this do you?” he asked.

“Not particularly, no,” Hermione admitted. “But you do and if what you just said is true, then the responsibility doesn’t rest solely on your shoulders. You aren’t the one that your teammates are going to be scrutinizing.”

I wouldn’t be so sure about that, Ron thought. Sooner or later someone is bound to notice my ‘broomstick’ and when they do, I can pretty much guarantee all eyes will be on me.

“And just because someone scores off you,” Hermione continued, oblivious to his struggle, “that doesn’t mean that you’re bad. Maybe it’s just that they’re really good and isn’t that what you want? The whole point of holding tryouts is to find the best Chasers.”

“Yeah, but—”

“It’s just another practice, Ron. It’s not a game. No one is going to be keeping score. It’s the exact same thing you’ve been doing all week with Ginny, only this time Katie is going to be watching her.”

“I guess,” he said half-heartedly.

“You’re not feeling any better, are you?”

“Not really,” Ron groaned. Actually it’s rather painful now, he thought.

“But thanks for trying.”

“So... um... do you want me to come?” Hermione asked.

YES! I’d love to see you come, his mind screamed and his already out of control body responded to the thought.

“You haven’t come to any of my other ‘practices’,“ he said however, grateful she hadn’t noticed his condition yet. Although it wouldn’t be long, given his current state and he couldn’t help but wonder how she was going to react.

“Do you want me to?” Hermione pressed him.

“Would you come to them if I did?”

“Of course I would.”

“Without a book, or your notes, or anything resembling schoolwork?”

“Unless we have a test coming up or a paper due,” she replied, after giving the matter some serious consideration. “But I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

Too late for that, he thought, shifting restlessly.

“Do you want to go?” he asked.

“To the tryouts or your practices?” Hermione asked, pulling her head off his chest and bringing her
arm up so she could lean on her elbow and look at him.

“Either.”

“Well,” she said, “people will notice.”

“So?” Ron replied, rolling over on his side to face her, but making sure to maintain his distance.

“If they ask me why I’m watching your practices what am I supposed to say?” Hermione asked.

“Tell ‘em to mind their own bloody business.”

Like that will work, she thought, rolling her eyes.

“To hell with it,” Ron muttered, finally deciding to take the risk and give in to his urges. “So do you want to come?” he asked, arching his eyebrow suggestively as his arm wrapped around Hermione’s back and moved in closer.

“RON!” she cried in shock, when he shifted and she felt his erection against her stomach.

“What?” he asked innocently, although the smug look on his face suggested he knew exactly what she was talking about.

You certainly weren’t complaining this afternoon.

“Are you mad?” she shrieked, placing her hands on his chest and pushing against him when he tried to pull her closer. “There are other people in the room.”

“They can’t hear us,” he assured her, just before he leaned forward and pressed his mouth to her neck. “It’s not like they know you’re in here or anything,” he muttered between kisses.

“But... but... I know,” Hermione protested, her hands were still on his chest, but she was no longer trying to shove him away. “We can’t,” she said, although whether she was trying to convince herself or him, Ron wasn’t exactly sure. “Not with other people in the room.”

You’re killing me here.

“We can go down to the common room,” he suggested. “There isn’t anyone else down there.”

“You’re impossible,” Hermione said, pushing him hard and managing to wiggle free when he fell over on his back.

“Impossible to resist?” Ron asked, coming up on both of his elbows and giving her one of his lopsided smiled.

“Not to mention arrogant,” she snapped, trying hard to keep a straight face, but in the end she had to bite her lip to keep herself from smiling back.

“Is that a no?” Ron asked, pretending to be hurt.

“Yes, it’s a no,” she replied. “I’m not going down to the common room to do that. Anyone could walk in and see us.”

“Boys’ shower?” he suggested, looking at her hopefully despite the fact he already knew she was going to nix that idea as well.
When she says no, I’m going to have to go take a shower on my own.

“I’m comfortable here,” Hermione replied, scooting closer and surprising him by leaning forward and pressing her lips to his.

Even as his arm went around her shoulder and he kissed her back, Ron was trying to figure out whether it was simply a good night kiss or an invitation to something else.

Bugger, he thought, wincing when he turned on his side and accidentally brushed up against her.

“Lift that Imperturbable Charm for a minute,” he said, pulling away from her and sitting up with a grimace.

“Why?” Hermione asked, clearly startled by the request. “What are you...where are you going?” she asked, when she saw him flip the covers back and come up on his knees.

“To take a cold shower.”

“No you’re not,” she insisted, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him back down.

“Mione, I... I really need to go.”

“No, you don’t,” she said, moving in to kiss him again.

“But... you just said--”

“I said I was comfortable here,” she replied, giving him a pointed look as she waited for the meaning of her words to sink in.

“But the others...”

“...can’t see or hear us, you said so yourself. Not as long as we stay here, but if we go out there, they might, so I’ve changed my mind. The best place to do this is here.”

“Do what?” he asked, without even really thinking about it. “You... oh...” he said, following the declaration with a short moan when her hand brushed over his tented pajama bottoms. “You... you... don’t have to,” he said, although it was more because he thought he should, than because he wanted her to stop.

“We’re you really going to take a cold shower?” Hermione asked, pressing her hand firmly against him. “Or were you going to take care of this yourself?”

“HERMIONE!” Ron cried, both shocked and horrified by the fact she thought he wanted to sneak off so he could bash the bishop. It didn’t matter that there was some truth to her accusation. She wasn’t supposed to know or talk about it.

“Can I watch you?” she asked far to innocently.

“NO!” he cried, his face and ears flushing such a deep shade of red, they nearly matched the thick velvet curtains surrounding his bed.

“I’ll let you watch me,” she stated with a demure smile.

“NO! Wait... what?” Ron asked, gulping loudly and starring down at her with wide eyes.

“I’ll let you watch me,” she said again, only she wasn’t nearly as confident as she sounded, because
this time her cheeks flooded with color as well.

“Are you serious?” Ron asked, his voice deep and husky with desire.

He’d watched her do that once before, on the night the two of them had taken a shower together at Grimmauld Place and quite frankly it had been the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. It had taken every ounce of willpower he had not to lose control and come right on the spot. As it was, he’d forgotten how to breathe. And here she was offering to do it again.

“You’ll... and I... I can watch? Well... uh... will you go first?”

“No way,” Hermione cried, knowing full well he’d either back out of his end of the deal or get distracted and forget about it entirely. In fact, they’d probably both get distracted, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Truth be told, it was starting to sound more appealing by the second. “Now that I think about it, maybe I ought to just take care of you myself.”

“No wait,” Ron cried, when Hermione threw the covers off herself and sat up on her knees. “You...you really don’t have to do that,” he said, but mentally he was kicking himself as the words left his mouth. Memories of the things she had done to him with her hands that very afternoon in the Room of Requirement flooded his mind, adding fuel to the desire already raging within him. “I mean... what about you?”

“What about me?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t want you to feel deprived.

“I...er... well... I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I mean, that’s not why I asked you to sleep in here. I wasn’t planning... I didn’t do it just because I wanted to mess around. I wasn’t expecting you to do anything but sleep.”

“I know,” she replied, licking her lips and steeling him with a look that was almost predatory.

“You...you do?” he stammered, as he registered the hungry gleam in her dark brown eyes.

“You were worried I’d have nightmares and you wanted to take care of me.”

“Yeah... but... now you’re here and... I...er...”

“You want to take care of me in other ways?” she asked coyly.

But Ron wasn’t fooled. She might sound embarrassed and shy, but her eyes said something else entirely.

She knows exactly what she’s doing to me and she’s enjoying it, he thought, his eyes shifting down to the neckline of her t-shirt, which had pulled away from her body as she leaned forward ever so slightly. She’s like a bloody cat toying with her prey before she pounces, he groaned to himself, when she noticed where his eyes were and sat back before he was able to really see anything.

“See something you want?” she asked, licking her lips and arching one eyebrow.

And just like that, he went from prey to predator. “You damn right I do,” he cried, lunging forward and tackled her to the foot of his bed. “You saucy wench. It’s not nice to tease.”

“Is that what I was doing?” Hermione asked, smiling up at him sweetly.

“You know perfectly well that it was,” Ron replied, his smoldering blue eyes running down the
length of her body and coming back up again to lock on her chest.

“All you had to do was ask,” Hermione said softly, still pinned beneath him.

“Maybe I ought to show you what it feels like to be teased,” Ron declared, his voice low and husky with unrestrained desire.

Yes, that’s exactly what I’m going to do, he decided, placing one hand on her hip, the other on her thigh, and flipping her over on her stomach in one fluid movement.

“Ron,” Hermione cried in surprise, when she unexpectedly found herself staring at the pile of clothes lying at the foot of his bed instead of him. “What are you doing?”

“Teasing,” he replied, coming forward on his hands and knees to straddle her body.

“Well, stop it,” Hermione said, when she felt his weight come down on top of her. “I can’t see what you’re doing.”

“I know,” he whispered, his mouth nearly level with her ear. “That’s the point,” he said softly, brushing her hair aside to kiss her neck. “You trust me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Hermione replied, but that was hardly the point.

The only reply she got was a soft chuckle as he abandoned her neck and pulled away from her. The instant he came back up on his knees, she felt his weight shift. Hermione tried to spin around, but Ron had obviously been expecting that. One of his large hands immediately came down and pressed firmly against her back, holding her in place.

“Don’t,” he said, “I’m not finished yet.”

“Finished what?” Hermione asked, her heart rate speeding up dramatically. She knew he’d never do anything to hurt her; that he’d never do anything she didn’t want. He was just playing around. He wanted to tease her and he was doing a damn good job. Not knowing what he was going to do next had an unexpected appeal. In fact, it was downright exciting.

Without warning she felt the mass that had been hovering over her back vanish as Ron sat upright, his knees still on either side of her legs. She knew if she tried to move again he’d prevent it, so she just lay there, waiting for whatever was coming next.

As he sat back, Ron took the time to admire Hermione’s thighs because it wasn’t all that often he got to see more than a glimpse of them. They were slender, yet toned, and her skin was a tantalizing light brown, not fair and dotted with freckles like his own. Without even really making the conscious decision to do it, his fingers slipped under the elastic waistband of her knickers and he slowly slid them down, noting that her arse was a shade or two lighter, but still not as pale as his own.

“Ron?”

“Shush,” he mumbled, leaning forward and dropping a few feather light kisses on her bum. Ron felt her shudder as his mouth moved delicately across her newly exposed flesh and her response encouraged him to become a bit bolder.

The kisses became firmer and interspersed between them he alternated between flicking her flesh with his tongue and gentle sucking. As he worked his way over one voluptuous cheek, he cupped the other and kneaded it gently.
“Merlin, you’re soft,” he muttered against her skin, unclenching her arse and slowly sliding his hand down until his fingers were pressed against her sensitive core. “God, Mione,” he groaned, delighted to find her wet and waiting, as he slid one finger past her folds to explore her throbbing center.

“Oh God,” Hermione whimpered, arching up instinctively when she felt his finger prodding her from behind.

“So wet,” Ron moaned, withdrawing his finger, only to shove it back inside. “Wet for me,” he said in a raspy voice. “You want me. You want this,” he growled, shoving a second finger into the warm recesses of her body.

SHIT! Ron swore inside his head, as he looked down and watched his fingers pump in and out of her tight body. He’d wanted to tease her and somehow he’d ended up tormenting himself even more. The desire to remove his fingers and replace them with his aching member, which was straining against his pajama bottoms, was nearly overwhelming. He had to stop. He had to distract himself or he was liable to loose his mind, strip off the rest of his clothes, and shag her senseless.

Without warning, Ron’s hands abruptly abandoned her and Hermione felt the mattress give as he flopped over on his back with a frustrated groan.

“Why’d you stop?” she asked, twisting her head around to stare at him over her shoulder.

“Can’t,” he muttered, his chest rising and falling in rapid succession due to his labored breathing. “Just... need a minute,” he continued, shutting his eyes tightly and struggling to get his raging hormones under control.

“Oh I see,” Hermione giggled, her eyes roaming down his body and locking on his tented pajama bottoms. “Teased yourself into a frenzy, did you?” she asked, rolling over and coming up on her knees to give him a mischievous smile. “Looks like you need me to take care of you after all,” she added, as she darted forward, leaned down, and slipped her fingers under the waistband of both his pajamas and his pants.

“See something you want?” Ron asked, opening his eyes and echoed her own words back to her with a smug grin.

“I’m about to,” she replied with a hearty laugh, tugging on his pants.

Ron immediately lifted his hips up off the bed to make it easier for her to remove his clothes. Completely starkers, he watched Hermione toss his clothing aside and wet her lips with her tongue.

“What about you?” he asked, hoping that she’d pick up what he was hinting at and remove the t-shirt, which was hiding most of her from view.

“Forget about me,” she said, pushing his legs apart and kneeling between them. “You’ve got more important matters to worry about,” she said, her eyes locked on his, rather than the rigid flesh jetting straight up in the air in front of her.

“Oh God,” he moaned in anticipation, as he watched her tongue dart out and wet her lips yet again.

Please, he begged in his mind, oh please.

She’d only used her mouth on him one time before and it had felt better than he’d ever imagined.

He was helpless to do anything but lie back and watch her. Somehow without even realizing that it had happened, Hermione had wrenched the power away from him. She was in control of the
situation; in control of him. His happiness depended upon her and at this specific point in time he’d do damn near anything she asked of him.

But she made no requests. She simply looked down at him for a moment as if he were a complicated Arithmancy problem that needed to be considered from several different angles. Ron watched with wide eyes as her concentration broke and she reached forward to slowly run one finger down his length.

“Please,” he begged, his heart thundering wildly in his chest.

“You’ll warn me, right?” she asked, wrapping her fingers firmly around his base, then stroking her hand up, only to push it back down just as quickly.

“YES!” he cried, but despite his assurances, she stilled her movements. “Please,” he whimpered, letting his head fall back into his pillow in frustration.

She’s bloody trying to killing me.

“Please what?” she asked mischievously.

“You know what,” he groaned.

“I do,” Hermione admitted, feeling him throb in her hand as she leaned forward and ran her tongue slowly down the length of him. “But I’m not going to do it unless you ask me to.”

“Use your mouth,” Ron practically shouted.

Oh God, please, he thought, moaning quietly when she leaned forward and her hair swept in front of her face, blocking his view.

He couldn’t see what she was doing, but he could definitely feel it. Her soft lips were now pressed against his sensitive flesh, kissing him tenderly, tip to base. Her mouth was the most exquisite thing he’d ever felt. Soft and gentle; hot and wet. He could feel her warm breath brush over him moments before her tongue darted out to taste him again.

“Oh GOD!” Ron cried out when he felt her lips close around his sensitive head and she sucked hard.

She definitely had the teasing part down. He actually had to fist his hands into his sheets to prevent himself from reaching up and grasping her head.

“Liked that, did you?” Hermione asked as she let him go. She sounded more than a little pleased with herself. “Let’s see what else you enjoy,” she whispered, grasping him firmly in one hand. When she flicked her tongue over his aching flesh and experimentally swirled it around the tip, Ron thought he might actually die from the pleasure that shot through his body.

“Oh...Merlin...yes...” he moaned, when she pushed herself forward and her sinful mouth finally enveloped his length. So hot... so wet... so fucking good, his mind screamed. It took every ounce on strength he had not to thrust up off the bed and speed things along, but he knew that he had to let her move at her own pace. Even if it is agonizingly slow.

Almost as if she’d read his mind and had decided to punish him for his thought, Hermione started bobbing her head up and down very leisurely. This was still rather new to her and she was reluctant to go too fast for fear she might do something wrong and end up hurting him.
Slow and steady wins the race, she thought, nearly laughing at the absurdity of the unsolicited remark as soon as it popped into her head. *This isn’t a race and even if it were, slow and steady isn’t going to do the trick*, she reminded herself, picking up her pace and experimenting briefly with depth and rhythm while she listened to the sounds Ron was making in an effort to judge what he liked best.

His groans seemed to be louder and more frequent when she took him in deeper, so she decided to try that. She wasn’t able to move over him as fast as she had been when her stroke had been shallow, but if his throaty moans were any indication, it no longer mattered.

Now that she was moving over him in earnest, Ron could feel her hair brushing back and forth over his stomach, tickling him and adding to the incredible sensations he was already experiencing. Unfortunately it was also obscuring his view and he wanted to watch her. He wanted to see her soft pink lips wrapped around his member. He wanted to watch as she move over him. He wanted to watch himself slide in and out of her exquisite mouth, so without warning he sat upright, leaned forward, and brushed her hair aside.

Caught completely by surprise, Hermione immediately stopped what she was doing and pulled herself off of him.

“No, please,” Ron begged, wincing slightly when the cool night air hit his wet flesh. “Don’t stop. I... I just... want to watch you.”

“I don’t know if I can do it if I know you’re watching me,” Hermione admitted, averting her eyes as her cheeks flooded with color.

“All right,” Ron said, closing his eyes and lying back down quickly. “I won’t,” he added, mentally smacking himself upside the head.

IDIOT! You just had to go and make her uncomfortable. I hope you’re bloody happy. You were so damned close, but you just had to watch. OH GOD! Please don’t stop. Please. Please. Please.

Ron was so relieved when he felt her bend forward and reposition her mouth over him that he could have cried. The only problem was, she didn’t move. He waited with anticipation, but nothing happened. One agonizing moment passed, then another, and still nothing happened, so he thrust his hips up off the bed tentatively, just to see what she would do. She didn’t pull away from him, so he came up a little further, slowly pushing himself into her mouth in the process. When he had nearly half his length buried inside, he sunk back down to the bed just as slowly, only to push forward again.

For a brief instant the image of himself, resting on his knees, hands buried in her wild hair, holding her head in place as he fucked her mouth, clouded his mind. But he forced himself to pushed it aside and resisted the urge to speed up his movements.

If you try something like that you’ll scare her off for good, he reminded himself, settling back down on the mattress and waiting for her to make the next move.

When she finally did start moving again, it was achingly slow. Her rhythm was a bit irregular at first, mostly because she kept checking to make sure he wasn’t trying to watch her. Every time she looked, his eyes were shut tightly, so after a few moments she decided that it was safe to proceed and increased her speed.

This time rather than simply running her tongue down his length as she bobbed her head over him, she decided to try something a bit different. When she pulled her head back, she sucked on him hard and was instantly rewarded with a strangled moan of pleasure.
Feeling a bit more confident, Hermione wrapped one hand around the base of his cock and increased her pace, stroking his length with her tongue as she pushed forward and sucking him as she pulled back. Then for reasons she never did quite understand, she brought her free hand up and pressed it against his balls.

The reaction was instantaneous. Not only did Ron yelp in surprise, he jumped as well. His entire body shuddered as he jerked up off the bed, unwittingly embedding his cock deep in her mouth in the process. Hermione gagged when he hit the back of her throat and the feel of her convulsing around him was enough to push Ron over the edge. Without warning, the spring that had been coiling up deep within him snapped. Stars exploded behind his eyes and before he could pull himself back, the fire that had been smoldering moments before, blazed down his shaft and he moaned loudly as his release washed over him.

“S...s...sorry,” Ron panted, his face beat red, not just from the intensity of his orgasm, but from mortification as well. “I... wasn’t... expecting...God...” He faltered and groaned again. “That was... incredible. Sorry,” he repeated again quickly, when he noticed Hermione’s wide eyes narrow.

“I wasn’t planning on doing that,” she declared, as she reflexively swiped the back of her hand over her mouth.

“Sorry,” Ron stammered yet again.

Bloody hell. Please don’t curse me, he thought, trying hard not to cringe as he fought for breath. However, rather than reach for her wand, Hermione did the unexpected and threw herself at him instead. For a second Ron thought she was going to try and pummel him to death rather than waste her time coming up with an appropriate spell, but she apparently had a different idea altogether.

Nearly half the air in his lungs was forced out when she landed on top of him, but she didn’t wait for him to recover. Even as he was trying to suck it back in, her mouth closed over his. It took him a moment to realize she wasn’t trying to smother him. Of course the fact that her tongue had pushed into his mouth and was brushing against his own, clued him in fairly quickly.

She’s not angry, she’s turned on, he thought, just before he started kissing her back.

It was then that he noticed that she tasted different and he realized why. Somehow that knowledge was both disturbing and arousing at the same time.

Better not think about it too much, he decided, snaking his arms around her back and rolling them both over until he was sprawled out on top of her.

“Your turn,” he growled, pushing his hands under Hermione’s shirt and trailing his fingers up the side of her body and over the swell of her breasts as he continued to devour her lips. “I want to see you,” he stated, pulling his weight off her and sitting upright quickly so he was straddling her.

He didn’t wait for her to reply or give him permission. The instant he was upright, Ron gripped the bottom of the shirt she was wearing and shoved it up until both of her breasts were exposed.

“Merlin, you’re beautiful,” he sighed, reaching down and trailing his fingers over her reverently.

Ron’s eyes darkened with rekindled desire and he unconsciously licked his lips when her nipples hardened right before his eyes. Mere seconds before his only thought had been to get her shirt off,
but now the shirt was all but forgotten as he reached forward and cupped both of her breasts.

They’re bloody brilliant, he thought, brushing his thumbs back and forth over her upraised flesh. He would have happily spent the rest of the night lavishing his attention on her supple mounds, but Hermione was impatient and wanted his attention directed elsewhere.

“Ron, please,” she sighed, squirming beneath him.

“Please what,” he asked playfully, prying his hand off her left breast, then leaning forward and kissing it gently.

Let’s see how you like it when the shoes on the other foot, he thought, taking her taut nipple into his mouth and flicking it with his tongue just before he started to suckle her.

“I...I want...” Hermione mumbled.

“What do you want, love?” he asked as he kissed his way down the slope of her breast to the valley below.

“I want... I feel so...so... empty,” she replied, her fingers running lovingly through his thick red hair. “I need you to... I want you to... I want to feel you inside of me.”

That’s not what she meant, Ron chided himself, shifting his weight, sliding his right hand down her stomach, and reaching for her center as his revitalized cock twitched and hardened significantly.

Hermione’s heart hammered forcefully against her chest when she felt Ron’s fingers delve between her legs. Her whole body began to tingle with anticipation. His earlier attempts at ‘teasing’ had been arousing, but it was nothing compared to the fire raging within her now. Just knowing that she had the power to push him over the edge and make him lose control was intoxicating, but the sounds he’d made as she did it... they were downright sexy. She was beyond aroused, her body was actually aching for him.

“Oh God,” Hermione moaned softly, arching up and pressing her lower body against his hand. Ron took her actions as an invitation and immediately parted her folds and shoved two of his finger deep inside of her.

“Oh shit,” he groaned loudly as he pulled them back and pushed them in again, delighted to discover exactly how stimulated she was. “You’re so bloody wet.”

“It’s not enough,” Hermione whimpered, when he leaned forward and kissed her stomach. “I need more.”

“All right, love,” Ron replied, pulling away from her with a soft chuckle. No more teasing, he thought, swiftly spreading her legs and kneeling between them, determined to do whatever it took to bring her to completion. He continued to finger her, making her squirm as he dropped his head between her legs and kissed her inner thigh. Slowly he moved his mouth over her and when his tongue finally found her center and plunged into her moist opening, Hermione actually bucked against him with a yelp of pleasure.

Her lustful cries only served to feed his own mounting need and for a while Ron actually forgot that he was supposed to be pleasing her rather than simply indulging himself. Fortunately the pulsating rhythm of his fingers combined with the motion and pressure of his tongue as he feasted on her, was nearly enough to drive her over. It was only after she’d cried out his name and shuddered beneath him, that Ron realized Hermione had added her own fingers into the fray and help herself along.
Shit, he swore, irritated with himself for getting distracted and allowing his own desires to get in the way of hers. “I’m sorry, love,” he grunted. *Sorry I’m a bloody useless sod who only thinks about himself.*

“Come here,” Hermione said, grabbing his arm and urging him to come up and lie beside her. “We’re not finished yet.”

“We’re not?” he asked, taken by surprise, but doing as she asked nevertheless.

“Kiss me,” Hermione demanded, grabbing Ron’s shoulders the instant he was beside her and pulling him down on top of herself.

OH FUCK! Ron’s mind screamed, when Hermione spread her legs around him and he unexpectedly found himself nestled between them.

“WAIT!” he cried out as his erection accidentally brushed against her inner thigh, causing sparks on pleasure to surge through his body.

So close. I’m so bloody close. All I have to do is move forward just a bit and... NO! We can’t.

“I don’t want to wait anymore,” Hermione said, before kissing him again deeply.

YES! a voice inside his mind screamed triumphantly.

NO! NO! WE CAN’T! he argued with himself. *The potion.*

BLOODY FUCKING POTION!

“Hermione?” Ron mumbled against her lips, just before he pulled away from them, “What do you mean? What about the.. the potion?”

“It’s brewing,” she replied quickly, her eyes dark and swirling with lust. “It will be all right,” she assured him. “We can just collect what we need and add it now. Well, tomorrow,” she amended, “unless... no, now would probably be better. We can add it tonight.”

“But... but it isn’t even finished. You just started for Merlin sakes and--”

“It doesn’t matter,” she insisted, “It shouldn’t make all that much of difference at this point.”

“But...” Ron stammered, his heart racing with excitement. He wanted her so badly and apparently she wanted him as well, but it was all happening so fast and he just couldn’t think.

It didn’t help that his libido had shoved it’s way to the forefront of his mind and kept screaming things like, *YOU HEARD HER, SHE’S READY! and DON’T RUIN THIS! SHUT UP AND TAKE HER! NOW!*

It would have been so easy to give into the voice and bury himself inside her. He was so close to her center, all he’d need to do would be move up a bit and shift his hips, but he was nervous. He was more than nervous actually, he was worried. The nagging feeling that something else was wrong wouldn’t leave him.

“STUPID RUDDY POTION!” he yelled as he remembered what was holding him back.

“It shouldn’t change the potion much,” Hermione replied, squirming beneath him.

“Much?” Ron cried in horror. “I know enough about brewing potions to know that’s not how it
works. Everything had to be exact and added at just the right time or the entire thing will be ruined.”

“No,” Hermione disagreed. “It will alter it a bit, that’s true, but I should be able to compensate for that and balance it all out so that by the time it’s finished it’ll be . . .”

“But...” Ron stammered.

BUT WHAT! he libido screamed. YOU HEARD HER! SHE CAN FIX IT AND WE WANT HER, SO SHUT UP AND SHAG HER!

“Hermione...it just seems so... are you sure you’re ready?” he asked, staring at her uncertainly.

“Don’t you want to?” Hermione asked, looking a little hurt.

YES, BUT THIS STUPID SOD IS HOLDING US BACK! STOP OVERANALYZING EVERYTHING! YOU’RE TURNING INTO HER!

“More than you could possibly know,” Ron moaned sorrowfully.

“But?”

“I...er...” Ron stammered.

SHAG HER! his libido shrieked in his head.

I CAN’T! he shouted back in his mind. I can't perform the Lànain unless she’s a bloody virgin.

BUGGER IT ALL!!!!!

“I...um... think we should wait,” Ron muttered as he came up on his knees and moved away from her. “You know...do it right.”

“Right?” Hermione asked, coming up on her elbows and staring at him with her brow wrinkling in confusion.

“I...well...” Ron faltered. “The potion... I mean, I thought we’d ...we’d sorta be...you know, married first. I mean it’s only a few more weeks and well, I thought it would kinda be romantic or something.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, instantly feeling better.

He wants it to be romantic. That’s sweet. Inconvenient, but sweet.

“Um... we still have to do it before we drink the potion. You do realize that, right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he admitted, “but... well... um... we can still perform the Lànain first.”

“Ron!” Hermione growled, her eyes narrowing significantly.

“We’re going to be married anyway,” he said, as if that justified his remark, “and I want to protect you.”

“From what?” she asked, tugging her shirt down until she was completely covered and giving him a skeptical look.

“You asked about my Boggart,” Ron replied, purposely averting his eyes and picking at the tatty
“Are you talking about rape?” Hermione asked, her eyes wide with horror, both at the thought and the pained expression on Ron’s face.

“Over my dead fucking body! Ron thought, his face hardening with resolve.

“They’re monsters, Hermione. Brutes that have been locked away in prison for years. Locked up for murder and torture and worse. I don’t want that to happen to you. It won’t. Not as long as I can prevent it. You have to let me do this,” he pleaded as he came forward on his knees and knelt in front of her. “You have to let me protect you.”

“I’ll take the charm off... I’ll take it off and release you the second you ask me to, I swear I will. I don’t want to hold you against your will or anything,” he assured her. “It isn’t about ownership or control or anything. I know I can be a jealous git, but that’s not what this is. I swear, it’s not. I just... I want to keep you safe. We’re going to be married soon and it’s my responsibility to take care of you and... please Hermione,” he said, looking at her imploringly, “just think about it. I mean really think about it before you make up your mind, because—”

“All right,” Hermione replied with a loud sigh. “I’ll think about it,” she added. “But I’m not making any promises.”

“Really?” Ron cried in surprise. “You’ll really think about it?”

“I said I would, didn’t I?” she snapped back. But I’m not making a decision until I’ve read up on it and know what I’m agreeing or disagreeing to.

“I’m sorry,” Ron said as he lay down beside her and let his head fall back in his pillow. “I didn’t mean to ruin the mood and everything.”

“It’s late,” Hermione replied, snatching her knickers off the bed and slipping them back on before she crawled under the covers. “We should probably get some sleep anyway. You’re going to have a long day tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is Saturday,” he reminded her, sliding under the covered without a stitch of clothing on. “We can lie in as long as we want.”

“But we have detention and you have Quidditch, plus you still need to finish your Transfigurations homework.”

“Can’t I do that on Sunday?” he asked hopefully.

“Have you finished your History of Magic paper yet?”

“No,” Ron groaned, knowing what was about to come next.

“Have you even started it?”

“Of course I have,” he replied, “but it’s sooooo boring. I mean really, who cares about that tedious Council of sixteen-whatever and why those nutter centaurs wanted to be classified as ‘Beasts’ rather than ‘Beings’? They don’t make any sense because they’re mental, the lot of them. That’s all I need
“Yes well, you’ll know much more than that by Monday night,” she retorted, as she settled down beside him and turned so she was facing the curtains, “because our papers are due first thing Tuesday morning.”

“Hermione?” Ron said softly, as he draped his arm over her waist and pulled her flush against his body.

“What?”

“Are you mad at me?” he asked.

“No,” she replied, grabbing his hand and intertwining their fingers.

“Mione?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks, love. I had a good time tonight.”

“Me too,” she replied, glad he couldn’t see her smile. “Now shut up and go to sleep.”
Chapter 24: Utterly Clueless

Ron didn’t know what time it was when he began to stir, not that it really mattered. It was Saturday and he could lie in as long as he wanted. So rather than check the time, he rolled over on his stomach and reached for Hermione. It wasn’t the first time he’d reached out for her in a groggy state, only to discover that she wasn’t beside him. The difference was he hadn’t simply been dreaming about her. She had been there when he dozed off, he was certain of that. They’d spent the better part of the night snuggled up together, so he was expecting to find her.

Where’d she go? he wondered, begrudgingly opening his eyes and looking at the empty spot beside himself for a moment, before glancing at his watch. Damn, he thought, when he realized it was after eight, which meant she hadn’t just popped off to use the loo.

So she’s not coming back, he told himself, as he rolled over on his back and covered his eyes with his arm, that doesn’t mean you can’t go back to sleep.

Unfortunately after ten minutes of tossing and turning Ron realized that he was waging a losing battle. As tired as he was, he simply couldn’t go back to sleep. His mind was too active wondering where Hermione had gone and why. And as if that weren’t enough, his stomach had gotten in on the act as well and was grumbling loudly, almost as if it were saying, ‘Hey! What are you just laying here for when there is food downstairs?’

“All right,” he muttered in defeat as the threw the covers back, scrambled out of bed, and hastily got dressed. “I’m going already,” he said to his stomach, ducking out the door and marching down the hall, “so knock it off, will ya?”

“You’re up early,” Ginny said, when she spotted her brother descending the stairs to the common room. If she’d been expecting a reply, she didn’t get one, at least not a spoken one. All Ron did was grunt at her as he threw himself down on the sofa.

“Good morning to you too,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes at the ceiling before she began walking back and forth in front of the windows.

“What are you doing?” Ron asked, stifling a yawn as he watched his sister pace.

“Nothing,” Ginny snapped. “What are you doing?”

“Watching you wear a hole in the floor, apparently,” he replied.

“Oh, shut up.”

“Someone’s cranky this morning,” Ron chuckled.

“I am not,” she insisted, her hands now on her hips. “I’m just...”

“Nervous?” he finished for her. “I get it,” he added, turning his attention to the girls’ staircase the instant he caught the motion of someone descending it out of the corner of his eye. Unfortunately it wasn’t the person he’d hoped it would be.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Lavender said to Ron, quickly scanning the room before she approached him.
“Where’s Harry?” Parvati asked as she came up behind her best friend.


“You guess?” Parvati questioned.

“Well, it’s not like I jump up and check his bed first thing in the morning. Have you seen Harry yet, Gin?”

“No,” his sister replied, narrowing her eyes and locking them on the two girls conversing with her brother. “Maybe you ought to ask Hermione,” she added, mentioning his girlfriend’s name on purpose just to see how the girls would react.

“Well, there you go,” Ron said to Parvati. “What’s it to you anyway?”

“It’s just a bit odd seeing you down here on your own,” Lavender said, as she sat down on the couch beside him.

On his own? Ginny asked herself in outrage. What the hell am I? I do exist, you stupid bint. No one asked you to come over here and butt in where you’re not wanted.

“You two are inseparable, when you aren’t fighting,” Lavender added. “You’re not still fighting are you?”

“No,” Ron replied curtly. “And I’m not going to tell you what it was about, so don’t bother asking.”

“It’s good that you two made up though,” Parvati chimed in. “I’m sure Hermione appreciated it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ginny demanded, crossing her arms and leaning back against the window.

“Nothing,” Lavender said quickly. “Just that it will make things easier for her because she won’t have to pick sides or anything.”

“Where is Hermione anyway?” Ron asked his sister.

“She went down to breakfast early,” Ginny replied, “She said that she had some reading she needed to get done and that she’d meet us down on the pitch later.”

“Oh,” Ron replied.

“Oh, that’s right,” Parvati said, glancing over at Ginny. “The Quidditch tryouts are today. So you’re trying out for one of the Chaser positions then?”

“I suppose that’s better than reserve Seeker, anyway,” Lavender added.

“Actually, I prefer scoring to seeking,” Ginny replied honestly, “so even if Harry wasn’t back on the team, I’d still go out for Chaser.”

“Well, good luck,” Parvati said. “Not that you’ll need it, I’m sure. You’re a good flyer and you were already on the team last year.”

“Plus you’ve already got two votes in your favor,” Harry said, as he descended the stairs and joined in the conversation.

“Oy, speak for yourself,” Ron objected. “I’m voting for whoever is best, sister or no sister.”
“Thanks a lot,” Ginny sighed.

“Not that it really matters,” Ron continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “Since Katie is the one with the final say.”

“So are we waiting for Hermione?” Harry asked, when Ron’s stomach rumbled.

“Naw,” the redhead replied as he stood up. “Ginny said she already went down without us. She’s probably in the Library buried behind a stack of books by now.”

“So breakfast then?” Harry asked, glancing at Ron and then Ginny.

“Sounds good to me,” Ron replied, heading off towards the portrait hole.

“Mind if we come down with you?” Parvati asked Harry.

“Suit yourself,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders as he followed Ron out of the common room.

“You coming, Ginny?”

You’re damned right I am, she thought, springing forward and following Harry out the portrait hole.

Ok, this is just getting ridiculous, Ginny thought, gaping at Lavender, who had just reached out and felt her brother’s arm as she complimented him on his Keeper skills.

“I can’t wait for this afternoon,” the vivacious blonde continued, speaking so rapidly Ron wouldn’t have been able to butt in even if he had wanted to. “It’s going to be so exciting watching everyone try out. I wonder if Seamus is trying out. I bet he is. He’s always talking about Quidditch. I wonder if he’s any good. Well, I’m sure you’re better. Your entire family plays, right? Even your older brothers. I mean the ones that weren’t at school with us. Wasn’t one of them Quidditch Captain? Oh, it’s going to be so much fun watching you take everyone on this afternoon. I can hardly wait.”

Oh! My! God! Ginny moaned in her head, the plate of food she’d been picking at since they’d sat down completely forgotten as she watched the scene unfolding before her. I didn’t think she was ever going to stop talking long enough to take a breath. Where the hell is Hermione? she asked herself, as she stared at her brother, who was completely gobsmacked.

Fifteen minutes of shameless flirting hadn’t been enough to get through his thick skull, but apparently being felt up at the breakfast table had clued him in and now that he realized what was really going on, he was more aghast than his sister. If the size of his eyes were any indication, Ron finally saw the out of control train speeding towards him, he just didn’t know how to get out of the way.

At least she’s a little more subtle about it, Ginny thought, shoving her plate away from herself as she refocused her attention on Parvati, who was sitting on the other side of Harry chatting him up.

There was no way she could eat anymore. She hadn’t really been all that hungry in the first place, but watching the raven haired beauty compliment Harry on his defensive spells and tell him what a wonderful teacher he was, while she questioned him about whether or not he planned on restarting the D.A. was nauseating. At least with Ron she could pretend that the outrage she felt was on Hermione’s behalf, but deep down she knew the truth. It wasn’t Lavender and it wasn’t Ron, it was Parvati that had her stomach in knots.

“I... uh... I’ve got to go,” Ron yelped without warning, jumping up and slowly backing away from the Gryffindor table.
“What’s the matter?” Harry asked, as he, and everyone else in the vicinity, stared at Ron in surprise.

“Nothing. I’ll see you upstairs,” he called back over his shoulder before bolting for the door.

“What the hell was that?” Harry asked Ginny, who simply shrugged her shoulders. “Did he look pale to you?” he continued. “I mean, I know he gets nervous about Quidditch and all, but you don’t think he’d actually make himself sick over it, do you?”

I don’t think it was Quidditch that turned his stomach, Ginny thought, her eyes falling on Lavender who was looking slightly bewildered.

“I don’t know,” she replied as inspiration struck and she acted on the impulse. “Maybe you ought to go check on him.”

“Yeah, all right,” Harry agreed, pushing away from the table and standing up himself. “Guess we’ll see you down on the pitch later,” he added, turning around and walked off.

“Right,” Ginny said, feeling both satisfaction and guilt as she watched him follow after her brother. She was relieved to see him go and she couldn’t help feeling a little smug as she noted the disappointed expression on Parvati’s face. But at the same time she knew that she had no right to interfere the way that she had. She had no claim on Harry after all.

“What did you do to him?” she heard Parvati whisper to her friend.

“Nothing,” the young blonde leaned forward and whispered back.

“You didn’t grope him under the table, did you?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, you must have done something to scare him off and now Harry’s up and gone with him.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Lavender insisted. “Nothing you weren’t doing, anyway.”

“I don’t know, Lav. Maybe you should rethink this. I mean he seems rather standoffish to me.”

“He’s just playing hard to get.”

“That’s one possibility I suppose,” Parvati replied doubtfully, “But I think it’s more likely he’s just a prat.”

“He’s a little rough around the edges, but we can work on that and—”

“A little rough?” Parvati cut her off. “He practically bit my head off the other day when I asked what was up with him and Harry.”

“He was just being protective of his friends,” Lavender insisted, “and I think that’s nice.”

“Yeah, well,” Parvati replied, clearly not convinced, “Hermione’s his friend and he yells at her on a daily basis.”

“It’s not just him though,” Lavender replied in a hushed voice. “She certainly doesn’t help matters any. She’s always niggling them about something.”

“Well, that’s true.”
I shouldn’t have done that, Ginny thought as she stood up and left the girls to their conversation. You’ve given up on him, remember? she scolded herself, feeling even worse as she approached the double doors leading into the Entrance Hall. He doesn’t even know I’m alive.

All right, she corrected herself, he knows I’m alive, but he doesn’t think of me as anything other than Ron’s little sister. That’s all I’m ever going to be, so I better get used to it, because it’s not going to change and interfering when other girls flirt with him isn’t going to help any. All I’m doing is torturing myself, she thought, thoroughly depressed now.

“I’m serious, Harry,” she heard her brother’s voice echo across the hallway the moment she entered it. “She was...” Ron started to explain and then faltered, as he and his best friend started to ascend the marble stairs. “She kept stroking my arm while she was blabbering away and she was complimenting me for no good reason and I think... no, I know... she was hitting on me.”

“She was just being nice,” Harry argued.


“So she patted you on the arm. Big deal.”

“Pat? It wasn’t a pat. She bloody well felt me up.”

“Uh huh,” Harry replied, clearly not convinced. “We’re still talking about your arm, right?”

“No, he’s right,” Ginny said, as she mounted the steps herself and followed after them. “I saw her do it.”

“SEE!” Ron shouted triumphantly. “Wait a minute,” he added, looking at his sister dubiously. “You saw it and... You’re not going to tell Hermione are you?”

“Tell her what?” Ginny asked, “That you two were chatting up girls over breakfast?”

“But I wasn’t,” Ron moaned. “I was just eating and she... she was...”

“Oh relax, will ya. I’m not going to tell her,” his sister assured him. “You didn’t do anything anyway. Well ,that’s not entirely true,” she amended. “You did abandon Harry and make a run for it.”

“Harry wasn’t the one being groped.”

“So it’s progressed to ‘groped’ now, has it?” Harry chuckled.

“It’s not funny,” Ron groaned.

“Actually it is,” Harry replied. “Don’t you agree?” he asked Ginny.

DAMN IT! Ginny swore to herself, when Harry smiled at her and she felt compelled to agree with him despite the fact she really didn’t find the situation remotely funny. Of course that was because of the way it affected her. If it weren’t for that, she had to admit that she’d find her brother’s reaction more than a little humorous, so she decided she better just play along.

“You should have seen the look on his face when he figured out what was going on,” Ginny replied. “Now that was funny.”

“Oh, shut up!” Ron cried, his face flooding with color as he spun around and continued to march up the stairs alone.
“You coming?” Harry asked, as he started to follow after Ron.

“Um, no,” Ginny replied, despite the fact she was still climbing the stairs herself. “I... uh... think I’m going to go to the Library instead,” she continued. “I have some homework I need to get done before the tryouts and all. You know, because afterwards I’ll probably be too nervous to really concentrate.”

“Er, ok,” Harry said, shooting a skeptical look her way. “Only, you don’t have any of your books.”

“Oh, well,” Ginny came back quickly, “that’s because the books I need are still in the Library. I probably should have checked them out sooner, but I spent most of my free time practicing so I’d be ready today. I’m sure Hermione will be able to help me find what I need though and I’ll just borrow some parchment from her. Well, I’ll see you later,” she said, as she increased her pace and scurried up the stairs ahead of him.

Well, that’s just one more thing to feel guilty about, Ginny thought, as she walked down the fourth floor corridor on her way to the Library. It was bad enough that I stuck my big fat nose into Harry’s business and tricked him into walking out on Parvati, but then I had to follow it up by lying to him? What was I supposed to do though? I couldn’t very well tell him the truth, she thought with a sigh. I really need to talk to Hermione about this. Even if she doesn’t have any useful advice, I just need to tell someone and I know I can trust her to keep it to herself.

Unfortunately, Hermione was nowhere to be found. Ginny searched the entire Library, to no avail. If she was reading, she wasn’t doing it there.

Maybe she got what she needed and went back upstairs, Ginny thought, as she slowly made her way back up to Gryffindor Tower. But when she entered the common room, her friend wasn’t there either. Fortunately her brother and Harry were also absent, so she was able to sneak up to the girls’ dorms without being seen.

She wasn’t too keen on the idea of going to Hermione’s room, mostly because she didn’t really want to run into Parvati again so soon, but as it was the only other place she could think to look, she didn’t have much of a choice. She needn’t have worried however. When she finally did reach the 6th year girls’ room, it was empty.

Out of ideas about where to look, Ginny made her way back to her own room instead, knowing that sooner or later Hermione would show up and until then she’d just have to shove it all aside and find a way to distract herself.

“Besides, you have more important things to worry about anyway,” Ginny reminded herself, as she flopped down on her bed. “You need to be focus on Quidditch right now,” she mumbled, reaching for the copy of Beating the Bludger- a Study of Defensive Strategies in Quidditch that was resting on her bedside table and flipping it open. “You can think about boys later.”

Hermione finally showed up in the Great Hall, just after her friends had finished their lunch and were about to head down to the pitch to warm up for their Quidditch tryouts.

“I need to talk to you,” Ron leaned forward and whispered to his girlfriend, after she had grabbed some cheese and an apple off the Gryffindor table and joined them.

“Well,” Hermione asked as they followed Harry and Ginny through the door leading out of the Entrance Hall and onto the grounds. “What is it?”
“Uh... not now,” Ron replied softly. “After the tryouts,” he added. “You’re going to wait with Ginny while the team discusses everything and Katie makes her decision, right?” he asked, his eyes darting from her to Harry and his sister, who were still walking just slightly ahead of them. “Right then,” he continued when Hermione nodded her head in response to his question. “I’ll tell you after that.”

“Why not now?” Hermione asked, creasing her brow as one eyebrow hitched up higher than the other. “If something is wrong I’d rather know about it--”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he assured her. “It’s nothing like that. It’s just... something odd happened at breakfast and....I’ll tell you about it later,” he added, when Harry stopped walking and spun around to check on them.

“So where’ve you been all day?” Harry asked Hermione.

“What?” she replied, rather startled by the question. “Didn’t Ginny tell you? I had some reading I had to do.”

“But you weren’t in the Library,” Ginny said. “I checked.”

“They didn’t have the books I needed,” Hermione admitted, “so I went to the Room of Requirement.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Ron asked, in what he hoped was a casual manner.

“More than I was expecting, actually,” she replied. “Unfortunately most of the books I looked through contain the same information. Mostly just historical accounts and the like. I suppose I’ll have to go back tomorrow.”

“You are the only person I know that would use the Room of Requirement as a study hall,” Ginny said, shaking her head sadly.

“So what have you three been up to?” Hermione asked, ignoring her red-headed friend’s comment and quickly changing the subject.

“Er...” Ron mumbled.

“Let me guess,” Hermione said. “Chess?”

“And exploding snaps,” Harry replied.

“Did you do any homework?”

“Not really,” Ron replied, albeit somewhat reluctantly. “Oh come on,” he cried, when she pursed her lips and shot them a disapproving look. “You didn’t really expect us to work on those boring essays without you,” he stated. “We always work on History of Magic together.”

“Uh hum,” she replied, clearly not buying his excuse, “because you need my notes.”

“Not just your notes,” Ron shot back, with a cheeky grin. “I need...”

“Don’t,” Harry exclaimed as he suddenly realized what his friends were doing.

“...you too,” Ron finished.

“Oh God,” Harry moaned, wrinkling his face up in disgust. “Did you really have to say that in front of me?”
“What?” Ron asked innocently. “We do. I’d like to see you finish your essay without her help.”

“That’s not what you meant,” Harry protested.

“Well, no,” the redhead admitted, his ears flushing slightly. “Not entirely, but it works both ways, doesn’t it?”

“I can’t believe... you were... flirting,” he said, screwing his face up in disgust. “In front of me.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Ron protested, his cheeks taking on the same coloring as his hair and ears.

“That was nothing,” Ginny chuckled. “Wait until you walk into a room and catch them snogging. Hell, Fred caught them in the shower together.”

“GINNY!” Hermione screeched, blushing so deeply her flaming red cheeks actually surpassed both Ron’s and Harry’s.

“I’m going to kill that bloody tosser,” Ron mumbled under his breath.

“So it’s true then?” Ginny asked with a devilish smile, not unlike the one her twin brothers wore when they were up to no good.

“No, it is not,” Hermione cried indignantly. “He caught us in the bathroom,” she corrected, as if that made the slightest bit of difference. Although technically speaking they had been in the shower at the time, but Fred had no way of knowing that for sure and Hermione wasn’t about to admit it to anyone.

“Well, there ya go, Harry,” Ginny said smugly. “I’d say that lovely mental image ought to be enough.”

“To what?” he retorted, his green eyes wide with horror behind his glasses, “To scar me for life?”

“Best to just get it over with now,” she replied, giving his arm a sympathetic pat. “Nothing you’re liable to see can possible be any worse than that, so there you go, the worst is over and we can all move on.”

“Speak for yourself,” the two boys mumbled at the same time as they both diverted their eyes to the ground.

“Aw come on,” Ginny sniggered. “It’s not that bad. I could always tell you how I found out.”

“NO!” Harry insisted, holding his hand out in front of himself to stop her. “I don’t want to know,” he said, shaking his head from side to side as if that would erase the pictures in his mind. “I’m going to get changed and then I’m going to play Quidditch and pretend this entire conversation never happened. That’s right,” he said to himself, as he walked away from his friends. “It never happened.”

“What?” Ginny asked when Ron’s head shot up and he glared at her. “He’s going to catch you two going at it eventually. We all have, even Dad.”

“Oh shut up,” Ron cried, blushing again. “We’re not that bad.”

“Actually, you are,” his sister corrected. “And you’re getting worse. You spent most of yesterday smiling and making goo goo eyes at each other and frankly it’s a bit annoying, so knock it off, will ya?”

“No,” Ron replied flatly. “If you don’t like it, you don’t have to watch.”
“But Harry does, and you’re going to make him uncomfortable.”

“I’m not the one that just made him uncomfortable,” her brother shot back. “That was you and your ‘mental images’. I can’t believe you told him that. I should have known Fred would never keep that to himself, but to tell you.”

“He didn’t,” Ginny confessed. “I overheard him and George talking about it that night, after you’d snuck back to your room.”

“Bloody extendable ears.”

“Ron,” Hermione said, placing her hand on his arm in an effort to calm him down before he worked himself up any further. “She was only trying to help and she has a point. We probably should tone it down a bit for Harry’s sake.”

“I don’t want to tone it down,” Ron stated irritably. “I don’t want to hide it anymore,” he added, “And I don’t want other girls hitting on me over breakfast.”

“WHAT!” Hermione cried in surprise. “WHO?”

“ It doesn’t matter,” Ron said. “The point is they’ll stop doing it, once they know about us.”

“ It most certainly does matter,” Hermione came back quickly, turning away from him and locking her eyes on Ginny. “It was Lavender, wasn’t it?” she asked, narrowing her eyes when Ginny nodded her head.

“You knew?” Ron exclaimed in surprise? “But... how?”

“She’s been asking me about you. About you and Harry actually,” Hermione admitted, her voice eerily calm now.

“She’s after Harry too?” he asked, his forehead wrinkling up in confusion.

“No Parvati is, you daft git,” Ginny chimed in. “Honestly, can you two possibly be any thicker?”

“HEY!” Ron shouted.

“What happened?” Hermione said, both girls completely ignoring his outburst.

“It was nothing,” Ginny assured her friend. “Just some harmless flirting. Lavender touched his arm and the instant he figured out what was going on, he got up and left.”

“I am still here you know,” Ron said loudly.

“No, I mean with Harry,” Hermione said. “Are you... uh...I mean did he realize what was going on?”

“Is she what?” Ron asked Hermione, his eyes jumping back and forth between her and his sister.

“Utterly clueless,” Ginny replied, although whether she was talking about him or Harry now, Ron wasn’t sure.

“About what?” he demanded impatiently.

“Parvati,” Hermione answered.
“Parvati is interested in Harry?” Ron asked. “Since when?”

“Since she and Lavender decided that it would be fun to have ‘best friends dating best friends’,” his sister said with a grimace.

“Dating?” he shouted with a look of disgust.

“Afraid so,” Hermione sighed.

“They even had the nerve to ask Hermione for advice,” his sister added.

“Wait a minute,” Ron said incredulously, his blue eyes locked on his girlfriend’s. “Let me get this straight. Lavender Brown, asked you,” he said, pointing his finger in Hermione’s direction, “for advice on how to chat me up?”

“Yup,” Ginny said calmly.

“You and Harry, actually,” she replied, as Ron gaped at her.

“And?” he cried, when she didn’t elaborate any further.

“And what?” Hermione asked.

“What did you tell her?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” Ginny answered for her. “She stormed out of the room in a huff.”

“Hermione!”

“What?” she cried defensively. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“How about, ‘he’s already dating his best friend so leave him the hell alone?’”

“That might have worked,” Ginny chuckled. “Of course the entire school would still be buzzing with rumors about you and Harry.”

“You are not helping,” Hermione scolded her amused friend.

“Well, it’s true,” she retorted, laughing even harder when she saw the horrified expression on her brother’s face.

“I don’t believe this is happening,” Ron said, more to himself than to anyone else. “If some bloke asked me for advice about you I’d--”

“Tell him off,” Hermione replied.

“Beat the hell out of him more likely,” Ginny muttered under her breath.

“And what good would that do?” Hermione continued. “None,” she said, in answer to her own question. “At best you’d come off looking like an over protective friend.”

“Or a jealous prat,” his sister added.

“Don’t you see? It wouldn’t have matter what I said. It wasn’t going to dissuade her. The only thing that might have done that would have been for me to tell her that you already had a girlfriend and I couldn’t because Harry didn’t know about us yet.”
“Well, you can tell her now,” Ron said, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“Not without the whole school finding out,” she reminded him. “Do you really think Harry is ready for that yet?”

“Probably not,” he begrudgingly admitted. “But... you can still tell her I’m not interested.”

“I could,” Hermione replied. “I’d love to in fact, but it won’t mean anything coming from me. She won’t believe it unless she hears it from you.”

“ME!” Ron yelped. “No way. I’m not going anywhere near her.”

“You can’t avoid her forever,” Ginny reminded him. “You do have classes together.”

“Yeah well, she can bugger off,” he snapped crossly.

“Well, now’s your chance to tell her that,” his sister informed him, motioning towards the girls that had just exited the castle and were slowly making their way to the pitch together.

Bloody hell, Ron groaned in his head when he saw Lavender and the Patil sisters were in the center of the group bearing down on them.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing Hermione’s hand and dragging her forward, knowing that if he could make it to the changing room next to the pitch before they overtook them, he’d be safe. “Let’s go.”

“All right,” she acquiesced, following along of her own accord.

There’s no point pressing him on it now anyway, she decided. He’ll deal with it eventually and if he doesn’t I will, she thought, despite the lecture she’d just given him.

Logically, she knew that the words would have more weight behind them if they came from Ron, but there was still part of her that was itching to do it herself. She’d hold her tongue for now, but as soon as Harry was used to them being together she was going to let Lavender Brown have it.

The Quidditch tryout took far longer than Hermione anticipated it would. She figured on an hour, two at the most. Never in her wildest dreams did she think that she’d still be sitting in the stands at four-thirty in the afternoon. But there she was, nearly three and a half hours after it all started, alone, (unless you counted the chattering girls sitting in front of her, which she didn’t), and more than a little bored.

It hadn’t been so bad when Harry and Ron had been sitting beside her, watching with everyone else, as Katie put all the candidates through the paces. The first thing she’d done was have them all line up and race to the end of the Pitch and back again to gauge who was fastest, which hadn’t made much sense to Hermione. Clearly the person with the fastest broom was the one that would win, but when she pointed that fact out, the boys had simply looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

“It’s not about the broom,” Harry tried to explain. “It’s about their ability to control it.”

“Don’t waste your breath, mate,” Ron chuckled, when Hermione argued that Ginny would have come in first rather than third if Harry had loaned her his Firebolt. “I already tried to explain it to her once.”

“You did not,” Hermione retorted.
“Did too,” Ron shot back. “I told you that Katie was going to be checking their agility and reflexes.”

“When?”

“Last night,” he reminded her with a smile.

Her first impulse had been to argue with him further, but in the end she bit back her retort and settled on, “If you say so,” instead. The previous night wasn’t exactly something she wanted to discuss with ten gossip mongering girls sitting well within earshot.

Of course that wasn’t the only reason she’d held her tongue. The problem was that Ron had been right. He knew it and more importantly, he knew that she knew it as well, but he didn’t press the matter. Apparently he was willing to let her off the hook with nothing more than a smug look when the new Quidditch captain produced a whistle from her robes and gathered the fliers around herself so she could give them new instructions.

Needless to say, the sanctimonious smirk Ron was wearing irritated her to no end. She would have liked nothing better than to continue bickering with him just to get rid of it; unfortunately she knew that if she did, he was liable to force her to admit that he was right. And by that point there was no way she could deny that Katie was indeed checking their reflexes, because every time she blew on her whistle, the airborne students racing across the pitch would bring their brooms to an abrupt halt and change directions; to the left if the blast had been short or to the right if it had been long.

Rather than admit defeat out loud, in front of other people, Hermione opted to remain silent, and simply listened to the comments the boys made to one another about the various players as the tryouts continued. Not that they held her interest all that long. Eventually she let her mind wander and it was then that she realized that she hadn’t been the only one to back down. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she realized that Ron had given even more than she had. He’d had her dead to rights, and rather than go in for the kill, as she would have done if the situation had been reversed, he’d been gallant about it and allowed her to back down with her dignity intact.

Actually it was rather sweet of him, she decided, reaching out, casually covered his hand with her own for a moment, and giving it a gentle squeeze. She only meant to show him that she wasn’t annoyed, but when she tried to withdraw, he snatched her hand back and linked their fingers.

Hermione instantly felt her face heat up, but as luck would have it, her blush wasn’t all that evident because it was a chilly day and her cheeks were already pink from the breeze that had been whipping through the stands. If Harry saw what was going on, he didn’t comment on it. Although the fact that he continued to stare straight ahead, without even glancing in their direction, led her to believe that he had noticed and was purposely ignoring it. She would have protested either way, but Ron, acted first.

“Bloody wind,” he swore, scooting closer and sandwiching Hermione between Harry and himself, as he scowled at the overcast sky. “Bet you wish you hadn’t worn that skirt now,” he added, releasing her, shedding the crimson robes that were covering the rest of his Quidditch uniform and draping them across all three of their laps like a blanket. “Better?” he whispered, clasping her hand again now that it was hidden from view.

“Much,” she whispered back. “But won’t you be cold?”

“No,” Ron replied as Katie gathered the perspective players around her again and started pairing them off. “It’s not really that bad,” he continued as the fliers started to soar about the pitch in various formations while they passed the Quaffle back and forth. “I have more padding than Harry does,” he explained, smacking one of the leather patches attached to his uniform just to prove his point. “They
keep the heat in.”

“Well, that explains the stench,” Harry snorted.

“Are you insinuating that I stink?” Ron retorted in a joking manner.

“Not yet,” his friend replied, with a laugh. “But give it time.”

“And I suppose you smell like a bouquet of roses after a game, eh Potter? More like a pile stinksap if you ask me.”

“Stop it,” Hermione moaned, wrinkling her nose up in revulsion. “You two are disgusting sometimes, you know that?”

“Disgusting? I thought that was Harry without his shoes on.”

“RON!” she cried, elbowing him in the side and scowling when he laughed even harder.

“He can’t feel that, you know?” Harry chuckled. “Not with all the ‘extra padding’. Maybe you ought wear that outfit every day, eh mate?” he joked. “Help cut down on all those bruises.”

“I don’t leave bruises,” Hermione protested.

“That’s not entirely true,” Ron replied. “I do have a few...er... marks,” he added with a knowing smile. “Not that I’m complaining,” he leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

“You’re incorrigible,” she declared, rolling her eyes at the sky and trying very hard not to smile herself.

By the time Ron was finally called out onto the field nearly forty-five minutes had passed. Harry remained in the stands however and the two friends watched together as the hopeful Gryffindors took turns trying to get the Quaffle through one of the three hoops the redhead was guarding.

Over all, Hermione thought Ron did very well. When all was said and done, he managed to block more than two-thirds of the shots, some of them without even putting all that much effort into it. Ginny also appeared to be doing fairly well, at least as far as Hermione could tell.

She asked Harry his opinion just to be sure and he readily agreed. Unlike Hermione, he’d obviously been keeping track of how many goals each of the candidate made, because when she asked him what he thought of Ginny’s performance, he informed her that she had actually scored the most.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean that she’s the best though,” he added. “She’s spent a lot of time practicing with Ron recently,” Harry explained, when Hermione wrinkled her brow in confusion. “It could be that she’s just learned how to read him better than the others. Of course that’s something else Katie will be looking for. I mean it makes sense that Ginny would have an easier time reading Ron, because he’s her brother and all,” he continued, “but if she can figure out what he’s planning, or which ring he thinks she’s going to aim for, and she can compensate, that’s an important skill.”

Hermione expected the tryouts to wind down once everyone going out for the two open positions had faced off against Ron, but things didn’t exactly work out that way. After a fifteen-minute break, Katie called everyone, including all of the current members of the team out on the field for an impromptu game. The teams were smaller than normal, comprised of one Beater a piece, two Chasers instead of the normal three, and a Keeper on each side. Ron obviously couldn’t guard all six hoops on his own, and as they didn’t really need a Seeker, Harry was recruited to defend the rings on one side of the field.
He balked at first, claiming that he didn’t know how to Keep, but in the end he relented and he wasn’t nearly as bad as he feared he’d be. His quick reflexes and fast broom helped, but even so, he was really only able to defend two of the three hoops most of the time. Not that it really matter all that much, since Katie was rotating different Chasers in and out of the game and had them switching teams so often that in the end, they went up against Ron just as often as they did Harry.

If only I’d brought one of those books from the Room of Requirement, she thought, after nearly thirty minutes of watching her friends play. At least then I wouldn’t feel like I was wasting time just sitting here, she continued with a sigh as she watched Jack Sloper swing his beaters bat at the lone Bludger that had been hurling across the field since the game started and nearly fall off his broom when he failed to connect.

But I promised Ron that I wouldn’t. Although I didn’t realize this was going to take all day when I made that promise. Still, I’m supposed to be supporting my friends, she reminded herself. Not that they really need it right now, of course. But after the game, Ginny’s going to need someone to wait with her while the rest of the team discusses everything and Katie makes her decision.

So much for getting anything accomplished today. This game is liable to go on until dinner and then there will be a party for the people that are chosen. I’ll have to put in an appearance there, especially if Ginny makes it. And as if that weren’t enough, Ron and I have detention tonight, she thought with another sigh, so it looks like I won’t get to go through the rest of those books on the Lânain until tomorrow.

“Well?” Harry asked, as he followed after his best friend, who had unceremoniously shoved his way through the party raging in the common room and headed straight upstairs when he returned from the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

“Sorry mate,” Ron replied, shaking his head back and forth slightly to let him know that they’d failed to get any useful information about Voldemort during their covert defense lesson with Tonks and Mad-Eye. “Hermione had a go at it like you suggested,” he said as they entered their empty dorm room. “She even played the ‘I’m worried about my parents’ card,” he elaborated, “but Moody saw right through her.”

“He laughed in her face actually, which hacked her off a bit,” he added, smiling to himself as he sat down on the edge of his bed and used his toes to pry his shoes off. “Apparently she can use logic or anger to throw the Imperius off. She had a grand time telling him to go to hell every time he’d put her under and ask her to do something.”

“What about Tonks?” Harry inquired. He’d known it was a long shot when he asked his friends to press the Order members for news about Voldemort during their detention. Even so, he’d spent the part two hours hoping that they might reveal something, even if it seemed insubstantial or irrelevant.

There had been a definite lack of news about Voldemort or any type of Death Eater activity in the Daily Prophet since the Muggle-borns were attacked. Harry, like Hermione, and nearly everyone else, suspected that the Minister of Magic was behind that. The problem was he’d stopped drinking Mrs. Weasley’s ‘special tea’ and the dreams that he’d expected to return, hadn’t. Not only that, he hadn’t sensed what Voldemort was thinking or feeling since the beginning of the summer.

Hermione suspected that Voldemort was purposely blocking him out of his mind, and that knowledge was more than a little unnerving. It wasn’t that he liked being connected to that monster, but he still wanted to know what he was doing and the fact that Voldemort appeared to be hiding it on purpose, worried Harry. Of course he was trying not to let that show.
“You could have come with us,” Ron reminded him. “They tell you things that they won’t tell us.”

“That would have looked a bit odd, don’t you think?” Harry asked. “Seeing as how I don’t have detention. Besides,” he added, in an attempt to change the subject and lighten the mood, “I wasn’t the one looking for an excuse to duck out of the party. A party being held in honor of your sister I might add. Someone had to help Ginny celebrate the fact that she made it back on the team.”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t see the way those two harpies zeroed in on us when we got back from the kitchen with the Butterbeer,” the redhead retorted.

“They were just trying to help us,” Harry argued. Ron had told him about Lavender and Parvati’s little plan as soon as the Quidditch tryouts were over, but he still wasn’t sure if he really believed it.

“Help themselves more likely. They were like a couple of vultures circling the room waiting for their next meal to arrive. If you want to be devour by Parvati, that’s your business, mate. But you can count me out.”

“I can think of worse fates,” Harry replied with a smirk.

“That’s not the tune you were singing after the Yule Ball,” Ron chuckled as he stood up and pulled his shirt over his head. “I seem to recall you saying something about--”

“Oh we’re going to talk about that, are we?” Harry laughed. “In that case there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. What exactly did happen to your Viktor Krum figure? I’ve always been curious about that, seeing as how I found one of his arms under my bed.”

“Shut up,” Ron groaned, throwing his shirt at his best friend’s head.

“No seriously,” Harry said with a snigger as Ron’s ears became progressively darker. “Did you tear him apart with your bare hands or did you...”

He would have continued to taunt Ron, if a knock on the bedroom door hadn’t drawn their attention. Who could that be? Harry wondered, as he approached the door. Seamus and Neville wouldn’t knock and everyone else is down at the party.

“I thought you went to bed?” Harry said, as he opened the door and stared down at Hermione in surprise.

“I did,” she replied, brushing past him and sweeping into their room uninvited, “But I needed to see Ron for a second.”

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“What’s the matter?” the redhead asked, removing his trousers without so much as a second thought and stalked over to his chest of drawers in nothing but his pants to retrieve a pair of pajamas. “Wait a minute,” he sighed, slipping the bottoms on and turning around to face Hermione again “It isn’t about the party is it?” he asked, “Because I already told you I wasn’t going to break it up. Give ‘em a break, will ya? It’s not even that late.”

“No,” Hermione replied, completely missing the stunned expression on Harry’s face. “It’s not the party. I just wanted to give you these,” she continued, holding her hand out in the air and opening her fist to reveal two small pills resting in her palm.

She’s not embarrassed either, Harry realized, as he gaped at his friends with wide eyes. *Neither of them is. Why should they be,* he reminded himself, focusing on Ron, whose complexion was as fair as ever. *If what Ginny said is really true they’ve seen each other starkers,* he thought, glancing at Hermione again and blushing slightly, as the image of her wearing nothing at all and standing under
a spray of water popped into his head.

You shouldn’t be thinking about things like that, he scolded himself, forcing his eyes to the floor and fidgeting uncomfortably the instant he realized he’d been looking at her chest. *She’s practically your sister.*

But she’s not, a voice in the back on his head protested.

She might as well be, he argued with himself. *I don’t have those kind of feelings for her. Besides, she’s dating my best friend. It’s just that... it doesn’t seem real. They act the same way they always did. She still nags and he still complains about it. If I hadn’t seen them holding hands... I never would have suspected anything was different. Well, expect for the fact Ron just stripped in front of her. That’s definitely different.*

“What in the hell would I want those things for?” Ron asked loudly, drawing Harry from his own thoughts and reclaiming his attention.

“Just take them,” Hermione sighed in exasperation as the thrust the tablets at Ron, who was backing away from her.

“I’m not taking those ruddy pill things,” he cried, staring at her hand warily.

“Honestly, Ron,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not like I’m trying to poison you. They’re just aspirin.”

“What are you doing with aspirin?” Harry asked, clearly not sharing his best friends concern.

“I’m not going to bother Madam Pomfrey with something as trivial as a headache,” Hermione replied, her eyes still focused on her retreating boyfriend. “I know you have one,” she informed Ron. “I saw you wincing and rubbing your temples when Moody was finished working with you. My head hurts too,” she added, “and I barely did anything tonight. Just take them. They’ll help.”

“I’ll just sleep it off, thanks,” he replied.

“Oh for heaven’s sake. Will you tell him, Harry?”

“She’s right,” Harry agreed. “They do work. Muggles take them all the time.”

“Yeah?” Ron asked sarcastically. “They also stitch themselves up like a pair of ripped trousers,” he added. “But you’ll never catch me doing anything as barmy as that.”

“Fine. Go ahead and be stubborn about it,” Hermione snapped, “but I’m leaving them here,” she continued, stalking over to Ron’s bed and setting the Muggle medication down on his bedside table. “See if you can get him to take them before he goes to sleep,” she said to Harry, “or he’ll be grouchy all day tomorrow.”

“Wait, you’re not leaving?” Ron asked, hurrying forward when she started moving towards the door.

“I’m tired and I know you are too,” Hermione replied. “I’m going to turn in early. I’ll see you both in the morning,” she added, glancing over at Harry and giving him a brief smile.

“But,” Ron protested, grabbing her hand and stilling her before she managed to open the door. “You don’t have to go,” he said softly. “We don’t have classes tomorrow, so ... you know,” he said, lowering his voice even further, “you can stay in here.”
“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she replied uncomfortably.

“Why not?”

“Because we’re Prefects for one.”

“So,” Ron shot back quickly. “We were Prefects last night and you slept in here. No one will know.”

“Harry will know,” she whispered, glancing over her shoulder at their other best friend, who was rummaging through his own chest of drawers and obviously had his back turned to them on purpose. Of course just because he wasn’t watching them, didn’t mean he couldn’t hear them.

“Harry doesn’t care,” Ron replied. “Do you mate?”

“Um... no, not really,” he lied, hoping that his discomfort wasn’t too evident. But even as he spoke, he found himself wondering what exactly had happened between them the night before and the images that accompanied that thought made him feel even more awkward.

This is Hermione, he reminded himself. *Proper, do everything by the rules, Prefect, Hermione.*

Who spent the night in the boys’ dorm with her boyfriend, the belligerent voice in the back of his head chimed in. *They did more than just sleep in the same bed and you know it.*

No, I don’t, Harry argued with himself. *And I don’t want to know. What they do, or don’t do, behind those curtains is none of my business.*

Unfortunately the more he tried not to think about what they could have been doing, the stronger the mental images flashing through his mind became.

“I...er... I think I’m... uh... going to go back down to the party for a little while,” Harry said, tossing his pajamas down on his bed.

“No Harry,” Hermione protested, before he even had a chance to make it half way to the door. “You don’t need to that. I’m going.”

“Hermione,” her boyfriend whined as he shot her an imploring look.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said firmly to Ron, before reaching for the doorknob.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” he asked, placing one hand on the door just to the left of her head and leaning forward so she wouldn’t open it.

“Oh yeah. Good night Harry,” Hermione said, without turning around.

“That’s not what I meant,” Ron chuckled softly, “and you know it.”

“We already said goodnight,” she reminded him, still facing the door.

“But I’ve seen you since then, so we’ll have to do it again.”

“You’re impossible,” Hermione groaned, biting her lip to keep from smiling when she spun around and saw him smirking at her. “Fine,” she relented with a sigh, “Goodnight, Ron,” she stated in an overdrmatic manner, as she came up on her tiptoes and pecked him lightly on the cheek. “Take the aspirin,” she whispered, placing one hand on his chest and pushing him away from the door and herself. “You’ll feel better,” she added, throwing the door open.
“I’d feel better if I got a proper kiss,” he whispered, after glancing into the hallway to make sure there was no one else around to accidentally overhear them.

“Looks like you’re in for a rough night then,” she informed him as she slipped into the corridor and started walking back towards the stairs. “See you two in the morning.”

“Aw well,” Ron sighed, shrugging his shoulders as he shut the door and turned around to face Harry again. “It was worth a try.”
Ron hated Sundays. They were almost worse than Mondays in a way. Sure he could lie in if he wanted, but there wasn’t really much point to that, seeing as how the instant he woke up he started dreading the rest of the day. He could hide in his bed for a while, but he couldn’t put it off entirely. Eventually he was going to have to go downstairs and when he did, he’d have no choice but to start on his homework. After a nice long breakfast of course. Even Hermione couldn’t expect him to work on an empty stomach.

Unfortunately breakfast never seemed to last long enough on Sundays. Especially when you had hour upon hour of tedious schoolwork to look forward to. Not that he didn’t try and drag it out with second and even third helpings, but eventually even he had to stop eating and when he did, he knew that Hermione was going to pounce.

Sundays were her best day after all. It was the only day during the week when the common room was quiet and everyone was doing their schoolwork. Unlike the rest of the student population, who had to buckle down and finally get to work on the assignments they’d been putting off all weekend, Hermione, who was always finished with her coursework early, was able to sit in a chair and read, or revise her work, to her hearts content.

Only this week rather than sit in the common room beside her friends, she opted to read somewhere else. Ron, of course knew what she was really doing, because she’d told him before she left. She was going to check on the potion, then she was going back to the Room of Requirement for a while, but she said she’d be back around noon. Noon came and went however, and Hermione never showed up.

Not that Ron was really all that worried. He knew that she often lost track of the time when she was reading, and he had more important problems to worry about. Like the fact that Lavender Brown had snuck into the room while he was preoccupied with his Transfiguration homework and had the audacity to ask him if he’d like to study with her, when he was clearly already studying with Harry.

His curt reply of, “No!” obviously hadn’t been enough to put her off, because even after he disregarded her and shifted his attention back to his Transfiguration book, she continued to stand there for some unknown reason. In the end he had to get downright rude before she’d leave.

“Why are you still here?” Ron asked, when she failed to slink off as he expected. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“Yes,” Lavender replied, more than a little taken aback and clearly flustered. “But ...well... are you sure you don’t want any help? Because I’d be glad to--”

“From you?” Ron interrupted with a snort. “That’s rich,” he laughed. “Maybe you haven’t noticed, but I’ve been studying with the smartest witch in school for the past six years.”

“Of course I’ve noticed,” Lavender replied, clearly on edge now. “But she’s not here to help you now, is she?”

“Why would I want you when I can study with her?” Ron retorted, loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear him.

“I... I just thought that...that...”
“Yeah well, there’s your problem,” he snapped, slamming his book shut as he did so.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lavender asked, narrowing her eyes and placing one hand on her hip. She wasn’t exactly sure what he was insinuating, but she was fairly certain that she’d just been insulted.

“Why don’t you go somewhere else and see if you can’t figure it out?” Ron replied, glancing over at Harry who was seated on the sofa beside Neville shaking his head sadly. “Or not. I don’t really care what you do, as long as you do it somewhere else.”

“Damn Weasley!” Seamus hooted, after Lavender had turned around and stormed back over to Parvati, who’d been watching the exchange from across the room.

“What?” the young redhead replied, glancing at the sofa and finally noticing that all three of his roommates were staring at him.

“That was rather rude, don’t you think?” Neville asked.

“Even for you,” Seamus added. “And that’s saying something.”

“She brought it on herself,” Ron responded, shrugging his shoulders to show that he really didn’t care if he’d hurt her feelings. “What part of the word ‘no’ didn’t she understand?”

“You do realize that when a pretty girl asks you to study with her, she’s usually interested in raising more than just your marks,” Seamus said, arching his eyebrows suggestively and sniggering when Neville’s face flooded with color. “That was a bit of an idiotic move if you ask me.”

“Which I didn’t,” Ron shot back defensively. “Besides, she’s ‘studied’ with a few too many blokes for my liking.”

“Trust me, Weasley. That’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Seamus replied with a smirk. “I’d rather study with a girl that’s been tutored up a bit and knows what she’s doing than one that’s never even cracked a book.”

“She’s all yours then,” Ron said, disregarding Seamus as he shoved his Transfigurations homework aside and replaced it with his History of Magic text.

I don’t believe this, Hermione seethed as she stormed back to Gryffindor Tower with a thin red book tucked under her arm. Why didn’t he tell me? He had to know that I’d find out about this sooner or later.

Of course he knew, she told herself, after giving the Fat Lady the password and marching into the common room. He was just hoping that it would be later rather than sooner. The overprotective jackass, she ranted in her head, scanning the room until she spotted the ginger hair she was searching for.

“You knew,” Hermione hissed as she came up behind Ron, who sitting at a table by himself hunched over a sheet of parchment. “You knew and you didn’t tell me,” she said in a low voice, slamming the book she’d been carrying down right on top of his essay.

Ron yelped, jumped in surprise and spun around to find his girlfriend glaring at him ominously. “What?” he asked, hoping to buy himself enough time to figure out why she was so hacked off.
It couldn’t be Lavender, he reasoned. *I told her about that. SHIT! Just don’t admit to anything until you know what you’re admitting to.*

“You knew,” she repeated, her voice low and harsh.

“Knew what?” Ron asked, hoping that he didn’t look as frightened as he felt. Hermione in a temper and shouting was one thing. Hermione in a temper and using a subdued voice was something else all together.

“That this,” she said, pointing at the book she’d slammed down on his homework, “was only going to effect me.”

“What?” he asked again, more confused than ever. That is until he glanced down at the book she was pointing at and noticed the title, *Chained by the Bond- The Restraints of the Lànain Curse*, printed on the cover. “Oh.”

“Oh? That’s all you have to say for yourself?”

“It’s... uh... not a curse.”

“Not for you it isn’t,” Hermione hissed. “But you failed to mention that part didn’t you? And here I thought we’d be able to ‘protect’ each other, but that’s not how it works, is it? You’re the only one that will have any control. In fact you’ll have all of the control and I’ll pretty much be at your mercy.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ron asked, both irritated and insulted by her insinuation that he’d mistreat her.

“You know perfectly well what I’m talking about,” she spat back. “You’ll be able to ‘protect’ me from other men, but it doesn’t go both ways. You’ll still be free to touch anyone you want.”

“I don’t want to touch anyone else,” he whispered, his voice dripping with indignation.

“That’s not the point.”

“It’s not?” Ron asked, furrowing his brow in confusion. “So why are you snarling at me then?”

“Because you still could.”

“But I don’t want to.”

“Well, neither do I.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Ron protested in a hushed voice, “and you know it.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry,” she informed him matter-of-factly. “Because I can take care of myself.”

“No Hermione, you can’t.”

“I most certainly can,” she screeched, causing several heads to spin in their direction.

“What the hell are you looking at?” Ron growled at the onlookers as he rose out of his chair, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and proceeded to glare at them until one by one they turned away. “We’re going to finish this conversation upstairs,” he snapped, gathering his essay up, shoving it into the book Hermione brought back from the Room of Requirement, and tucking it under his arm.
before anyone else could see it. “Come on,” he said, placing one hand on her back and pushing her forward.

For a split second the words, “You can’t tell me what to do,” hovered on the tip of her tongue and she considered staying right where she was. But there were far too many people in the common room and even though they were no longer watching, she knew that they were all listening. She wanted to continue the ‘conversation’, so she swallowed her retort and followed Ron up the stairs.

As soon as she cleared the threshold of his dorm room and shut the door, Ron pointed his wand at it and shielded the room.

“Look Mione,” he said, tossing his wand on his bed. “I know you think you can--”

“Don’t you Mione me,” she shouted, placing both of her hands on her hips. “And I don’t think it. I know it.”

“And what about Malfoy?” he shot back, taking her by surprise.

“What about him?” Hermione asked, her brow creasing in confusion. “What does he have to do with anything?”

“You might have forgotten about what Malfoy did to you on the train, but I haven’t,” Ron snapped, clenching his fists at his sides as he remembered the way the pale Slytherin Prefect had been taunting her about being captured.

“He didn’t do anything,” Hermione insisted. “I told you that. I made the whole thing up.”

“BOLLOCKS!” Ron shouted. “He had you cornered, Hermione. You didn’t even have your bloody wand. If I hadn’t walked in when I did there’s no telling what might have happened.”

“I would have kneed him in the groin, that’s what would have happened.”

“A surefire way to hack him off even more,” he said with sigh. “Look, I know you think that you can take care of yourself but--”

“I can,” Hermione insists, crossing her arms in front of her chest defiantly.

“Not on the bloody train, you couldn’t,” Ron persisted. “You were disarmed and at his mercy.”

“I was NOT at his mercy,” she retorted in a resentful tone of voice. “We were on a train full of people, for heaven’s sake. All I had to do was scream and--”

“What if he had put a Silencing Charm on the compartment?” he shot back quickly.

“He didn’t.”

“But he could have,” Ron insisted. “No one would have heard you scream then.”

“This is pointless,” Hermione sighed, throwing her hands up into the air in exasperation. “I’m not going to argue with you about something that didn’t even happen.”

“But it could have happened,” Ron stated. “Because it’s just that easy. You let your guard down for one second and that’s all it took. And it wasn’t just you,” he added. “I did it too. I relaxed as soon as you were on the train, because there were Aurors and Order members around and I didn’t think anything would happen to you. I shouldn’t have let you go off on your own, but I did. If anything had happened it would have been my fault,” he said miserably.
“I was the one that wasn’t paying attention,” Hermione confessed, her anger beginning to wane.

“When you got away from them,” Ron admitted as he sat down on the side of his bed and dropped his eyes to the floor, “I swore to myself that I’d never let anything like that happen to you again. That I’d never let those bastards hurt you and I broke that promise almost as soon as we were out of the bloody house. You don’t understand what it was like,” he said, the pain he’d felt evident in his voice. “I was right there when they took you and I couldn’t stop them. I tired, but I couldn’t get to you in time. And I just kept thinking about the things they could be doing to you, because I... I failed you.”

“No,” Hermione insisted, sitting down on the bed beside him and reaching for one of his hands. “No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did,” he moaned miserably. “I failed you and Harry in the Department of Mysteries and I failed you again this summer. I was there this time. I was right there with you on Diagon Alley and I still couldn’t stop them. I tried to get to you. I tried so hard,” he muttered.

“I know,” Hermione assured him as she threw her arms around his neck and pulled him close. “I saw you and I knew that you’d make it through the crowd. That’s why I did what I did. Because I wanted to protect you just as much as you wanted to save me.”

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” Ron whispered into her hair as she hugged him. “I’ve never felt so helpless and I don’t ever want to feel like that again. It didn’t have to happen,” he said, pulling back and locking his sorrowful blue eyes on hers. “Any of it. I could have prevented the whole thing if we’d only been... if we’d only done this Länain thing sooner. Krum never would have been able to hold onto you. I could have forced him to let go, even with the crowd standing between us. You would have gotten away and none of it ever would have happened.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” she said softly.

“I know that it will protect you.”

“And what about you?” Hermione asked, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“What about me?”

“Who’s going to protect you, Ron?”

“I don’t need the same kind of protection,” he stated. “Besides, most Death Eaters are men and the Länain can only repel members of the opposite sex.”

“Like Bellatrix Lestrange?” Hermione asked. “She enjoys toying with her victims before she finishes them off,” she added, when Ron remained silent.

“But she isn’t going to... to... rape me,” he said, fidgeting uncomfortably.

“She’s a sick, twisted, bitch and I wouldn’t put anything past her. You want to protect me. I understand that. But I want to protect you too.”

“I don’t matter,” Ron said, dropping his head again.

“How can you say that?” Hermione asked, no longer trying to stem the flow of tears that were streaming down her cheeks. “You matter to me,” she affirmed. “And you matter to Harry. You matter to your family,” she continued. “We all love you and I’m going to do whatever I can to keep you safe.”
“Hermione, you can’t.”

“Why not?” she asked. “We have two charms.”

“Because it doesn’t work that way,” Ron insisted.

“Just because it isn’t normally done, doesn’t mean it won’t work,” Hermione stated. “It’s just a spell. I read it over carefully. It doesn’t differentiate between the sexes. The gender of the person that ends up wearing the talisman doesn’t matter. It’s the magic and the blood that forges the bond. The talisman just amplifies it and sustain the connection. If you can put one on me, I can most certainly put one on you.”

“But...” Ron stammered, “but, it’s just not done. Men don’t...”

“Don’t what?” Hermione cut him off. “Relinquish control to their wives?”

“It’s not that,” he insisted. “It’s just...it’s...”

“Humiliating?” she finished quickly. “Degrading?”

“Yeah.”

“And yet you expect me to agree to it?”

“It’s not the same thing,” Ron maintained.

“It is the same,” Hermione insisted. “I’m not your property. I’m not some subservient little twit that’s going to sit back and be controlled by her husband. Marriage is a partnership. We have to be equals or it won’t work. I’ll do it, but only if you agree to do it as well. That way I’ll have just as much control over you as you do over me and we’ll be on an equal footing.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” he asked, scrutinizing her facial expressions closely.

“Yes, I am.”

“All right,” Ron said, after a moment of silence. “I... I’ll do it.”

“You can’t do it just like that,” Hermione protested. “You need to think about it first.”

“No, I don’t,” Ron replied, waving his hand in the air as if he were using it to brush her suggestion aside. “I don’t care. It’s not about control or ownership anyway. At least not as far as I’m concerned.”

“And maybe it’s better this way,” he admitted, now that the shock had worn off a bit and he was able to process exactly what a dual bonding would signify. “I mean if you ‘own’ me as well, that will take some of the stigma off of it, right? Because like you said, we’ll be equals and there is nothing shameful about that. I mean sure, it’s a little embarrassing,” he continued to ramble, “and Fred and George will say I’m ‘whipped’. They’ll take the mickey out on me something fierce if they ever find out, but they do that anyway, so... yeah, I’ll do it. But... we’re not... uh... really going to tell people, right?” he asked uncomfortably. “I mean we’re not going to announce it or anything?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Are we going to tell anyone?”

“You mean Harry?” Hermione asked. “I don’t know,” she admitted, when Ron nodded his head in
answer to his question. “What do you think?”

“Hey Harry, guess what?” Ron said, as if their best friend was standing in the room with them. “Hermione and I are going to perform the Lànain. Oh you’ve never heard of it?” he continued on as if Harry had replied. “Well I’m not surprised, seeing as how it’s one of those nefarious practices created by pure-blood maniacs like You-Know-Who. But basically I’ll take this charm that I nicked from Sirius, put it around Hermione’s neck, and once I do that, she becomes my wife. Oh yeah,” he snorted. “That ought to go over well.”

“He’s bound to be shocked,” Hermione admitted, “but once we explain the protective aspects...”

“But what about the part where we’re married?”

“I think we should tell him that part too,” Hermione replied, after considering it for a moment. “He’s our best friend. If we’re really going to get married, I want him there. It just wouldn’t be right if he wasn’t a part of it. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” Ron agreed, although he sounded as if he wished he didn’t. “So... uh... what about the potion? Do you want to tell him about that too?”

“No,” Hermione stated so vehemently, that it took Ron by surprise. “I don’t care if Voldemort knows that we’re bound by the Lànain. It’s inconsequential, because it’s not part of the original plan. But he can’t know about the potion or why we’re taking it. We can’t tell Harry about that until he’s mastered Occlumency enough to consciously block out his thoughts. He needs to be able to control his emotions as well, or at least conceal them enough that Voldemort can’t use them to figure out what’s going on. We definitely can’t tell Harry about the counter-curse yet. He’s far too emotional.”

“You can’t blame him, Hermione,” Ron said in his best friend’s defense. “You’d be emotional too if -”

“I know,” she said, cutting him off. “I didn’t mean it as a criticism. I was just stating a fact.”

“Yeah well, Snape’s a condescending, vindictive, slimy, son of a bi...”

“RON!”

‘Hey, it’s a fact,” he stated, before Hermione could admonish him any further. “Not even you can argue that point. He’s had it in for Harry ever since he got here. The slimy git,” he mumbled, under his breath. “You can’t blame Harry for not wanting to spend anymore time than necessary with that -”

“Ron,” Hermione said his name again in warning, when she sensed the direction he was about to proceed.

“It’s the truth,” he protested.

“The truth is that it’s also necessary for Harry to learn Occlumency.”

“It doesn’t matter how necessary it is,” Ron informed her. “He’s not going to grovel at Snape’s feet.”

“If he won’t do it, I will,” Hermione stated point blank.

“You can’t,” he shot back quickly. “If you do that, it’ll just make things worse.”

“How can they possibly be any worse than they already are?”
“Knock it off,” Seamus snapped, when Neville, who was sitting beside him on one of the sofas in the common room, shifted his weight and swung around to peer up the staircase leading up to the dormitories for the fourth time. “I’m trying to write here.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry,” Neville apologized, spinning around to face forward again and flopping against the back of the couch with a sigh.

“What’s the matter with you anyway?” Seamus asked, stilling his quill and looking up from his History of Magic essay.

“Nothing,” he replied. “It’s just... I need my essay and I left it upstairs.”

“So go get it.”

“I can’t,” Neville groaned. “Well, I could,” he added, when the young Irishman rolled his eyes. “But I’d rather wait until Ron and Hermione are finished...you know...”

“Bellowing at one another?” Seamus asked.

“Yeah. So Harry,” Neville said, directing his attention towards the young man with tousled black hair and glasses, who was sitting in a chair to his left. “How much longer do you think it will be?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Harry asked, lowering his book to discover both of his roommates studying him.

“You must have some idea what they’re arguing about,” Neville explained.

“No clue,” Harry replied honestly. “But knowing those two, it could be anything.”

“Who cares what they’re bickering about?” Seamus chimed in. “I’m just glad they took it somewhere else. At least they’re not shrieking like a couple of banshees down here. I hate it when they do that. Oh all right,” he admitted, when he noted the disbelieving looks his companions shot in his direction. “I don’t actually hate it. In fact, it’s fairly entertaining, but not when I have a mountain of homework to finish.”

“I don’t suppose you’d go up and see how much longer they’re going to be?” Neville asked Harry hopefully.

“Me?” he asked in surprise. “Why don’t you do it?”

“Because he’s afraid he’ll get caught in the crossfire,” Seamus sniggered, “At least if they curse you by accident they’d stop fighting long enough to repair the damage. If they hit one of us they probably wouldn’t even notice, or care.”

“I’m sure they’d notice,” Harry assured them.

“But they wouldn’t stop bickering.”

“Er...” Harry mumbled as he pictured Ron pushing Hermione to the point that she was so incensed she’d actually throw a curse at him. “Probably not,” he confessed, as the Ron in his mind ducked out of the way and the spell hit Neville instead. “Actually they’d probably use it as additional ammunition to hurl at one another,” he confessed.

Look what you made me do? he heard Hermione’s voice screech in his head.
I’m responsible for your bad aim now, am I? he heard Ron retort.

I do not have bad aim. You moved.

I’d have to be pretty thick to just stand there and let you curse me, now wouldn’t I?

“Come on Harry,” he heard Neville plead. “Just go up and check. If they look like they’re going to be at it for a while, just grab my essay off the top of my bureau. Please.”

It took a couple of minutes, but eventually Harry gave in to Neville’s request, albeit reluctantly, and the next thing he knew, he was ascending the stairwell to the boys’ dorm.

This isn’t good, Harry told himself, as he cautiously edged his way towards his own room and stood outside the closed door. He expected to hear angry shouts, or at the very least some muffled muttering, but even after he placed his ear against the door, he was met with silence. *This is definitely not good*, he thought, as he pulled away from the door and contemplated whether or not he should just go back downstairs.

They probably Shielded the room so no one would hear them, Harry realized, but that knowledge didn’t set his mind at ease. In fact, if anything, it made him even more anxious. It wasn’t that he simply didn’t want to walk in on his two best friends when they were in the middle of a heated row. They argued so often that he was fairly indifferent to it most of the time. But this fight was different. For one thing, they were a couple now.

What if they’re arguing about couple things? Harry wondered.

That would certainly explain their unexpected departure. It just wasn’t like Ron to stop in the middle of an argument and take it somewhere else. When he was upset about something, everyone knew it. If he wanted to say something, he’d say it, without so much as a second thought about anyone else that happened to be in the vicinity to overhear him. Harry couldn’t remember a time when he’d seen Ron postpone a fight until he found a private place to have it out.

The more he thought about it, the more Harry realized that he really didn’t want to walk into the middle of this particular row. So he did the most logical thing he could think of; he knocked. It was only after the fact that he realized they wouldn’t be able to hear him anymore than he could hear them. Not if the room was really Shielded, which he was now fairly certain it was.

Oh well, he thought, reaching for the doorknob and twisting it. *I’ll just give it a try and when it won’t open, I can go back down and tell Neville that I couldn’t get in.*

The problem was that the door wasn’t locked as he had expected it to be and when he turned the knob, it did open. The gap that resulted was just a few inches. Not enough to see into the room by any means, but it was enough to allow any sounds from within to filter into the hallway. The odd thing was, there was no sound. No shouting, no talking, nothing but silence.

Maybe he took her somewhere else, Harry reasoned as he pushed the door open a little wider and peered into the room. *But where?* he wondered, slipping inside to retrieve Neville’s assignment. *There’s nowhere else to go up here, unless he took her to the showers,* he thought somewhat dryly.

Almost as soon as the thought entered his head, he heard it; a soft moan coming from the direction of Ron’s bed.
OH SHIT! Harry thought, his eyes becoming the size of galleons as he froze in place and tried to figure out what to do. His first instinct was to turn around and run out of the room as fast as he could, but if he did that, they were liable to hear him. His next thought was that he could probably sneak out the same way he’d snuck in, but that left the problem of what would happen if he went downstairs without Neville’s paper? What if Seamus or even Neville decided to come up and get it? Shouldn’t he at least warn his friends to lock the door?

SHIT! he swore again, as he heard Ron mutter something he couldn’t quite make out. Part of him expected his best friend to get up and catch him standing there. Thankfully that didn’t happen.

Just get the damned essay and get out of here, Harry rebuked himself, once he had resumed breathing. Unfortunately as he slowly inched his way towards Neville’s bureau, he got a better view of Ron’s bed, and despite the fact he tried not to look, he just couldn’t help but not see them.

It wasn’t as if he’d never seen a snogging couple before, but as he gaped at his best friends he realized there was a vast difference between a public snog, like the ones you encountered in the common room or Hogsmeade, and a private snog. The most obvious being the fact that they were lying down, although it appeared that they had started out sitting side by side on the edge of the bed, because one of Ron’s feet was still dangling over the side.

The next thing Harry noticed was the fact that Hermione wasn’t reclining beside Ron, she was sprawled out on top of him and she was making noises as she kissed him. Soft little moans that not only burned into his brain, but made his entire body heat up.

Cho didn’t make sounds like that when we kissed, he reflected as he watched one of Ron’s hands slide down Hermione’s back and come to rest on her bum.

You shouldn’t be watching this, he told himself, as Ron’s hand slipped down further and plunged under Hermione’s skirt. She whimpered softly, but continued to kiss him and then without warning, Ron rolled them both over. The instant he was on top of her, Ron entwined both of his hands with Hermione’s, then pushed them up over her head, as his mouth came off of hers and fell to her neck.

STOP! Harry cried out in his mind, trying to force himself to look away and failing. It was almost as if he’d been frozen in place, although whether it was from shock or horror, he wasn’t exactly sure, because he was feeling a good deal of both, along with something else that freaked him out even more. He wasn’t simply aghast at what he was witnessing, but at the way his own body was responding to it.

JUST STOP LOOKING! his mind screamed and finally, he managed to clench his eyes closed.

But the damage had been done. Even with his eyes closed tightly, Harry could still see them in his mind. Not only that, he could hear them. Not just the soft moans they were currently making, but the sounds they had made before, in particular the way Hermione had whimpered when Ron touched her. That whimper just kept playing over and over in his head.

She’s your friend, Harry scolded himself, as he slowly started backing towards the door. Stop thinking about her like that. Just stop it! You don’t fancy her and you don’t want to snog her.

But you would like to snog other girls like that, another voice responded in his head. A girl that isn’t crying. One that will let you touch her and make sounds like that when you do.
But what if I’m rubbish at it? he asked himself. *Maybe I really was doing it wrong and that’s why Cho didn’t react like Hermione is. OH GOD! I’m a bad kisser. What the hell am I supposed to do now?*

Ron seems to know what he’s doing, the other voice piped in. *You can always ask him.*

No, I can’t. Maybe if he were with someone other than Hermione, but I don’t want to know about the two of them...like that.

It’s a little too late for that, seeing as how you’ve just seen them going at it.

I’ll just go downstairs, find Ginny, and have her Obliviate me. Then it will be like it never happened.

Until you walk in on them again, he thought, as he took one final step backwards and collided with the door.

DAMN! he silently swore, when he saw the flurry of movement across the room and Ron’s head emerged from behind the curtains at the corner of his four poster bed.

“Harry?” he said, blushing deeply when he spotted his best friend standing by the door. “What are you--”

“Sorry,” Harry interrupted, his green eyes immediately dropping to the floor. “I didn’t mean to... Neville just... well, he wanted to know how much longer you’d be. He needs his essay and...I didn’t hear anything, and no one answered when I knocked, and the door was unlocked, so... er... sorry. I’ll just grab his essay for him and get out of your way.”

“No, wait,” Hermione said, as she slipped around the opposite side of Ron’s bed and came out where he could see her. “It’s all right,” she continued before he had a chance to protest. Had Harry looked up, he would have noticed the blush creeping across her cheeks as well, but as he could only bring himself to look at her feet, her embarrassment was lost on him. “We need to talk to you about something.”

“What?” Ron cried in surprise. “Now?”

“Why not now? He’s here and the room is Shielded.”

“But--” the redhead stammered.

“So,” Harry said, shifting uncomfortably. “Um... you two are okay then?”

“Huh?” Ron asked, his ears still a deep shade of crimson, although the color was slowly draining out of his face. “Oh. Yeah, we’re great.”

“Shut the door, Harry,” Hermione instructed. “There’s something important Ron need to tell you.”

“ME!” he shouted as Harry closed the door and turned the lock. “I’m not doing it.”

“It was your idea,” she shot back. “Besides, you know more about it than I do.”

“Can’t we just give him that bloody book you found and be done with it?”

“Tell him,” she insisted.

“Aw, come on Hermione,” Ron pleaded. “Don’t make me do it.”
“It was your idea, now tell him.”

“Tell me what?” Harry asked, finally bringing his eyes up and looking from one to the other uncertainly.

“Tell him!”

“BLOODY HELL!”

“YOU’RE WHAT?” Harry cried in disbelief, as he goggled at both of his friends.

“Getting married,” Hermione repeated, without so much as batting an eyelash. She’d watched Ron sidestep the issue as he fumbled his way through an explanation of the Lânain. But the longer he rambled on about bonding rituals and the spells protective aspects, the more confused Harry seemed to become, so in the end she cut him off and got right to the heart of the matter.

“MARRIED!” Harry shouted, gaping at Ron, whose entire face had flooded with color. “But... you’ve only been together for...How long have you been together again?” he asked uncertainly.

“Five years,” Ron replied almost instantly, “Hermione reckons that first year doesn’t really count, so...”

“Five years?” Harry echoed back, his eyes wide with astonishment. “Wait... wait, just slow down a minute,” he continued, holding one hand out in the air and shaking his head as he tried to take it all in. “You haven’t been together that long.”

“It’s been just under four months,” Hermione corrected.

“You can’t ask someone to marry you after being together for only four months,” Harry said, more to himself than to anyone else in particular.

“Why the hell not?” Ron asked indignantly.

“Because it’s... it’s just not done.”

“Well I did it, and she said yes, so we’re getting married,” the young redhead stated rather defiantly.

“But... this is insane,” Harry said, disregarding Ron and focusing his attention on Hermione, who was the most logical person he knew.

“Okay, so it’s a bit rash,” she confessed.

“A bit?” Harry asked incredulously. “It’s positively barking, Hermione. You, at least, must see that.”

“Of course I do,” she replied with a sigh, “but the thing is, I don’t care. It just...it feels right. It’s not just about the protection,” she tried to explain. “I mean, that is a big part of it, but there is a lot more to it than just that. I love him, Harry,” Hermione said, her cheeks flooding with color as she said those words out loud to someone else, “and he loves me. It’s true that technically we’ve only been together for a couple of months, but the feelings have been there for a really long time. This is something that we both want to do and we want you to be a part of it. It just... I know it’s a bonding ritual and not a real wedding, but you’re our best friend and it just wouldn’t be right if you weren’t there.”

“You won’t have to do anything,” Ron assured his stunned friend, as he walked over to his bedside
table and snatched a thin red book off the top. “Like Hermione said, it’s not like a wedding. You won’t have to participate, or say anything, or get dressed up or anything like that. We don’t really even need a witness for it to be legal, but ...uh... just think about it, all right? I mean the three of us have always been together for the important things, at least as much as we can be, and this is--”

“What he means is that it would mean a lot to us both if you were there,” Hermione cut in.

“All right, that’s enough,” Ron said to his girlfriend, his assertiveness taking both her and Harry by surprise. “Can’t you see we’re overwhelming him?” he asked, as he pulled his homework out of the book in his hand. “Just back off and let him process it all before you start pressuring him for an answer.”

“I wasn’t going to--”

“Yes, you were,” Ron stated flatly as he held the book out for Harry to take. “Here, mate. This might help a bit,” he said, waiting patently for Harry to reached out and take the thin volume from him. “Hermione nicked it out of the Room of Requirement. Don’t let anyone else see it though. Especially my sister. She’d go stark raving mad if she found out about this.”

“Not that book,” Hermione moaned just as Harry glanced down at the title. “You don’t want to read that one,” she said, trying to snatch it back. “It makes it sound vile.”

“It is vile,” Ron reminded her. “In it’s traditional form anyway,” he added. “Don’t try and sugar coat it.”

“But Ron, you haven’t read that,” she protested. “It’s positively awful. It’s all about how the Lànain has been used to enslave and control women for centu--”

“Harry knows that I would never take advantage of you like that,” he said, cutting her off. “But there are better books,” she protested.

“This is the one you brought back,” Ron retorted.

“I was upset. I didn’t meant for it to be--”

“And you aren’t upset now?” Harry asked, glancing down at the book he was holding again, before refocusing his attention on Hermione.

“No,” she readily admitted.

“Why not?” Harry asked. “If what Ron said earlier is true, this is a pretty dodgy spell. I mean it’s so loathsome you’re going to hide it from everyone else, including your parents.”

“Especially my parents,” Ron said with a shudder.

“And now you don’t even want me to read about it,” Harry continued.

“I don’t care if you read up on it, but that book is.... I just don’t want you to get the wrong idea about it,” Hermione replied. “Yes, the spell itself is... well let’s face it, what it’s was traditionally used for was despicable. But that’s not what we’re doing. It’s just that when you’re reading about it, it’s easy to get bogged down with the effects of the spell and why it was created. So much so that you tend to forget that the intent of the caster has as much, if not more, to do with the end results. And what we’re going to do.... it isn’t about ownership and control. Besides, we’re both going to be doing it and the fact that Ron is willing to go that far just proves that his intentions are honorable.”
“Stop,” Ron protested, his face heating up yet again as she praised him. “Just let him read the book,” he continued. “And you can give him any others you think might be helpful,” he added, when Hermione looked like she was about to protest again. “And once you’re finished,” he said, turning his attention to Harry, “you can ask us anything you want. How’s that?”

“Yeah, all right,” Harry agreed somewhat mechanically.

“Only, don’t read that downstairs,” Ron warned his best friend. “It’s not something you want other people to see you with.”

“Right,” Harry replied, as he walked over to his trunk and stowed the book away for the time being.

“Have you finished that book on Occlumency I brought you yet?” Hermione asked, completely out of the blue.

“Aw leave him alone,” Ron moaned in Harry’s defense. “That can wait.”

“No it can’t,” she retorted, placing her hands on her hips. “You really need to start working on that, you know?” she started in with her lecture. “And if the book isn’t helping, then you’re just going to have to talk to Professor Snape, because...”

“Hermione,” Ron tried to interrupt, when he saw the look on his best friend’s face.

“...it’s not something you can keep putting off.”

“HERMIONE!”

“What?” she asked, spinning around to shoot Ron an irritable look.

“Don’t you think Harry should at least finish his homework first?” he asked, trying not to smirk.

“Oh. Well, of course he should,” she admitted, her scowl becoming even more prominent because she knew what he’d just done and why. “But he still needs to--”

“But not right now, he doesn’t,” Ron countered. “Right now we need to finish our History of Magic essays,” he said, waving the sheet of parchment he’d pulled from the book in the air as he started moving towards the door. “Come on, mate, we best get back to it.”

“Yeah, right,” Harry replied, stalking over to Neville’s chest of drawers and snatched the essay he’d been sent to retrieve off the top.

“Are you going to help us or what?” Ron asked Hermione, as Harry followed him into the hall.

“I’m not doing it for you, if that’s what you mean,” she retorted, rolling her eyes as she followed them back downstairs.

“She isn’t going to drop this whole Occlumency thing, you know?” Ron warned his best friend, when the two of them were getting ready for bed a few hours later. “The homework ploy put her off for now, but she’s not going to forget about it.”

“I know,” Harry sighed, replaced his trousers with pajama bottoms.
“You did at least read the book, didn’t you?” Ron questioned as he climbed into bed.

“Parts of it,” Harry admitted.

“I’d finish the rest if I were you,” Ron replied, “before she gets it in her head to quiz you. Hey,” he added, a new idea dawning on him, “why don’t you talk to Moody. He’ll be back on Saturday for our detention. I bet he knows how to do it. Or even Tonks. She’s an Auror too, plus she’s here all the time and definitely on our side. I never did trust Snape. All that talk about relaxing and clearing your mind before bed. Sounds like the perfect way to open yourself up to You-Know-Who, if you ask me. Slimy two-faced git.”

“Yeah, Tonks,” Harry agreed, as he climbed into bed himself.

Why didn’t I think of that, he thought. *Working with Tonks wouldn’t be so bad*, he quickly decided. *She was nothing like Snape. She was friendly and approachable and had a wicked sense of humor. Merlin knows it’ll be easier to open myself up to her. Yeah, that could definitely work. I’ll tell Hermione that I’m almost finished with the book and that I’m planning on asking Tonks to help me. She can’t very well object to that.*

“So...uh...” Ron grumbled rather uncomfortably from his bed, “is there...uh... anything you want to ask me about, you know, what we talked about earlier?”

“Not really,” Harry replied from the confines of his own bed. He’d spent the past few hours mulling it all over as he sat in a chair beside his friends in the common room, pretending to read his Charms book. But even now that the shock had worn off a bit, he still wasn’t sure what he really thought of it all.

One the one hand, his friends seemed to be fairly sure about what they were doing. It still boggled his mind that they were willing to make such a lasting commitment to one another, especially so soon after getting together, but he reasoned the war and everything else going on had a lot to do with that. The primary reason Ron wanted to cast that specific spell in the first place was to protect Hermione, and he couldn’t really find fault with that. In fact it was a bit of a relief knowing that he didn’t have to worry about anyone harming her in that particular manner. Harry had never admitted it to anyone, but that thought had crossed his mind when he’d learned that she’d been taken from Diagon Alley.

Of course the spell they were going to cast wasn’t really a protection spell. In fact, the protective aspects were simply a side effect. In the end what they were really going to do was bind themselves to one another in such a manner that they’d be considered married in the Wizarding World.

They were getting married. His two best friends in the world were getting married. To each other. Not just to protect one another, but because they were in love.

In love.

Every time Harry thought about that it made him queasy. He knew that they fancied one another. Actually he’d known that Ron had fancied Hermione for a long time, but when did it become more than that and how could they tell the difference? How did they know it was the real thing? How did they know it would last?

He’d fancied Cho for years before they actually got together and when they finally did, it had been an unmitigated disaster. His entire relationship with Cho, if you could even call it that, had been marred with one misunderstanding after another. None of their rows had ever been anything as
vicious as the ones Ron and Hermione had, and yet the two of them always got past it. Not only did they get past it, they didn’t seem to hold any resentment towards one another afterwards.

Except for the infamous row over Scabbers during third year and the whole Viktor Krum thing, but even that had been forgiven eventually. Harry still didn’t understand how they did it. How did they just let that stuff go? Why was it that they could fight non-stop for six years and become even closer where as his relationship fell apart after a few misunderstandings?

Obviously Cho hadn’t been the right girl for him. Harry did understand that. When he looked back on it now he could even admit to himself that they really didn’t have all that much to talk about, with the exception of Quidditch or Cedric, which he refused to discuss. How could he fancy a girl that was all wrong for him for so long whereas his best friend zeroed in on his perfect match straight away? How did he know that Hermione was the one?

It just didn’t make any sense. It was insane really. No one found their true love at eleven or even at sixteen. But almost as soon as that thought had occurred to him, Harry realized it wasn’t true. His own father had fancied his mother as early as 5th year. True they hadn’t started dating until 7th year, but his dad had still known that his mum was the one for him and they had been married not long after they finished school. And they weren’t the only ones to get married young. Maybe it was just more prevalent in the Wizarding World. Ron’s parents had been married within a year of finishing school as well.

“Er...all right,” Ron said, in response to Harry’s remark. “I just... I thought you might be holding off until it was just the two of us or something. You know, because it’s hard to talk openly in front of Hermione sometimes.”

“So once you put that charm on her she won’t be able to take it off?” Harry asked, out of the blue.

“Not on her own, no,” Ron admitted. “I have to do it, but I promised her that I would. If that’s what she wants. All she has to do is ask me. I’d never force her to keep it on if it wasn’t what she wanted.”

“And if you do take it off,” Harry pressed on, “it’s basically like you’re divorcing her, right?”

“More or less.”

“So you wouldn’t be married anymore?” Harry asked from his bed.

“Technically we still would be,” Ron replied, after a prolonged silence. “But only because I’ll have a charm on as well. She’ll have to take it off me, before the bond would be completely severed.”

“Well that explains it then.”

“Explains what?” Ron asked curiously, rolling over on his side and peering through the curtains at his best friend’s bed.

“How you’re going to keep this from your parents. I mean you can’t take the charm off yourself, right? And your parents will definitely know what it is if they see it?”

“Er... yeah.”

“And your brothers?”

“And Ginny,” Ron added. “So what’s your point?”

“Well, I can see how you’re planning on hide it from them now. You’ll just have Hermione take
your charm off before you go home for Christmas and since her parents won’t know what it is, she’ll be able to keep hers on. But... what are you going to do in the mean time? I mean sooner or later someone is bound to see one of them. Neville’s a pure-blood. Won’t he notice yours?”

“I can shower in the Prefects’ Bathroom and I’ll wait until he’s not around or not paying attention before I change my clothes. Besides, I’m a bloke, and I’ve never heard of a bloke allowing a woman to bind him with the Lànain. Even if he did see the charm, that thought probably wouldn’t occur to him,” Ron explained.

“What about Hermione? Neville and Seamus might not pay much attention if they caught a glimpse of the charm, but I wager Parvati and Lavender would. Hermione doesn’t usually wear jewelry, so it’ll stand out and draw their attention, won’t it?”

“Naw,” Ron said dismissively, moving down to the end of his bed, leaning over the side and popping the lid of his trunk. “I’ve got that covered,” he added, pulling a small box out from under his jumpers and tossing it onto Harry’s bed.

“What’s this?” Harry asked, as he reached for the box.

“Hermione’s birthday present,” Ron replied, watching his best friend remove the lid and pull a silver necklace out.

“This isn’t—”

“No,” Ron replied quickly. “That’s your standard protection charm. Their complete rubbish, mind you. No one in their right mind actually believes they’ll protect you from anything. But it looks a lot like the Lànain talisman, so I had George get me one from Diagon Alley. So I’ll give that to Hermione on her birthday,” he continued, “once the common room is nice and full, and everyone will see her put it on and know what it is. If those ditzy girls want to make a big deal about her wearing jewelry, they can do it then and get it out of their system. But the point is we’ll be able to swap it later and they’ll never even notice.”

“What about your sister?” Harry asked. “You aren’t lumping her in with the ‘ditzy’ girls are you, because I have a feeling she might be a little more observant.”

“Eyes of a bloody hawk, that one,” Ron groaned. “Yeah, Gin will be a problem. Hermione’s just going to have to be extra careful around her. Good thing they don’t share a room.”

“Why don’t you just tell her?” Harry asked.

“Are you mental?” Ron exclaimed loudly. “Ginny might be little, but she’s... well you’ve obviously never been cursed by her. Even the twins have enough sense to fear Ginny’s wrath. Sure they tease her, but they always stop short of seriously hacking her off. There’s no way I’m telling Ginny about this. She’d bloody well maim me. Then she’d march up to the Owlry and send Pig straight to Mum, so she could come to Hogwarts and finish me off. It would be a blood bath,” he moaned, “I mean you’ve never really seen Mum when she’s truly angry. If you thought that howler I got after we borrowed Dad’s car was bad... it’s nothing compared to the real thing.”

“Maybe if you had Hermione explain it.”

“Ginny won’t listen to explanations, Harry,” he shot back. “The only reason Hermione listened to my idea was because she’s Muggle-born and she didn’t know what the Lànain was used for. She didn’t have any preconceived notions to get over, so she was willing to listen and actually think about it reasonably. Ginny won’t do that. She’ll think I was turning into some kind of smarmy
Slytherin bastard and freak the hell out. No, we can’t tell her.”

“She won’t hear it from me,” Harry assured his agitated friend, “but I don’t see how you’re going to be able to keep it from her once you... well, you know.”

“We keep loads of things from Ginny.”

“You mean we used to,” Harry corrected. “Last year sorta changed that though, didn’t it? I mean she knows about most of the things we’ve done and...well, pretty much everything,” he continued, thinking about the prophecy, which he had revealed to Ginny over the summer and still hadn’t told his best friends about.

“Yeah, well, she’s not going to know about this,” Ron grumbled, settling back down in his bed and covered himself up just as the door opened and Seamus and Neville entered the room. “Well, I’m knackered,” he said, burrowing into his pillow and closing his eyes. “We can finish this conversation tomorrow,” he whispered to Harry, knowing that he’d understand why he didn’t want to discuss it any further tonight.

“Yeah,” Harry replied, glancing at Seamus who was leaving a trail of clothing on the floor as he crossed the room to his own bed “Night mate.”

“Night,” Ron muttered, as he turned over on his side.
Chapter 26: The Lànain

The windy drizzle that accompanied the tail end of September became a torrential downpour as October rolled in. The corridors of the castle were cold and drafty, but not nearly as damp and miserable as the grounds. Being Prefects, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were called upon to mind the first and second years during their breaks in between classes and after lunch until the storms tapered off. Ron in particular seemed to loathe this chore, but he managed to entertain himself by giving the cheeky little pipsqueaks he was watching Goblin names and then shouting out things like, “OY, BODRIG! Yeah, I’m talking to you. Sit down and shut the hell up,” when they got too rambunctious. This of course annoyed Hermione to no end and they often bickered about it as they made their way to their own classes afterwards.

Harry, for the most part, ignored their squabbling. Niggling each other was one of their favorite past times after all, so he just walked along beside them when they started in on one another and left them to it. To the casual observer it might appear as if nothing had changed between Ron and Hermione, but Harry knew the truth and now that he did, he couldn’t understand why he hadn’t noticed the difference earlier.

Yes, they squabbled, but in a completely different way. The biting comments and scathing little remarks were no longer hurled with venomous looks or malicious intent. In fact, they were often accompanied by a barely concealed smile or a soft chuckle. As disconcerting as it was, Harry now realized that it was just how his friends flirted with one another. They’d been doing it for years without even realizing it and it didn’t appear as if they were going to stop any time soon.

That’s not to say they didn’t have genuine disagreements from time to time, because they did. In fact there was a fairly significant argument about a week after Hermione’s birthday that resulted in her storming into the common room muttering words like “reckless” and “prat” under her breath. Harry and Ginny immediately knew who the prat was, despite the fact Hermione marched up to her room without so much as a word of explanation to them. And their suspicions were confirmed when Ron came clambering through the portrait hole a few moments later with a scowl on his face.

“What did you do now?” Ginny barked, abandoning her Muggle-Studies homework to confront her brother almost as soon as he cleared the portrait hole.

“I didn’t do anything,” Ron said angrily. “It was her. She’s the one that did it,” he insisted, pointing at the staircase Hermione had just ascended, before pushing his sister aside and stomping off to his own room.

“She’s right, you know? You are a prat,” Ginny shouted at him, before her eyes fell on Harry, who was still sitting on the sofa by the fireplace. One look was all it took for them to realize that they were both on the same page. Without saying a word, Harry stood up and the two of them headed up to their perspective dorms to see if they could get to the bottom of the matter.

When Harry entered his room, he found Ron pacing about, mumbling to himself in much the same way Hermione had been.

“So?” he asked, stepping into the room and shutting the door behind himself. “What happened?”

“You wanna know what happened?” Ron asked as he stopped pacing and spun around to face his best friend. “I’ll tell you what bloody happened. Hermione has gone off her nut, that’s what. She’s
bloody well lost her mind. I mean, I knew she was still a little paranoid, but this... it’s just bloody
ridiculous. She could give Moody a run for his money, that one.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked, now more confused than ever. “Hermione isn’t
paranoid.”

“The hell she isn’t?” Ron shot back. “When was the last time you saw her go out on the ground, or
go down to the Library on her own after dinner? She doesn’t even use the Prefects’ Bathroom
anymore because she doesn’t like to be in there alone.”

“Since when?” Harry asked, more than a little taken aback by this revelation. He had noticed that
Hermione had altered her normal routine a bit. She now went to the Library in the morning after a
quick breakfast and right after her afternoon classes let out, but most of her evenings were spent in
the common room. He’d just assumed that was because she wanted to spend more time with Ron,
and himself of course. It had never occurred to him that she might be afraid to be on her own once it
got dark.

“Are you sure?” Harry pressed. “I mean she has never been the type to spend a lot of time outside
and it’s not like anyone else has been going out there lately, what with the rain and all. You’re going
to have to come up with something a little better than that if you want me to believe that she’s
anywhere near as bad a Moody.”

“She cursed the tunnel,” Ron said wryly.

“Huh?”

“The tunnel leading to Honeydukes. She just bloody cursed it.”

“What!” Harry yelped, shock and then outrage surging though his body. “She did what?” he asked
in disbelief. “Why?”

“Because she saw a rat,” Ron replied, throwing his hand up in the air in exasperation. “Of course
there are rats in there. It’s a bloody tunnel. But would she listen to me? No. She went stark raving
mad and tried to curse it.”

“Why were you trying to go to Honeydukes,” Harry asked, and then the absurdity of the question hit
him. “Oh,” he added, the truth dawned on him. “You weren’t trying to get to Hogsmeade, you were
just looking for a private place to... Okay,” he said, blocking that thought out of his head quickly, “so
she cursed the rat.”

“No, she missed the rat,” Ron informed him. “And when the little blighter got away she cursed the
tunnel instead; cursed it with some spell I’ve never even heard of. It was some Ancient Egyptian
curse that Bill taught her over the summer. Fire shot out of her wand, and these hieroglyphic symbols
formed in the air, then burst apart to form a barrier of some kind, and then it sorta shimmered before
it vanished. But just because you can’t see it anymore, doesn’t mean it’s not still there. Bloody Bill,
this is all his fault. What the hell was he thinking teaching her how to cast shit like that? Especially
when he doesn’t even know the counter curse?”

“Wait?” Harry said, his stomach plummeting. “Bill doesn’t know the counter curse?”

“Nope.”

“So Hermione doesn’t know it either?”

“Fraid not,” Ron sighed. “Apparently that’s what they were working on when he taught her how to
“So she can’t lift the spell once she’s calmed down?”

“Nope.”

“Well this is just great,” Harry fumed, right along with his best friend. “That’s the only secret passage leading into Hogsmeade that Filch doesn’t know about and now we can’t even use it. All because of a rat?” he asked incredulously.

“Not because of the rat,” Ron corrected, “Because she thought it was Pettigrew. He threatened to kill me and apparently she took it seriously. It wasn’t, or course,” he added when he saw his best mate blanch at this news. “Pettigrew, I mean. It was just your common variety rat, but she wouldn’t listen. She said it didn’t matter because he knows about the tunnel. And since Pettigrew knows about it, she reckons You-Know-Who has to knows about it as well, and if he knows about it, he could use it or wait for one of us to use it, so she’s blocked it off. Like I told you, she’s paranoid. Even if she did know the counter curse, she said she wouldn’t use it and you know how stubborn she is. Bugger it all,” Ron grumbled, flopping down on his bed. “I don’t know what to do,” he said a few moments later.

“Nothing we can do, is there?” Harry replied rather resentfully. “Except for maybe write Bill and see if he’s worked out the counter curse yet. We should probably warn Fred and George too, you know, in case they’re ever in Hogsmeade and get it in their heads to sneak into the castle to surprise us.”

“I mean about Hermione,” Ron clarified. “I don’t know what to do to make this better.”

“You two didn’t... call it quits over this did you?”

“Of course not,” Ron exclaimed loudly. “I wasn’t talking about our fight. I don’t give a damn about that. I can fix that tomorrow. I was talking about her paranoia.”

“Is it really that bad?” Harry said, begrudgingly allowing his irritation with her actions to give way to concern. “How come I haven’t seen it?” he asked with a sigh, when Ron nodded his head. “Am I really that unobservant?”

“Naw, she’s just better at hiding it now,” the young redhead confessed. “She had me fooled for a while too. I mean, I really did think she was getting over it until that whole mess with the Boggart. That’s when I started noticing things again. But they’re subtle, you know? Like the fact she only goes to the Library or walks around the school on her own when it’s light out and there are loads of other people around.”

“She patrols the corridors at night when you have your Prefect rounds.”

“Yeah, but I’m with her,” Ron reminded him. “Plus she has your map, so it’s not like anyone is going to be able to sneak up on us.”

“So that’s why she wanted the map,” Harry said softly to himself.

Part of the reason, Ron thought, but he kept the other reasons to himself.

“What else?” Harry asked, wanting to know the other signs he’d failed to notice.

“Well, there’s the whole Prefects’ Bathroom thing, and er...some other stuff I can’t really tell you about just now,” Ron reluctantly admitted. “Because of that whole Occlumency thing, you know? But... she’s been working on this plan for a really long time. She only told me about it a little while
ago,” he added for good measure, “and... Well, I can’t really tell you much more than that, except that it’s...er... a bit ...um... extreme and er... probably not exactly legal and the fact that she’d go that far has to say something about how freaked out she really is.”

“Hermione has a plan?” Harry asked calmly. “To beat Voldemort?”

“Not exactly, but it’s still a ruddy brilliant plan,” Ron replied, “But I... I can’t tell you anything else so don’t ask me, because I...”

“...can’t tell me,” Harry finished for him. “Because if you do, Voldemort might get wind of it through me.”

“I’m sorry, mate.”

“You and me both,” Harry muttered under his breath.

“Er...so how is your Occlumency going?” Ron asked cautiously. “Have you talked to Tonks about helping you yet?”

“No,” he admitted somewhat reluctantly, “but I will.” If there really is a plan that might work, I want to know about it.

Much to Harry’s surprise, Ron did actually make up with Hermione the next morning. He was never quite sure how his friend accomplished it, since Ron beat him out of bed and managed to get down to the common room first. But whatever he did, he did it in record time, because when Harry came downstairs himself about ten minutes later, they weren’t arguing, nor was Hermione giving Ron the cold shoulder as he expected. In fact, she was waiting for him at the bottom of the staircase looking rather nervous.

“Sorry,” she mumbled almost as soon as he came into view.

“Come again?” Harry asked, convinced that he must have misunderstood her. Hermione had never apologized to him before. As a matter of fact, he couldn’t remember her admitting that she was wrong about anything, ever.

“I’m sorry,” she said a little clearer, but just as softly as before. “I’m still right,” she added a bit louder, bringing her eyes up off the ground to find her friend gaping at her from the stairwell. “That tunnel is dangerous and none of us should be using it, but I...er... I shouldn’t have done that without at least talking to you about it first, so I’m sorry. There are you happy,” Hermione added, crossing her arms in front of her chest and spinning around to face Ron, who was standing behind her.

“Yup,” he replied with a smirk. “What about you Harry? You satisfied with that?”

“Don’t gloat,” Hermione snapped.

“Aw, come on love,” Ron said softly, stepping forward until he was standing right beside her. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Yes it was,” she groaned.

“But you feel better, don’t you?”

“No,” Hermione stated, pushing him aside and stalking towards the portrait hole. “You feel better.”
“She’s just a little embarrassed,” Ron sniggered as they watched her walk away.

“How’d you get her to do that?” Harry asked, once the two of them had cleared the portrait hole and started following her down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

“Just turned on the Weasley charm,” the tall redhead replied with a chuckle.

“No, seriously?” Harry asked, genuinely curious about Ron’s newfound influence of their other best friend. “How did you make up with her so quick?”

“Practice,” Ron stated and left it at that.

“More importantly, how did you get her to apologize?” Harry pressed him.

“Aw well, that was a little harder,” Ron admitted. “I had to apologize to her first.”

“But you didn’t do anything.”

“Doesn’t matter, mate” Ron replied. “It’s what she wanted to hear, so I said it. Doesn’t mean that I meant it though. Well, not all of it, anyway.”

“She probably didn’t mean it either,” Harry informed him with a slight smile.

“Probably not,” Ron laughed, “but she still said it and we both heard her, so technically we won.”

When Thursday afternoon rolled around the boys were lucky enough to have not just one, but two free periods after lunch. They were thankful for the break, even if technically speaking they were supposed to use the time to catch up on their school work. Of course neither of them wanted to study, and they quickly agreed to use the free periods as an opportunity to visit Hagrid instead.

Hermione, of course, objected. She also had a free period after lunch, but unlike the boys, she only had an hour and then she had another lesson to attend. Naturally, she wanted to spend her free period in the Library and she felt the boys should spend some time there as well.

In the end, Ron was able to get her to compromise. He and Harry agreed to wait until she was finished with her Arithmancy class, so all three of them could go down to Hargid’s hut together, and in return Hermione relented, and allowed them to return to the common room. She assumed that they’d work on their schoolwork there. A misconception neither of them bothered to correct. Ron did insisted on walking her to the Library however, and only once she was settled in and he was sure that Malfoy and his Slytherin cronies were nowhere in sight, did he follow Harry back upstairs.

“Maybe we should go back,” Ron said after Harry had given the password to the Fat Lady and her portrait had swung open. “Not to study,” he amended, as he followed his best friend through the doorway. “But, we can play chess down there just as easily as we can up here.”

“And that won’t annoy Hermione at all, will it?” Harry chuckled, envisioning the scowl that would be plastered across her face every time she huffed and looked up from whatever she was reading. “Not to mention Madam Pince. She’s liable to throw us out if she catches us doing that, even if we are quiet.”

“What if she leaves?” Ron asked, watching Harry flop down in one of the sofas by the fireplace.

“Well, she does have another class,” he replied, his bright green eyes darting over to the structure
Neville and Seamus were constructing out of Exploding Snap cards, waiting to see which one of them would blow it up.

“Not Hermione,” Ron sighed as he sat down in a chair opposite his friend. “Madam Pince. What if she leaves Hermione in there by herself?”

“Why would she leave?” Harry asked, directing his attention back to his best friend. “She’s fine,” he added, realizing for the first time that Hermione might not be the only one that was slightly paranoid, “but if you want to go back down, I suppose we could grab our stuff and—”

“Naw, you’re right,” Ron replied, whipping his wand out of his robes and pointing it at the staircase leading up to their dorm. “We’ll just annoy her and the last thing I want is to have her hacked off at me tonight or all nights. Accio chess set,” he said, Summoning the box containing his chess pieces downstairs rather than going up to retrieve it himself.

“So you two are still plan on... going through with it then?” Harry asked, before Summoning his own chess pieces down and busying himself with setting them up so he wouldn’t have to meet Ron’s eyes.

“Yeah,” Ron responded as he set up his own pieces and waited for Harry to make the first move.

Isn’t he supposed to have last minute jitters? Harry wondered, as he sent his pawn forward to start the game.

Try as he might, Harry just couldn’t wrap his head around what was about to happen. It just didn’t seem real. He kept waiting for it to sink in, but it didn’t.

But it is real, he told himself as Ron sent one of his own pawns forward. They’re doing it tonight after their Prefect rounds. They’re actually going through with it. My best friends are getting married. Tonight. And Ron isn’t totally freaked out. How can he NOT be freaking out? He doesn’t even look nervous, Harry thought, studying the young redhead very closely as he moved another pawn forward.

They had been best friends for six years now and Harry had seen Ron in enough situations to know when he was agitated. He’s seen him worried. He’d seen him nervous. He’d seen him frightened out of his mind. He’d also seen Ron in situations where he was afraid or anxious or both, and yet still resolute and unwilling to shrink away from the task at hand. But that wasn’t the case here. He simply wasn’t overly concerned or even hesitant about what he were about to do. In fact, the longer Harry sat there playing chess with him, the surer he became that the calm facade Ron appeared to be wearing was, in fact, real.

That’s not to say Ron was behaving completely normal, because he wasn’t. He’d barely eaten anything at all during lunch and he’d been uncharacteristically quiet and subdued during their morning lessons. It was almost as if he’d spent the day in a perpetual state of preoccupation. Although what he was actually thinking about, Harry could only guess. He knew what he’d be thinking about if he were in Ron’s shoes, but his best friend didn’t look like or act like someone that had spent the better part of the day thinking about what was going to happen once the ceremony was over and his wedding night began.

How can he not think about it though, Harry wondered as Ron put his bishop in play. They’re going to have sex. He should be going out of his mind right now, but he’s just sitting here like it’s no big deal, playing chess.

“Why aren’t you nervous?” Harry asked, surprising himself more that he appeared to surprise Ron.
“Oh yeah,” Ron scoffed, “like you’re going to beat me.”

“I mean about... tonight,” Harry said, glancing over at Seamus and Neville to make sure they weren’t close enough to overhear him and then lowering his voice anyway.

“Why should I be?” Ron asked casually.

“Oh gee, I don’t know,” Harry whispered. “How about the fact you’re getting married in a couple hours for one?”

“You mean bound,” Ron corrected him, knowing full well that they would only be betrothed to one another and not technically married until the union was consummated, which wasn’t going to happen until after the Coupling Potion was finished. Of course he couldn’t exactly explain all of that to Harry, so he tried to keep his answers vague. “So? It’s not like that’s going to change anything.”

“Are you daft?” Harry asked, totally thrown by his friend’s blasé response. “It’s going to change everything.”

“Like what?” Ron said, shooting Harry an odd look.

“Like everything,” he replied.

“No it’s not,” Ron answered in a dismissive manner. “Not really,” he amended himself. “I mean it’s not going to affect us in any major way. We’re not going to morph into different people or anything. Things will be pretty much the same tomorrow as they are today.”

Except for the part where you’re married and shagging, Harry thought.

“Um... Look Ron,” he said, flopping back in his chair and glancing at his companion uncomfortably. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way,” he continued softly, in order to make sure that no one else in the room would hear him, “but Hermione is my friend and I...er... I wouldn’t be a good friend to her if I didn’t ask about your... uh...”

“...intentions,” Ron finished for him. He’d been wondering if Harry was going to pluck up the nerve to confront him again, seeing as how the ‘over protective big brother’ responsibilities were normally his department and therefore not a role Harry was comfortable playing. “I thought I’d already made those clear.”

“I know that you care about her,” Harry whispered. “And that you’d never do anything to harm her,” he continued, as if he hadn’t heard Ron’s sigh. “But this is all happening a little fast don’t you think? And I...er... well, I have to ask you if... um... Aw, hell. You’re not jumping the gun a bit just because you want to sleep with her?”

“Jumping the gun?” Ron asked, choosing to focus on the Muggle expression his friend had used in order to stall.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Harry persisted. “Are you doing this now, because you want to shag her?”

“I could have slept with her before now if that was all I wanted,” Ron finally admitted after a few moments of silence had elapsed.

“But you wouldn’t have been able to cast this spell,” Harry countered. “Because according to the books Hermione gave me, it only works on .... virgins.” He whispered the last word so softly, Ron barely heard him. “If you sleep with her, you can’t cast the spell, and if you wait to cast the spell, you
can’t sleep with her, so is that why you’re doing this now. Because you’re tired of waiting?”

“I’m doing it now, because I want her protected now,” Ron replied in a low voice. “I wanted her protected before we left headquarters, but... well, that wasn’t possible.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Harry informed him with a piercing look.

“Just because we cast the spell, doesn’t mean... well, it won’t change all that much as far as our relationship is concerned,” Ron said with a sigh. “Besides making it more permanent,” he added as an afterthought. “But it’s not going to change how I feel about her and I’m certainly not going to pressure her into doing anything she doesn’t want or isn’t ready for just because I’ll have more leverage, if that’s what you mean.”

“It’s not,” Harry replied, “I want to know why you want to do this now. If it’s not going to change anything, why not just wait?”

“Because I love her,” Ron answered, knowing it was what Harry wanted to hear. “Because I want her protected as soon as possible. Because I’m going to spend the rest of my life with her regardless and I don’t see any reason for us to wait and get married later, when we can do it now. At least this way we’re guaranteed to have a couple years together, but once we’ve finished school... I might not be able to promise her that. If the war is still going on, we’ll all join the Order and there’s no telling what could happen then. If something happens to me, I don’t want her to look back and have any regrets. I know what that’s like, because it’s how I felt when they took her. I don’t want her to feel like that, Harry. I don’t want there to be anything left unsaid or undone between us. I can’t promise her a lifetime right now, because I don’t know how long I have, but I can promise her every day from now until then, whenever that might be.”

“Whoa,” Harry exclaimed, startled by the intensity of his best friend’s statement. “That’s... You ought to tell her that, you know, because it was... wow. But, nothing is going to happen to you,” he added, after reflecting on the last few things Ron had said. “Either of you.”

“You don’t know that, Harry.”

“Yes I do,” the young man with glasses stated vehemently. “I’m not going to fall for any more of his tricks and I’m not going to let anyone else I care about get hurt because of me.”

“It’s not because of you,” Ron informed him sadly. “It’s because of him. Because he’s a sick twisted son of a bitch and he has to be stopped. You aren’t responsible for the things he does or for what we do either for that matter. We all make our own choices and Hermione and I choose to stand with you. You’re not going to be able to keep us out of it. I’m not going to stand on the sidelines and let you take him on all by yourself. I’m going to protect my family, and that includes you and Hermione. I just hope she’s able to understand that when the time comes.”

“Understand what?” Harry asked, studying his friend intently. “You wouldn’t be planning on trying to keep her out of things, would you?”

“You’re damn straight I am.”

“But you just got done telling me that I wouldn’t be able to keep either of you out of it. What makes you think you’ll be able to stop her?”

“I’ll find a way,” Ron stated with determination. “I have to. She already tried to sacrifice herself for me once. I’ll be damned if I’m going to watch her do it again.”

“What about this plan of hers?” Harry asked. “Won’t she need to be there for it to--”
“No,” Ron said quickly, cutting him off. “In fact,” he added, a new thought occurring to him. “She’s going to have to stay well out of it for that to work.”

Because if she doesn’t and we both get ourselves killed, there will be nothing to keep our souls earthbound and no way to get them back in our bodies, which means that CPR stuff she taught us would be useless. So she has no choice, Ron reasoned. She’s going to have to steer clear of the action, which suits me just fine. I’m sure she won’t be too happy about it, but it’s her plan after all.

“That’s all you’re going to tell me?” Harry asked, once he noticed that his friend had retreated inside his head and was once again preoccupied with his own thoughts.

“That’s all I can tell you,” Ron replied. “For now. But you’re going to talk to Tonks tomorrow after D.A.D.A., right?”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed. He didn’t really know why he kept putting it off, but he really wasn’t looking forward to starting Occlumency training again, even though he was sure Tonks would be only too happy to help him.

If she can, he reminded himself, because she might not be able to. Surely if she could Dumbledore would have mentioned it or even suggested it by now. Unless he thinks it’s not important now that the dreams have stopped and we know that Voldemort can’t possess me for any length of time. He can still spy through me though, which explains why no one tells me anything anymore. Not even my best friends.

“HARRY?”

“Huh?” he said, after being startled from his own thoughts.

“You are going to ask her if those partition things will help, right?” Ron repeated himself, seeing as how his friend hadn’t been listening to him the first time he asked the question.

“Oh, yeah. The partitions. Right, I’ll ask about those too. But I don’t know if Tonks knows how to do that.”

“But Hermione does,” Ron replied. “Although I’m not entirely sure she knows what she’s doing when she does it. I think Dumbledore might have mentioned something about it being instinctive, but she can definitely look Moody in the eye and flat out lie to him, even under the Imperius. Maybe they both ought to work with you,” he suggested. “If that will help. But there’s no point worrying about it until you talk to Tonks, right? So what do ya say we just try and forget all this serious stuff and distract ourselves by finishing the game?”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Harry replied, refocusing his attention on the chessboard set up in between them.

The rest of the day seemed to fly by as far as Harry was concerned. One minute he was playing chess with Ron, and the next thing he knew, Hermione was standing in the common room beside them, fussing about how they were going to need coats if they still planned on going down to visit with Hagrid before dinner. This of course caught Harry off guard. Not the fussing. That was completely normal, but the fact that so much time had gotten away from them. They should have been watching the clock, seeing as how they were supposed to meet Hermione downstairs when her Arithmancy course let out, but they had been so wrapped up in their games, that after a while, they stopped checking.
Luckily Hermione didn’t appear to be miffed or put out in any way, so Harry assumed that she must have returned to the tower first, to get rid of her books and when she did, she obviously spotted them.

“Yes Mum,” Ron scoffed, looking at Harry and rolling his eyes.

“Suit yourself,” Hermione shot back with a smirk. “But just so you know,” she whispered, as she sat down on the arm of the overstuffed chair Ron was seated in and leaned forward so only her friends would be able to hear her, “I have no intentions of catching your cold, so there will be no snogging once you get sick.”

“Oh yeah? We’ll just see about that,” he chuckled, grabbing her arms and tugging her off the side of his chair and onto his lap. Not that she stayed there for very long. In fact, she was on her feet and standing in front of him looking rather cross within in a matter of seconds.

“Well played, Weasley,” Harry chuckled, once Hermione had snorted at him and gone up to her dorm to change her clothes.

“Aw, shut up,” Ron retorted, rising up out of his chair and moving off towards the boys’ staircase. “You coming?” he asked, as he mounted the stairs to grab a jumper and his coat.

“Just bring my coat down,” Harry replied as he haphazardly swiped the remaining chess pieces off the board and into the same boxes, figuring they could sort them out later.

Once they were outside, the boys were glad that Hermione had insisted that they bundle up, although neither was willing to admit it. Even so, they were drenched by the time they arrived at Hagrid’s cabin, but as soon as he opened the door and let them inside, Hermione remedied the situation with some well placed Drying Spells.

They spent the rest of the afternoon chatting with Hagrid, although he wouldn’t say much about what he did over the summer, other than the fact that he’d kept busy. And he flat out refused to give them any information on what Voldemort might be up to, even after Harry got tired of beating around the bush and asked him outright.

“Heard ‘bout what happened ter yeh o’ course,” he said apologetically to Hermione, after Harry brought up Voldemort. “Dropped everythin’ an’ volunteered teh join the search parties as soon as I heard. Course we didn’ have the foggiest idea where ter start lookin’. Coulda bowled me over with a feather when we got word yeh’d made it out all on yer own. An’ from what I hear, Ron has bin takin’ good care o’ yeh ever since,” he added, winking at Ron whose entire face instantly became a blooming shade of red. “Bout time yeh two stop dancin’ around it if yeh ask me.”

“Which we didn’t,” Ron grumbled to himself.

“So what ‘bout yeh, Harry?” Hagrid asked offhandedly as he set a plate of his homemade rock cakes down in front of them. “Got yer eye on anyone in particular?”

“No,” he answered adamantly, hoping Hagrid would take the hint and not press the matter if he responded fast enough. Unfortunately he failed to account for his best mate trying to shift the attention off of himself.

“I’m sure Parvati will be heartbroken to hear that,” the tall redhead sniggered.

“No more so that Lavender will be when she find out that you’re already off the market,” Harry countered, effectively wiping the smirk off his Ron’s face.
“Parvati eh?” Hagrid chimed in. “She seems like a nice enough girl.”

“Can we please talk about something else?” Harry sighed in exasperation.

“How’s Grawp?” Hermione promptly asked, effectively drawing Hagrid attention. “He must have been awful lonely out there in the forest all by himself all summer.”

“Oh, Grawpy is fine. Jus’ fine. Much more settled now. The Centaurs still give him a bit o’ trouble if he gets too close, but other then that... Bin workin’ with him on his English when I can find the time. He understands a far bit o’ it now. Don’t say much himself, unless he wants somethin’. Bin askin’ if yeh was goin’ ter come fer a visit ever since he saw you two in the forest with Magorian an’ Bane,” he said to Harry and Hermione. “We’ll have teh wait until the rain tapers off a bit, o’ course.”

“Yeah, that’s what’s holding you back,” Ron muttered to Harry under his breath. “The rain. It has nothing to do with the fact that his little brother doesn’t know how to keep his gigantic hands to himself.”

After dinner, the trio returned to the common room and despite the fact Harry knew he wasn’t going to be able to keep his mind on what he was doing, he dug into his rucksack and pulled out his incomplete Potions homework. He would have asked Hermione for help, but she disappeared upstairs almost as soon as they returned and she didn’t show up again until it was time for her and Ron to leave for their Prefect rounds.

“We’ll see you at midnight,” Ron whispered, as he leaned down and gathered his discarded robes off the back of the sofa Harry was sitting on.

“Right,” Harry replied, watching his best friends leave the room together.

Midnight, he thought, staring down at his watch. That gave him just over three hours to finish his Potions homework, nip upstairs and retrieve his Invisibility Cloak, slip out of the common room unnoticed, and then make his way to the Room of Requirement, where Ron and Hermione would be waiting to perform the Lânain.

Unfortunately, might not be as easy as it sounded. Not if Ginny Weasley was still sitting at that table near the door working on her homework. In fact, Harry was going to be in trouble if she was anywhere in the common room when it was time for him to leave, because she was bound to notice the portrait hole open.

She knows that you have an Invisibility Cloak, Harry told himself as he stared down at his Potions book, pretending to read, and if she follows you and figures out what is going on, Ron will kill you. This would have been a lot easier if Hermione had just explained it all to her, he thought. Ginny is reasonable enough. I’m sure she’d understand once Hermione told her why they’re doing it. And even if she didn’t, I doubt she’d interfere the way Ron seems to think she would. Besides, she’s going to find out eventually. But not from you, he reminded himself, setting his book down, gathering the rest of his things together, shoving them all back into his bag, and retreating upstairs before he could unwittingly give anything away.

Unfortunately when he slipped down stairs a few hours later, Ginny was, in fact, still in the common room, although she was no longer by the door, nor was she working on her homework. She was just sitting there on the sofa by to the fireplace, talking to a little girl with blond hair that Harry had seen in the common room a couple of times, but never really paid all that much attentions to.
Why would she be hugging a first year? Harry wondered, watching Ginny place her arm around the little girl's shoulder as he slowly inched his way towards the portrait hole. Of course once he was there, there was nothing he could do but stand still and wait for Ginny and the little girl to go up to bed, which took far longer than he would have liked.

“ Took you long enough,” Ron, who was standing in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Balmy, studying the Marauder’s Map said, even before his best friend managed to get his Invisibility Cloak off his head.

“Since you were watching the map, you must have realized that I was waiting for your sister to clear off,” Harry replied, as he materialized out of thin air.

“ Not really,” Ron admitted. “I only checked a couple minutes ago and by then you were already out of the tower,” he replied, pulling his wand out of his pocket and pointing at the folded sheet of parchment. “Mischief managed,” he mumbled.

“Where’s Hermione?” Harry asked.

“ She’s already inside,” Ron replied, nodding his head towards the blank wall opposite the tapestry where the doorway leading into the Room of Requirement was concealed. “You know, reading over the incantation for the hundredth time just to be sure she’s got it all down.”

“What about you?” Harry asked, after Ron had paced back and forth in front of the blank wall three times and a door appeared.

“I pictured a crib sheet as one of the things I was going to need just now while I was walking,” the redhead informed him.

“Got everything else you need?” Harry asked as his friend reached for the doorknob. “You didn’t by chance leave the most important thing in your trunk, did you?”

“SHIT!” Ron swore, abandoning the doorknob to pat down the pockets of his robes when realized what Harry was talking about. “Hermione only asked me if I had everything ten bloody times while we we’re on rounds. She’s already nervous about getting caught as it is, and now I’m going to have go back to our room and get the bloody charms. She’s going to kill me.”

“Not tonight, she’s not,” Harry chuckled, producing an intricately carved wooden box from his own pocket and tossing it to Ron. “Consider my best man duties fulfilled,” he said, as the redhead caught the box containing the Lànain talismans and his mouth fell open.

“Harry!” he cried jubilantly as he stared at it box in wonder. “You’re the best, mate. Seriously. You just saved my life. But, how did you know that I forgot them?”

“Well, that’s my job isn’t it?” Harry laughed. “To make sure you don’t botch up your own wedding, or binding ceremony, or whatever the hell it is. And since you left for your rounds without going upstairs first, I figured the only way you could have had those with you is if you’d been carrying them around all day, so I went upstairs and checked your trunk. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Are you kidding?”

“So you’re ready then?” he asked, decided now probably wasn’t really the right time to mention the pornographic book he’d accidentally run across as he was searching for the charms. “You really want to do this.”
“Yeah,” Ron replied, after taking a deep breath and letting it out. “Yeah, I think I’m ready.”

“I see the nerves are finally kicking in?” Harry said, watching the color drain out of his best friend's face. “Finally sinking in, is it?”

“Oh God!” Ron moaned as he sunk back against the wall beside the door. “What if I do something wrong and mess the whole thing up?”

“It all seemed fairly straightforward to me,” Harry replied. “Just let Hermione go first and mimic whatever she does.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay,” Ron replied mechanically. “I can do that. I can do this. It’s no big deal,” he said, opening his hand and staring down at his sweaty palm. “It’s just a few little cuts, that’s all.”

“Maybe I should go check on Hermione,” Harry suggested. If Ron was finally feeling the pressure he could only imagine the state he’d find her in, now that she didn’t have any schoolwork or Prefect duties to obsess over and distract herself with. “You know, make sure she’s ready and everything?”

“Yeah,” Ron replied, stepping out of the way so his best friend could get through the door, “and Harry, tell her if she um... if she’s changed her mind or anything, that’s all right. No wait,” he cried, when Harry reached for the doorknob. “Don’t tell her that. I don’t want her to think that I’ve changed my mind and I’m just too cowardly to admit it. In fact,” he said, after taking another deep breath and hardening his resolve. “I’d better go in with you, or she’s liable to think I’ve done a runner.”

“All right, Hermione?” Harry asked, as the two of them stepped into a room that would have been an exact replica of the Gryffindor Common Room, had they not entered through a door instead of a portrait.

“What are you doing?” Ron asked, when he noticed that Hermione was hunched over one of the study tables, consulting an open book, with a piece of charcoal in her hand.

“Marking the right lines,” she said, turning around and holding her left palm up in the air to reveal three black marks, two of which intersected to form a misshapen cross in the center of her hand. “We barely touched on Palmistry while I was still taking Divinations, so I wanted to make sure I knew which lines were which,” she explained. “And I figured as long as I was checking, I might as well mark them, so we wouldn’t make any mistakes.”

“What if that interferes with the spell?” Ron asked, approaching the table she was standing at and peered down at the open book to find a Palmistry chart.

“It’s just charcoal.”

“Well, I know which lines are which,” Ron replied, taking her hand in his and brushing his thumb back and forth over the lines until they disappeared, “so we won’t be need that. Here,” he said, dropping her hand and holding his own up for her to see. “I’ll show you.”

“This one in the center is the Line of Mentality,” he informed her, as he dragged one finger over the horizontal line running across the middle of his palm. “It represents intelligence, so yours ought to be pretty easy to spot. But it also represents our magical prowess, which is why it's important for the Lânain.”

“This one,” Ron continued, placing his finger on the line that began near his wrist and stoking it upward towards his middle finger, “is the Line of Destiny. The Lines of Marriage are the hardest to spot, but I only have the one,” he informed her, pointing at the small horizontal slash just under his
little finger, “so that ought to make it fairly easier for you. Let me see your hand again so I can find
yours,” he said, grabbing her palm, flipping it over, and holding it up so he could inspect it. “Hey! You’ve got two.”

“I do not,” Hermione said defensively, yanking her hand out of his and reexamining it herself. “It’s
just that one right there,” she said, pointing at the deep line under her pinky.

“And what about that one below it?” Ron asked.

OH NO! Harry thought, actually groaning out loud as he realized where this was heading. DON’T
DO IT! DON’T MENTION KRUM, YOU IDIOT!

“Er... Ron...”

“That’s barely even a line it’s so shallow,” Hermione shot back defensively, “and it doesn’t even
come all the way around onto my palm.”

“It still counts,” Ron insisted. “I never realized you were that attached to Lockhart,” he added with a
smirk.

“I wasn’t.”

“Aw, but you have a line,” Ron sniggered, “and I seem to recall a certain someone sleeping with a
get well card under her pillow.”

“Oh, shut up,” Hermione groaned, her cheeks becoming a lovely shade of red. “I’m never going to
live that down, am I? You’re going to spend the rest of our lives teasing me about it?”

“Pretty much,” Ron replied, his bright blue eyes dancing with amusement.

“In that case I have two words for you,” Hermione replied. “Fleur Del.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” Ron said quickly, effectively cutting her off. “And I don’t have a line,” he
added, holding his hand out in the air to prove it.

“You still made a prat out of yourself,” Harry chuckled.

“Thanks a lot, Harry,” Ron mumbled, his ears going slightly red.

“Well you did,” he reiterated with a smile.

“Yeah, well, I make a prat out of myself all the time, so what’s the big deal, right?”

“Not all the time,” Hermione said, taking Ron’s hand in hers and running her thumb back and forth
over the thin line under his little finger.

“Hermione?” he asked, the uncertainty ringing through in his voice. “Are you sure? Because we
don’t have to do this now. I mean, I...er.. I don’t mind waiting and...”

“I’m sure,” she replied softly, her eyes locked on his.

“Really?”

“I’m sure that I love you,” she said, moving in a bit closer. “I’m sure that I trust you. And I’m sure
that I want to do this,” she added, grabbing a small dagger off the table and holding it out for Ron to
take.
I don’t want to hurt you,” he said quietly, as he stared down at the blade in her hand.

“It will only hurt for a minute.”

“Will you... do you think you could go first?” Ron asked nervously.

“Okay,” she said weakly, looking down at Ron’s palm before glancing over at Harry, who had gone very quiet. “Will you hold the charms for us while we...um... start?” she asked.

“What?” Harry asked in surprise. “Oh, yeah. I guess. If it’ll help,” he added, glancing at Ron, whose face was slowly draining of color.

“How do you want to do the last part?” Hermione asked Ron as he reached into his pocket and handed the box containing the Lànain talismans to Harry. “One at a time, or together?”

“Together,” he replied almost instantly.

“Are you sure?” Hermione said, as she stared into his eyes.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Ron said softly. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more sure about anything. You’re not going to cry are you?” he asked, when he saw her eyes glassed over.

“I might,” she admitted.

“Aw, why do girls do that?” he complained.

“I love you,” she whispered, before closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. “Are you ready,” she asked, holding his right palm face up in front of herself.

“Yes,” Ron responded. He watched Hermione take a deep breath to steady herself and then she opened her eyes and pressed the point of the dagger against the center of his hand.

“The Line of Ability will bind you too me,” she said as she applied more pressure and traced the Line of Mentality with the sharp edge of the knife, leaving a thin trail on blood as she went. “Fate had conspired to make you mine,” she chanted, repositioning the blade just under Ron’s middle finger and dragging it down the Line of Destiny. “You belong to me,” she said softly, cutting the Line of Marriage on Ron’s hand, then released him, and cut the same three lines on her own palm. “Your turn,” she said, holding the knife out for Ron to take.

Seeing as how Ron’s right hand was already bleeding, as was Hermione’s left, he went to work quickly, and in just a matter of seconds their remaining hands had been pierced as well. No longer needed the knife, Ron chucked it onto the table and turned to Harry, who was staring at them both with wide eyes.

“All right there, mate?” he asked, when he saw the look on Harry’s face.

“What? Yeah, I’m fine.”

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Ron assured his friend. “Do me a favor though and open that box.”

“Oh, yeah, you’ll be needing these won’t you?” Harry asked as he removed the lid from the wooden box in his hand and held it out to Ron.

“Thanks, mate,” Ron said, snatching one of the charms out of the box and placing it in the center of his left hand. “I better not touch the other one yet,” he said to Hermione, who nodded her head and retrieved the second talisman herself.
“Ready?” Ron asked, once Hermione had the charm positioned in the center of her left palm, just like he did.

“Do you remember the incantation?” she asked, after nodding her head.

“Yeah, I think. I studied it, but there should be a crib sheet around somewhere, just incase,” he said, his eyes darting across the table beside them. “Damn, where is it?” Ron asked, when he failed to see it lying beside Hermione’s book.

“Is this it?” Harry asked, snatching a half sheet of parchment off one of the overstuffed chairs and glancing down at what appeared to be a short spell. Although what it actually said, Harry wasn’t entirely sure, because it was written in Gaelic.

“Let me see that for a second,” Ron said, turning away from Hermione to read the spell over one last time, just to make sure he had it down. “All right, I got it. Let’s do this before I forget. Ready?” he asked, reaching for Hermione’s right hand and pressing his own palm, and the charm he was holding, against hers, before linking their fingers.

“On three,” Hermione said, after grasping Ron’s right hand. “One,” she said, pressing her palm and the charm she was holding against him. “Two,” she said, linking their fingers in the same way he had. “Three,” she said, before nodding her head and chanting the short incantation along with Ron.

As they reached the end of the incantation there was a short burst of red light between their interlinked hands and when they pulled them apart their wounds were healed and the blood gone, leaving only the talismans.

“It must have worked,” Ron said, staring down at the spot where the slashes had been.

“There’s only one way to know for sure,” Hermione said, stepping forward as she took the talisman she was holding out of her hand and unclasped the chain it was dangling on. “If you can get this off, then we’ll know didn’t work,” she said, holding it out in the air, but making no move to put it around Ron’s neck.

“Well, go on then,” he said, giving her one of his lopsided smiles. “Make me yours. Not that I’m not already,” he added in a near whisper.

“You shouldn’t joke,” Hermione scolded.

“What makes you think I’m joking?” he asked. “All right, I’ll go first then,” he said, unclasping the necklace he was holding, then gathering her hair together, shifting it to one side, and placing the silver chain around her neck. “What happened to that protection charm I gave you?” Ron asked, as he fumbled with the clasp of the necklace.

“I took it off a little while ago,” she replied, shivering a bit as Ron leaned into closer to see what he was doing and she felt his warm breath on her neck. “It’s in my pocket if you want it back.”

“That was a gift,” he said, sounding slightly insulted as he pulled away from her.

“I thought this was the gift,” Hermione replied, running her fingers over the chain now hanging around her neck.

“Not many women would see it that way,” Ron retorted.

“Maybe that’s because their ‘husband’ isn’t willing to do it in return,” she shot back, leaning into Ron and placing the charm she’d been holding around his neck.
“Well, I am now officially yours,” Ron said happily, once she pulled away from him. “Whatever will you do with me?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“Well, that would be my cue to leave,” Harry chimed in before Hermione got any further. “Congratulations and all of that,” he said, grabbing his Invisibility Cloak off the chair he’d draped it over when he’d first entered the room and all but running for the door. “I’ll see you two later.”

“Where are you going?” Hermione asked, clearly surprised by Harry’s hasty retreat.

“To bed. Goodnight,” he said, slipping through the door before either of his friends had time to say another word.

“Was it something I said?” Hermione asked Ron, who was laughing.

“Apparently,” he replied as he slipped his arms around her waist, “he didn’t want to watch me kiss the bride.”

Chapter 49

“Aw, come on Hermione,” Ron whined, as she dragged him out of the Room of Requirement and along the corridor Harry had just retreated down. “We don’t have to go back yet.”

“It’s a school night,” she reminded him, keeping a firm grip on his hand to ensure that he followed her back to Gryffindor Tower.

“It’s also our wedding night,” Ron protested.

“Technically we’re only betrothed to one another until we consummate the union,” she shot back, “And we’ve already agreed that we aren’t going to do that until the potion is ready.”

“I know,” Ron sighed, “but that doesn’t mean we have to go back to the Tower straight away. I thought we might...”

“Fool around a bit?” Hermione finished for him.

“Well, yeah,” he replied. “We were alone and in the perfect place. Why not take advantage of it?”

Because once we get started, neither one of us will want to stop, she thought. And I don’t have the strength to resist you tonight. Not after what we’ve just done.

“How about the fact that we’re out after curfew?” she said, hiding behind the rules so she wouldn’t have to admit that she didn’t trust herself to be alone with him at that particular moment.

“So? We’re Prefects,” Ron countered as she dragged him down the dimly lit corridor. “We’re supposed to be out after curfew.”

“Our round ended over an hour ago,” she argued.

“That’s never stopped us before. We always go back late.”

“Not this late,” Hermione protested. “We have double Defense Against the Dark Arts first thing in the morning. We’ll need to be awake and functioning for that. And what about Harry?”
“What about him?” Ron asked. “He’s going to have to find his own girl to fool around with,” he joked.

“He all but ran away as soon as we were finished,” Hermione said, halting in front of the Fat Lady’s portrait and looking at him suspiciously. “Oh Ron, you didn’t?”

“Didn’t what?” he asked, furrowing his brow in confusion.

Watch it, Weasley, he warned himself, as he stared into Hermione’s deep brown eyes. She’s got that I’m about to pitch a fit and stomp off in a rage look about her. What the hell is going on here? Why is she trying to pick a fight now?

“You didn’t ask him to clear off as soon as we were finished, did you?” Hermione said accusingly.

“Of course I didn’t,” Ron replied honestly. “Why would I do something like that?”

“Then why did he leave?” Hermione asked, after uttering the password and entering the common room.

“Well, I could be wrong,” Ron said, as he followed her over the threshold and did a quick scan of the room to make sure they were alone, “but I think it probably had something to do with the fact it’s our wedding night,” he continued, going out of his way to stress the last two words as he spoke them. “It’s only natural that we’d want some alone time. I’m not saying that he had to run off like he did, but still, it was a logical conclusion for him to make. So the question isn’t why Harry ran off,” he informed her, “it’s why you did? What’s going on? Why don’t you want to be alone with me?” Ron asked. But instead of responding as he expected, Hermione simply stood there looking at him.

Even if she hadn’t heard the uncertainty and disappointment in his voice, she still would have known that his ego had been wounded, because the doubt he was feeling was clearly visible on his face. So rather than reassure him with words, she did the first thing that popped into her head and without so much as a warning, she launched herself at him, slamming her body against his, shoved both of her hands in his hair, pulled his face forward, and kissed him.

To say Ron was staggered by the ferocity of her attack would have been an understatement. In fact, it took him a good thirty seconds before he gathered enough wits to respond. It wasn’t just that he hadn’t expected Hermione to kiss him just then, although that was part of it. But the truth was he’d never expected her to kiss him like that in the middle of the common room. Behind closed doors was one thing, but they were in plain sight.

True, the room was empty, but if anyone came downstairs, they were bound to notice the two 6th year Prefects ravaging one another. And yet here she was, rubbing herself against him in a way that quite literally left him feeling week in the knees as she all but devoured him when he stood.

“That’s why,” Hermione panted a few minutes later, when they were forced to separate for some much needed air.

“Huh?” Ron mumbled, opening his lust filled eyes and allowing them to roam freely down her body. At that particular moment he had no idea what they had been talking about before the kissing started, nor did he care. “C’mere,” he said, tightening his grip on her waist and pulling her back when she tried to disengage herself and separate her body from his.

“See, this is what I was talking about,” Hermione said, placing both of her hands on his chest and pushing against him. “You can’t control yourself anymore than I can,” she informed him, as his mouth descended to her neck, eliciting a moan of pleasure that only seemed to spur him on. “We...
we have to stop,” she said weakly, contradicting her words when she allowed her eyes to flutter shut and she let her head fall back even further to give him better access.

“Why?” Ron whispered against her ear, his sultry breath tickling Hermione’s neck and causing her entire body to break out in goosebumps. “Why should we stop?” he asked, nuzzling against her neck as his hands slid down her back and cupped her arse.

“Oh god!” Hermione moaned loudly, when Ron pulled her forward and ground his lower body against hers. “Please,” she whimpered quietly, as she teetered on the edge of reason.

“Just tell me what you want, love,” he prompted, bringing her hand up between them and leaning forward to kiss the spot on her palm where he’d cut her earlier.

“I... I want--” she panted.

Oh to hell with it, she thought, giving in to temptation and seeking out his lips once more.

We have to stop, she told herself as she kissed him. Before we get too carried away. But it feels so good, she argued, after Ron’s tongue darted over her lower lip and dip into her mouth. No. No, we have to stop. I have to stop! she shouted in her head. While I still can. STOP NOW! JUST STOP! PULL AWAY!

“Ron,” Hermione mumbled against his lips, when he started steering her back towards one of the sofas. “Ron... please,” she said a little louder, prying her mouth away from his. “We can’t.”

“What?” Ron asked, groaning loudly. “Why the hell not?”

“We’re in the middle of the common room.”

“You’re killing me,” he growled out in frustration.

“I’m sorry.”

“Hermione?” Ron whined. “All right. Not down here,” he sighed, running one hand through his already tousled hair. “Why don’t we go to my room?”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea,” Hermione informed him. “It’s a school night and if I go up there with you, I’m not liable to come back down. Lavender and Parvati are bound to notice if my bed hasn’t been slept in and then they’ll know that I never made it back from rounds. And what if one of your roommates catches me this time? It’s just too risky.”

“I can set my alarm and wake you up early,” Ron suggested, hoping that would be enough to appease her.

“I’d love to come up with you,” Hermione said, “but that’ll never work. You’re not exactly the easiest person to wake up in the morning. We’ll both be tired and you’ll most likely sleep right through an alarm, but I can’t say the same about your roommates.”

“I’m out of ideas then,” Ron admitted, “but you must have some sorta plan worked out, so what is it? Just tell me where you want to go and--”

“Ron,” Hermione said, shaking her head back and forth as she cut him off. “I...um... I think it would probably be best if we just went to bed.”

“ Alone?” he asked, goggling at her in disbelief. “You can’t be serious?” he said, when she bit her
lower lip and nodded her head silently. “No way,” he said, taking a step forward and wrapping his arms around her lower back. “I’m not letting you go,” he informed her. “Not tonight. We can sleep right here for all I care,” he said, glancing at the sofa quickly before refocusing his attention on her, “but you’re staying with me.”

“You know as well as I do that we won’t sleep,” Hermione sighed.

“But Hermione it’s--” he began to protest, but he stopped when her index finger covered his lips.

“Not tonight,” she said softly.

“Tomorrow then,” Ron insisted, after pulling her hand away from his mouth and linking his fingers with hers. “Tomorrow isn’t a school night, so you can stay in my room. I’ll let you go now, but only if you promise that we can spend tomorrow night together.”

“All right,” Hermione replied with a slight smile, after mulling it over for a moment.

“The whole night? No fair sneaking off once I fall asleep.”

“The whole night,” she agreed.

“And Saturday night too.”

“We’ll see,” Hermione said, dropping her eyes to the ground and shaking her head as if she were slightly annoyed, when in fact she was trying to hide her amusement from him. He was just so adorable standing there pouting like a petulant child as he negotiated the terms of her release. If he had any idea how hard she was fighting herself and how close she was to giving in and going up with him now, she’d definitely be in trouble.

“Not good enough,” he stated, tightening his grip on her so she wouldn’t be able to escape. “Saturday night too.”

“If you get your Transfigurations homework done before Sunday,” Hermione countered.

“Oy! That’s blackmail, that is,” Ron cried in mock outrage.

“Takes one to know one,” Hermione shot back quickly. “That’s the deal, take it or leave it.”

“If I agree do we get to seal the deal with a kiss?” he said with a chuckle.

Uh oh, Hermione thought, knowing full well where that would take them. “I think you’ve had more than enough kisses for tonight,” she replied, squirming in his arms in an effort to free herself.

“Just one more and I’ll let you go,” Ron stated with a smirk.

“Deal,” Hermione said quickly, leaning forward, pecking him on the lips, then pulling back and regarding him with a cheeky smile of her own before he even had time to register what had just happened.

“You cheated,” Ron cried, but even as he said it, he released his hold on her and allowed her to step away from him.

“Well?” he said, after she’d taken a few steps backwards and then halted beside the sofa. “Aren’t you going to go up to bed?”

“I don’t want to,” she admitted, studying him intently. “Ron I... I don’t want you to think that tonight
didn’t mean anything to me, because it did,” she said, as she sat down on the couch and motioned for him to join her. “It meant everything,” she continued, reaching out for the chain that was hidden beneath his shirt as soon as he sat down beside her. Before he could react, she pulled the charm out, brought it up to her lips and kissed it softly. “I still can’t believe that you’d do this for me,” she said, letting the charm fall back against his chest as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him just as tenderly.

“Why wouldn’t I? I love you,” Ron said quietly, once she’d pulled back and was looking at him again.

“I love you too,” she replied as her eyes glassed over. “I... I’m sorry if I’ve ruined things. I’m sorry that you have to wait, but it won’t be much longer now and--”

“Hermione,” Ron said, cutting her off. “You don’t have to apologize for that. I mean sure, it’s frustrating and it’s hard to wait sometimes, but it’s not your fault. The potion is the most important thing right now. But, it’s almost done, right?”

“It’ll be finished next week.”

“Thank Merlin,” Ron sighed loudly.

“I was thinking about that though,” Hermione said hesitantly. “About ... you know, when it’s finished,” she clarified, “and I was thinking that maybe ... well, it’s not something I want to rush.”

“What?” Ron asked, some of the color draining out of his face. “But I thought you were ready.”

“I am,” she assured him. “At least I think I am. When we’re together I know that I am, it’s only when we’re not together that I get nervous about it. But that’s not what I meant. I don’t want to rush it. It will be our first time and we only get one of those, so it’s special, you know? And it means even more now,” she continued, as she subconsciously fingered the chain hanging around her own neck, “because--”

“...we’ll Really be married,” Ron finished, and Hermione nodded her head.

“So it won’t just be our first time,” she said quietly. “It’ll really be our wedding night and I don’t want to fumble through that in some mad rush in a broom cupboard, or a classroom, or a secret tunnel, and then come back here like nothing has happened.”

“You think that’s what I want?” Ron asked, sounding more than a little insulted.

“No, I don’t,” she replied quickly. “I know that’s not what you want either, which is why I think we ought to wait, even after the potion is finished. Not long,” she said, when Ron looked like he was about to protest. “Just until Halloween.”

“Halloween?” Ron asked, his mind racing with all the things that would mean. “Everyone will be at the feast.”

“Exactly,” she said, the weight lifting off her shoulders when Ron responded in a positive manner. “We’ll have the Tower to ourselves for hours and we won’t have to sneak around or worry about getting caught or rush through it all. But it’s more than that. Halloween... it’s just... it...feels like the right time. It has a lot of significance, you know?

“Harry’s parents were killed on Halloween,” Ron said, more to himself than to Hermione.

“And Voldemort was defeated, but that’s not what I was referring to,” she stated. “Halloween is
important to us. All three of us,” she clarified. “It’s the anniversary of the day we all became friends, so it seems fitting for it to also be the day that we become more than that.”

“We’re already more than friends,” Ron reminded her.

“I know,” Hermione replied. “But I’d still like Halloween to be our official wedding day. The one we celebrate and remember every year. I know that it’s just another day and it shouldn’t really matter, but I feel like it does.”

“Works for me,” Ron replied with a soft chuckle. “And I’ll never have to worry about forgetting our Anniversary, will I? Because who could forget Halloween? Best damn holiday of the year, with the possible exception of Christmas.”

“Just because you can have a meal comprised of nothing but sweets,” Hermione said, shaking her head back and forth sadly.

“You reckon Harry will bring some back for me?”

“I’m sure he will, if you ask nicely. So that means you’ll be the one telling him why we’re not going to be there with him.”

“ME!” Ron yelped. “You already made me explain the Lànain to him. Why can’t you do it this time? It’s only fair.”

“Fair or not, you’re the one that has to do it.

“Aw, come on.”

“I can’t talk to Harry about our sex life.”

“But I’m a bloke, therefore I automatically can?”

“All right, fine,” Hermione retorted. “I’ll talk to Harry, but that means you get to tell Ginny.”

“Who said we were going to tell Ginny anything?” Ron countered.

“Do you honestly think that she won’t notice that we’re missing from the feast? I don’t particularly want her to come looking for us, do you? Because that’s what’s liable to happen if we don’t explain it to her before hand.”

“Harry can tell her then.”

“It’s not Harry’s responsibility, it’s our. So I’ll talk to Harry and you can explain it all to your sister,” Hermione said, knowing full well that Ron would never go for that.

“All right, you win,” he sighed. “I’ll take Harry.”

“I thought you might.”

“I’m never going to win another argument against you for the rest of our lives, am I?”

“Did you ever win any before?”

“Oh shut up,” Ron groaned. “I must have won at least one somewhere.”

“I’m sure it’s more than one actually,” she chuckled, leaning forward and kissing him quickly.
“Although I’m not keeping score.”

“Hermione, three hundred and seventy five. Ron, four. Does that sound about right to you?” he asked, his voice taking on a disgruntled timbre.

“I adore you,” Hermione laughed softly, throwing her arms around his neck again and kissing him soundly, before pulling away and standing up. “Well, we better go to bed, before it becomes three hundred and seventy six. I’ll see you in the morning,” she added, as she started walking towards the girls’ stairs. “Goodnight, Ron.”

“Night,” he grumbled, as he watched her ascend. Only after she had disappeared did he stand up himself.
“What are you doing?” Harry asked, popping his head out of his bed after hearing movement in the room and spotting Ron riffling through the bureau his clothes were in.

“You don’t really expect me to sleep in my robes do you?” the redhead said sarcastically, dropping a pair of pajamas on his bed.

“I meant what are you doing back here?” Harry asked quietly. “I thought you two were going to... well, I just assumed that you’d both be staying in the Room of Requirement tonight.”

“Nope,” Ron replied, spinning around to face his bed, before removing his shirt and replacing it with his pajama top.

“So you two didn’t...”

“Nope,” Ron said again, before Harry got any further.

“You sly dog,” Seamus whooped, wrenching the curtains surrounding his bed open and grinning up at Ron like a Cheshire cat. “You’ve been holding out on us. Okay, you’ve been holding out on me,” he amended, as his gaze settled on Harry, who obviously knew much more than he did about Ron’s love life. “OY! Longbottom,” Seamus shouted, hurling his pillow at the boy sleeping in the bed next to his. “Wake up. You’ll never guess who’s gone and got himself a girl.”

“Bloody Hell,” Ron groaned, his face flooding with color. “Will you shut up.”

“So?” Seamus asked, rubbing his hands together with an expression of glee that was reminiscent of Ron’s twin brothers. “Who is she? I’m assuming that it isn’t Lavender,” he said, before the embarrassed redhead even had a chance to open his mouth and respond.

“All right, so it’s not her,” Seamus continued, once he saw the look of revulsion that crossed his roommate’s crimson face “Obviously she’s in another house, because if she were a Gryffindor you two would be going at it in the common room instead of that Room of Requirement. Being a Prefect finally coming in handy, is it? Makes it real easy for you, doesn’t it? All you have to do is ditch Granger after your rounds and then hook up with your bird for a little slap and tickle,” he sniggered, arching his eyebrows suggestively. “Do you think she’ll give you detention or deduct house points when she figures out what you’ve been doing? Hermione, I mean.”

“Neither,” Harry said with a soft chuckle, but didn’t elaborate any further because his best friend spun around with a horrified expression on his face and shot him a look that all but screamed, “Are you mental? Shut up!”

“So who is it, Weasley?” Seamus asked again. “Please tell me that it wasn’t that Loony Lovegood bird.”

“Don’t call her that,” a new voice chimed in loudly.

“What’s it to you what I call her?” Seamus asked Neville, who was blushing slightly now that all eyes were locked on him.

“There’s nothing wrong with Luna,” Neville said, rising up off his elbow and sitting up in his bed.
“So what if she’s a little eccentric? I happen to think she’s nice, so don’t go putting her down just because you don’t know her.”

“Good for you Neville,” Harry said, giving his friend and encouraging smile.

“What is this, the Loony Lovegood fan club?”

“I warned you,” Neville cried, snatching the pillow Seamus had thrown at him off his bed and heaving it back as hard as he could.

“Temper, temper,” Seamus laughed. “Maybe you ought to save some of that for Weasley, seeing as how he’s the one bonking her.”

“He’s full of shit, Neville,” Ron said, disregarding Seamus while he slipped his pajama bottoms on and climbed into his bed. “Just ignore him.”

“Full of shite, am I?” Seamus chuckled. “You might want to take a look in the mirror before you try denying it again. Unless you expect me to believe that you did that to yourself.”

“Did what?” Ron asked, his hands going to his neck automatically.

No way, he thought, Hermione would never leave a visible mark and she never even touched my neck. He’s just fucking with me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, trying to play it cool, despite the fact his bright red ears were a dead giveaway.

“I’m talking about your hair,” Seamus sniggered, “There’s only one way I know of to wind up looking that disheveled and that’s to have yourself a good tumble. There’s no point denying it. Especially since Potter already gave you away. Aren’t you going to say anything?” he asked, when Ron remained silent.

“Hadn’t planned on it, no,” Ron finally replied, flopping down and burrowing under his covers. “Night Harry.”

“Aw, come on,” Seamus moaned as he watched Harry settled down as well. “Just tell me who it is.”

“Sod off, Finnigan,” Ron grumbled. “Can’t you see I’m trying to sleep here?”

“All shagged out are you?” he asked jovially. “Bit more work than you thought it would be, teaching a greenhorn how to slob your knob properly?”

“You’ll shut it right now if you know what’s good for you,” Ron warned, snapping upright in his bed and glared at the sandy haired Irishman ominously.

“Touch a nerve, did I?” Seamus continued, intentionally baiting him just to see if he could get Ron riled up to the point he’d forget himself and let something incriminating slip. “What’s the matter, Weasley? Pashing a prude not all you thought it would be? You’re wasting your time, mate. You know that, don’t you? That’s the problem with those inexperienced girls. You have to put so much time and effort into it and when they finally spread their legs for you, it’s a lackluster ride at best.”

“SHUT YOUR BLOODY MOUTH!” Ron roared, his entire face beat red, not with embarrassment, but anger. “One more word about Her....” he started to say, but managed to catch himself just in time and cover his mistake. “Just one more word about her and I swear to God, you’ll regret it.”
“You are so predictable, Weasley,” the Irishman chortled.

“As are you,” Harry piped in from his bed. “And since you’re little fishing expedition netted you nothing, will you kindly shut the hell up so the rest of us can get some sleep?”

“Fine,” Seamus grumbled as he crawled back into his own bed. “But I don’t see why you two are going out of your way to keep it such a bloody secret. I mean, obviously you don’t want Granger to know, because she’ll go all Prefect and spoil all his fun, but it’s not like I was going to tell her.”

“No, you’ll just tell everyone else,” Harry replied.

“Contrary to what you might think, I am actually capable of keeping a secret, Potter.”

“For how long?” Harry asked as he settled back down. “A week?” But even as he said it, he was wondering why Ron hadn’t just fessed up. It certainly would have shut Seamus up, because even he wasn’t stupid enough to knowingly talk about Hermione like that in front of either of them.

“Piss off,” the young Irishman groaned from behind his curtains.

“Well?” Hermione said, the instant Harry joined his friends at the Gryffindor table for lunch the following afternoon. “What did she say?” she asked, knowing that he’d remained behind once their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson had ended so he could talk to Tonks about continuing his Occlumency training. “Is she going to help you? You did actually ask her, right?” she added, when she noted Harry’s blank stare. “You better not have chickened out, because if you did I’ll march right up to the staff table when she comes in and ask her myself.”

“Hermione, take a breath and give him a chance to answer before you get your knickers in a twist,” Ron sighed. “Don’t worry, mate,” he said to Harry, “she won’t actually do that.”

“And what makes you think I’m wearing any knickers?” Hermione leaned forward and whispered in Ron’s ear.

The effect on him was instantaneous. Not only did Ron’s ears flood turn bright red as he snapped his head to the left to stare at her, but the fork he’d been holding fell out of his hand and landed with a clatter in the center of his plate.

“Are you serious?” Ron hissed softly, his meal now completely forgotten.

“No,” Hermione admitted with a smirk, “I was just trying to make a point. You shouldn’t be making assumptions.”

“Bloody Hell,” Ron groaned. “You shouldn’t be saying things like that. What if Seamus had heard you?”

“Shouldn’t be saying things like what?” Ginny asked casually, glancing at Harry, who shrugged his shoulders, before she sat down beside him and stared across the table at her brother.

“Shove off Ginny,” Ron retorted, his ears becoming even darker. “Don’t you have friends of your own to sit with”

“RON!” Hermione cried, digging her elbow into his side.

“OW! What?” he asked, twisting in his seat in an attempt to get away from her. “She’s the one
shoving her nose into other people’s business. She’s damn near as bad as Finnigan.”

“Is that so?” Ginny replied calmly. “And to think, I came over here to warn you.”

“Warn me about what?” Ron asked, his deep blue eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“Sod off, you great prat,” his sister said, loading her plate full of food. “As if I’m going tell you anything now.”

“Ginny?”

“So Harry,” she said, purposely ignoring her brother’s attempt to get her attention. “What happened with Tonks?”

“Um, not all that much,” Harry replied, sounding as if he’d rather not discuss it.

“You did talk to her though, right?” Hermione pressed him.

“Er... yeah,” he admitted.

“And?” Hermione asked.

“It’s a no go,” he replied with a heavy sigh.

“She doesn’t know how to do it?” Ron asked in surprise. “But I thought they trained Aurors how to-”

“They do,” Harry cut him off, “but apparently it’s not that easy. Occlumency is purely defensive and doesn’t effect anyone but the person using it, so it’s something all Aurors are trained in.”

“So what’s the problem then?” Ron questioned.

“The problem is that Legilimency is invasive and according to Tonks, there are strict Ministry guidelines that have to be followed in order to be trained in it. And unfortunately it takes a Legilimens to train an Occulmens well enough that he can lie without... Aw hell, I don’t remember the term she used, but what it boils down to is that she can help me with the basics and my technique and all. She said she could even show me how to do some relaxation exercises, but eventually I’m going to have to train with a Legilimens if I wanted to reach a level where I can look someone right in the eye and lie without giving anything away.”

“So sooner or later you are going to have to talk to Snape?” Hermione said flatly.

“Not necessarily,” Harry replied almost instantly. “Dumbledore is a Legilimens as well. I was hoping that if Tonks were to help me get started again and I got those relaxation exercises down and all, he might be willing to train me instead.”

“Professor Dumbledore is awful busy, Harry,” Hermione warned. “He has a lot of responsibilities to deal with right now and he might not be able to--”

“And I don’t?” Harry shot back, the resentment in his voice taking Hermione completely by surprise.

“I’m sure that isn’t what she meant,” Ginny said, suspecting that Harry was referring to the Prophesy hanging over his head, which he still hadn’t told his friends about.

“So you are going to work with Tonks then?” Ron asked cautiously.
“Just a bit,” Harry replied, sounding normal once more. “Now that you two are finally finished with your detentions she said she’d try and make some time for me on Saturdays.”

“Well that’s something, isn’t it?” Ron asked. “I mean you’ve already had some training right, so maybe a bit of a brush up is all you need.”

“Yeah, right,” Harry mumbled. “Since when has my life ever been that easy?”

“Hermione,” Ginny said, when her brother and his friends stood up to leave the table. “I have Charms next and I can’t seem to get my Silencing Charm down right. I was wondering if you could maybe take a minute and talk me through it so I know what I’m doing wrong.”

“Of course,” she replied, motioning for Ron and Harry to go on without her. “I’ll meet you two in class.”

“But we have Potions next,” Ron objected, uncomfortable with the idea of her walking through a dungeon full of Slytherins by herself, but unwilling to admit it.

“So?” Hermione replied.

“So you can’t be late,” he replied, glaring at Malfoy who was still seated at his own table.

“I won’t be late,” she assured him. “This will only take a minute. But, go on if you’re worried. I’ll catch up.”

“Are you sure?” Harry asked, knowing that Hermione didn’t like to walk around dark or secluded places by herself.

“Fine, stay then. You can help actually. Which one of you wants to volunteer?” she asked, refocusing her attention on Ginny.

“For what?” Ron asked.

“Come on, mate,” Harry hissed in his ear, grabbing Ron by the arm and dragging him away. “Let’s go,” he added, because he had a fairly good idea what Hermione was about to suggest.

“But I need one of you to stay so Ginny can show me what she’s doing wrong.”

“Are you mental?” Ron asked, his mouth dropping open. “We’re not letting Ginny practice a spells she doesn’t even know how to do on us.”

“Oh, let them go,” Ginny said quietly.

“All right then,” Hermione sighed, “I suppose you better start by telling me what happens when you try and cast the charm.”

“Nothing,” Ginny replied as she watched her brother and Harry walk away.

“Nothing at all?”

“No, I mean nothing unexpected. It works fine,” she admitted. “I was just using that as an excuse to talk to you alone for a minute.”

“Ginny,” Hermione said disapprovingly.
“Ron told you about Seamus, right?” the young redhead asked, before Hermione managed to say anything else.

“Of course he did,” she stated. Ron had told her all about Seamus first thing that morning and he’d been none too happy about it. Mostly because his roommate’s sudden interest in his love life meant that she wasn’t going to be able to stay with him in his room over the weekend as they’d planned. “I’m surprised he told you though.”

“He didn’t. Seamus did,” Ginny admitted. “Well, in a round about way. When we were leaving Defense Against the Dark Arts earlier, he sorta fell back and asked me if I knew who Ron was seeing,” she informed her friend. “I played dumb of course, but he wasn’t buying it. The thing is, when he told me what he overheard Harry and Ron discussing, well... Parvati was close enough to hear him and of course she told Lavender,” Ginny whispered. “It was an accident,” she insisted. “I really don’t think he meant for either of them to find out, but they did and Lavender asked me point blank if Ron has a girlfriend.”

“And what did you say?”

“Er.. well I didn’t know what to say,” Ginny admitted quietly. “I mean, I know that you want to keep it quiet and all, so I didn’t really say anything, but Seamus did. He ... um... sorta told her that she was wasting her time trying to chat Ron up because it was never going to happen. He told her if Ron was anything, it was loyal, only.... um... I don’t think it had the desired effect.”

“What do you mean, desired effect?” Hermione asked, her brow knit in confusion.

“Well, some girls like a challenge, don’t they?” Ginny asked rhetorically. “And by telling Lavender that she didn’t have a snowballs chance in hell, I think he might have unwittingly motivated her to make another play for him.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Hermione cried out loudly.

“I’m sure Seamus didn’t mean for this to happen,” Ginny reiterated. “He really was trying to help. He was telling her that she’d have to be out of her mind to go after him again, after the way he shot her down the last time she tried when I left them in the hallway, but the thing is, I think she might just be stupid enough to try it and I thought you ought to know. I doubt Seamus will tell Ron. I sure as hell wouldn’t if I were him.”

“Is this what you were going to warn him about when you sat down?”

“Until he decided to be such a git,” Ginny admitted. “It would serve him right if I sat back and let him be blindsided, but I definitely wanted you to know what was going on, because this effects you too. So ... er... what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione admitted.

“Are you going to tell Ron?”

“I suppose I’ll have to,” Hermione replied. “Only I can’t do it in class, and I should probably wait until we’re alone. I’ll definitely have to wait until Seamus isn’t around,” she mumbled to herself. Ron was already angry with him for butting into their business and unwittingly ruining their plans, if he found out about this, he was liable to overreact and go after him.

I’ll tell him later tonight, and then I’ll just have to keep him away from Seamus tomorrow, she decided.
“Thanks Ginny.”

“If you want any help dealing with Lavender,” the fiery redhead replied with a mischievous gleam in her eye, “just let me know. I’d be only too happy to lend a hand.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Hermione replied, grabbing her bag off the floor so she could head down to her Potions class, “but thanks.”

I should probably tell Harry first, Hermione thought to herself, as her last class of the day let out and she left her Ancient Runes classroom. *Maybe he’ll have some advice on how to go about telling Ron. If nothing else, he’ll be able to help me calm him down. Besides, she continued in her head as she made her way back up to Gryffindor Tower alone, he’s going to need some time to figure out how to keep Ron from going after Seamus once they all go to bed.*

Maybe I ought to just wait and tell Ron tomorrow, Hermione thought. *I can tell Harry tonight and then the two of us can tell Ron tomorrow and that will give him a whole day to calm down. That could work,* she decided. *Unless he wants to start a fight, in which case he’ll fume about it all day and work himself up even further,* she thought with a sigh. *So I’m right back where I started, which is to talk to Harry first and see what he thinks.*

Unfortunately, the minute the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Hermione stepped over the threshold into the common room, talking to Harry was no longer important.

It all happened so fast that even after the fact, Hermione wasn’t quite sure how she did it. One second she was looking at Ron, who was sitting in one of the oversized chairs by the fireplace, where he’d obviously been playing a game a chess with Harry, and then her eyes darted up to Lavender Brown, who was perched on the arm of Ron’s chair.

Time seemed to stop, as Hermione froze in the doorway, her book bag still slung over her shoulder, and took in her roommates attire, or lack of attire, seeing as how her robes, jumper and school tie had been discarded, leaving her in a skirt that was far too short and a tight fitting, white, button up shirt, that left very little to the imagination. And as if that weren’t bad enough, the top three buttons of her blouse were undone, exposing enough cleavage to captured the attention of every boy in the immediate area, all of whom were staring at her like a herd of deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

THAT’S IT! Hermione thought, the instant Lavender leaned forward, affording Ron a perfect view down her shirt, which he took full advantage of.

“Has anyone ever told you how beautiful your hair is,” the sultry blond cooed, as she reached forward and ran her fingers over one of Ron’s ginger locks. “The way it shimmers in the firelight.”

GET YOUR BLOODY HANDS OFF OF HIM YOU CHEAP TART! Hermione screeched in her mind and no sooner had the words formed in her head, than Lavender did just that, although not of her own volition.

At first, Hermione didn’t notice the spark of red light that sputtered to life where Lavender’s fingers were touching Ron, and just as she did, there was a blinding flash and the young blond was literally hurled across the room, much like a pesky bug that had been flicked off a tabletop. She landed with a loud thump, several feet away, on the cold stone floor, looking even more stunned than everyone
“LAVENDER!” Parvati cried out, jumping out of her chair and hurried over to her friend, who was gasping for breath as if she’d had the wind knocked out of her.

“What the hell?” Seamus asked no one in particular as he jumped off the couch, followed by Harry, Neville and Ron who were just as startled by the unexpected attack.

“Is she all rig--” Harry started to ask Parvati, but stopped as he noticed all the color drain out of Ron’s face. “What is it?” he asked Ron instead, whipping his wand out, spinning around to see what had his best mate so spooked, and finally noticing Hermione, who was positively seething in the doorway. “Oh shit,” he muttered under his breath.

“HERMIONE!” Ron cried in horror, before saying the first thing that popped into his head. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“IT’S NOT WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE!” she screamed, dropping her book bag to the floor and swooping down on the tall redhead with a look that was so menacing everyone else stepped away from him without thinking. “Not what it looks like?” she snapped, placing both hands on her hips. “It looked like you were staring down her shirt, that’s what it looked like,” she hissed.

“HOLY SHITE!” Seamus cried loudly, as he suddenly realized what was going on. “He didn’t... they’re not... are they?” he asked Harry.

“Go ahead, tell me that you weren’t,” Hermione demanded, completely ignoring the fact that everyone in the room was staring at her. “Oh, shut up,” she cried, the instant Ron opened his mouth. “Just sit down and shut the hell up. I’ll deal with you in a minute.”

“They ARE!” Seamus yelled triumphantly.

“Are what?” Neville asked timidly.


“Huh?”

“She’s the bird,” Seamus said to Neville, pointing his finger at Hermione as he explained the obvious. “The one he was with last night.”

“Get your finger out of my face before I break it off,” Hermione snapped, pushing Seamus aside and stomping over to Lavender and Parvati.

“OOoooh, catfight,” the young Irishman said excitedly, rubbing his hands together.

“Will you shut up,” Harry said, smacking Seamus in the back of the head as he chased after his bushy haired friend, hoping to head her off before she did anything she might regret. “Hermione, wait.”

“Stay out of this, Harry. It’s between me and her,” she warned, as she stomped up to both of her roommates.


“I’m not the one trying to steal other girl’s boyfriends.”

“You didn’t have to curse her,” Parvati shot back.
“How was I supposed to know you two were together?” Lavender said defensively.

“You should have told us,” Parvati added.

“I already told you that my personal life is none of your business. You were just so worried about those ridiculous stories about me and Harry, that you never even considered Ron as a possibility.”

“Why would you possibly want Ron, when you could have Harry?” Parvati said without thinking.

For a moment all Hermione could do was gape at the two girls standing in front of her in utter disbelief as Parvati’s words sunk in, then she exploded.

“WHAT THE HELL IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN!!” she bellowed at the top of her lungs, clearly offended on her boyfriend’s behalf.

“No, don’t,” Harry said behind Hermione, wrapping his arms around her shoulders to prevent her from lunging forward. “You’re a Prefect, remember,” he added in a quiet voice. “You’re supposed to set the example.”

“All set an example all right,” Hermione said, twisting her shoulder in an attempt to break free. “Let go,” she hissed. “I’m fine.”

“All right,” Harry said, loosening his hold on her but staying close just in case. “You’ve said what needed to be said, so why don’t we just go back over to--”

“I’m not finished yet,” Hermione cut him off. “I’m not even close.”

“This never would have happened if you had told me the truth,” Lavender insisted. “But instead you just sat back and ...and you listened to everything we said and you never said a word. Not one word.”

“Like it would have mattered,” Hermione shot back. “You knew perfectly well that he was seeing someone, and yet you still came down here dressed like that and tried to entice him.”

“Hermione, stop,” Ron said, coming up behind her and Harry. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Let me guess, she was sitting a little too close to the fire and got hot?” Hermione asked, rolling her eyes when she saw the truth of her statement flash across Ron’s face. “I can’t believe you’d actually fall for something that obvious.”

“Well, it was kinda hot over there,” Ron said weakly.

“You’re an idiot,” Hermione cried, throwing both of her arms up in the air in exasperation. “But he’s my idiot,” she snapped, after turning around to glare at Lavender once more, “so keep your shirt on and your grubby paws off of him. And you,” she said, turning on Ron again.

“Are you going to kill me now?”

“No.”

“You’re not?” Ron asked, his voice ringing with hope. “Really?” he added somewhat skeptically.

“Do you want to be with Lavender,” Hermione asked point blank.

“Hell no,” Ron replied loudly without even bothering to think about it.
“Then that’s that,” Hermione said, grabbing his hand and dragging him away from the two girls she’d been arguing with.

“Damn,” she heard Seamus mumble as she led Ron and Harry back to their seats by the fire. “I was hoping we’d see some carnage.”

“Carnage?” Hermione huffed. “I’ll show you carnage. He’s the one that told Lavender that you had a girlfriend,” she informed Ron, pointing at Seamus. “And then he talked her into go after you again.”

“I did not,” Seamus shouted indignantly.

“Did too,” she countered. “Ginny was standing right there and she told me everything that happened.”

“I was only trying to help,” Seamus said, taking a step back when he saw Ron’s feature’s harden and he began to scowl.

“Oh really?” Hermione retorted. “And how much help were you offering when she sauntered over here and started shedding her clothes?”

“DAMN!” Ginny cried as she hurried through the portrait hole and immediately noting how agitated everybody was. “It’s true, isn’t it?” she asked, scanning the room for Lavender or Parvati, both of whom were missing. “Did you really send her flying across the room?” she asked Hermione excitedly. “Oh, why couldn’t you have waited until I was here to see it,” she moaned. “Instead I had to hear about it from a couple second years that you sent running for the hills. I can’t believe I missed it.”

“Well, you’re just in time for round two,” her brother said angrily.

“Where Ron kills Seamus,” Harry added, when Ginny looked at him blankly.

“Any last words, Finnigan?”

“Aw, she told him then?” Ginny said to Harry with a smirk. “Excellent.”

“Oh my God,” Harry mumbled, just before he started laughing. *How could it take me so long to notice?* he wondered. *She’s got a mischievous streak, just like the twins.*

“It wasn’t like that,” Seamus said in his defense, as he stepped away from the glowering redhead advancing on him. “I was trying to talk her out of it, I swear.”

“So much for being able to keep a secret,” Harry mumbled to himself, shaking his head sadly.

“I only mentioned it to your sister because I figured she already knew,” Seamus said, hoping that would placate Ron. “I never meant for Lavender or anyone else to find out.”

“Ginny?” Ron said, glancing at his sister, who bit her lip, but didn’t respond. “Well?”

“Well what?” she asked evasively.

“Did he tell Lavender or not?”

“Um,” Ginny mumbled, caught between two conflicting desires. On the one hand Seamus was responsible for Lavender finding out, albeit in a round about way. But it had still been an accident. Of course if she told her brother that, he’d probably let the meddlesome Irishman live, which would
mean that she’d miss out on all of the fun yet again.

He never asked you if it was intentional or not, Ginny reminded herself just before she replied.

“Well, he didn’t exactly tell Lavender himself,” she admitted. “He told Parvati and she told Lavender.”

“I did not,” Seamus protested. “She overheard me.”

“Which means you told her,” Ginny stated wryly.

“Not on purpose.”

“You still told her,” Ginny insisted.

“But I didn’t mean to.”

“But you still did,” Hermione cut in. “Intentional or not, this is all your fault.”

“I wasn’t the one that got caught looking down her shirt,” the sandy haired Irishman shot back, hoping that if he reminded Hermione of that fact, she’d turn on Ron and they’d distract one another long enough for him to make his escape. Unfortunately it didn’t exactly have the desired effect. Hermione’s eyes remained locked on him, although they narrowed considerably, and Ron actually growled at him.

“I beg to differ,” Hermione retorted. “Every single one of you is guilty of that offense,” she added, dragging her eyes from Seamus to Harry and Neville, who both dropped their heads and stared at the floor as they blushed.

“The difference is we don’t have girlfriends,” Seamus insisted.

“And you never will,” Ginny piped in. “If you go around oggling girls like they’re a piece of meat.”

“All right,” Hermione sighed, “I’ve heard enough. It doesn’t matter. It’s over and done with, but I want to talk to you,” she said, pointing at Ron. “Alone. You boys don’t mind if I use your room for a couple minutes, do you?”

“Not at all,” Harry replied almost instantly, shrugging his shoulders when Ron shot him a look that said, ‘Oh gee, thanks for the support. She’s about to kill me, you know?’

“Ron?” Hermione called his name, walking over to the staircase leading up to the boys’ dorms and spinning around to wait for him.

“Don’t go thinking you’re off the hook, Finnigan,” the redhead whispered, intentionally slamming his shoulder against his roommate as he began shuffling towards his girlfriend. “If you run, you’ll only die tired, because I know where you sleep.”

“Hermione, I know you’re upset, but it didn’t mean anything. I swear,” Ron insisted as soon as he entered his bedroom and shut the door behind himself. “I didn’t do it on purpose. They were just... there... and I couldn’t help it.”

Oh yeah, that’s just brilliant, Weasley, he thought, cringing inwardly at his own stupidity. The I’m a
randy dog excuse? That’s the best you’ve got? Next you’ll be trying the everyone else was doing it excuse. And as you know, that one NEVER work, so shut the hell up, before you dig yourself in any deeper. Your only chance now is to take whatever she throws at you like you deserve it. Apologizing until she’s sick of hearing the words ‘I’m sorry,’ probably isn’t such a bad idea either.

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you like hers better than mine?” Hermione asked, staring down at her chest before looking at him uncertainly.

DON’T ANSWER THAT! a voice screamed inside Ron’s head. It’s a trap.

“I know hers are bigger,” she continued, cupping her breasts with her hands as if she were trying to gage how adequate they were. “By why is that so important? Don’t they all feel pretty much the same?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know?” Ron shouted, feeling even more panicked now then when he first entered the room. “I’ve only ever touched yours,” he added, shifting uncomfortably, praying that he’d be able to find a way to get out of this and away from her before she realized he was aroused. He knew what she’d think, if and when she discovered the state he was in; she’d think it was because of Lavender and that being the case, she’d flay him alive. “Not that I want to touch anyone else’s,” Ron droned on like a raving idiot. “Yours are great and I love it when you let me touch them.”

OH! MY! GOD! Just shut the hell up, you imbecile, the more sensible voice screamed in his head.

But it’s the truth, he argued.

You’re one sick puppy, you know that, Weasley? the voice stated. Here she is about to lay into you, and you’re still turned on.

It’s not like I can help it, he countered. I love it when she gets all riled up. And it’s not everyday I get to watch two girls fight over me. That was hot. Watching her feel herself up isn’t helping either, he groaned internally.


“I...I don’t know why I looked,” Ron stated out loud. “I swear I didn’t mean to. I was going to tell her to bugger off, but when I turned around to say it...she was... they were...just there. I’m sorry. I’ll never do it again. I promise”

“Oh course you will,” Hermione said, shaking her head back and forth in what he could only assume was a disapproving manner. “You could be a little more subtle about it though. All of you could,” she continued. “I mean honestly, the four of you were practically drooling.”

“It didn’t mean anything,” Ron said again miserably.

“I know it didn’t,” she sighed unhappily. “It’s just...sometimes it’s hard. Never being noticed I mean.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, his brow creasing with confusion. “I notice you. I look at you like that all the bloody time.”
“No one else does,” she countered.

“They better not,” Ron said angrily. “I’ll bloody well beat them senseless if they do. What do you want other blokes looking at you like that for?” he asked harshly.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s what you said.”

“It’s just... sometimes I hate being so... average.”

“Average?” he parroted back in surprise. “Are you mental? You’re the most brilliant witch in the whole bloody school, for Merlin’s sake.”

“Yes, brilliant, bookish, know it all Hermione. That’s all anyone sees, because nothing else about me stands out. I’m not curvaceous like Lavender or exotic like Parvati. My hair isn’t smooth and shimmering like Ginny’s. It’s just like everything else about me; boring, brown, and average.”

Oh, I get it, Ron thought, her words and their meaning gelled together in his mind. If there was one thing Ron Weasley understood, it was insecurity.

“If you think that I was looking at her because I don’t find you attractive, or because I think she’s better than you in any way, then you’re wrong. Dead wrong,” he stated, seeing no reason to beat around the bush or try and find a tactful way to explain it. “I looked because she was there, and well, it was sorta hard not to. But I didn’t feel anything close to what I feel when I look at you,” he added, closing the distance between them, wrapping his arms around her shoulders, and pulling her forward against his better judgment so she’d be able to feel the way his body had responded. “This happened because of you, not her,” he stated.

“Ronald Weasley!” Hermione gasped in shock, shoving him away when she felt his arousal press against her stomach. “I can’t believe... you were... you’re...what the hell is the matter with you?”

“What?” he asked sheepishly, shooting her one of his lopsided grins. “The woman I love just laid claim to me in a very dramatic and very public way. I wouldn’t be surprised if half the bloody school knows by now.”

“You probably shouldn’t have used the Lâmain in front of everyone like that though,” he said, ignoring her comment completely. “It’s a good thing everyone was so shocked or they would have realized that you didn’t have your wand out.”

“I don’t know,” she replied honestly, trying to figure that out for herself. “I certainly didn’t mean to. It just happened. Once second I was watching her leaning over you and the next she wasn’t.”

But what happened in between that time? she asked herself. Nothing. I walked in and she was flirting with him. She leaned over and touched his hair and I was jealous. Not just jealous, she reminded herself. Jealous and angry and possessive. That must be what triggered it, but how?
“But I didn’t do anything,” she said out loud. “All I did was....”

“Was what?” Ron asked, curious to know how to work the magic himself, in case he ever needed to.

“All I did was think, ‘get your hands off of him’,” she replied, covering her eyes with one hand and letting out a sigh as she realized it must have been the thought that triggered the magic.

“All you did was think it?” he asked. “Wicked.”

“It was not wicked,” she scolded. “I could have hurt her.”

“But you didn’t,” Ron said. “Plus it was ...hot.... er... flattering,” he ammended when she scowled at him. “I mean, I know how you feel about me and all, but I’m glad everyone else know about it too. I was getting sick and tired of watching every little thing I said or did,” he explained. “Do you have any idea how hard it’s been to hold myself back all the time?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her again. “But we don’t have to worry about that anymore,” he stated happily. “I can touch you or kiss you anytime and anywhere I want.”

“Is that so?” Hermione asked.

“Yup,” he replied, leaning forward and kissing her briefly, just to emphasize his point.

“Not in class, you can’t,” she stated, clearly setting down a new set of guidelines for him to follow, “or when I’m trying to studying?”

“That’s three-quarters of the blasted day and half the night,” he moaned.

“And not if any of the younger students are around.”

“Aww, come on,” Ron complained. “The first years don’t care if I hold your hand.”

“I’m talking about snogging and you know it,” she scolded. “There will be absolutely no kissing or any questionable behavior in front of the first and second years. We’re Prefects after all.”

“So was Percy,” Ron countered, “but that didn’t stop him from sneaking around the dungeons and snogging his girlfriend in empty classrooms all over school. And he still became Head Boy, you know? So did Bill, for that matter. McGonagall isn’t going to take your badge away just because you have a boyfriend. Actually, now that I think about it,” he added with a smile, “I bet she already knew about us that day she gave your badge back in Snape’s office, so that means we have her blessing and you have nothing to worry about.”

“No kissing in front of the younger students,” Hermione insisted.

“I don’t see any first or second years around right now,” he replied with a smirk. “We’re finished with our classes and you aren’t studying,” he added, his grin becoming even wider. “Nor will you be on this fine Friday evening. Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“You’re impossible,” she said, shaking her head from side to side sadly and trying hard not to smile. But even biting her lip to hold it back didn’t work for very long. “I don’t know why I put up with you.”

“I do,” he leaned forward and whispered, just before his lips fluttered over her neck. “I seem to recall you telling me once that I take your breath away,” he said, sucking on the sensitive spot right under her ear. “Let’s see if I can still do it,” he pulled away and muttered, just before Hermione’s fingers weaved into his hair and her supple lips crashed against his.
“They’ve been up there for ages,” Neville said to Harry, glancing down at his watch for the fifth time since they began playing exploding snaps. “What do you think they’re doing?”

“She’s probably trying to find a place to stuff the body,” Seamus sniggers.

“Watch it,” Harry snapped, his green eyes narrowing behind his glasses at his roommate’s crude innuendo. “Ron isn’t the only one that’s capable of cursing you.”

“Actually I was referring to Weasley’s lifeless corpse,” Seamus replied, going to great lengths to sound like he’d just been offended. “Someone’s mind is certainly in the gutter though, and for once it wasn’t me,” he chuckled.

“Just watch what you say about Hermione,” Harry warned.

“Aye right,” Seamus shot back. “Like there’s any chance of Weasley getting lucky. He’s up there with Hermione Granger. A hacked off Hermione Granger at that. She’s probably cursed him three ways from Sunday by now. Or not,” he added, when the couple in question descended into the common room together hand in hand.

“I’m starved,” Ron informed Harry, after releasing Hermione’s hand and walking up behind his friend. “You ready to go down to dinner, mate?”

“Sure,” Harry replied, rising up out of his chair.

“What about Seamus?” Neville asked.

“What about him?” Ron said, his threat to murder his big-mouthed roommate in his sleep forgotten in the afterglow of a good snog.

“Didn’t you want to…OW!”

“Shut it, Longbottom,” Seamus hissed, elbowing Neville in the side before he could remind Ron that he was still supposed to be angry.

“Neville, you’ll tell Ginny that we already went down, won’t you?” Hermione said, after scanning the common room and failing to spot her friend’s bright red hair. “I’d go up and tell her myself,” she added, “but that’s probably not such a good idea right now.”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll tell her,” Neville replied, leaning over the cards on the table in front of him and gathering them back together in an ordered pile.

“What the hell are you looking at?” Ron barked at a group of fourth-year Hufflepuff girls, who had the audacity to gawk at the trio as they made their way down the marble stairs leading to the Entrance Hall.

“Ron,” Hermione reproached him softly.

“They’re not even subtle about it,” he complained, unsettled by the open stares he’d received in the hallways as the three of them made their way down to dinner.

“And that surprises you?” Harry asked. “Merlin knows they’ve stared at me like that enough times.”
“The Gryffindors weren’t acting like that,” Ron insisted.

“That’s because they have to live with you,” Harry chuckled as they approached the doors of the Great Hall.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ron asked.

“It means they saw you threaten Seamus and they know that you know where they sleep too.”

“Laugh it up, Potter,” Ron said sarcastically, following Harry through the huge oak doors.

“All right, I think I will.”

“Bloody hell,” Ron groaned under his breath, blushing scarlet as he stepped into the room full of chatting students, many of whom abruptly cut off their conversation when they caught the flash of his red hair, and immediately started nudging their neighbors in the side, before turning their attention in his direction.

“Just ignore them,” Hermione, who was more accustomed to this kind of unwanted attention, advised, pushing past Harry, who was chuckling quietly to himself. “All of them,” she added, when she saw Ron’s eyes dart over to the Slytherin table and lock on Malfoy, who pointed at them as he leaning forward and whispered something to his friends, all of whom immediately started laughing.


“Just ignore it,” Hermione stated again. “Come on,” she said, snatching his hand up and drag him towards the Gryffindor table, knowing that the sight and smell of all that food laid out before him would quickly remedy that particular problem. “When I find out who those second years were...” she muttered to herself. “Honestly... running all over school telling anyone that would listen that I snapped and attacked another student, when it was clearly an accident.”

Didn’t look like an accident to me, Harry thought, but he wisely kept the comment to himself.

“When I find out who they are,” she continued, glancing down at the end of the table where most of the younger students were seated as she sat down herself. “It would serve them right if I gave them detention.”

“For what?” Harry asked, as he sat down beside her. “They didn’t break any rules.”

“Maybe not,” she acquiesced. “But sooner or later they will, and when they do I’ll be on them so fast they won’t know what hit them.”

“Aw come on Hermione, leave ‘em alone,” Ron said as he loaded his plate full of food. “They’re already intimidated by you. If you start following them around waiting to catch them at something, you’ll traumatize the little snot rags.”

“Me? I’m not the one that shouts Goblin names at them.”

“I only do that when they get on my nerves, plus it’s funny,” Ron countered.

“To you maybe.”

“If you two don’t stop bickering and start eating, your food is going to get cold,” Harry said with a smile. Apparently some things really aren’t going to change.
“I get to play the winner this time,” Ginny said from her chair, as she studied the chessboard set up between Ron and Harry.

“Whatever,” her brother mumbled, not even bothering to look at her as he forced his knight to move forward despite the chess piece’s vehement protests. Had Ron been paying attention he might have noticed the way Ginny’s eyes had drifted over and locked on Harry as she spoke, or the fact that she was trying to restrain a smile, but the truth was, he was far to distracted by Hermione to pay his sister any mind.

Harry however wasn’t distracted and he had noticed. He’d noticed a lot of things actually. Like the fact that Hermione, who was reclining on the couch beside Ron using him as a pillow while she read, had her book propped up in her lap and was turning the pages with one hand, because the other hand had slid behind Ron’s back not long after their first game started. He’d noticed that his opponent’s shirt had ridden up a bit on his right side by the beginning of their second game and that every now and then it would move because Hermione was tracing light circles on the small of Ron’s back with her fingers.

Harry noticed things about his other companion as well. Like the way Ginny’s bright brown eyes lit up as she studied the chessboard and saw what her brother had missed. He noticed the way she had looked up at him, her eyes dancing with glee and smirked. And how she just as quickly beat that smirk down before it could become a full born smile, and then struggled to maintain an impassive expression, least she unintentionally give their shared secret away. He watched Ginny bite her lower lip to keep from laughing as he leaned forward to manually move his next piece forward so Ron would have no warning whatsoever.

Have her lips always been that pink? he wondered, looking at Ginny instead of the chess piece now clutched in his hand. And her cheeks, they’re kind of pink too, but in a good way, he thought. And what happened to her freckles? They seem lighter than they used to be. Or maybe they were always that way and I’m just confusing her with one of her brothers. But her hair, it’s definitely brighter. Ron’s hair doesn’t reflect the firelight like that, does it?

What are you doing? he asked himself, as his eyes drifted back to the luscious bottom lip Ginny was currently mistreating with her teeth and he suddenly realized where his mind was heading. She’s your best friends little sister, for Merlin’s sake. Stop thinking about her like that right now, you randy git. It’s just Ginny.

“Checkmate,” Harry stated smugly, after setting the piece in his hand down in front of the Ron’s King.

“WHAT!” Ron cried, sitting bolt upright and pitching Hermione forward in the process. Caught off guard, she had no choice but to let her book tumbled unceremoniously to the floor and use her free hand to catch herself as Ron leaned over the table and stared down at the chess pieces in disbelief. “No way!” he stated loudly, while Hermione huffed beside him and righted herself. “How’d you... it’s not... you... this game doesn’t count,” he stated, causing his sister to finally loose control and burst out laughing.

“The hell it doesn’t,” Ginny scoffed. “Face it, Ron, he beat you fair and square.”

“It wasn’t fair,” Ron insisted. “I couldn’t concentrate because...” But he seemed to change his mind mid-sentence. “Well, just because,” he finished, his cheeks becoming even brighter than Ginny’s. “I demand a rematch.”
“I already called the next game,” Ginny insisted. “So you’re just going to have to wait your turn.”

“Bugger off Ginny!” Ron snapped.

“Ron,” Hermione hissed, elbowing him in the side. “Don’t talk to your sister like that.”

“Harry, I’d like to introduce you to my brother Ron; the sore loser,” Ginny guffawed.

“Shut up!”

“Has he always been like this?” Harry asked with a hearty laugh of his own.

“You have no idea,” Ginny chuckled in response. “When we were little he used to flip board games over and throw his pieces at the twins. It’s true, they were usually cheating, but what else would you expect from Fred and George?”

“At least I didn’t go crying to Mum and have her force everyone else into letting me win.”

“I did not.”

“Did too.”

“Poor sport.”

“Whiny baby.”

“Oh my God,” Hermione laughed. “Suddenly I’m glad that I’m an only child. What about you Harry?” she asked.

“Well, I grew up with Dudley,” he replied between his sniggers. “Not that we ever played together, mind you,” he added. “But I reckon Dudley has to be just about the biggest sore looser on the planet. Once I even saw him pitch his computer out his bedroom window in a fit of rage after loosing a video game. Seemed like a bit of a moronic move to me, but then he never was very bright. Of course he only had to suffer through one night without video games because my Uncle went out and bought him an even better computer the next morning just to shut him up.”

“So it wasn’t such a moronic move after all,” Ginny said. “Not if he got something even better out of it.”

“What kind of warped punishment is that?” Ron asked. “If we ever tried something like that Mum would have taken away everything we owned and she would have kept it all locked up somewhere until we worked off the cost of whatever it was we broke.”

“And that’s why you appreciate the things you have and understand the value of hard work,” Hermione chimed in, “unlike people like Dudley or Malfoy, who get everything they’ve ever wanted handed to them on a silver platter. Your Mum obviously knows how to be a proper parent.”

“So what was it you broke?” Harry asked Ron.

“Oh it wasn’t Ron,” Ginny said, with a smile and a twinkle in her eye. “It was Charlie.”

“Charlie and Bill actually,” Ron corrected. “They were fighting over who got to use the better broomstick. Bill always used it because he was the oldest, but Charlie didn’t think that was fair, so he got outside first one day and snatched it up.”

“Only Bill tried to take it away,” Ginny continued, “and to make a long story short, Charlie decided
that if he was never going to be able to use it, than Bill shouldn’t be able to use it either.”

“So he snuck out to the broomshed later that night and hacked it up with an axe,” Ron finished. “Mum went through the roof and of course she knew all about the argument, so it wasn’t very hard to figure out who had done it.”

“I reckon Charlie didn’t count on that,” Ginny sniggered to herself.

“It would have taken him the entire summer to work off that broom if Bill hadn’t pitched in and helped him,” Ron continued.

“Bill helped him work it off even though it was his broom that had been destroyed?” Harry asked.

“That’s what brother’s do,” Ron replied. “Besides, Mum gave him Charlie’s broom so it wasn’t like he was the one stuck playing Quidditch on that old Shooting Star that pulled to the left. Flying that broom was a punishment in and of itself.”

“You should know,” Ginny laughed. “You’re the one that got stuck using it nine times out of ten.”

“Charlie was a seeker,” her brother shot back. “He couldn’t very well catch the snitch on a rubbishy old broom like that.”

“Of course, that was it,” Ginny sniggered. “How noble of you. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact they forced you to use it. Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t using that broom one of the stipulations they laid down before they’d allow you to play with them?” she asked, despite the fact she knew the truth already.

“There was that too,” Ron reluctantly admitted, “but given the choice between flying a piece of rubbish and watching on the ground with you...”

“Hardy har har,” Ginny shot back. “The jokes on you isn’t it?” she chuckled. “While you were stuck flying in circles on that dilapidated piece of dung, I was flying every other broom in the shed.”

“Because you’re a sneak,” he brother shot back.

“You’re just sore because I was smart enough to have George teach me how to pick a lock without using magic and you never thought to do it yourself.”

“Whatever. I want a rematch,” Ron said to Harry.

“Well that’s just too damned bad,” his sister answered instead. “You’re going to have to wait your turn like any other loser.”

“Oh, let them play,” Hermione leaned forward and said softly as she took Ron’s hand in hers.

“You’re the reason I lost to begin with,” Ron grumbled.

“I know,” she admitted. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen. But look on the bright side.”

“There’s a bright side to being a big fat loser?”

“Look around the room and tell me what you see,” Hermione said as Harry started repositioning the pieces so they could start a new game.

“Nothing,” Ron replied, after doing as he was told.
“Exactly,” Hermione stated. “Almost everyone else has gone up to bed.”

“Including the first and second years,” Ron said with a smile, finally cottoning on to what she was hinting at. “So does that mean you plan on using this time to make it up to me?” he asked with a cocky grin.

“Well, I suppose that depends on how long their game lasts,” Hermione came back, “but I’d be willing to give it a try.”

“OY! What are you trying to do, make the two of us sick or something?” Ginny exclaimed loudly. “If you’re going to snog, go somewhere else and do it. Harry and I certainly don’t want to watch,” she said with a shudder of revulsion. “I still have nightmares about that first time I walked in on you and caught you—”

“All right Ginny, we get it,” Ron said loudly, hoping to drown her out. “I’m sure Harry doesn’t want to hear about that either.”

“Not particularly, no,” Harry replied almost instantly. “I’ll probably start dreaming about it too, he thought silently. And the last thing I need is more mental images of Hermione without her clothes on. I need to find a girl of my own to fixate on, he thought, glancing at Ginny briefly, before forcing his eyes back down on the chessboard. But not your best friends little sister. What are you thinking? Ron really will murder you in your sleep if you even consider using his sister as a shag toy. Shag toy? Where the hell did that come from? Christ, I’m turning into Seamus now.”

“HARRY!”

“Huh?”

“I asked if you were ever going to move,” Ginny said, giving him an odd look.

“Oh, right, sorry,” he said, moving a pawn forward to start the game. “My mind wandered there for a minute.”

“Obviously,” Ginny replied. “You certainly didn’t need to concentrate to make a move like that,” she continued, sending her own pawn forward.

“There’s nothing wrong though right?” Hermione asked, lowering her voice despite the fact the room was practically empty. “I mean, it wasn’t Voldemort or anything, was it?” she whispered.

“No, no nothing like that,” Harry insisted. “He’s still blocking me out. At least I think he is. I’m not getting the flashes anymore.”

“Have you tried?” Ginny asked.

“What? Forcing my way into his head?” Harry asked incredulously. “Of course not.”

“What kind of dumbarse move would that be?” Ron asked, gaping at his sister.

“What?” Ginny said, “Like you’ve never thought about it. If he can possess Harry, then it stands to reason that Harry could possess him.”

“But he can’t possess Harry,” Hermione whispered. “At least not for very long. Isn’t that what Dumbledore told you?” she asked.

“More or less. It was too painful for him. All of the emotions I was feeling, or something like that,
they were too painful. He couldn’t take it.”

“It would probably be the same for you,” Hermione stated, “having all that twisted evil and hate become a part of you, even for a few minutes. It would be unbearable. There’s no reason to even think about putting yourself through something like that.”

“Well, it was just a thought,” Ginny said somewhat defensively.

“Stop thinking and start playing,” Ron insisted, “so I can have my rematch.”

I wonder though, Hermione silently thought, her eyes falling on Ginny. What would happen if Harry were connected to someone that loved him by a Coupling Potion. Even if it was just a temporary connection and not as strong as what Ron and I are going to do? If Harry is connected to him, and she were to connected to Harry with the potion, then wouldn’t she be connected to Voldemort as well? And if she loved him, and Harry loved her, then Voldemort would feel it twofold. If he couldn’t stand Harry’s emotions by themselves, how would be deal with feeling the emotions of two people at the same time? Would he even be able to handle it? Would it be possible for the two of them to gang up on him and use their connection to strengthen each other at the same time?

There are so many questions, she silently moaned in frustration, and no way to know the answers. Unless we experimented with it a bit. Ron and I could always link ourselves to Harry temporarily, once he’s gotten his Occlumency down, and see what happens. But even a temporary connection lasts for two weeks and that’s a long time to force Harry into experiencing our feelings. Too long in fact. Unless there is no other choice.

But if I save some of the Coupling Potion in it’s basic form, before Ron and I add the extra ingredients, then theoretically the three of us should be able to take it right before the final battle, and not only will Harry’s soul be connected to us and protected from the Killing Curse, there will be two additional sets of emotions for Voldemort to deal with. Maybe the three of us together would be strong enough to overpower him. Or maybe we’ll simply wind up driving each other insane for two week.

You’re getting ahead of yourself again, that’s the problem. You need to figure out how to work the connection between two people before you even think about trying it with three. So just take a step back and focus on getting the potion finished and yourself connected to Ron. That’s what’s important right now. It’s going to take time to figure out how to manage the connection without driving one another completely mad in the process. Thank god it’s just powerful feelings and not thoughts that are transmitted, otherwise it we’d be completely overwhelmed.

Even so, I should probably tell someone what we’re planning, just incase something goes wrong. And I can’t tell Harry, not yet, so it’s going to have to be Ginny, whether Ron likes it or not. But it can wait until Halloween. She won’t need to know about it until then, so that gives me a while to figure out how I’m going to explain it.

“Mione?”

“Hum?” she replied mechanically, when she felt Ron shift beside her.

“Are you all right, love? You’ve been awful quiet.”

“Just a bit tired I guess.”

“Why don’t you go up to bed then,” he suggested.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly planning on going up there tonight,” she replied somewhat reluctantly. “I
thought it would be best if I gave Lavender some space,” she explained. “I’ll apologize to her tomorrow, but for now I think it’s best if I just stay away.”

“You can come up with me then,” he whispered. “Like we originally planned.”

“No,” she said, sounding more than a little disappointed. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea either. Not tonight. Not with everyone knowing about us and Seamus being in there and all. It’s one thing to sneak up there like I did before, but it would be different having everybody know that I was there. It’s just... not a good idea.”

“So where are you going to sleep?” Ron asked.

“Right here.”

“On the couch? By yourself?”

“Unless you want to join me,” she added quietly.

“Hey, now there’s an idea,” Ron said, his eyes lighting up. “A ruddy brilliant idea, actually. I’ll just pop upstairs and get us a pillow and a blanket, shall I?”

“Can you get me something to sleep in too?” Hermione asked.

“I can do you one better than that,” he said, standing up quickly and grasping her hand. “Come on,” he added, pulling her to her feet as well.

“Where are we going?” Hermione asked, when Ron started tugging her away from the couch they’d been sitting on.

“Upstairs,” he replied, matter-of-factly.

“But Ron,” she protested, dragging her feet.

“Just trust me,” he insisted. “We’ll be back in a couple minutes,” he added, for Harry’s benefit. “So don’t go starting another game or anything. Just prepare to have the floor wiped with your sorry arse.”

“Get out!” Ron barked, the instant he stepped into his bedroom, taking his roommates completely by surprise.

“Sod off, Weasley,” Seamus snapped back from behind the curtains of his bed. “It’s our room too.”

“Maybe so, but you’re still going to leave.”

“Bugger off.”

“Just for a few minutes,” Ron said to Neville, who had apparently just finished watering his Mimbulus Mimbletonia, because he was frozen beside the plant looking thoroughly confused.

“Why?” Neville asked, setting the small watering can he’d been holding down on top of his bureau, as Ron kicked off his shoes and quickly shucked his trousers, before yanking a drawer open and replacing them with a pair of pajama bottoms that were several inches too short.

“Hermione needs a place to change her clothes,” he explained, purposely turning his back to Neville
before tossing his white button up shirt in a chair and replacing it with a t-shirt from a different drawer. “Thanks to Finnigan here, she can’t use her own room tonight,” he added, “so I need you to wait out in the hall, just for a minute.”

“Oh, okay,” Neville said, his face flushing ever so slightly as he started moving towards the door.

“You too,” Ron said to Seamus, who made no move to get out of his bed.

“Well, she’s more than welcome to change in here,” the young Irishman replied flippantly, “but I’m not leaving.”

“The hell you aren’t,” Ron countered. “You’ve got two choices. Either you get out of that bed and walk out into the hall on your own, without making any rude comments,” he added. “Or I’ll curse you’re randy arse and toss you out myself. Yeah, I thought that’s the one you’d choose,” he said, when Seamus yanked his curtains open and climbed out of bed, grumbling something under his breath about the cold floor and his bare feet.

“You got five minutes and then I’m coming back in,” he said, as he followed Neville to the door.

“You’ll come back in when I let you in,” Ron said, shoving his grumpy roommate through the doorway and following after. “It’s all yours,” he said to Hermione, who was standing in the hallway waiting for them. “I left the drawers open for you. Put on anything you like.”

“Thanks,” she said, before slipping under Ron’s arm and entering the room, closing the door behind her.

“I should have known,” Seamus snorted.

“Known what?” Ron asked without thinking.

“That she’d make you wait out here while she changed. God forbid you catch a glimpse of her knickers. The world might stop turning.”

“Shut the hell up,” Ron snapped, lifting his hand and pointing his wand directly at Seamus, who was clearly surprised, despite the fact the redhead had warned him. “Silencio,” he said, effectively silencing his roommate and ensuring that he was incapable of making any further comments as long as Hermione was within earshot. “Maybe next time you’ll listen to me when I tell you not to do something,” Ron said, crossing his arms in front of his chest and leaning back against the wall to the left of the doorway as Seamus grabbed his throat and shot him a murderous glare.

Of course the resourceful Irishman didn’t need the use of his voice to get his message across, because his fingers still worked just fine. The other two watched as all but the middle finger on Seamus’s right hand curled and he lifted it high in the air.

“My sentiments exactly,” Ron sniggered, mere seconds before the door flew open and he heard Hermione gasped as she came face to face with Seamus, who was flipping her off for some unknown reason.

“How dare you,” she snarled, puffing up like the Prefect that she was as she stepping out into the hallway in a pair of Ron’s pajama bottoms, which were rolled up around her ankles and a maroon jumper that clearly wouldn’t fit him anymore, but was still far too large for her. “Five points from Gryffindor for showing disrespect to a Prefect,” she snapped, “and the next time I see that specific finger pointed at me,” she added, “it’ll be detention. You got that? Well?” she asked, when Seamus’ mouth fell open and he failed to respond.
“Er... he can’t answer you,” Neville interjected.

“Why not,” Hermione demanded.

“Well you see....”

“Because I cursed him, that’s why,” Ron piped in.

“You cursed him,” she asked in disbelief.

“You’re damn right I did. He was mouthing off, so I shut him up.”

“Ron!” Hermione cried. “You can’t just do something like that.”

“Well I did, and I’m not lifting it either. He deserves far worse than that after all the shit he’s stirred up today. I’d say he got off pretty easy.”

“Give me that,” Hermione said, dropping the quilt she’d been holding on the floor, before wrenching Ron’s wand out of his hand and pointing it at Seamus. “Finite Incantatem.”

“Something you want to say to me, Finnigan?” Ron asked, as Hermione handed his wand back.

“No,” Seamus replied, glancing over at Hermione. It’ll keep, he thought, deciding that it would probably be better to wait and spare himself the detention he’d earn if he spoke his mind now.

“Thanks for letting me borrow your room again,” Hermione said, as Ron leaned down, snatched the quilt off the floor, and tucking it under his arm. “Good night,” she added, grabbing Ron’s hand and dragging him back towards the stairs.
Chapter 28: Taunts & Tantrums

If Ron hadn’t known better, he would have sworn that someone cast some sort of time acceleration spell over the castle. One minute it was Friday evening and the next thing he knew, Monday morning was upon him and his entire weekend was gone. Of course the problem wasn’t really that the weekend was over, so much as what that meant.

He had to attend classes and in order to do that, he was going to have to leave Gryffindor Tower, something he’d managed to avoid doing over the past two days. That’s not to say he hadn’t left the tower at all, because periodically he had ventured out for meals, but only at odd times. Or times that were odd for Ron.

Sleeping in the Common Room with Hermione on Friday night had produced unforeseen results. Like the fact that he woke up bright and early on Saturday morning with a rather painful crimp in his neck. But in the end that turned out to be a good thing for several reasons. The main one being that later in the day Hermione had tried to massage it out for him. But the crick had also caused him to wake up far earlier than he normally would have and as a result, the two of them were able to sneak up to their perspective dorms before anyone saw them, get dressed, then go downstairs to the Great Hall for breakfast, and make it back to the Common Room before most of their classmates were even out of bed.

It wasn’t until lunch that the problems really started. Not that Hermione or Harry seemed to mind, or even notice, the stares and whispers that follow the three of them as they traversed the halls. Ron, however, did notice and it bothered him more than he wanted to admit. It wasn’t that he was embarrassed about being with Hermione. He was actually proud of that and he wanted people to know, but that didn’t mean he wanted them all talking about him behind his back, or right in front of his face for that matter. And the fact that they intentionally kept their voices low and whispered as they talked about him made it even worse, because it could only mean one thing. Whatever it was that they were saying, it wasn’t good.

Of course nothing could have been as bad as the things Draco Malfoy said about Hermione once the trio had finished their lunch and wandered back out to the Entrance Hall, where he was lying in wait for them. In the end, Ron wasn’t the only one to pull his wand. Harry had as well, but his main motivation had been to ensure that Crabbe and Goyle didn’t try and interfere. Things would have gotten pretty ugly if Tonks hadn’t come walking down the marble staircase at that precise moment, seen what was about to happen, and stepped in before any curses were actually thrown.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher sided with the Gryffindors, but that didn’t stop Hermione from lecturing the two of them all the way up to Gryffindor Tower. That’s when Ron decided to purposely alter his dinning habits. He knew that he wouldn’t be able to go without meals entirely, but if he avoided the Dinning Hall during peak hours, not only would there be less people around to whisper about him, there was also a good chance that he’d miss Malfoy altogether. Not that he was intimidated by Draco or his slimy friends in the least. But he did enjoy being on speaking terms with Hermione and he knew full well what would happen if he gave Malfoy the opportunity to push his buttons again.

But now that the weekend was over and classes were resuming, there was no way he was going to be able to avoid the Slytherins simply by going down to dinner late. They had double Potions with them on Wednesday and that’s when it would happen. Ron knew it without a shadow of a doubt. That’s when Draco would provoke him. He’d wait until Wednesday and do it right under Snape’s
hooked nose. Malfoy wouldn’t even have to hide what he was doing then, because the Potions Master would simply look the other way. Until Ron finally lost his temper that is.

“Maybe I ought to just skive off Potions,” Ron said to Harry as the two of them got dressed on Wednesday morning. “Where’s a Nosebleed Nougat when you need one?”

“Hermione would never buy that,” Harry replied.

“I could slip a Puking Pastille into my eggs during breakfast?” Ron suggested. “Maybe a Fainting Fancy? She could scold at me all she wanted then, for all the good it would do, seeing as how I’d be unconscious and all.”

“Unless you managed to sneak a Skiving Snackbox into your trunk before you left headquarters, you’re out of luck, mate,” Harry said, as he sat down and tied his shoes. “You know that Malfoy only says those things when you’re around because he knows he’ll get a rise out of you,” he reminded his friend. “He started in on me and Hermione yesterday, when we went down to lunch without you, but neither of us reacted the way he wanted and eventually he stopped wasting his time. Just try and ignore whatever he says to you today. You know why he’s doing it. He just wants to get you in trouble.”

Ignore it? Yeah right, Ron thought.

“That’s easier said than done,” he grumbled, snatching his bag off the floor and slinging it over his shoulder. “Do me a favor though,” Ron added, reaching into his robes and producing his wand. “Keep this for me,” he said, holding it out for Harry to take, “and don’t give it back until we’re in D.A.D.A.”

“And what if he tries to curse you?” Harry asked as he stowed his best friend’s wand in his own pocket.

I still have my fists, Ron thought.

“I suppose I’ll have to duck, won’t I?” he replied. “You can watch my back from the side, right?” he joked. “Because you probably don’t want to get caught standing directly behind me.”

“My ears must be burning Potter. We were just talking about you,” Draco drawled as the three Gryffindors approached the Potions Classroom, “or maybe the inflammation is a bit lower. Of course that’s to be expected when you’re porking a filthy Mudblood. What about you, Weasel King? You feeling the burn yet?”

“DON’T!” Hermione cried, dropping her rucksack on the floor, grabbing Ron’s arm, and dragging him backwards before he had a chance to push past Harry and wipe that smug smirk off Malfoy’s pointed face. “Just... don’t,” she said a bit softer. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Shove off Malfoy,” Harry replied, allowing his own bag to fall to the floor so it wouldn’t be in his way if he needed to act fast.

“We’re curious though,” Draco continued as if he hadn’t heard him. “How exactly does it work? Do you take it in turns or alternate days or what?” he asked Harry. “Or maybe you only get to have a go at her when Potter’s tired of boning her himself,” he said to Ron.

“Shut your fucking mouth or I’ll shut it for you. Even if I have to break your jaw to do it,” Ron growled, clenching his fists at his side.
“I always knew you were pathetic,” Draco spat back, “but Christ, don’t you have any pride at all? You’re actually happy with Potter’s cast offs, his sloppy seconds. That’s just... well, I guess I shouldn’t be all that surprised really. You are a Weasley after all. You’re used to hand-me-downs. Everything you’ve ever owned belonged to someone else first. Used clothes, used books, and now you can add that used up Mudblood cunt to the list.”

“You’re fucking dead!” Ron bellowed. Hermione gasped beside him and squeezed his arm briefly before changing her mind and letting go of him.

As soon as she removed her hands, Ron started moving, but before he even managed to take two steps forward there was a loud bang and a jet of purple light hit Malfoy square in the chest, knocking him off of his feet and sending him skidding down the hallway. Pansy Parkinson screamed and ran to Draco’s side just as Snape’s threw the door of the Potions Classroom open and stepped out into the corridor to see what the commotion was.

“Weasley, detention!” he barked, before he even bothered to glance at Malfoy, who had sprouted two identical black feelers on the top of his head. “You two,” he added, pointing at Goyle and Theodore Nott, when Malfoy tried to stand up and discovered that he was unable to do anything more than flip over on his stomach and scurry along the floor like an oversize beetle. “Help him get up to the hospital wing.”

“Yes, sir,” Nott replied before jumping into action.

“Explain,” Snape said to Pansy, who had stepped out of the way so Nott and Goyle could pull Draco up and drag him out of the dungeon.

“Potter cursed him,” she said.

“For no reason whatsoever,” Millicent Bulstrode added.

“Is that so?” Snape asked, turning around and locking his cold black eyes on Harry.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Harry confessed without the slightest bit of hesitation. “I’m the one that cursed him. And I had a damned good reason.”

“Well, in that case it’s only fitting that you join Weasley in detention,” Snape snarled. “And twenty points from Gryffindor. Each.”

“What!” the two Gryffindors shouted in unison.

“You can’t give Ron detention,” Harry yelled angrily.

“I didn’t even do anything,” Ron argued.

“I can and I did,” the Potions Master retorted in response to Harry’s comment. “You two will remain after class and if either one of you even thinks about arguing with me, it’ll be two detentions,” he said, before he turned his back on them and swept into his classroom, his voluminous black robes billowing out behind him as he went.

“That no good slimy son of a bi...”

“RON!” Hermione cried out in warning. “If he hears you talking about him like that he’ll give you another detention or worse, he’ll kick you out of class.”

“Fuck him,” the angry redhead snapped. “At least I’ll have the satisfaction of having earned that
“Sorry,” Harry said, after taking a deep breath and forcing himself to calm down.

“For what?” Ron asked. “It’s not your fault Snape is a two-faced bastard. Besides, I would have done the same thing if I’d had my wand. What did you hit him with anyway?” he whispered, as the three of them followed the remaining Slytherins into class.

“Insect Jinx,” Harry replied. “I almost used it on Dudley last year. Interesting to see what it actually does. I didn’t mean to get you in trouble though,” he admitted. “Actually I was trying to keep you out of it. You already had a months worth of detentions for kicking Malfoy’s sorry arse on the train. I figured it was better me than you this time. At least I wouldn’t get expelled.”

“Silence!” Snape demanded, as the students took their seats. “You have exactly one hour to copy the instructions off the board and brew your Befuddlement Draughts. Without any help,” he added, locking his eyes on Hermione, as if he were speaking directly to her. “When the hour is up you will test your concoctions on each other, finished or not,” he added, glaring at Ron and Harry, “and then we’ll see just how successful you were. You may begin.”

It was well past Midnight when Harry dragged himself up the corridor leading to Gryffindor Tower and entered the Common Room. It had been a ghastly Saturday night, thanks to Snape’s revolting detention, and all Harry could think about as he trudged out of the dungeons and made his way back to the tower, was how good a long hot shower would feel. Unfortunately, he was so focused on that thought, that he failed to notice the two girls standing in the far corner of the room when he entered it, or the fact that they were quarrelling about something in inaudible whispers. They however, didn’t fail to noticing him.

“Where is he?” Ginny barked, turning her back on Hermione and stalking across the room before Harry could disappear up the steps leading to his dormitory. “Where’s Ron? Why isn’t he with you?” she asked. The two of them had gone to detention together after all, so if anyone knew where her brother was hiding, it would be Harry.

“He decided to use the Prefects’ Bathroom,” Harry replied, glancing over his shoulder at the staircase that would take him up to a shower of his own. “Look, it’s late and Snape had us scrubbing cauldrons half the night, without the use of magic I might add. I’m covered in goo and to be honest, I don’t even want to know what any of it is. I just want to wash it off and go to bed,” he said, moving towards the stairs.

“Well that’s just too damned bad,” Ginny shouted, the anger in her voice taking Harry completely by surprise.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked, as he spun around and discovered her glowering at him.

“What’s the matter with you?” she shot back. “How could you?”

“How could I what?” Harry asked, trying to stomp down the flicker of irritation he felt course through his body before it found a hold and ignited into something else. He was already in a bad mood thanks to Snape, and he didn’t really want to take that out on Ginny. But if she was going to push him now, for no reason whatsoever, he wasn’t going to just stand there and take it

“I thought Hermione was your friend.”

“She is,” he retorted, narrowing his green eyes at the angry redhead, before shifting his gaze to
Hermione, who had joined them by the stairs. “What the hell is she talking about?” he asked his silent friend.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Hermione said to Ginny instead of answering Harry’s question. “How many times do I have to tell you that it’s not like that. Will you just calm down and leave Harry alone. He didn’t do anything.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Ginny snapped. “And that’s the problem. He didn’t do anything. He just sat back and let it happen. He stood there and watched while you... while he... why didn’t you stop him?” she shouted at Harry.

“Stop who from what?”

“What the hell is going on in here?” Ron asked, as he entered the room and closed the portrait behind him. “I could hear you all the way out in the hallway,” he said to his sister.

“I thought you were going to use the Prefect’s Bathroom,” Harry said.

“I was,” Ron replied, looking down at his filthy clothes, “but then I realized I’d have to put these back on, so I--”

“You...you selfish bastard,” Ginny hissed, right before she launched herself at her startled brother. “How could you?” she shrieked, grabbing the collar of Ron’s grimy button up shirt and tearing it open.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Ron snapped, reaching out and grabbing his sister’s wrists to prevent her from doing any further damage.

“How could you even think about doing something so... so despicable,” she asked, staring at the charm hanging around his neck. “You’re going to take that wretched thing off her,” she demanded, tilting her head in Hermione’s direction. “You take it off her right now or I swear to God, you won’t live long enough to finish it.”

“Finish it?” Harry asked, his brow creasing with confusion. Ginny had obviously found out that they’d performed the Lânain, which explained her angry outbursts, but it was over and done with. What else was there left for them to do?

“Oh,” he muttered, as he suddenly realized what she was talking about. They wouldn’t actually be married until they consummated the union and she wanted Ron to release Hermione before they took it that far.

“A little help would be nice,” Ron said to Hermione, as his sister struggled to get free.

“I already tried, but it didn’t work,” she replied.

“What do you mean it didn’t work?” Ron asked.

“What are you two talking about?” Harry asked in confusion. “Tried what?”

“Well, she’s your sister,” Hermione said to Ron. “She isn’t a threat.”

“She just threatened to kill me.”

“But, she didn’t mean it. That’s probably why it didn’t work.”

“Why what didn’t work?” Harry asked again.
“Oh, I meant it,” Ginny snarled, “But I won’t be doing it myself. Just you wait. Once I tell Mum what you’ve done she’ll floo here and take care of you all by herself.”

“It’s not what you think, Ginny,” Ron said letting go of her wrists and holding one hand out in front of himself as if he thought that might placate her. “Just calm down and let me explain.”

“CALM DOWN!” she bellowed. “How am I supposed to calm down? I just found out that my own brother is a ...”

“All right!” Hermione shouted, “That’s enough. This is neither the time, nor the place to have this discussion,” she added in a much softer voice, looking pointedly at Ginny as she did so. “I told you about this in confidence because I thought we could trust you and here you are shouting about it in the middle of the Common Room.”

“You told her?” Ron asked in disbelief.

“It’s not the way you’re making it out to be and you know it.” Hermione continued with her speech as if she hadn’t even heard him. “I spent the past three hours explaining everything to you, so just stop with the theatrics. Ron didn’t do anything wrong. This is what we both want,” she said, purposely lowering her voice, “and we’re not taking them off. Not for you, not for your Mum, or for anyone else. It’s our decision to make, not yours.”

“But you don’t understand what those that thing are used for,” Ginny argued.

“I understand perfectly,” Hermione came back. “You’re the one that’s confused. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I don’t fully appreciate how vile this is to you because I’m Muggle-born,” she whispered. “But I think that might actually a good thing in this case because I didn’t have any preconceived notions to overcome. I know why the spell was created and what the charms were traditionally used for,” she said in a hushed voice. “But I was able to look beyond that and realize that it doesn’t matter what other people used them for. All that matters is what we’re using them for and it has nothing to do with domination, ownership, or control. It’s about love and security. This is your brother we’re talking about, Ginny. Do you honestly think he’s capable of abusing my trust in that way?

“Well, no, but--”

“He promised me that he’d take it off the minute I asked him to,” Hermione stated. “That he’d release me if it was what I really wanted. But this is what I want,” she said, drawing her own talisman out from under her shirt by the chain so Ginny could see it. “It’s what I want and it’s staying on,” she insisted. “And even if you did force him to take mine off, it still wouldn’t change anything come Halloween. We’ll still be... married,” she whispered the last word so softly Harry wouldn’t have known what she said if he hadn’t been able to read her lips, “because he’s wearing one too. The only difference is that he’d be more protected than I am.”

“Halloween?” Harry asked, looking at his friends one by one for an answer. “What’s Halloween got to do with any of it?”

“That’s when they plan on finishing it,” Ginny said. “While we’re all at the feast.”

“Ron hasn’t told you about that yet?” Hermione asked Harry, who was staring at her with wide eyes.

“No.”

“I thought you were going to tell him tonight while the two of you were in detention,” she said to Ron.
“Yeah well, obviously I didn’t get to it,” he retorted. “It wasn’t exactly a conversation I wanted to have with Snape popping into the room every five minutes to sneer or hurl insults at us.”

“But you did tell Ginny?” Harry asked Hermione, who nodded. “Only she freaked out and you spent the past three hours trying to calm her down.”

“More of less,” Hermione replied. Although the truth was that she’d spent most of that time telling Ginny about the Coupling Potion, explaining exactly why they were going to take it, and answering her friends questions.

Ginny had only freaked out about half an hour before Harry showed up. And only because that was when she realized they weren’t going to let the bond created by the potion dissolve, that it would, in fact, be permanent as long as they continued to be intimate on a regular basis. She’d freaked out because she’d realized that kind of bond could be viewed as the equivalent of marriage. She was even more aghast when she realized Hermione already knew this and she was going to go through with it anyway.

So, Ginny, being the good friend that she was, had tried to talk Hermione out of it. Not because she didn’t understand how beneficial the potion would be, or because she didn’t think it was a good idea for Hermione to be intimate with her brother, or because she didn’t like the idea of them being married and Hermione becoming family. The truth was, she had hoped that might happen sometime in the future, but not now. Getting married now, in secret, was insane. Hermione had even agreed with her on that point, but she still had no intentions of altering any part of her plans.

Ginny had argued that they could still go through with most of it. She thought that using the potion to protect their souls was an absolutely brilliant idea. There was no reason they couldn’t finish brewing the potion and add the extra ingredients as planned on Halloween night. All she was suggesting was that they not drink it straight away. Once it was finished, she’d argued, there was no reason they couldn’t preserve it and store it away somewhere until it was needed. It wouldn’t change their relationship any. They’d still be able to be together as often as they wanted and they’d still have the finished potion in case they ever needed it. The only difference would be that they wouldn’t be married, not yet anyway.

But as logical as Ginny’s argument had been, Hermione knew that it wasn’t that simple. They were already bound to one another by the Lànain, and as soon as they consummated their relationship, whether it be to finish off the Coupling Potion or not, they would be married. At least as far as anyone in the Wizarding World was concerned. So it wouldn’t matter if they drank the potion or not. Unfortunately, Hermione made the mistake of revealing this to Ginny, thinking that she’d be able to explain it all to her and that everything would be alright by the time the boys got back from their detention. But it didn’t exactly happen that way. Once Ginny realized that her brother had placed a Lànain talisman around Hermione’s neck, she stopped listening to reason, and started raving about what she was going to do to him if he didn’t take it off.

“So, let me get this straight,” Harry said, glancing from Hermione, who was blushing to Ron. “You two aren’t going to the Halloween feast?” he asked his best friend, who shook his head, “because you’re going to stay here and have s... Wait,” he said, holding one hand up in front of himself. “Forget that I asked. I don’t think I really want to know anymore. I’m going to take a shower now and then I’m going to bed,” he said quickly, bolting up the stairs and disappeared from view before anyone had a chance to stop him.

“Well, that was an excellent idea,” Ron groaned sarcastically, covering his eyes with his hands and rubbing them briefly, “Let’s tell them about our Halloween plans so they don’t get worried and come looking for us. And now Harry is all uncomfortable again and Ginny thinks I’m some sort of twisted,
domineering, brute.”

“Everyone knows that I’m the domineering one,” Hermione retorted.

“This isn’t funny, Hermione.”

“I know,” she assured him, reaching forward and grasping his hand despite the fact his fingernails were caked with black gunk. “But it’ll be all right. You go check on Harry,” she said, standing on her toes and giving him a chaste kiss. “And I’ll take care of your sister.”

“I am standing right here, you know?” Ginny said, sounding both annoyed and insulted at the same time. “Take care of me,” she muttered under her breath, crossing her arms in front of her chest and glaring at the couple standing in front of her. “Like I’m the one with the problem.”

“Actually you are,” Ron stated.

“You aren’t helping.” Hermione sighed.

“Well she is. It’s our life, not hers. What we do or don’t do is none of her business. Just butt out, Ginny.”

“A bit different when the shoes on the other foot, eh?” his sister snapped back. “It’s perfectly acceptable for you to stick your big fat nose into my business all the time and tell me what to do or who I can date and who I can’t, but when I’m concerned about you it’s--”

“I’ve never told you who you could date.”

“Oh, please. You were always going on about Michael and what a prat he was.”

“I was just stating a fact,” her brother retorted. “You know it’s the truth. That’s why you dumped him. And good riddance.”

“That’s not the point,” Ginny insisted. “You’re constantly telling me what to do.”

“I’m your brother, that’s my job. I’m supposed to look out for you.”

“And I’m looking out for you.”

“By threatening to sic Mum on me?”

“If that’s what it takes. You can’t do this, Ron. It’s just.... it’s not right. You know that.”

“Why?” Hermione asked quietly. “Why isn’t it right? Because of the way the talismans have been used in the past? He didn’t force me to do this, Ginny. He didn’t trick me or try and deceive me. It isn’t about control or ownership. And it isn’t just me,” she whispered. “Ron let me put one on him too, so we’d be equals in this and so would could protect one another. I have the same control over him as he has over me,” she stated. “I’m just as guilty as he is. More so in fact, because I’ve already used it once. So why aren’t you demanding that I release him?”

“You’ve used it?” Ginny asked, her mouth falling open in shock.

“How do you think Lavender ended up on the other side of the Common Room?” Ron whispered.

“It was an accident,” Hermione added quickly. “When I walked in and saw what was going on, I was jealous. And in that split second that I viewed her as a threat, the Lànain magic must have kicked in, because before I even knew what was happening, I’d repelled her. And that’s not even the
worst of it,” she admitted. “I tried to use it again tonight, on you.”

“You tried to--” Ginny stuttered, her eyes going wide with shock. “On me?”

“Not the way I did with Lavender,” Hermione tried to explain. “I just ... it was the perfect opportunity to test it out. You’d just jumped Ron and he was holding your wrists so you wouldn’t be able to hit him and I thought maybe I could make you back off a bit. I wasn’t trying to send you flying across the room,” she assured her friend. “Nothing that violent. I just wanted you to back away from him. If it had worked, it should have been like a light shove, but it didn’t work. I don’t know if it’s because you’re family, or because I didn’t really perceive you as a threat, but it doesn’t seem to work on you. But my point is, I purposely tried to use it this time. Ron hasn’t done that. So if anyone is in the wrong here, it’s me.”

“I asked you to do it,” Ron insisted.

“But I’d already tried it by that point.”

“Because you wanted to see if you could protect me.”

“That is the reason we put them on,” Hermione said in a soft voice. “It’s not about ownership, Ginny. It’s about being able to protect one another. If Bellatrix Lestrange ever so much as touches Ron, she’ll end up in far worse condition than Lavender, because I won’t just think, ‘Get your hands off him’, it’ll be more along the lines of, ‘Die you evil bitch!’”

“I don’t think you can actually kill anyone with the Lànain, love,” Ron whispered. “Even if that’s what you’re thinking. Unless you repelled her into a tree or something. But I don’t think you can really control what direction she’d go, so that would be more of an accident. But the point is,” he said to his sister, “we can repel them. Or I can anyway, seeing as how most Death Eaters are male. If we’d done this sooner, Krum never would have been able to restrain Hermione that day in Diagon Alley. I could have forced him to let go and she would have gotten away. I couldn’t save her then, but I can save her now. Those sick bastards will never have another opportunity to touch her. Not as long as I’m alive to prevent it. The first one to try it is in for a rude awakening.”

“And it’s not just for us,” Hermione whispered. “All of this will make it easier for us to protect Harry as well.”

“You mean the potion and that counter curse you developed?” Ginny said.

“No, these too,” Hermione answered, concealing her charm beneath her shirt once more.

“They’ll have to go through us to get to Harry,” her brother stated. “Only that won’t be as easy as they think, even if we’re disarmed, because they won’t be able to touch us. But, they don’t know that, do they? I reckon I’ll be able to take a couple of them out before they realize how I’m doing it.”

“And what happens after that?” Ginny asked.

“I don’t know,” her brother replied. “Hopefully it’ll give Harry enough time to come up with something, and if nothing else, it might free up a couple wands for us to use. At least it’s something they won’t know to expect.”

“Like Hermione’s counter curse?”

“You can’t tell Harry about that yet, Ginny,” Hermione whispered. “Or the potion. Not until he’s--”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she replied. “Not until he’s got his Occlumency down well enough to block
his thoughts from Voldemort. And how exactly do you two plan on hiding the fact that you’re connected and reading each others minds? He’s bound to notice something sooner or later.”

“Well, to begin with, we won’t be reading each other’s minds,” Hermione said softly. “It won’t transmit thoughts, just powerful emotions.”

“Like fear,” Ron added. “So if something happens to one of us, the other will know.”

“Of course it will probably take a little while to get used to, but after a couple days I’m sure we’ll have it all sorted out,” Hermione stated. “I mean it’s not like I’ll feel everything he’s feels. Just really strong emotional reactions. And it’s better if we’re the ones to test it out. That way you and Harry will know what to expect if you ever need to--”

“What?” Ron yelped, goggling at Hermione with a look of utmost horror plastered across his freckled face. “Are you insane?” he asked his sister. “Absolutely not.”

“It’s my life, not yours,” Ginny retorted, paraphrasing the statement her brother had made to her earlier and purposely quoting it back to him. “What I do is none of your business, so just butt the hell out.”

“The hell I will.”

“If I want to bind myself to Harry, I will, and you won’t stop me.”

“You wanna bet?”

“Knock it off, both of you,” Hermione interjected. “We’re only talking about the basic potion,” she added, giving Ron a look that let him know that it probably wouldn’t be a very good idea to try and argue with her at the moment. “It won’t be like what we’re doing. And they’ll only use it in an emergency situation so their souls will protected the same way ours will be.”

“Oh, okay, then. I guess that would be all right,” he acquiesced, seeing as how he couldn’t really argue the fact that their souls wouldn’t need to be protected if Voldemort and his cronies decided to storm the castle. “As long as they let it wear off,” he added for good measure. “So you’re going to brew a second batch then?” he asked Hermione uncertainly.

“No, I won’t need to do that,” she whispered her reply. “It’s already been taken care of. The potion is ready. I finished it earlier tonight while I was explaining how it works to Ginny. And then I separated some of it out and gave it to her, so she’d have it, if and when she needs it. But she isn’t going to use it unless it’s an emergency,” she stated, looking pointedly at Ginny as she did so, “because anyone that connects to Harry, will more than likely wind up connecting to Voldemort as well, and that’s not something one wants to do on a whim.”

“Yes Mum,” Ginny retorted. “I heard you the first time, and the second time, and the even the third time you told me that. I get it. Leave the experimentation up to you. But what about Fred and George?”

“What about them?” Ron asked, glancing back and forth between the girls.

“Well, we were talking about it and--” Hermione began to explain.

“They’re already so in tune with each other,” Ginny cut in, “that this kind of connection probably wouldn’t be all that much of a disruption for them. I mean they can damn near read each other’s minds as it is. What’s a few shared emotions? So I thought it might be a good idea to let them test it out as well. You know, so you could compare what they experience with the basic version of the
potion to what you two experience with your supped up version. The first Hogsmeade visit is in November. I could write them and have them meet us there. We’d have to work it in between our patrols of course, but--”

“Ron and I won’t be going into Hogsmeade,” Hermione cut her off. “I already discussed it with McGonagall and she agreed that it would be safer for everyone if the three of us, Ron, Harry and myself that is, didn’t go into the village until...well, the point is, we’re not going. The only reason there are patrols at all this year is because Dumbledore is concerned that Voldemort might try and stage an attack there to get at Harry, and the chances of that happening are far less if we’re not there, so McGonagall has already taken us off the patrol schedule.”

“What!” Ron cried angrily. “When the hell did this happen? I suppose she left it up to you to break the news to the Harry and me. Nice of her to let you do her dirty work for her.”

“Actually, it was my idea,” Hermione admitted. “Not hers.”

“Are you mental?”

“Are you telling me that you’re willing to risk your life, and the life of every other student in this school, for a bag of sweets and a some Zonko’s rubbish?”

“Yeah, maybe I am,” Ron snapped, crossing his arms in front if his chest and glaring at Hermione. “You had no right to go behind our backs and make a decision like that without at least discussing it with us first.”

“And what about my life?” she countered. “Are you willing to risk that? Is it worth risking my life for a new book or a couple butterbeers?”

“Nothing is going to happen. The place will be crawling with teachers and Prefects doing patrols. And don’t forget Tonks. She’s an Auror for Merlin sakes. Look, I understand that you’re worried, because of what happened on Diagon Alley, but it’s not the same. No one was watching then. That’s not going to happen again.”

“You don’t know that for sure. All it takes is a second. You could be gone just like that,” she said, snapping her fingers, “and I’m not willing to take that risk. Don’t you understand what it would do to me if I lost you?” she moaned, covering her eyes as tears began streaming down her cheeks. “I couldn’t bear it. Please don’t ask me to,” she mumbled against his chest, when Ron stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. “Not for something so meaningless.”

“All right, love,” he sighed, watching his sister slip upstairs so they could have some privacy, as he kissing the top of Hermione’s head and hugged her body against his.

He hated to see her this upset, but he understood her fear and her pain. He also knew it would be far worse if something did actually happen. Ron didn’t really have to imagine what it would be like, because he’d already experienced it himself, and it was something he never wanted to suffer though again. He definitely didn’t want Hermione experiencing it either. Especially because of something as trivial as a trip to the Three Broomsticks. “I won’t go into Hogsmeade this visit,” he assured her. “But I can’t speak for Harry. You’ll have a hard time talking him out of it, I’m afraid.”

“You’ll back me up when I tell him though, right?”

“I’ll stand behind you, if that’s what you mean,” he replied. “But you’re going to have to explain your reasoning to him yourself.” And it’ll probably take more than a few tears to bring him around to your way of thinking, he continued in his head.
“Are you angry at me?”

“No,” Ron replied, tightening his grip.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I just wish you had talked to me about it first, is all.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione mumbled. “I’m sorry about Ginny too. I only meant to tell her about the potion, like we discussed, but the rest just sort of slipped out.”

“Yeah, well, that’s Ginny for you. She’s got a real talent for getting people to reveal things they never meant to divulge. No harm none. Unless she really owls Mum. But she seemed to come around a bit, don’t you think? Unless she’s just trying to throw us off.”

“I can go up and check on her if you like,” Hermione suggested. “Make sure she’s not writing to your mother now.”

“It can wait until morning,” Ron said, kissing her on the forehead, before placing his hand under her chin, tilting her face upward, and brushing his lips over hers.

“Ron?” Hermione asked, when he pulled back.

“Hum?”

“You won’t let her force you into taking it off, will you?” she asked. “Your mother I mean. When she does finally find out. Because sooner or later, she’s bound to find out.”

“I know,” he sighed, “but by then it won’t matter. Halloween is just a couple days away and after that we’ll really be married and there’s not a lot she can do about it. Calling off an engagement is one thing, but Mum would never suggest a divorce. I’m not saying she won’t try and strong-arm us into taking the talismans off, but she’ll try and force a proper wedding on us first. You do realize that, right?” he asked. “Not that we have to do it, of course,” he stammered quickly. “I mean, not if you don’t want to.”

“I think I might like that, actually,” Hermione replied. “Maybe when we’re finished with school.”

“Really?” Ron asked in surprise. “You don’t want to wait? You know, for your parents and all? I mean, I know Muggles do things a bit differently and I just assumed that you’d want to hold off on anything traditional until a suitable period of time had gone by an we both had jobs and all. I don’t think it’s such a good idea for me to ask your dad for his blessing until I have a good job, because I’ll need to prove that I can take care of you and all.”

“You take care of me now.”

“You know what I mean,” Ron replied uncomfortably. “That I can provide what we need. Like a place for us to live and food to eat.”

“You don’t have to provide those things all by yourself,” Hermione stated. “I’m perfectly capable of helping you. Besides, you’ve got three years of Auror training to look forward to and by the time you’re finished with that and have an actual paying job, we will have secretly been married for five years.”

“Assuming that I get into the program.”
“You will, if it’s what you really want.”

“What I really want is to be with you,” Ron said, leading Hermione towards one of the sofas by the fireplace and plopped down in the center of it. “So maybe I shouldn’t even apply for the Auror program,” he added. “I’ve been thinking about it, and if I get a Ministry job straight out of school, I can start saving right away. And if I live at home like Percy did, it’ll only take me six, maybe eight months, before I have enough set aside for us to get our own place and then I can talk to your dad without looking utterly pathetic.”

“Ist that what your father did?” Hermione asked as she settled down beside him. “Did he take the first job that was offered to him just so he and your Mum could get married?”

“I don’t know if it was the first job offered,” Ron replied. “Dad has always been fascinated with Muggles, so I wouldn’t be all that surprised it if wasn’t exactly what he wanted. Merlin knows he’s turned down enough promotions.”

“What about your Mum?” she asked.

“What about her?”

“Surely she must have had some sort of career aspirations before she fell in love and decided to start a family. What did she want to be?” Hermione asked, genuinely interested in the answer.

It had struck Hermione that Mrs. Weasley was generally the one that pushed her children to excel in school and to get good, respectable, Ministry jobs afterwards, whereas their father didn’t seem to care what they did, as long as it made them happy. And so far, Percy was the only one that wound up seeing things the same way his mother did, much to Mrs. Weasley’s chagrin.

“I don’t know,” Ron replied. “Family has always been real important to Mum. She lost most of hers in the first war,” he explained. “I just always assumed that she wanted to be a Mum.”

“I’m sure she did,” Hermione said. “But she must have wanted to be something else at some point. Maybe that’s why she pushes all of you so hard,” she suggested. “Parents generally want their children to have a better life than they did. Maybe she wants you to have what she couldn’t.”

“What she gave up you mean?” Ron replied. He’d never really given that much thought, but it made sense in a way.

“It doesn’t have to be one or the other you know?” Hermione informed him. “There’s no reason you need to give up becoming an Auror, just so you can look responsible or respectable for my parents. I don’t want you to give up on your dreams, especially when there is no reason for it.”

“There is a reason.”

“No there isn’t. Halloween is in five days. We’ll already be married by the time we mention any of this my parents.”

“But they won’t know that.”

“You will, so why would you give up something you want in order to obtain something that you’ve already got. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes sense to me.”

“Well, that just proves that you’re an idiot.”
“Oh, that’s nice.”

“I do understand what you’re suggesting, and it’s very sweet,” Hermione assured him, “but it’s just not necessary. We’ll already be married by that point, so it’s not like they can say no. Besides, it will be our age, not our financial situation that they’ll object to. But the point is. I’m not going to let you settle for anything less than what you really want.”

“So this is what the rest of my life is going to be like, huh?” Ron chuckled.

“Pretty much,” Hermione replied happily.

“And are you going to tell me what it is that I really want as well?”

“No, I thought I’d leave that up to you to decide,” she answered. “Provided you don’t try and do something stupid, like settle for the first opportunity that falls in your lap. And I will know if that’s what you’re doing, because we’ll be connected, which means I’ll be able to feel it.”

“Oh well,” Ron sighed, draping his arm around Hermione’s shoulder and pulling her closer to him. “It’s not like I can put anything over on you anyway.”

“If you think you’re getting a snog when you’re covered in filth, you’re sadly mistaken,” Hermione retorted with a smile.

“Aw, you’re no fun,” Ron whined. “On second thought,” he added, his face brightening significantly. “I’m sure Harry has finished with his shower and gone to bed by now. If you come upstairs with me, I’ll let you wash my back.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“You know that you want to,” Ron teased, his smirk becoming even wider when he saw Hermione bite her lower lip as she considered it. “See, you do want to,” he proclaimed triumphantly. “You’re just as bad as I am really, you just hide it better.”

“Perhaps,” Hermione admitted, “but the difference is, I know how to fight temptation.”

“Aw, come on,” Ron pleaded. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I’m sure you would,” she sighed, remembering the last time the two of them had taken a shower together, “but I don’t think it’s a good idea to risk it.” Not with Halloween so close.

“Risk? What risk?” Ron asked coyly. “No one is going to catch us,” he assured her, “It’s one o’clock in the morning. They’re all in bed.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about and you know it,” Hermione retorted.

But you said the potion was ready, Ron whined in his head. So even if we do get carried away, it won’t really matter.

Except that it does matter to her, because she wants to wait until Halloween, he reminded himself. It isn’t something she wants to rush through and neither do you. Not really.

“Fine,” Ron relented, letting his head flop against the back of the sofa in submission. “But you aren’t seriously going to go up to bed without at least giving me a goodnight kiss first, are you?”

“Hold out your hands,” Hermione said, drawing her wand out of the pocket of the jeans she was wearing, then pointing it at Ron outstretched palms, and casting a Scouring Charm on them. “And
take that off,” she said, pointing at his stained shirt. “Here,” she said, tugging the maroon jumper she’d borrowed from him the week before off and tossing it in his lap. “You can put that on instead.”

“I like this better on you,” he stated, disappointed to discover that she was wearing a t-shirt beneath it. “It doesn’t even fit me anymore,” he complained, as he picked up his old Weasley jumper and pulled it on over his head.

“Then you won’t object when I take it back.”

“What about you?” Ron asked, looking at Hermione’s bare arms. It was late and the fire was low, which left the Common Room pretty chilly. “Won’t you be cold?”

“I assumed that you’d be keeping me warm,” she replied, burrowing into his chest the instant he settled down against the back of the couch. “Until I go upstairs anyway,” she added.

“I like the sound of that,” Ron replied, hugging her tightly and rubbing his hands up and down both her arms briefly, before he leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers.
Warning:

This chapter is rated NC-17 due to its strong sexual content. At times it is quite explicit and it’s definitely NOT suitable reading material for children, or those that are sensitive or easily offended.

Chapter 29: Completion

When Ron heard the soft tap on his bedroom door, he abruptly stopped pacing and spun around to face the direction the noise had come from. It was her. She was here. It was really going to happen. They were going to have sex. They were going to have sex and once they did, they’d actually be married. Hermione was about to become his wife. Not just his wife; she’d be more than that. She was about to become his soulmate, because after they consummated their marriage, they were going to link their souls with a Coupling Potion. They were about to be connected in ways even his parents weren’t.

Oh God, he moaned in his head, unable to do anything but stare at the closed door, panic gripping him and clawing its way up the inside of his stomach when the knocking sound came again, even louder this time. Oh God, oh God, oh God!

“Ron, are you in there?” he heard Hermione’s voice call through the door.

Bloody hell! Snap out of it and let her in, you pillock.

“Can I come in?” she asked, even as she opened the door. “Ron?” Hermione asked again uncertainly, pushing on the door as she called out his name. “Why didn’t you answer me?” she inquired, when she spotted him standing in the center of his dorm room. “Everyone on my side has gone down to the Halloween feast,” she stated from the hallway, “so I figured it was safe to come up. They’re all gone, right?” she asked him, referring to his roommates. “So can I come in then?” she added, once he’d nodded his head to let her know that they were, in fact, alone.

Say something, you idiot, a voice shouted in his head, but try as he might, he just couldn’t speak, so he responded by nodding his head again.

BLOODY BUGGERING HELL!

“Are you all right?” Hermione asked, when Ron’s already wide eyes shifted from her face to the bag she’d snatched out of the hallway, and became even larger. “Are you feeling all right?” she pressed, moving in closer when she noted his pallid complexion and rapid breathing. “You aren’t going to be sick, are you?”

I might, he thought. But it’ll take more than that to stop me.
“Wha... what’s that?” he finally asked, pointing at the rucksack Hermione had dropped at their feet.

“Oh,” she said, her cheeks coloring a bit. “Just... um... some things I thought we might need.”

“What kind of things?” Ron asked, unable to keep the alarm out of his voice as he imagined what that small bag might contain.

*Ropes? A blindfold? Chocolate sauce? Strawberry-flavored body oil? You are such a pervert. This is Hermione you’re talking about. Books? She wouldn’t bring sex books, would she? No,* he decided, *but I wouldn’t put it past her to sneak that potion into her bag and haul it up here. That’s what it is.*

“It’s the potion, isn’t it? You brought it up with you.”

“I didn’t see any reason for us to risk sneaking down to the fourth floor when we’re finished.”

*BLOODY HELL! We’re seriously going to do this.*

You’re damned right we’re going to do it, his libido shouted loudly in his head. *We’ve waited long enough. Don’t you dare back out now.*

*Shut up!*

“Are... are you s-sure, Hermione?” Ron stuttered as he watched her eyes dart over to his bed and noticed the way she shifted uncomfortably. “Because we... we don’t have to yet. I mean, we can... we can wait if you want.”

*NO WE BLOODY WELL CAN’T!*

I told you to shut up.

You shut up! You’re the one that’s about to ruin everything. Again. Less talking and more snogging, his libido demanded.

“This is stupid,” Hermione sighed, taking a few deep breaths before she marched over to Ron’s bed and slowly started peeling off her robes. “It’s not like we haven’t fooled around plenty of times,” she added, sounding far more confident than she actually felt. “This isn’t really all that different.”

“Uh huh,” Ron cried without thinking. “It’s *totally* different.”

“No, it’s not,” Hermione disagreed, hoping that she could convince herself as well as him. “Not really,” she continued, as she slowly folded her robes up and set them at the foot of his bed, before
loosening her school tie and slipping it over her head. “We’ve done just about everything but this,” she reminded him.

_Not that we haven’t come pretty close a time or two, she continued in her head, so really, it shouldn’t be that big of a deal. You can do this, she told herself, knowing that once they got past their initial nervousness and started enjoying what they were doing, they’d both relax and eventually reach a point where it felt natural for it to happen. Just focus on what you need to do now to get him in the mood and put what’s going to happen later out of your mind._

“It’s what we both want, right?” Hermione said, tugging her jumper off and folding it into a neat square before placing it, and her tie, on top of her robes to form an ordered pile. “So there’s no reason we should wait any longer.”

“Um... right.” Ron mumbled, unsure how to proceed. “So... uh... should I lock the door, then?” he asked, watching her shed her clothes. “Right,” he said again, forcing his feet to move when she gave him a disbelieving look. Not only did he bolt the door when he reached it, he grabbed the nearest chair and wedged it under the doorknob for good measure. “That ought to keep them out long enough,” he muttered.

“Long enough for what?” Hermione asked, as she gingerly sat down on the edge of Ron’s bed and leaned forward to remove her shoes and socks.

“For you to get dressed,” Ron replied, using his toes to work his own shoes off. “One of the benefits of living with Fred and George is that you learn how to barricade a door well enough to prevent them from sneaking up on you while you’re asleep. I couldn’t keep them out entirely, not if they really wanted to get in, especially once they learned to Apparate, but _Alohomora_ won’t move that chair,” he explained, “and Seamus won’t expect it to be there, so if he tries to creep in here and catch a glimpse of you starkers, we’ll hear him coming well before he manages to get through the door.”

“You don’t think he’d actually try something like that?” Hermione asked, rising to her feet again.

“Not if he values his life, he won’t.”

“Well, just in case, I’m going to Imperturb the door,” she stated, going down on one knee and fishing around in her bag until she found her wand. “That way no one will be able to hear us, either,” she added, stowing her wand away after she’d used it.

“So you’re not going to Shield the bed, then?” Ron asked, as Hermione stood up again and slid her hands behind her back.

“Why?” she asked. “We’ve got the entire room to ourselves.”

_Bloody hell!_ Ron groaned in his head, completely oblivious to the fact that she’d answered his
question because the only thing he’d heard was the sound of the zipper on the back of her skirt sliding down. As insignificant as that simple sound might have been in any other context, it had an immediate effect on him. It wasn’t just that his level of anxiety shot up a notch or two. It was that he discovered it was possible to be completely terrified and aroused at the same time. Up until that point, he’d been worried that his nerves might pose something of a problem, but obviously that wasn’t going to be the case. All Hermione had to do was unzip something and his body was instantly ready.

This is it, he thought, watching with wide eyes as Hermione slowly stepped out of her skirt. We’re really going to have sex. But how the hell am I supposed to start? he asked himself. I can’t just jump on her. Then the answer came to him. Let her make the first move.

She’s already made the first move, you daft git, a more sensible voice piped in. She’s stripping, for Merlin’s sake. Don’t just stand here and watch or you’ll make her uncomfortable, he scolded himself, when he realized he was ogling her shapely thighs.

How can she not already be uncomfortable? Ron asked himself, as Hermione folded her skirt in half, turned around so her back was facing him, and set it down on top of her pile of clothes. How can she not be terrified? he wondered, more than a little disappointed by the fact that the button-up shirt she was wearing was just long enough to hide her knickers from view. We’re going to have sex.

“Well?” Hermione said when she spun back around and found Ron gaping at her like he’d never seen her bare legs before. “Are you just going to stand there by the door, or what?” she asked. “Because it’s rather chilly in here and I was counting on you to help warm me up.”

“Er, okay,” Ron replied awkwardly, tugging his jumper over his head and dropping it on the floor as he moved forward to close the distance between them.

“Wait,” Hermione said, holding one of her hands out in the air to stop him before he got too close. “The lights,” she added, when she saw the confused expression on his face.

“But I want to see you,” Ron protested, saying the first thing that popped into his head without taking the time to think about how it might sound, or how uneasy it could make her. “Er... sorry,” he added almost instantly. “It doesn’t really matter. I’ll put them out,” he said, moving over to his bedside table, snatching his own wand off the top, and pointing it up at the gas lanterns burning above their heads.

“Just dim them,” Hermione amended, as she climbed onto his four poster bed and closed the curtains.

For a moment Ron considered extinguishing all of the lanterns, just to set her mind at ease, but in the end, he gave in to his base desire and left one of them burning. Most of the light would be diffused by the draperies Hermione had drawn around his bed, but enough would get through for them to see by.

Besides, he reasoned, quickly shucking his slacks before moving towards his bed again, it’s more romantic and this way I won’t make a complete berk out of myself fumbling around in the dark
trying to figure out where everything is.

After taking a few deep breaths and attempting to slow his racing heart, Ron ducked under the thick red drapery separating him from his soon-to-be wife, but what he discovered behind those curtains was so astonishing it halted him in his tracks before he managed to get more than one knee up on the mattress. Hermione wasn’t buried beneath his blankets as he’d expected. She hadn’t tried to cover herself up to ward off the cold night air. Quite the opposite, actually. She was kneeling in the center of his bed, her white shirt nowhere in sight, wearing nothing but the sexiest pair of undergarments he’d ever seen.

Not only did Ron’s eyes go wide for the umpteenth time that night, but his mouth went dry as he zeroed in on the thin band of pink lace hugging her thighs. He’d seen Hermione’s knickers countless times by now, but never once had she worn anything as feminine or overtly sexy as this. And it wasn’t just her knickers, he realized, when his eyes snapped up and locked on her chest. Her bra matched, only the delicate pink lace merely ran across the top of the cups, whereas the rest of it... Dear God, the rest of her bra was transparent. A pale pink mesh covered most of her breasts, accentuating them, yet hiding nothing from view.

“So you like it, then?” Hermione asked demurely, unable to keep her cheeks from flushing as she watched the fire ignite in Ron’s deep blue eyes.

“Uh huh,” he responded, unable to get anything more coherent out as he struggled to maintain control and stomp down his lust. He wanted to tell her that she was perfect, that he’d never seen anyone or anything more beautiful. He wanted her to know that he could happily spend the rest of his life just looking at her, but the words wouldn’t come. They were washed away as a powerful surge of desire erupted within him. All he could think about now was touching her, cupping those glorious lace-covered breasts, and feeling her taut nipples press against his palms while he caressed her.

Before he even realized that he was doing it, Ron found himself fully on the bed, kneeling in front of her and reaching forward to do just that. He realized where his hands were heading in the nick of time and managed to divert them both to her shoulders at the last possible second, but he couldn’t stop his ears from flushing when he heard her giggle.

Bloody hell, Ron swore in his head, as Hermione reached out and unknotted the tie hanging loosely around his neck. You can’t just attack her, you randy prat, he admonished himself. Keep your hands to yourself until she’s given you permission.

“Hermione?” he all but begged when she started unbuttoning his shirt. But rather than reply, she simply pressed her mouth to his collarbone and kissed him gently. OH GOD! Ron moaned in his mind, when she continued to work his buttons loose and her mouth dropped progressively lower. “Mione,” he tried again.

“Hmmm?” she hummed against his chest, but Ron had reached the end of his tether.
He wanted her succulent lips pressed firmly against his own, not gliding softly down his chest. He needed to kiss her. He wanted to taste her, and he wasn’t going to wait any longer.

*To hell with waiting for permission,* he decided, cupping both her cheeks in his large hands, shifting her face upward until she was looking at him, and then pressing his mouth against hers and kissing her deeply.

Ron wasn’t surprised that she kissed him back, or that she did so with a hunger and intensity that matched his own. Hermione usually snogged like she argued, with everything that she had. He was however, caught off guard when she started shaking in his arms and unexpectedly pulled away from him.

“Too fast?” he asked, after seeking out her eyes and realizing that she really was just as nervous about all this as he was.

“A little, yeah,” she replied somewhat hesitantly.

“We don’t have to,” he reminded her. “We can forget the whole thing and go down to the feast if you want.”

“No,” Hermione said, “Just...can you just hold me for a minute?” she asked.

No sooner had the words left her mouth, then Ron’s arms snaked around her back and Hermione found herself hauled back against him. Releasing a deep breath, she relaxed and let her head fall against his chest so she could listen to the comforting beat of his heart.

“Ron?” she asked, when she realized just how rapidly his heart was pumping. “Are you...afraid?”

“No,” he lied instantaneously. “Okay,” he amended, once he realized why she’d asked. “I might be a little nervous, but I’m definitely not afraid. Are you?”

“A little,” Hermione admitted. “I know it’s silly, but I can’t help it.”

“It’s not silly,” Ron assured her, hugging her even tighter. “You know the last thing I ever want to do is hurt you,” he added.

“You will,” she stated flatly. “It’s unavoidable, but it will only be for a minute,” she added, when she felt his entire body stiffen. “It has to happen,” she continued. “There’s no point putting it off. I don’t want to wait anymore. I love you and I want this. I want to be with you, really be with you. I want to be your everything.”

“You are,” Ron replied, running one hand through her hair as he dropped a feather light kiss on her forehead.

“Not quite yet,” Hermione whispered against him, “but soon I will be. I’ve thought about it a lot,” she stated a bit louder, “and I don’t want you to do it slow. I’m not the type to inch my way into cold water a little at a time. I’d rather dive right in and get the worst over with. So when the time comes... just do it fast and get it out of the way.”

BUGGER! Ron groaned to himself, as the enormity of what he was going to do to her settled down on his shoulders once more. He was going to hurt her. He was going to hurt her bad enough that she’d actually bleed and worst of all, he was going to enjoy it. For him it would be pleasurable and satisfying, but not so for her. He was going to take pleasure from inflicting pain on her and as much as he hated himself for it, deep down he still wanted to proceed.
“What if I can’t?” he asked himself out loud.

“You have to,” Hermione answered, realizing a little too late how her anxiety was affecting him. “It’s not something I can do on my own. I need you to do it,” she stated. “For me, for us.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Yes, you do,” Hermione insisted, letting her eyes fall down to his boxers where there was still visible proof of that fact, although it was no longer as obvious as it had been when they were kissing.

“No, I don’t,” he insisted, pulling away so he could look her in the eye. “I don’t think I can live with myself if I take pleasure from hurting you.”

“Oh sweetie,” Hermione sighed, taking both of his hands in hers when she saw how much her comments had upset him. “It’s not like that. It will only be for a couple of seconds and then it will be pleasurable for me as well. Maybe not to the same extent,” she amended, when she saw he wasn’t buying it. “But I’m sure it will be lovely. How can it not be?”

“But there must be some sort of spell or something we can use so you won’t...”

“No, Ron,” she said, shaking her head back and forth sorrowfully. “There are spells of course, but we can’t use any of them. The barrier has to be breached and you have to be the one to do it. It’s what I’m sacrificing, my body and my purity. You’ll be bound to me not just by the potion, but by the blood I shed to complete it. That sacrifice is needed to maintain the connection, as is the sacrifice you’re going to make for me.”

“That’s not a sacrifice, Hermione. There won’t be any pain involved, not for me anyway.”

“It is a sacrifice,” she insisted. “It’s something that I’ll be taking from you. Not against your will, but I’ll be taking it just the same. You can’t give it without my help and I can’t take it without yours. That’s the whole point. We’ll both be giving and taking at the same time. It might not seem like a sacrifice because it feels good, but it is, and as long as we continue to surrender our bodies to one another, we’ll be able to preserve the bond created by the potion.”

“But I don’t want to hurt you,” Ron moaned, falling back into his pillow.

“If my arm were broken and you were the only one around to help me, you’d set it for me, wouldn’t you?” Hermione asked, as she lay on her stomach beside him. “Even though you know that you’d have to hurt me a bit to do it? You’d do it because you know that it’s necessary for the bones to be properly aligned if you are going to splint it or attempt to heal the break, and because it’s not something I can do for myself. This is the same thing,” she said, leaning forward and kissing him tenderly. “I can’t do this on my own. I need you to do it for me,” she said, kissing him again. “I want you to do it. I want to give myself to you. I want you to make me yours and I want to make you mine in every way. I know that’s what you want too,” she said, kissing him yet again. “You’re just over thinking it.”

“That’s my line isn’t it?” he attempted to joke.

“I love you,” Hermione said, pressing her body against his for a bit of extra warmth.

“I love you too,” he said very seriously, rolling over on his side until he was facing her.

“How about we make a deal?” Hermione asked, as she reached forward and finished unbuttoning his shirt.
“What kind of deal?” Ron replied, tucking a wisp of hair behind her ear so it wouldn’t obscure his view of her face.

“What do you say we,” and by we, I mean you, “stop thinking about the potion and all that other stuff for a little while and just focus on us?” she said, placing her left hand on his chest and running it up to his shoulder. “What we want. What feels right,” she added, pushing the loose half of his shirt off his shoulder. “Maybe that will help take some of the pressure off.”

“You mean just think of it as any other night?” Ron asked, taking her hint and sitting up just enough to jerk his shirt the rest of the way off, before dropping it and settling down again. Even thought it’s not, he added in his head.

“Exactly,” Hermione answered, as she leaned forward and dropped a feather light kiss to his chest. “We only do what we both want to do,” she said, as she continued to caress him with her lips. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“That sounds...go...ooo...d.” Ron squeaked the last word out, when her hand slipped off his stomach and settled between his legs.

“Very impressive, Mr. Weasley,” she cooed, brushing her hand back and forth over his revitalized erection. It isn’t going to be nearly as difficult to distract him as I thought. “Just lie back now,” she instructed, pushing him over on his back as she came up on her knees and straddled his legs, “and let me take care of you.”

“Take... take care of me?” he asked, just before she settled down on top of him and gently kissed the sensitive spot right on his neck.

“That’s right,” Hermione whispered into his ear and then continued to suck on his neck. “This feels good doesn’t it?” she asked quietly, raining soft kisses against his flesh again and again.

“Yes,” Ron agreed, unable to keep himself from groaning when she shifted her weight off him and slipped her hand into his pants.

“And you don’t want me to stop, do you?” Hermione asked, seductively trailing her index finger down the length of his cock, leaving a trail of fire in its wake, before gripping him firmly and squeezing. “Because this feels good too, doesn’t it?” she asked as Ron moaned loudly. “I’ll take that as a yes,” she whispered, before darting her tongue out and licking him under the ear.

I wonder if he will still throb like this once he’s inside of me, Hermione thought, as she felt Ron’s member pulse in her hand. And if so, will I be able to feel it?

Stop. Just stop it right now or you’re going to get nervous again. No more thinking about that, she instructed herself, releasing her hold on Ron and using both of her hands to rid him of his boxers. Just focus on what you’re about to do. This you’ve done before, so it’s not a big deal. Just stay focused on doing this and forget about everything else until later.

“Hermione, what--”

“Shush,” she said softly, as she came up on her knees and moved down until she was straddling his legs again. “I want to take care of you,” she said, wetting her lips as she stared down at the rigid flesh jetting out in the air before her.

“Oh Merlin,” Ron groaned, when she darted her head forward to lick the fluid off the tip of his weeping cock.
Wait, a voice cried in his mind, as Hermione’s tongue swirled across him in a circular motion. If she uses her mouth to get you off, you won’t be able to...

“WAIT!” Ron cried out anxiously. “What are you doing?” he asked as she wrapped her lips firmly around him and he felt his hardness sink into the searing wetness of her mouth.

“I’d think that was fairly obvious,” she replied, after pulling her mouth off him so she could speak. “It’ll be better this way,” she assured him, before licking his entire length, base to tip. For you, she thought, but she didn’t say that part out loud. “That’s what the books said anyway,” she added matter-of-factly. “That you’ll last longer on your first time if you’ve already had one—”

“HERMIONE!” Ron shouted in horror, coming up in his elbows so he could stare down at her. He didn’t know what was worse, the fact that she’d read up on ways to prevent premature ejaculation, or the fact that she thought he needed that kind of help.

“What?” Hermione asked naively, clearly not seeing what the big deal was. “I didn’t write the books,” she stated, when he continued to gape of her with a horrified expression on his face. “And it’s not just for you, you know?” she continued. “There were sections on how to make it better for me as well, but we can talk about that once I’ve finished.”

“Oh fuck,” Ron cried out, as he watched Hermione lean forward and sucked him into her mouth once more.

His mind was literally reeling. Hermione had read up on how to make his first time as pleasurable as possible and she was off to a damned good start. Not only that, she’d done research on herself as well and she was going to share her findings with him.

She’s probably going to walk me through it step by step, he thought, and then he realized that the idea of her lecturing him on how to give her maximum pleasure wasn’t really all that unappealing. In fact, the idea of having her order him around in bed was actually rather exciting.

“Mione,” Ron groaned out loudly a few minutes later, all thoughts of being dominated by her long since forgotten, as the movement of her tongue and the suction of her mouth finally threatened to get the better of him. “Mione... oh...God,” he moaned again, gripping the patchwork quit covering his bed in both hands as he resisted the urge to buck up against her and force himself further into her mouth. “You... ugh... you better stop,” he whimpered, but his warning went unheeded. “Oh shit.... stop,” he cried, realizing he was teetering on the brink of release.

Hermione heard both of his warnings, but she didn’t want to leave him until he was finished. A small part of her knew that once it was all over he’d be embarrassed about making a mess, but she still wanted to push him over the edge. It excited her to know that she had the ability to make him loose control. True, he’d gotten better at restraining himself since the first time she’d done this to him, but like everything else with Ron, she just had to know what buttons to push. And in this particular case, the best way to accomplish her goal was to throw something totally unexpected at him, so that’s exactly what she did.

Hermione did pull her head back as Ron requested, but as she did so, she grasped his sensitive shaft with her teeth and rasped them up his entire length. The pressure wasn’t enough to hurt him, but she knew that it was definitely enough for him to feel, because his entire body jolted, then shuddered as he slipped over the edge and spilled himself into her mouth with a guttural groan.

But unlike the other times she’d done this to him, this time Hermione was ready for that eventuality, and she swallowed, even as she was pulling her mouth off of him. Fortunately her right hand was still wrapped firmly around the base of him, so she was able to direct his cock downward as soon as
it popped free and the remainder of his essence hit her in the chest rather than somewhere more embarrassing, like her face.

It took Ron a moment to actually regain his breath, and just as he was about to apologize for making a mess, Hermione parted the curtains and jumped off his bed. In that split second, he was sure that she was so disgusted that she’d decided to leave, but no sooner had that thought crossed him mind, then she returned and heaved her rucksack up on the bed.

“What you doing?” Ron asked, his eyes bulging with shock when Hermione reached into her bag and produced a strip of silken material which she used to wipe his semen off her chest. “What the hell is that?” he asked, after she fished some type of weird plastic bag out of her rucksack, dropped the soiled cloth inside, and literally zipped it shut.

A plastic bag with a zipper? What the hell?

“We might need this,” Hermione replied straightforwardly, as she stuffed the plastic bag back in her rucksack and dropped it on the floor, before climbing back on the bed herself. “Just in case.”

“Just in case what?” Ron asked in disbelief.

“Well, you know?” she said, blushing slightly. “We need your semen for the potion, so now if something goes wrong we’ll have a back up.”

“Wrong?” Ron shouted in offense. “You mean like if I can’t keep it up.”

“Of course not,” Hermione replied, leaning over the side of the bed, digging through her bag again, and springing back up with another one of those weird plastic bags. At first Ron thought it was the same one, but when he looked closer he noticed that the material inside was actually streaked with a dark red ink of some kind.

“It’s blood,” she stated, when his brow knitted together in confusion. “My blood to be more precise. I pricked my finger before I came up here, so it’s still fairly fresh, which will help. It won’t be as potent as the blood we’ll get if my hymen is still intact,” she stated clinically, “but it’s still virgin’s blood, so it’ll be better than anything we can collected after... well, you know? I thought we should have that too,” she explained. “Just in case.”

“You’re mad,” Ron said, shaking his head as he goggled at the blood-splattered strip of material clutched in her hand. “Absolutely barking.”

“It’s called being prepared, Ronald.”

“What other mad things do you have stowed away in there?” he asked, springing forward, leaning over the side of the bed himself, latching onto the strap of her bag, and dragging it back up on the bed so he could rummage through it.

More strips of cloth, he thought, dragging them out and tossing them aside. An extra pair of knickers. Well, I suppose that makes sense. The potion, he continued, pulling a sealed glass jar full of bright blue goop out of her bag, then turning it upside down to test the consistency.

“Eew!” he groaned, wrinkling his nose up in disgust as it slowly ooze forward and he realized it wasn’t just thick, it was chunky as well. “This looks even worse then that Polyjuice Potion did. How much of it do we have to drink anyway?”

“Not that much,” Hermione said, snatching the jar out of his hand, then shoving it and her knickers back in her bag. “Are you quite through snooping through my things?”
“Apparently,” he replied, when Hermione grabbed the strap of her bag and yanked it away from him. “Only, I didn’t know you had a secret stash of chocolate coins,” he added, “Can I have one?”

“No,” she snapped much more harshly than she meant to.

“Aw come on,” Ron whined, begging not just with his words, but his bright blue puppy dog eyes. “You’ve got enough for both of us in there.”

If only the foil wrapped objects buried in the bottom of her bag had been chocolate galleons, she’d have gladly given them all to him, but they weren’t and when he discovered what they really were and what they were used for, he was going to flip. For a moment she contemplated telling him exactly why she had them, just to get it over with, but it had taken her a good ten minutes to calm him down and it didn’t seem like a very good idea to stress him out all over again. Not yet, she decided. “I’ll give you one later,” Hermione finally replied.

“Oh, I see,” Ron said with a smirk. “You think you can bribe me with chocolate do you?” he teased. “And what exactly is it that I have to do to earn them?”

“Nothing,” Hermione replied, managing to sound both scandalized and offended at the same time. “I would never bribe you to do that.”

“But you want me to,” Ron said with an impish gleam in his eye.

And chocolate covered Hermione would definitely be tasty, he thought, his smirk becoming even wider as he allowed his eyes to roam over her delicate lace-covered body. But I suppose we can always save that for another time.

“My turn,” he cried, lunging forward without warning and using his body weight to pin her to the bed.

“What are you doing?” Hermione squealed, shivering beneath him when his hot mouth descended to her neck to kiss her where he knew she was the most sensitive.

“Taking care of you,” he pried his mouth off of her just long enough to whisper. “Fair is fair. It’s my turn.”

Besides, Bill told me that I needed to do this first, he added in his mind, as he dropped a gentle kiss on her cheek and slowly kissed his way to her mouth. Take care of her needs first and make sure she’s relaxed; he played his eldest brother’s advice over in his head. I can do that.

What about what comes after that? he asked himself. Can you do that?

I’m sure as hell going to give it a try.

“Merlin, you’re beautiful, Hermione,” Ron said, pulling away from her and sitting upright so he could stare down at her body. “You know that, right?” he asked, then watched as the blush spread from her cheeks to the rest of her face.

“No, I’m not,” she disagreed, shifting uncomfortably under the intensity of his gaze.

“Yes, you are,” he insisted, his eyes burning with both love and lust. “Perfect,” he mumbled, reaching down and sliding his right hand over her smooth stomach until it was just below her breast. “Absolutely perfect,” he whispered, watching her nipples harden beneath the sheer material of her bra. “God, I love looking at you. And touching you,” he added, cupping her with his right hand and teasing her nipple with his thumb. “And kissing you,” he said softly, as he lowered his head to her
other breast and kissed it through the thin fabric of her bra.

“You taste so good,” he said, pushing his left hand down her body and brushing his index finger back and forth over her lacy knickers. “I’ll never be able to get enough of you. The way you taste. The way you feel. The way you make me feel. You drive me absolutely crazy, Hermione.”

“Oh Ron,” she moaned softly, when his hand finally slid beneath her panties and she felt his fingers teasing her opening.

“Christ, you’re wet,” Ron groaned against her chest, a dart of lust shooting through his body when he buried his index finger within her body and felt just how much she desired him. “Wet for me,” he mumbled, pulling his finger back only to thrust it into her again, and again, and again.

“Do you like that?” he asked, even though the answer to his question was blatantly obvious by the way she was arching up off the bed and pressing her lower body against his hand. “Because I can give you more,” he added in a gruff voice, shoving a second finger inside her body and stretching her tight opening even further. “So much more,” he moaned, further arousing himself as well as her. “Before the night is over I’m going to fill you completely.”

“Oh God,” Hermione whimpered loudly, extremely excited by his promise, “Please Ron,” she begged, grabbing the quilt they were lying on and fisting it tightly. “I want more. I need more.”

When he abruptly abandoned her body, Hermione sighed in disappointment and sat up to see what he was doing. She watched, heart hammering wildly, as he wrapped his fingers around the top of her delicate lace knickers and slowly dragged them down her legs, only to toss them aside when her lower body was completely bare to him.

When she looked at him, Hermione couldn’t help but smile as she realized that Ron was once again fully aroused. Without really thinking about what she was doing, she leaned forward a bit more and reached out to touch him, but the instant her fingers brushed against his hard flesh, he hissed loudly and pushed her hand away.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he stated, shifting to the side and spreading her legs open, then kneeling between them and leaning forward to push her back down against the bed. “It’s my turn to take care of you, remember?” he said, licking his lips and giving her a devilish smile.

She knew what he was about to do. He was going to use his mouth on her, the same way she had used hers on him. But that wasn’t what she wanted. It wouldn’t be enough. He’d kindled the fires burning deep within her with his promise of what was to come later, but she wanted it now. Her body literally ached for him. She wanted to feel more than his fingers or his mouth. They could bring her to completion, but they wouldn’t fill the void within her. There was only one thing that would fill the emptiness she felt inside herself, and she wanted to be filled, completely, just like he’d promised.

“Stop,” Hermione cried, just as Ron spread her open with his fingers and leaned forward to taste her.

“What?” he asked, jerking his head up and looking at her in surprise. “But... you don’t really want me to stop, do you?” he asked in disbelief. “I’ve barely even started.”

“I’m ready,” Hermione stated, knowing that if she didn’t speak up now, he’d eventually make her come, and that when that happened the aching desire that was currently burning through the veins would slowly ebb away. She wanted him now. It had to be now, or she might chicken out.

“But... No,” he protested, his eyes going wide as he realized what she was talking about. “You can’t be ready.”
“But I am.”

“No, you’re not,” Ron said obstinately. “You haven’t even... You can’t be ready. Bill said--”

Oh for heaven’s sake, Hermione groaned in her mind. Not this again.

“It doesn’t matter what Bill says,” she told him, forcing herself not to let her irritation with his meddlesome brother show. “All that matters is what I’m telling you,” she stated. “And I’m telling you that I want you now. I need more than your mouth. And I know that you want me too. I can see it in your eyes. I can feel it in your touch. Make love to me, Ron. Make me yours. Now. Please. I’m ready.”

OH FUCK! Ron cursed loudly in his head, as he stared into her deep brown eyes and saw the need that was dancing within them. This is it. This is really it. Oh God. This is really it.

“Hermione,” Ron said, looking at her cautiously, nervous about what was about to happen, despite the fact he wanted it desperately. So desperately in fact, he was almost afraid to finish the statement he was about to make for fear she’d take him up on his offer. “I know that the first time isn’t usually all that good for girls and...well, I don’t mind... I mean, I want you to enjoy it too and Bill said that this would help relax you, so... um... if you want me to do this for a while,” he said, although what he really meant was instead, he just couldn’t bring himself to say it, “I can.”

“No, I’m ready,” she assured him. “As long as you’re ready,” she added, shutting her eyes so he wouldn’t be able to see the fear she was feeling. “Just be sure you do it quick like we discussed,” she continued. “And... er...”

“And what?” Ron asked when she didn’t finish.

“You’re not going to like it,” she replied, opening her eyes in time to see the apprehensive expression that crossed his face.

“Not going to like what?” he demanded, his voice squeaking slightly as his panic levels kicked up a notch of two.

The sex? he wondered, trying to make sense of her statement before she answered him. Of course I will.

“Well, you see,” Hermione said uncomfortably, “The thing is, we need to collect your semen, so--”

“So you want me to pull out at the end,” he finished for her.

“Um... no,” she replied, although the truth was she had considered that option as well. But Ron would have to be in control and know exactly when the right moment was for that to work and every book she’d read on the subject agreed that boys often had little to no control during their first sexual encounter. That method was just too risky. “I...er... you’re going to have to...um... use this,” she said, reaching into her bag, which was still on the bed, and fishing out one of the foil wrapped objects he’d spotted earlier.

“Huh?” Ron said, looking at Hermione as if he thought she might be slightly unbalanced. A chocolate galleon?

“Do you know what a condom is?” she asked, bending the object in her hand in half so the foil covering would come loose, then peeling it aside and handing what was left to Ron for him to inspect.
“What the hell?” he asked as he stared down at the small circle of latex in his palm.

“It’s a contraceptive device,” she explained, “Muggle men use them all the time.”

“I’m not a Muggle,” Ron said, dropping the condom on the bed as he gaped at Hermione. “And you’re already protected by those pill things, right? So we don’t have to worry about—”

“You’re still going to have to wear one,” she said, picking the discarded condom up off the bed and unrolling it so Ron could see exactly what she was talking about. “Just this one time.”

“WEAR IT??!” he cried out loudly, both stunned and horrified when he realized what part of his anatomy she wanted him to wear it on. “NO WAY!” he shouted, shaking his head back and forth as he goggled at the mad Muggle device Hermione was holding up. “No bloody way!” I’m not covering myself up with some fucked up Muggle rubber glove. I won’t be able to feel a bloody thing. “No!” Ron said loudly. “Absolutely not.”

“But we need your semen for the potion,” Hermione argued, “and using a condom is the best way I know to procure the sample.”

“No!” Ron stated adamantly.

For a moment Hermione considered arguing further, but deep down she knew it would get her nowhere. Ron had his heels dug in and he was just as stubborn as she was when he wanted to be. She knew that she wasn’t going to be able to rationalize it or use reason to talk him into it, not when he wasn’t even willing to listen to her. She’d known there was a high probability of this happening and she did have a back up plan, it just wasn’t something she really wanted to do.

So much for romance, she thought, letting out a deep sigh as she closed her eyes and readied herself for what she knew had to be done.

“Well, that’s that then,” Hermione said, snatching her knickers up and putting them back on, before crawling down to the foot of the bed.

“What are you doing?” Ron asked, when Hermione grabbed her shirt off the top of her ordered pile of clothes, shook it open, and slipped her arms into it.

“Getting dressed,” she replied, reaching down and pushing the bottom most button through its hole.

“Why?” Ron asked.

“Because you said that you didn’t want to,” Hermione replied sadly.

“No I didn’t,” he insisted, crawling down the bed himself until he was kneeling beside her.

“Yes, you did,” she replied, “You practically shouted it in my face.”

“I wasn’t saying no to you,” Ron tried to explain. “Just to that mad Muggle thing, but that doesn’t mean we still can’t—”

“Yes, it does,” Hermione replied as she reached for her skirt.

“No, it doesn’t. I’m sure we can find some other—” Ron started to say, but then another thought occurred to him and he stopped mid-sentence. “Wait a minute,” he said, narrowing his eyes and glaring at her suspiciously. “Are you trying to... you’re not actually blackmailing me are you?”

“Of course not,” Hermione said, sounding offended and looking hurt despite the fact that had been
her back up plan. Only when it came time for her to implement it, she’d realized that she couldn’t go through with it. Not just because she didn’t want to manipulate him into doing something he didn’t really want to do, but because it would tainted the experience for both of them. He’d be angry and resentful, she’d feel guilty, and it would ruin their first time together.

Not that it’s not already ruined, she thought, wanting nothing more than to get out of there before the tears she was struggling to hold back finally spilled out. She didn’t want him to see her cry. She didn’t want him to think that he’d upset her or that he’d hurt her. She had no one to blame for the way she was feeling but herself. Everything had been perfect and she’d ruined it. You should have just told him about the condoms from the start rather than springing it on him. At least then he’d have had time to get used to the idea.

“Look,” Hermione finally said, “the mood has obviously been ruined and I really don’t want to argue with you, so I think it’s best if I just go. That way you can get dressed, go down to the feast, and salvage the rest of your night.”

“Is that what you really want?” Ron asked, trying to keep the disappointment he was feeling out of his voice. “Hermione?” he said her name with concern, reaching for her when she didn’t answer.

Why does he have to be so sweet? she asked herself, purposely tilting her head forward so her hair would cover her face and obscure his view.

It would be so much easier to leave if he were being a prat about all of this.

“Is that what you really want?” he asked again, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, before placing two fingers under her chin and lifting her face up so he could see her. “Do you really want to go?”

“I don’t want you to see me like this,” she said, brushing away a lone tear, hoping that he wouldn’t see it.

“I’m sorry,” Ron said miserably. “I didn’t mean to yell at you. I was just--”

“It’s not that,” Hermione assured him. “It’s not you at all, it’s me,” she stated.

“Yeah, right,” Ron mumbled under his breath. The ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ excuse. Shit, this is worse than I thought.

“I hate that I even considered doing that,” she continued, dropping her head again in shame now that Ron had released her. “That’s not the way I want our relationship to be and it’s certainly not the way I want to start off our marriage.”

“What are you talking about?” Ron asked, clearly confused by her ramblings. “What exactly is it you considered doing?”

“You were right,” Hermione admitted, lowering her head even further. “About the... the blackmail,” she said softly. “I did consider it for a minute,” she explained, “telling you that I wouldn’t have sex with you unless you agreed to wear a condom. Using sex to manipulate a man is the oldest trick in the book,” she groaned, “but I don’t want it to be like that with us. I don’t want to be like that period. And the worst part is, I considered doing it for something I didn’t even really want.”

“So you don’t... what you’re saying is that you really didn’t want to... to have sex,” he finished weakly.

“No, I do,” Hermione answered quickly. “I did,” she corrected. “I just didn’t... well, what I meant was I didn’t really want there to be any barriers between us. I don’t really want you to wear one of those things, even though I know it’s necessary. It’s like it will impersonalize it or something and I
don’t want that. Especially not on our first time.”

“But you still think it’s necessary,” Ron said, looking at her pointedly. “You were still going to leave because I said that I wouldn’t.”

“No,” she replied, but she amended herself almost immediately. “I suppose it was like that in a way. It is important for the potion and I realized that you weren’t going to listen to me,” she tried to explain. “Arguing with you about it would have been pointless and I didn’t want to manipulate you or force you into it, so I thought it might be best if I just backed off and gave you some time to think about it on your own. I mean, I did just spring it on you out of nowhere. Maybe once you’ve had a chance to talk to Harry about it, you’ll--”

“Are you mad?” Ron yelped. “I’m not talking about this with Harry. Not any of it,” he stated.

“But... he’s your best friend.”

“So?” Ron shot back. “Harry doesn’t want to hear about our personal life. He’s made that abundantly clear.”

“Oh come on, you expect me to believe that you and Harry never talk about sex? It’s only natural that you would. I know boys talk about that kind of stuff.”

All the bloody time, he thought, remembering the numerous conversations he’d heard Dean and Seamus have on the subject before Dean had been murdered. “In a general way maybe,” Ron admitted, “before there was a chance of either of us getting any,” he replied. “But I certainly don’t give him any specifics about us.”

“Didn’t he tell you about Cho?”

“There was nothing to tell,” Ron replied. “It was just a kiss. It wasn’t even a particularly good kiss. Besides, that’s different,” he insisted. “Cho’s not you.”

“But what do you do when you have a question or a problem?” Hermione asked curiously. “Surely you’d go to him first.”

“I have five older brothers,” Ron replied. “Most of those questions were answered before I could even think them up. It never mattered to any of them that I didn’t want or ask for their advice; they just gave it to me anyway. I mean look at Bill. You were sitting right there the last time he... Well, okay, so you were asleep, but you were still there in the room with us for Merlin’s sake. You’d think that would have put him off, but no, he just went right ahead and gave me his advice anyway. Buggered everything up in the process too, but did he care? Oh no. Er... why are we even talking about this?” he asked. Why are we talking at all?

“The condoms.”

“Oh yeah,” he mumbled, wishing that he hadn’t asked and that she hadn’t reminded him. Bloody Muggles and their barmy inventions. They’re all a bunch a nutters.

“If you ask Harry, I’m sure he’ll tell you that it’s quite common for Muggle men to--”

“Hermione,” Ron said, cutting her off. “Muggles do all kinds of wacked out things, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to do them.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?” she asked in an exasperated tone. “Because we need that sample. Unless...”
“Unless what?” Ron asked when Hermione stopped talking and bit her lower lip as if she were contemplating something.

“Unless we forget the whole thing and use the sample I already have,” she replied. “The sacrificial aspects aren’t the same, but maybe if I combined it with your blood it’ll be enough.”

“And if it’s not?” Ron asked.

“Worst case scenario, we won’t be able to maintain the link,” she stated, “But I doubt that will actually happen. The most probably outcome would be that my connection to you would simply be weaker than your connection to me. I suppose it’s also possible that my connection to you could diminish over time,” she added. “But I plan on saving the portion of the potion we have left over, so if that’s the case, I should be able to drink it again and reestablish the link that way if it becomes necessary.”

Damn. “And if I agree to wear that... that Muggle thing?” he asked. “What’s it going to do to me?”

“Nothing,” Hermione assured him. “It merely prevents the transfer of bodily fluids.”

“So I won’t be able to... to feel you?” he asked. “Your wetness I mean?” he clarified, his ears flooding with color.

“Probably not the way you mean, no,” she replied, blushing a bit herself. “You’ll still feel it, only it will be different. It’s hard to explain,” she sighed.

If only I had a latex glove, she thought. Then I could have him put it on and dunk his hand in water so he’d know what I’m talking about.

But you don’t have one, so you’re just going to have to try and explain it to him.

I do have extra condoms though, Hermione told herself, so why not use one of them to show him what I’m talking about?

“Okay, I know this is going to seem like an odd request,” Hermione said, as she snatched the discarded condom up off the bed, “but just go with me for a minute,” she continued. “Here,” she said, holding the condom out for him to take. “Slip your fingers inside this for a second and I’ll show you what I mean.”

For a moment or two, Ron just stared at her, his brow creased as he decided whether or not he wanted a practical demonstration, but since it was only his fingers she was talking about, he figured what the hell. “Okay,” he said, after he’d slipped his index finger into the condom, “Now what?”

“You don’t happen to have glass of water anywhere handy do you?” she asked. “Oh well,” she said, when Ron shook his head. Spit? she asked herself. I could have him spit on his fingers and rub it around. No wait, I know, she thought and without so much as another word, she grabbed his hand so she could hold it in place, leaned forward, and took the tip of his latex covered finger in her mouth.

Okay, that’s just gross, Hermione thought to herself, as she brushed her tongue against the finger in her mouth before pulling away entirely. No wonder they make flavored condoms. These regular ones are disgusting. “See what I mean?” she asked.

“I guess,” Ron replied, yanking the condom off his finger and holding it up in the air so he could get a closer look at it.

Okay, so it wasn’t what I expected. Not like those rubber gloves Mum has me wear when she wants
me to clean something particularly nasty. But it still didn’t feel normal. I could still feel it though, she was right about that, he told himself.

“We’re only talking about this one time, right?” Ron asked. “After that I won’t have to--”

“No,” Hermione replied instantly. “Just this one time. And only because we need to collect your semen.”

“So I’ll have to... come in that? “That thing will... it’ll catch it or something.”

“Exactly.”

“I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this,” he sighed.

“Oh Ron,” Hermione cried, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him. Honestly, she hadn’t expected him to agree to it either. At least not so quickly. “You will?” she asked between kisses. “Really?”

“Only if you promise that you’ll never tell anyone about this. Ever!” he replied. “And that included Ginny,” he added as an afterthought. If any of this ever got back to Fred and George he’d never hear the end of it. No. No one could ever know that he’d agreed to use some nutter Muggle contraceptive device. He’d be a laughingstock.

“I won’t,” Hermione assured him before kissing him yet again. “I won’t tell a soul. I promise. And it won’t be so bad really. It’ll just be the first time and once we drink the potion we’ll have all night to do it the normal way.”

“Wait,” Ron said, his eyes snapping open at her comment. “Seriously?” he asked, as an unexpected wave of desire coursed through his body and he felt himself start to respond. “We can... you want to do it more than once? Won’t you be... tender or something?”

“Well, yes,” Hermione said, her face turning scarlet as she spoke. “I suppose I will be, but I probably won’t feel the full effects until tomorrow morning. And that being the case, there is no reason we can’t fully enjoy ourselves tonight. Well, except for the fact that it’s Thursday and we have Prefect rounds at nine. I suppose we’ll have to stop for that.”

“But it’s Halloween,” he whined.

“We still have rounds, Ron. Honestly,” she retorted. “The feast doesn’t usually end before nine, so I suppose we’ll have to give everyone a little extra time to get back to their dorms, but even so, I bet we catch a lot of people out after curfew tonight.”

“Okay,” Ron said, pushing that information aside and bringing her back to what was really important. “But after that, you’ll come back up here with me, right? You’ll spend the night and we can... we can pick up where we left off?”

“Provided we’re both feeling up to it,” Hermione said, allowing her eyes to roam down Ron’s body and lock on the visual proof of just how up to the task he really was. “But I should probably go up to my own room first,” she said, staring at his erection and reflexively licking her lips. “Make sure Lavender and Parvati see me get into my own bed. I’ll slip out and come up here once they’re both asleep and with a little luck, you’re roommates will all be asleep by then as well.”

“But you will spend the night?” Ron asked, eyeing her eagerly. “The whole night? And... and we can--”
“Yes,” Hermione answered before Ron had a chance to even finish his question. “As many times as you want,” she added.

Or as long as I can take it, she thought. It is our wedding night after all. And it will probably be a while before we can be together like this again. We ought to make the most of it.

“Oh God,” Ron groaned loudly as he envisioned himself taking Hermione over and over again until he was completely sated, only to fall asleep in her arms. But he wouldn’t sleep for long. Just long enough to rejuvenate himself, and once that happened, he’d wake up and make love to her again. He’d make love to her all night long.

Their first time, he would try and be as gentle as possible. And after that, once the fire currently surging through his body had been squelched a bit, he’d take her again nice and slow. And he wouldn’t have to wear one of those ruddy cover things, so he’d really be able to feel her. Every glorious inch of her, sopping wet and slick with want, all for him.

Forget about sleep, he decided, wanting nothing more at that moment than to spend the rest of the night buried within her body. I’ll sleep in class or skive them off entirely. Maybe I can get her to skive them off as well and we can spend the whole day together in my bed. The whole weekend even. Harry can bring us food and we can spend the next three days shagging our brains out. It’ll be like our honeymoon or something. If I play it off that way it might even seem romantic.

“Now?” Ron asked, having worked himself up quite nicely with his little fantasy. “We should start now,” he added, his voice hoarse with need. “That way we’ll have plenty of time to finish the potion before everyone comes back,” he said, trying to justify his lust driven urgings.

“Now?” Hermione asked, looking down at his straining cock once more. “You want to put it on now?” she asked, bringing her eyes back up and looking at him uncertainly.

That’s not what I meant, Ron thought, but why the hell not? If we do that part now, I won’t have to stop or worry about doing it later. Yeah. Yeah, now is good.

“You don’t want to wait until we’re... you know...” she continued, oblivious to his thoughts.

“Yeah. I mean no,” Ron replied. “No. Why wait? Let’s just do that part now and get it out of the way. Maybe that way I’ll be able to get used to it a bit.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, reaching for her bag so she could retrieve another condom. “Okay, then. I guess that makes sense. Only, I’ve never put one of these on anyone before, so it might take me a couple tries,” she said, looking more than a little embarrassed.

“You’re going to put it on for me?” Ron asked, his dark eyes going a bit wide. Holy shit!

“Well, I thought it would be easier that way,” she answered, averting her eyes down to the condom in her hand as she unwrapped it so she wouldn’t have to look at him while her cheeks flushed. “I have a basic understanding of how it’s supposed to work after all,” she muttered. “I’m going to have to touch you though,” she said, looking up into his eyes at last. “Is that okay?”

“Hell yes, it’s ok,” Ron replied almost instantly. It’s better than ok.

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“Are you going to say anything?” Ginny finally asked Harry, who was sitting beside her in the Great Hall, seemingly lost in his own thoughts as he picked at his food. “We’ve been down here for nearly forty minutes and you’ve barely said two words to me.”
“What am I supposed to say?” Harry whispered back, shifting his body enough to ensure that neither Parvati or Lavender wouldn’t be able to read his lips. “It’s not exactly something I want to talk about. Especially here,” he added, nodding his head towards the two girls who’d been shooting glances in his general direction since they sat down. “In fact, I’m trying not to think about it, so stop bringing it up.”

“There are other things in the world to talk about besides my brother and his love life,” the young red-head replied in a hushed voice, stealing a quick look at Hermione’s roommates herself and staring straight at Parvati’s until she finally turned away.

Ginny wasn’t stupid. She knew that neither of them had believed a word of the explanation she’d given them to explain Hermione’s absence. The idea that her homework obsessed friend would forgo the Halloween feast in order to revise her Rune’s essay, in and of itself was entirely plausible. It was the fact that Ron was missing as well that made it so suspicious.

Everyone in the school knew that the two Gryffindor Prefects were a couple and the fact that Harry had shown up without them hadn’t gone unnoticed by many. Terry Boot hadn’t been the only one to ask about it. Luckily it had been Seamus, not Harry, who had jumped in and given Ron an alibi. An alibi that was backed up wholeheartedly by Neville, who’d seen Ron with his own eyes and truly did believe that he was sick. It wasn’t exactly easy to fake pallid skin and cold sweats. Unless one was extremely nervous, that is. Fortunately, Harry was the only one that had recognized his best friend’s symptoms for what they really were. But with Seamus and Neville convinced that Ron was ill, the rest of their classmates, while suspicious, had no real proof that anything out of sorts was going on.

“It’s called small talk, Harry,” Ginny continued sarcastically. “You know, that thing people do to pass the time? Surely you must have done it at some point in your life. Maybe a list of topics would be helpful,” she said, holding her right hand up and raising a finger every time she rattled off a possible topic of conversation. “Quidditch. Complaints about homework and/or teachers. Your plans for the weekend,” she offered. “How it felt to finally beat Ron at chess. Or we can speculate about what kind of entertainment Dumbledore’s got lined up for after the feast,” she suggested. “Just pick any one of those. See that’s the great thing about small talk,” she continued to ramble on, “it doesn’t really matter what you discuss. No matter what you pick it’s bound to be better than just sitting here sulking.”

“I am not sulking,” Harry stated a bit louder than he’d meant to. Damn, he cursed in his head, knowing full well that the two girls trying to eavesdrop on his conversation had heard that. “Well, I’m not,” he whispered.

“Oh please,” Ginny replied with a snort.

“I’m not jealous either,” he muttered under his breath.

“I never said that you were,” she replied calmly.

“Good, because I’m not.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, you know?” Ginny said a few moments later, as she stood up and leaned over the table to retrieve a caramel covered apple. “Even if you were. I am,” she admitted,
“Huh?” Harry said, his head snapping up in shock. *But he’s your brother. That’s just sick.*

“What?” Ginny asked when she noticed Harry’s incredulous expression. “It’s okay to want what they’ve got,” she stated. “We all want that, you know? It’s just that most of us don’t get it right on our first try and it’s hard waiting when you see it happen for someone else. I’m happy for them, sure,” she continued, “but I can still be happy for them and be envious at the same time. It’s only natural. It’s not like first year though.”

“First year?” Harry asked, somewhat confused as he watched Ginny take a small bite out of her apple. *Our first year or hers?*

“Oh, yeah,” Ginny replied, after swallowing. “I hated her when I was a first year. I’m surprised she never told you?”

“Wait, you hated Hermione?” he asked as he tried to wrap his head around this new information. He remembered Ginny as a first year. She’d been awkward and shy, but he’d never seen any signs that she’d hated anyone, least of all Hermione. She’d never been rude to Hermione. She hadn’t glared at her during meals or anything like that. He never would have guess. But there must have been some kind of signs if Hermione had figured it out. “And she knew about it?”


“You told her that you hated her?” Harry asked, his mouth falling open in surprise. *I knew she could be blunt,* he thought as he gaped at her, *but damn.*

“Sure,” she replied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “Why not? I waited until I actually knew her before I admitted it,” she said, as if the waiting made it okay because it wouldn’t have hurt her feelings as much.

“But why?”

“Because she stole my place. I know it was stupid,” Ginny admitted, “but I was just a kid and it made perfect sense at the time. I blamed Mum too, of course. I had it all worked out in my head, see,” she continued unabashedly. “How if Mum had only allowed me to come to Hogwarts with Ron when I wanted to, it would have been me hanging out with the two of you and not Hermione. It wasn’t just that he was my brother,” she explained. “Ron and I were really close before he went away to school, but then he came home and all he did was talk about the two of you,” she stated.

“So you hated me too?”

“Well, no,” Ginny replied. “You were different,” she said blushing slightly. “I mean, I knew that Ron was going to make friends of his own, just like the rest of my brothers did when they went away to school. But those friends were always other boys. So when Ron came back home with a best
friend that was a girl...it was sorta like a slap in the face. Not only did he not want to hang out with me anymore, when Mum forced him to, I had to listen to him talk about her. I mean, he talked about you too obviously, but it was her I was angry at because she was the girl in his life now instead of me.”

“It was hard hating her though,” Ginny admitted. “Because Hermione was never anything but nice to me. Even after what I did to her. She never once blamed me for it and she had every reason to. I felt so bad after she was attacked,” she confessed in a hushed voice. “I was so afraid when Mum told me that she was coming to stay with us before the World Cup and that I’d have to share my room with her. I just assumed that she’d hate me too, the difference was, she had a legitimate reason. I’m the one that set that great dirty snake on her after all.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Harry replied in a hushed voice. “You didn’t even know what you were doing.”

“That’s what Hermione said when I apologized for it, but I still think it was my fault. I’m the one that told Tom she was Muggle-born. I’m the one that spent months pouring my heart out to him and telling him how jealous I was of her and how much I resented her for taking my place. I don’t think it was just some random accident. It wasn’t just Hermione that the Basilisk attacked after all, Percy’s girlfriend was attacked that time around as well. What are the chances of that being a coincidence? The two girls closest to my brothers attacked at the same time? Either it was because of the things I’d told Tom, or because of the things I was feeling when I let the Basilisk out, but either way it was my fault.”

“You told her all of this?” Harry asked, wondering why Hermione had never mentioned it to him or Ron. “And what did she say?” he asked, when Ginny nodded her head.

“That didn’t matter. That it was an accident and that I shouldn’t be so hard on myself because I was a victim just like everyone else. She really was great about it. It was a bit annoying really,” she added with a smirk. “It was impossible to go on hating her after that. I had to admit to myself that she was actually nice and not the type of person that I’d been making her out to be in my mind. But if you’d have told me way back then that not only would we become friends, but that she was going to become my sister and that I’d be happy about it, I never would have believed you. It really is amazing how things work out sometimes, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, amazing,” Harry replied mechanically.

Ginny thinks of Hermione as a sister? It really shouldn’t have surprised him, because that’s the way he felt about her as well, but it did. Is it just because they’re really close friends now or because of her relationship with Ron. She is married to him after all, he reminded himself. The two of them had been holed up in his dorm room alone together long enough for them to consummate their union and complete the Lànain ritual. She’s a Weasley in all but name now. Surely she isn’t going to change her name? he thought. No, not while we’re still at school and trying to keep it a secret.

But she was an honorary Weasley before all of this Lànain stuff started, a more rational voice piped in. Same as you. So it’s not like it’s really that big of a change. Ron’s still your best friend and the closest thing you have to a brother. The same with Hermione. Just because their relationship has changed a bit doesn’t necessarily mean that yours will.

Except for the fact that I am now the third wheel, he argued, letting his insecurities get the better of
him once again. They won’t want me around the same way they used to. They have each other, they
don’t need me anymore.

That’s what Ginny thought too, the more rational voice reminded him. When she was little. But she
doesn’t feel that way now. She isn’t judging their relationship by how it affects her. She’s move
beyond that. She knows perfectly well what is going on upstairs and what it means, but you don’t see
her brooding about it. She doesn’t think of it as losing a brother, she’s viewing it as gaining a sister.
And if that really is the case, then it is the same for you, isn’t it? You aren’t losing Ron or Hermione.
They’ll still be your best friends. That shouldn’t change just because they are in love or because
they’re married. Obviously they’ll want some alone time, but it’s not like you want to watch them
snog... or do any of that anyway. And it’s better than having them niggle each other all the time. At
least this way you aren’t being put in the middle and forced to choose sides.

“So what do you think the entertainment is going to be?”

“Huh?” Harry asked, looking up at Ginny after he heard her speak.

“The entertainment tonight?” she asked again. “What do you think it’s going to be? I heard a rumor
that Dumbledore hired a Banshee choir. Merlin, I hope that’s just a rumor or I might have to cast a
Deafening Charm on myself. ”

“Won’t that just make it louder?” Harry asked.

“What?” Ginny asked.

“I always thought Deafening Charms made noise louder, not softer.”

“Damn,” Ginny swore loudly. “I think you’re right. Well, so much for that bright idea. I guess we’ll
just have to stuff napkin in our ears or something.”

“Can’t be any worse than that wailing egg, can it?” Harry asked, thinking back to the clue he’d had
to decipher for the Triwizards Tournament.

“You’ve never heard a Banshee sing, have you?” Ginny laughed.

“I’ve never heard a Banshee period,” Harry replied.

“I heard one once in Madam Malkin’s,” Ginny said. “She wasn’t singin’ of course, but boy could
she ever shout. Mum sent the rest of us outside while she picked up Fred and George’s school stuff,
but even with our ears plugged, we could still hear that Banshee screaming about the fact that the
robes she’d received were the wrong color.”

“So stuffing our ears with napkins won’t work either,” Harry said with a slight smile.

“No, we’re doomed.”
It did take Hermione more than one try to get the condom on right, not that Ron really seemed to mind all that much. One of her hands was wrapped firmly around the base of him, holding him in place, and she couldn’t help but stroke him with her fingers as she tried to unroll the condoms down his length. So what if it took her three times to actually get the thing to stay on right?

“How’s that?” she asked, releasing him when she was finally finished.


“If I do it’s liable to fall off,” Hermione replied. “And we don’t want that. It’s not painful is it?”

“No, I guess not. Just... odd and ... a bit distracting.”

“Well try not to think about it,” she said, unbuttoning the bottom button on her shirt and slipping out of it. “Focus on something else instead,” she added, reaching around behind her back, unclasping her bra, and allowing it to fall in her lap.

That’s right, just like that, she chuckled to herself when Ron’s eyes zeroed in on her bare breasts. Focus on me and forget about everything else.

“Would you like to take my knickers off?” Hermione asked shyly, “or shall I?”

“No,” Ron said, his lust filled eyes ranking over her slender body before landing on the thin pink lace hugging her hips. “Let me do it,” he said, inching forward on his knees until he was right in front of her.

Only his hands didn’t reach for her knickers as she expected. They went higher instead, the right one coming to rest on her shoulder, while the left one covered her breast. Ron’s mouth immediately descended to Hermione’s neck, and he sucked on it briefly before moving on to her lips. As their kiss deepened, Ron continued to gently knead the breast in his left hand, although periodically he’d stop just long enough to roll his thumb over her stiff nipple.

God, Ron groaned in his head, pulling away from her mouth so he could look down and watch his hand move over Hermione’s supple flesh. She feels bloody brilliant. Tastes even better, he thought, seconds before he gave into the impulse, leaned forward, and buried his face in the valley between her breasts.

Removing the hand that was on her shoulder and using it to grasp her around the waist, Ron darted his tongue out and ran it up the slope of her unbound breast. When he reached the peak, he sucked her taut nipple into his mouth while he teased its mate with his finger tips.

Bloody brilliant, he thought again when he both heard and felt Hermione moan.

Of course all the moan did was stoke the fire already burning within him. She was enjoying it too. He’d made her moan out in pleasure. He’d done it with nothing but his mouth and the gentle touch of his fingers. And the best part was, he hadn’t even meant to do it. Of course that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to intentionally do it again. He wanted to please her. He wanted to give her so much pleasure that she’d have no choice but to cry out. He wanted to hear her moan his name. He wanted to make her ache the same way he did. He wanted to drive her as crazy as she drove him. He wanted her to want it as badly as he did. He needed her to be ready, and he wasn’t going to proceed until he was sure that she was. He just never expected that to happen so rapidly.
“I love you, Ron,” Hermione said though her labored breathes.

Her declaration took him by surprise. Not just the timing of her words, but the fact that he could see that she meant it when he looked into her face. Her dark brown eyes were shimmering, clouded with the same desire he was experiencing, but it wasn’t enough to obscure her true feelings for him. This wasn’t about lust for her. It wasn’t about finding release or even about completing a potion. Those other things were all there. They were a small part of it, but mostly it was about love. She wanted to be with him because she loved him. She really did love him. And he loved her too. He loved her so much that for a moment he thought his heart might actually burst with the intensity of what he was feeling. But it didn’t. It kept right on beating in his chest as he gazed into her sparkling eyes.

“I love you too,” he whispered, although suddenly the words didn’t seem nearly enough to convey what he felt.

“It’s all right,” Hermione said, lying on her back and pulling him down with her. “I want this too. I’m ready.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, making sure that his eyes never left hers. If she had doubts he wanted to know and despite how she responded, he knew he’d be able to tell if he continued to stare into her eyes.

“Completely,” she replied, taking the hand that had been on her breast, lifting it up to her lips, and kissing it briefly, before pressing it against her stomach and pushing it down towards her knickers. “Take them off,” she said, when Ron’s fingers brushed over the lacy fabric. But rather than comply with her request, Ron moved both of his hands to her hips as he came up on his knees and straddled her legs.

Without so much as another word, he leaned forward, pressed his lips against her stomach, and kissed it tenderly. When he finished tasting the skin there, he moved lower, bypassing the lace covered portion of her body and pressing his mouth against her thigh, caressing her sides with his fingertips the entire time.

He was so close now he could actually smell her musky scent and it was incredibly arousing. With a swiftness that took even Hermione by surprise, Ron shoved his hand through the leg hole of her panties and pushed his fingers inside her.

He was rewarded not only with the sensation of her wet skin and the intense heat of her body, but by the satisfied moan that escaped her lips when his finger snaked into her. But as gratifying as that was, he wanted more. He wanted to see her. He wanted to watch as he prepared her to receive the rest of him.

“Please,” she sighed, although what she was really asking for, Ron wasn’t entirely sure. Not that it really mattered.

Whatever it is, I’m going to give it to her, he decided, as he pulled his hand free and used it, as well as it’s mate, to draw her knickers down her legs.

“Tell me what you want,” he whispered, after divesting her of her one remaining article of clothing. “Is it this?” he asked, spreading her legs open just enough so he could kiss her inner thigh.

“Oh God, Ron,” Hermione groaned, her heart thumping violently against her chest. “Please.”

“Please what?” he asked, moving his mouth to her other thigh and kissing her there just as softly. “Do you want me to help you come?”
“No,” she whimpered, managing to take him by surprise once more.

“Why not, love?” he asked, prodding her legs apart even further before kneeling between the soft cradle they created. Her response didn’t make any sense to him. Wasn’t the whole point to feel pleasure? Why was she purposely trying to deny herself that when he was only too happy to help her along? “I want you to,” he said, accidentally brushing his throbbing member against the bare skin of her inner thigh and hissing loudly when the contact sent a shockwave of pleasure coursing through his body. He was so close. So unbelievably close now, he couldn’t stop his hard arousal from twitching against her flesh in anticipation.

Soon, he told himself, but not yet. You have to take care of her needs first.

Ron was never really sure where the inspiration for what he did next came from, but even after the fact, he had to admit that the idea truly had been inspired. Not only did he wind up pleasing and stimulating her, he pleasured himself as well.

Why didn’t you think to do this sooner? he asked himself, as he reached down, grabbed the base of his cock, and pressed the tip against the swollen bud she’d taught him to rubbed in order to give her an orgasm. It’s bloody genius, that’s what it is, he thought, massaging her clitoris with his erection, causing Hermione to cry out loudly.

“RON! Oh God!” she shrieked, her entire body quivering beneath him. “What ... what are you... Don’t,” Hermione panted. “Please. You have to stop that. Now. Please stop.”

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, instantly sobering up. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to--”

“No, you didn’t hurt me,” she assured him before he could work himself up any further. “It’s just... If you... if you make me come, I won’t want to finish it. Not the same way I do now,” she tried to explain. “I’ll be too relaxed and the sense of urgency, the need I feel right now won’t be the same.”

“Oh,” he replied, not fully comprehending what she was telling him.

But women aren’t like men, he thought. They can keep going, even afterwards. How else are you supposed to give them multiples? They have to keep going for that to happen. Don’t they?

“But ... it’ll come back, right?”

“Eventually,” she replied, “but I don’t know how long that will take and why go to all that trouble when I’m ready now?”

“Trouble?” he asked, genuinely confused now. “What trouble?”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” she tutted, wrapping her arms around Ron’s shoulders and hauling him down on top of her. “Will you shut up and shag me already?” she scolded, seconds before her mouth crashed against his.

Merlin, I love it when she’s bossy, was the last truly coherent thought he had for the next five minutes or so. It was impossible to think after he felt Hermione’s tongue thrust past his lips and into his mouth, hot, wet, eager to please, yet demanding the same pleasure in return. Who was he to deny her what she wanted? Hermione always got her way. It just so happened that in this particular case, they wanted the same thing.

They continued to kiss, deeply, passionately, neither willing to be the one to break contact and pull away from the other. Tongues wrestled. Hands caressed and stroked every inch of bare skin they could find, and neither of them wanted it to end. It wasn’t until Ron’s fingers found their way
between Hermione’s thighs that she jolted beneath him and pulled her mouth away so she could gasp for breath.

She hadn’t meant to do it. She simply couldn’t help herself. Her body was on fire for him, and when she felt his fingers part her folds, the tingles of anticipation that shot through her core were so intense she couldn’t help but jump, both excited and afraid of what was about to happen.

This was it. Ron wasn’t playing around anymore. He wasn’t simply trying to make her come or give her pleasure. He was finally going to fill the aching void inside her. The finger that was stroking in and out of her center wasn’t simply trying to stimulate her, it was there to prepare her for what was about to happen. And that thought, more than the actual sensation of Ron’s finger, stoked the fires already raging within her body. She did want him, despite the fact she was anxious about how much it might hurt.

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” Ron groaned against her neck, as he shoved a second finger inside her and then a third, coating them with her essence. How he longed to feel that slick wetness against the skin of his throbbing cock. He wanted to pound it inside of her and feel the evidence of her desire. He wanted to pull back out and see it clinging to his shaft, but that Muggle thing she’d made him wear would prevent that from happening. He wouldn’t be able to feel her desire, not properly, but he still might be able to see it.

And with that thought, Ron brought his weight up off her. The hand that had been fingering her, immediately abandoned her body and he used it to guide himself to the proper place.

Unable to hold herself back, Hermione sucked in a deep breath and held it when she felt something push against her tentatively, then pull back, only to push against her again with a little more force. But it wasn’t until Ron found the right angle and his erection slowly slid between her folds that she truly realize how thick he actually was. The appendage poised at her opening now was much more substantial than his finger, or even three fingers combined. How could it possibly fit inside of her?

“Try and relax,” Ron whispered, despite the fact that his own heart was hammering like mad, both with excitement and terror at the thought of ripping through her fragile body.

Okay, she’s freaked out, he thought, pulling himself back when he felt her go rigid beneath him. So don’t warn her. Once she’s relaxed a bit, just do it. Oh God! he groaned internally, as he took a deep breath and prepared himself for what he had to do. What if she hates it? What if she wants me to stop or never wants to do it again?

But even as he was thinking these things, Ron pressed against her soft flesh again and he felt the point where they were touching give way. Slowly he slid past her lips and into a searing tightness that clenched around the head of his sensitive cock.

“Oh God!” Ron moaned loudly, struggling to hold himself back when he felt her tense up even further.

FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! he chanted in his mind as he waited, hoping that she’d relax. But as much as he wanted to wait and do it properly in hopes of lessening her pain, he simply couldn’t do it. All the self-restraint he had was rapidly fading away.

Her center was hot, it was slick for him, and he wanted to thrust forward and bury himself within it. It felt like he’d been waiting his entire life for this moment and now that it was finally here, he simply couldn’t wait any longer. One thrust of his hips was all it would take and then she’d truly be his. Not just her heart, or her soul, but her body as well. She’d offered herself up to him and now he was going to claim her. He was going to make her his in every way. All he had to do was thrust forward
and breach her barrier, and she’d become his wife. His wife, his lover, and one of his best friends all rolled together in one. One swift jab was all it would take and he’d possess her completely.

Mine, Ron thought, wishing with every fiber of his being that he wasn’t going to cause her too much pain. You’re mine now, he thought, surging against Hermione without warning and burying his entire length within her body with a loud grunt. Mine, the thought one last time, unable to hold back the strangled moan of pleasure that rushed through his lips as Hermione’s soft walls gave way and stretch around him.

She was tight. So incredibly tight. It was like nothing he’d ever experienced and it felt so much better than he ever could have imagined. She was tight and so unbelievably hot. And with a guttural groan of pleasure, Ron realized that wasn’t all, she was moving as well. Her body was throbbing around him, or maybe he was the one that was doing the actual throbbing, but either way it felt fantastic. The sensation of her tight walls squeezing him was enough to make him want to explode there and then and they hadn’t even really started yet.

He wanted to tell her that he was sorry; that he simple hadn’t been able wait a moment longer, but when he opened his mouth to speak, all he did was suck in a deep breath. It seemed that he was no longer capable of speech. He was too busy trying to fend off the overwhelming urge to move. Every nerve ending in his body was screaming at him to pull back and thrust into her again, and it took every ounce of strength he had to retrain himself.

If Hermione hadn’t gasped so loudly when he tore through her hymen, he might have given into the impulse, but she had gasped, and deep down Ron knew that he had to give her time to become accustomed to him. Her body needed time to adjust to the hard rod of flesh that had just invaded it. So he fought to keep himself as still as possible, and give her the time she needed, despite the fact that her tight heat and the unintentional clenching of her walls was driving him absolutely insane.

Yet even though it was torture to wait, it felt unbelievable. Her body felt so fucking good wrapped around him that he could have cried and he knew that once he started moving, it would feel even better.

But for now he had to wait. He had to wait for a sign that she was ready, so he contented himself with opening his eyes and shifting just enough so he could look down at the place where they were joined. They were as close as humanly possible now and he wanted to see it. He wanted to see the spot where they were connected; the place where they had come together as one. He wanted to see his wife’s glistening folds stretched wide around him. He wanted to watch as he pulled himself back. He wanted to see every inch that reemerged; every inch of himself that was covered in her wetness. But more than that, more than anything else, he wanted to move. He wanted to make love to her and he wanted to watch himself do it.

Hermione felt his length, hard and hot and throbbing inside her. She knew that he was waiting for her to adjust to him. She could feel herself stretching to fit around him and from the trembling in his arms, she thought that he felt it, too.

When his hips jerked restlessly, Ron did his best to still them, but he couldn’t stop his body from shaking. The strain was killing him. Literally. If he didn’t move soon he just knew that he would die. But he was going to hold himself back until he dropped dead or until she told him that it was all right, whichever came first. He just wished she say something soon, because every second he waited felt like an eternity of torture.

"Fuck!” he moaned, his voice hoarse and low, dropping his head to bed beside her where he began panting.
"Are you... are you okay?" Hermione asked, the concern evident in her voice.

No, I’m fucking dying here, he thought, but he managed to keep the comment to himself. He wasn’t the only one in pain after all.

“You feel so bloody good,” he finally groaned in response to her question. “It’s... you’re... unbelievable.”

“Go ahead,” Hermione whispered, causing his head to snap back up.

He looked deep into her eyes to make sure she’d actually said what he thought she said and it wasn’t just some trick his mind was playing on him. But as he looked at her, she nodded her head slowly and gave him the go ahead.

She tried not to wince when Ron can up on his elbows and pulled himself back, because she didn’t want him to be afraid, but she couldn’t help it. If he saw her though, he didn’t comment on it.

Little did she know that the reason Ron was biting his lip was because he had seen the grimace on her face and he was fighting the urge to pump into her hard and fast, as his every instinct was screaming at him to do.

“Oh...God,” he moaned loudly when he drew himself back slowly, inch by inch, then just as slowly slid back inside.

"Go on," Hermione urged, biting lip when Ron pulled back again and she felt her walls clench shut, only to be forced open by the unyielding length of flesh pushing against her.

He was doing it. He was shagging a girl. Not just any girl either, he was shagging Hermione. And watching himself do it was unbelievably hot. In fact, if he didn’t stop watching, he was going to lose it sooner than he wanted to and he wasn’t about to let that happen. It felt too good. He’d waited too long for this moment. He wasn’t going to rush through it. Not if he could help it. He wanted it to last forever. Of course, deep down he knew that wasn’t possible, but the longer it lasted, the better.

When Hermione opened her eyes and looked up at him, she could tell that Ron was striving to go slow, although whether that was because he wanted to make it last, or because he wanted to spare her anymore pain than necessary, she wasn’t sure. Not that it mattered, at this point. The searing pain that had ripped through her body when he first entered her was gone, replaced by a dull ache and a feeling of being stretched beyond her limits. But whatever his reasons, she wanted him to speed up, hoping that when he did, she’d feel something more than discomfort.

And if not? she asked herself. If not, it’ll be over quicker and I’ll be able to take pleasure from just knowing that he enjoyed it.

She loved knowing that her body could please him. It empowered her in a way she hadn’t expected. She wanted to please him. She wanted to make him feel good, but it was more than simply a desire to give him pleasure. What she really wanted was to make him lose control. Whether it be by kissing him, or stroking him with her fingers, or screaming at him in the Common Room, she had this constant need to push him over the edge. She didn’t know why it was so important to her that she had the ability to do this, but it was, and this was no different. She’d wanted to drive him crazy. She’d wanted him to want her so badly that he couldn’t stand it and now that she’d managed that, she wanted to make him lose control. She wanted to give him so much pleasure that he wouldn’t be able to hold himself back. The problem was, she didn’t really know how.

"Faster," she coaxed, letting him know that she was okay and that he didn’t need to hold back on her
account. But either he didn’t hear her, or he didn’t believe her, because rather than speeding up, he slowed down and then stopped moving altogether.

“I’m all right,” she tried again.

“I’m not,” Ron moaned, clenching his eyes shut and taking a few deep breaths. “Just... just hold on. I need... I just need a minute to...to...Oh God... Mione;” he groaned when she shifted beneath him. “Just ...whatever you do, don’t move again. Please...just...”

“Oh,” Hermione said, not even bothering to hide her smile when she realized what kind of problem he was having. He was closer to losing control than she’d suspected, and that being the case, she couldn’t help herself.

“SHIT!” Ron hissed loudly, when Hermione brought her knees up a bit higher, made sure her feet were planted firmly on the mattress, and then used the leverage to thrust her lower body against his.

“Move,” she demanded.

“OH FUCK!” he cried out loudly, slamming down on top of her and using his full body weight to pin her to the bed and keep her from pulling another stunt that would send him toppling over the edge. “That was... that was just cruel,” he grumbled. “I didn’t... I didn’t do that to you.”

“Oh Ron,” Hermione whispered, shamed when she realized just how right he was. He’d wanted to make her come too but he’d backed off and respected her wishes when she’d asked him to. And how did she repay him? She disregarded what he wanted, what he’d asked her for, and tried to get what she wanted instead. “I’m sorry. You’re right. That was... I wasn’t thinking about it like that. I’m sorry. Really I am. I won’t do it again. I promise.”

“It’s okay,” he muttered against her neck.

“No, it’s not,” Hermione replied, tangling her hands in his hair. “But it will be. Take all the time you need.”

It turned out to be little longer than a minute, although there was no real way for Hermione to gauge exactly how long it took. Not that she minded. It was sort of nice having him lie there on top of her. Yes, he was heavy, but there was something comfortable about his weight and the way they were still connected. She felt close to him. Closer than she’d ever been before. He was close enough that she could feel each of the deep breaths he sucked in and the air he exhaled puff against her neck. She could hear the faint whimpers he tried to muffle, when one of her hands fell down to his shoulder and started running down his back.

“You’re not going to fall asleep on me, are you?” she asked, when his breathing finally evened out.

“Not a chance,” Ron replied, coming up on his elbows and pulling off of her. Not until we’re finished anyway. “Is it... okay?” he asked somewhat uncertainly, pulling his hips back just a little and pushing forward again tentatively.

“I think so,” she replied, knowing that she wouldn’t truly be able to tell until he started moving in earnest. “It’s... I think you can... you can go faster if you want. It’s okay.”

“You sure?” he asked, pulling out half way and surging into her again quickly.

Fuck, that feels good, he thought, not even bothering to listen for her answer, before he pulled back and thrust into her tight body again.
The fourth time he entered her, Ron felt Hermione’s hips come up off the bed the same way they had earlier, only this time she was trying to move with him. It was more hesitant and much more experimental than the other time and it took her a few tries to get her legs in the proper position. It had been good for him when they first started, but having her try and match his rhythm and meet him thrust for thrust was simply incredible.

With a deep moan of pleasure, Ron leaned forward and covered her lips with his own, plunging his tongue into her mouth at the same moment he pumped her center. All he cared about now was this. His lips were on hers, his cock was dancing inside of her, her hip were rocking tentatively under his, he could feel her breasts pressed against his chest, and there was nothing on Earth that could possibly feel any better. This was as close to heaven as he was ever going to get, and he wanted it to last as long as humanly possible.

But the pressure was building again. Building far too quickly and the only way he could think to starve it off was to reign himself in and slow down again. Holding himself back, Ron began stroking in and out of her with aching slowness. Prolonging the agony by holding himself back; prolonging the bliss of moving within her.

The change in tempo caught Hermione off guard however. Unsure what to do, she fell back against the mattress with a moan.

Mistaking her displeasure for pain, Ron stilled his pace and looked down at her.

“It’s okay,” Hermione assured him, after opening her eyes and seeing his concern. “I’m all right. It doesn’t hurt as much now. Please don’t stop.”

And then it dawned on him. She hadn’t moaned because he was hurting her. She’d moaned because he’d slowed down and that wasn’t what she wanted. This wasn’t like some interactive wank. He wasn’t using his own hand to get himself off. Altering his rhythm might helped him prolong it, but it wasn’t just his rhythm anymore. Purposely throwing himself off was one thing, but he was throwing her off as well. That was something he’d never even considered. But the reason she’d been so demanding made much more sense now. He’d already had one orgasm tonight, which made it easier for him wait for the next one, but Hermione hadn’t. She’d held off and now... now she wanted to and every time he slowed down or stopped, he threw her rhythm off and added to her frustration.

BLOODY HELL! he swore in his mind. Why didn’t Bill warn me about that? Bugger. This is harder than I expected. Shit. Ok, you’re going to have to figure out what she wants and give it to her. But how the hell do I figure that out? Bill said to just ask her. What if you ask and she says she wants you to stop? No. No, she just said she didn’t want you to stop. So there it is. She wants you to keep going, only not slow. She wants you to do it like you were before. She wants it faster. Faster I can do,” he thought, drawing himself back and plunging back into her warmth with a satisfied groan.

Oh yeah, this I can do, he thought, pleasure coursing through his body when he started pistoning his hips against her and the friction caused by her tight walls rubbing against him increased. As he quickened the pace, Ron was hoping that Hermione would try moving with him again. But she didn’t. She did something even better this time.

All those books Hermione had read, and not one of them had mentioned the fact that holding her legs open at such a wide angle would be so uncomfortable. Not one book mentioned aching legs or what she could do to alleviate the problem. She just didn’t know what to do with them. She tried keeping them on the bed, she tried closing one just a bit, and hooking the other around Ron’s calf, but nothing seemed to work. The place where her thighs met the rest of her body was starting to burn and it really was quite annoying. She had to close them a bit. Just for a minute. Just to give them a
rest, and the best way she could think to do that was to wrap them around Ron’s waist. She never expected it to change things so dramatically, but it did.

Ron surged forward and to both their surprise, his cock went deeper than it had previously been. With a noise somewhere between a growl and a moan, he pulled back and pushed forward again, obviously enjoying the new angle.

And as unexpected as it was, Hermione was enjoying it too. Deep down she hadn’t expected to feel any type of physical pleasure. Yet it was there, and it was getting stronger. There was heat and pleasure building within her. It had been lurking behind her discomfort the whole time, and the faster Ron went, the more he increased the friction between them and the stronger it got.

Wanting to see just how deep he really could go, Ron thrust into her hard, his eyes open, watching Hermione closely for any signs that he was hurting her too badly. Fortunately, all he saw was surprise.

“OOooh,” Hermione yelped, her eyes going wide with shock. “That felt... do that again.”

Unable to suppress his grin, Ron did exactly as she requested, pumping into her again, hard and deep. This time Hermione actually moaned in pleasure, but her moan was nothing, compared to Ron’s, which was deep and resounding.

“OH GOD!” he cried, ramming himself into her again so deeply he literally pounded her down into the mattress of his bed. It felt unbelievable and everything else slipped away. This was all that mattered now. This tight heat and the unbelievable friction. It was so intense now it was almost as if the heat of her body was somehow spreading throughout his own. He was close. So unbearably close and he simply couldn’t hold himself back anymore. A maddening need for her overtook him as his climax built and all he could concentrate on was how good she made him feel.

Hermione moaned again, this time fairly loudly, but Ron didn’t hear her. He couldn’t hear anything anymore. Not her moans or his own. Not the way Hermione gasped when the hard length of him began pounding into her relentlessly. Not the rhythmic squeaking of his mattress, or the erotic sound of skin slapping against skin. He couldn’t hear any of it because he was lost.

Fire. She was on fire. Her body was burning and it hurt. It wasn’t the same piercing pain that had ripped through her when he first entered her. This was different. She ached. That was the only word she could come up with to describe it. She ached. Not just because of the unremitting pressure, although that was part of it. She ached for him and it felt good. So good in fact, that she wanted more. But he was already thrusting into her so hard and so deep that she was surprised that he hadn’t split her in two. It didn’t matter though. She still wanted more. This... this just wasn’t enough. This glorious friction that he was creating made her blood boil. It made her body burn for him. And while it wasn’t enough to make her come, it was enough to make her want to.

Her decision made, Hermione reached between them to touch herself, hoping to help herself along. Unfortunately for her, she was just a little too late. Almost as soon as her fingers found their mark, the hold Ron had on his control snapped. With a deep, throaty groan, he wrenched himself out of Hermione’s body and slammed back in, forcing her walls to part for him one final time before the stars exploded behind his eyes and he exploded with blinding force. A loud grunt was all the warning she had before Ron collapsed on top of her.

“Ssss...sorry,” he panted, his cock still twitching inside of her as he pumped the last bit of himself into the Muggle covering she’d had him wear. “ Tried... tried to... couldn’t... couldn’t wait... unbelievable... sorry,” he said again, rolling over on his back and bringing her along with him, so she wound up laying on top of him. “Sorry.”
“It’s all right,” Hermione assured him.

“No,” Ron objected, eye closed, chest still heaving beneath her. “No... it’s not. You didn’t...”

“Oh, that,” she replied when she realized what he was on about. “Don’t worry about that. It was still lovely. Really,” she assured him. “I didn’t really expect to,” she admitted, moving enough so he’d slide out of her and then rolling down to lie beside him so she could close her legs and give them a rest. “I suppose I’ll have to get used to it first.”

“Or I can take care of you beforehand,” he said, opening his eyes and smirking at her. “Or after,” he added, arching one eyebrow. “Just give me a second and I’ll--”

“No Ron, seriously,” she objected when he abruptly sat up. “We should... we still have to finish the potion and--”

“It can wait,” he interjected, leaning over her and shutting her up with a rather forceful kiss. “You shouldn’t have to,” he whispered a few moments later.

“No, really, you don’t have to. I’m--”

“Frustrated,” he replied, sliding one knee between her legs and forcing them open. “It’s only fair, love. Besides, I want to,” he assured her. “I wanted to before, remember.”

“But I’m all gross.”

“No, you’re well and truly shagged, that what you are,” he stated bluntly, causing Hermione to gasp before her mouth fell open. “And it’s hot as hell. I may just enjoy this as much as you,” he said, opening her legs a bit wider so he could kneel between them.

That’s when he saw it. Blood. There was blood on the bedspread beneath her. Just a few drops. Hardly any at all when you really thought about it, but it immediate caught his attention.

“Bugger,” he grumbled, his eyes darting down to his penis, which was still covered by that mad Muggle thing. “Fuck!” he swore loudly when he noticed that it wasn’t just wet with her juices, but with her blood as well. “You’re bleeding,” he said, his voice now full of genuine concern.

“That was supposed to happen,” she reminded him, “but it’s all right. It doesn’t hurt anymore. NO! DON’T!” she shouted, when she saw him reach for the condom. “DON’T TOUCH IT!”

“Why not?” he asked, jerking his hand back as if he’d been burned.

“We need what’s on the outside as much as what’s on the inside,” she said, sitting up quickly. “You better let me do it. Only, hold on a second,” she added, as she leaned over and wrenched the thick curtains apart. “DAMN!” she shouted, after leaning of the gap.

“Hermione?”

“Where’s my bag?”

“Hermione.”
“It was just here.”

“It’s right there,” Ron informed her.

“Where?” she asked, jerking her head back in and looking at him.

“There,” he said, pointing down at the foot of his bed where her clothes were still lying.”

“Oh,” she muttered, leaning forward and grabbing it by the strap. “Okay, just hold on a second,” she instructed, pulling the jar containing the Coupling Potion out of her bag and handing it to him.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” Ron asked uncertainly, once he’d taken it from her.

“Just hold it. Honestly,” she sighed. “I know I had extra strips of material in here,” she said, disregarding him as she dug through her rucksack. “Where are they?”

“Um...” Ron began and then thought better of it. He remembered the strips of material she was talking about. He’d seen them when he was rummaging through her bag. He also remembered chucking them out. He just wasn’t sure if he ought to tell her that or not. “What do you need them for?” he finally asked.

“To wipe off the blood.”

“Oh,” Ron replied, scanning the surface of the bed, because that’s where he’d tossed them. “Why don’t you just use your knickers?” he asked, when his eyes landed on the pink lace.

“I suppose that will work,” Hermione said, pulling her wand out of her bag, before dropping it, and reaching for her knickers. A flick of her wrist was all it took and her sexy pink panties were in shreds.

So much for seeing her in those again, Ron sighed in his head.

“Open the jar for me, will you?” Hermione asked Ron, as she crawled forward and knelt in front of him, using a tattered strip of her underwear to swab her fluids off the condom. “Is there anymore?” she asked, once she was finished.

“Any more what?” Ron asked, and he strained to get the lid of the jar off.

“Oh, I used a Permanent Seal Charm on that,” she said, tapping the jar with her wand to lift it. “Sorry. I forgot. Any more blood?”

“Er...” Ron replied, looking a bit queasy when the jar lid popped off and he got a good whiff of the concoction he was about to drink. “Over there,” he said, pointing towards the middle of the bed where she’d been lying. “I think there is some there, where we were... you know?”

“That’s it?” Hermione questioned, looking up at him once she’d found the spots he was referring to. “That’s all there is?”

“Isn’t it enough?” he asked, sounding genuinely concerned now.

“For the potion,” she replied, “yes.” For you to freak out about, she thought, no.

“I’m going to have to cut it out though,” she said, pointing her wand down at his bedspread before he had a chance to agree or disagree and tracing a small circle around the first spot with the tip. “I’ll patch it later,” she added.
“Ron, are you all right?” Hermione asked, when she looked up and saw how pale his face was.

“Yeah,” he replied somewhat mechanically. “It’s just... this is really it. We’re really going to ... to do this.”

“Of course we are,” she answered.

“What if...” he started to ask and then changed tack before he could get himself in trouble. “I’m sure you brewed it right and all,” he said, “but what if... what if something goes wrong?”

“We let it wear off.”

“No, really wrong,” he asked. *Like Polyjuice Potion and cat hair wrong*, he thought, but he wisely kept that to himself.

“That’s why I told Ginny where my notes were and exactly what we’re doing,” Hermione replied. “Nothing is going to go wrong, but if it does, Ginny will be able to tell Madam Pomfrey exactly what we did. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Yeah? Except she’ll tell Dumbledore, who will tell my Mum, who will floo here and go straight to the hospital wing, and when she finds out about the Lànain, she’ll bloody well kill us both. Nothing to worry about my arse. If any part of this goes wrong we’re soooo dead.

“Ron?”

The sound of his name being called, caught his attention and drew him back.

“Have you changed your mind about this?” Hermione asked, when his eyes met hers and she knew that she had his full attention again. “Because if you have, now would probably be a good time to tell me. If you go through with it anyway just because you feel obligated to, I’ll know. Once we’re connected you won’t be able to hide it from me. If you don’t want to do this, you need to tell me.”

“No, no I do,” he protested. “Really,” he added for good measure when her lips pursed ever so slightly. “Aw to hell with it, I might as well just tell you, since it’s like you said and you’re going to know everything I’m feeling anyway. I’m just a little nervous about it all,” he confessed. “If something goes wrong, Mum is going to find out and the shit will really hit the fan then. I mean you’ve never really seen my Mum when she is seriously hacked off about something. I might be able to protect you from Death Eaters, but I doubt I’ll be able to protect you from her. And the thing is, I know how you are. You won’t back down either. She’ll demand that we take the Lànain charms off and you’ll look her dead in the eye and refuse to do it. If the two of you dig in and butt heads it’s going to be bad. Really, really bad.”

“And you don’t want to get caught in the middle of it?” Hermione asked, shaking her head disapprovingly.

“Hell no,” Ron replied with complete honesty. “But it’s not that so much. I’ll take your side, naturally.” *And by that I mean I’ll stand behind you, way behind you, and keep my mouth shut.* “But the thing is... I don’t know if that will be enough. I honestly don’t know what will happen if you two ever really square off. I just know it will be ugly. You’re both stubborn as hell and used to getting your own way, but eventually one of you will have to give.”

“Are you saying that you want me to give in?” Hermione asked, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “You don’t want me to stand up to her? You want me to let her control us?”
“Of course not,” Ron sighed. Why was this so hard to explain. It wasn’t that he wanted her to do anything per se, he was simply worried about the magnitude of the fight that would ensue and uncertain as to who the overall victor would be. “I don’t want you to do anything,” he tried to explain. “Nothing you wouldn’t normally do anyway. I’m just worried about which one of you will win.”

“Oh, it’ll be me,” Hermione stated point blank. “You can count on that.”

See, this is exactly what I’m talking about, Ron thought. Stubborn and unwilling to give in or even consider the fact that you might not come out on top.

“But it isn’t going to come to that,” Hermione stated, “Because there is nothing wrong with this potion,” she insisted, taking it out of Ron’s hand and tossing the strip of lace and the spots she’s cut out of his bedspread into the jar. “It is going to work just fine,” she continued, holding the jar beneath him as she cautiously removed the condom he was wearing, and dumped it’s contents into the potion as well. “Well, that’s that,” she said, after replacing the lid and shaking it until the thick goopy mess inside turned bright purple. “It’s finished. Do you want to honor of having the first taste or shall I?”
Chapter 30: Busted

“Now what?” Ron asked, after Hermione took the jar containing the Coupling Potion out of his hands, placed her lips where his had been and swilled down a large mouthful.

“That’s it,” she informed him as she replaced the lid and resealed the jar with her wand.

“That can’t be it,” Ron protested. He felt exactly the same way he’d felt before he’d tasted the potion, except for the fact that his stomach was churning.

Definitely worse than Polyjuice Potion, he told himself.

“Well it is,” Hermione stated, shoving the remaining potion back into her rucksack, before leaning through the curtains surrounding Ron’s bed and setting her bag on the floor. “It wears off gradually,” she said, as she sat back up. “Maybe it comes on the same way.”

“So you aren’t feeling it either?” he asked, sounding somewhat accusatory.

“I did too make it right,” Hermione snapped out of no where.

“Can you....you’re not--” Ron started to sputter. “Are you reading my mind?”

“I don’t have to,” she retorted, as she slid beneath the blankets on his bed and hid her body from view. “It’s written all over your face.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding both relieved and a bit disappointed at the same time. “So it’s not working then?” he asked, yanking his bedspread back and sliding under the covers beside her.

“Even when it does kick in, we won’t be able to read each other’s mind,” she reminded him. “It’s just strong feelings, remember? It’s not like I’m going to know everything you’re thinking.”

“Well, that’s good,” Ron chuckled. Because if you knew what I thought about most of the day you’d probably kill me.

“What’s this?” Hermione asked, rolling over on her side and coming up on one elbow to look at him disapprovingly. “You wouldn’t by chance be trying to keep secrets from me now, would you Mr. Weasley?” she teased, finally breaking into a smile as she reached forward and placed her free hand on his stomach. “Because if that’s the case,” she said, tracing light circles with her fingertips, “I may just have to torture them out of you.”

“Oh you think you can get the better of me, do you?” Ron scoffed. “In case you hadn’t noticed,” he said, his eyes falling to the silver charm hanging between her breasts, “you’re disarmed and I’m bigger than you are.”

“The bigger they are, the harder they fall,” Hermione replied flippantly when she saw Ron smirk at
her. And you’re going down you smug prat, she thought, moments before she dug her fingers into his stomach and rolled over on top of him.

“That’s not fair,” Ron yelped in surprise, squirming beneath her and trying to scoot away when she began tickling him in earnest.

“Who said I was going to fight fair?” she laughed, as she continued poking him in the ribs. “It isn’t fair that you’re bigger than me, so I’ll just have to compensate for it.”

But no sooner had the words left her mouth, then the world unexpectedly shifted. Before Hermione even knew what had happened, she found herself lying flat on her back with Ron straddling her hips.

“I can cheat too, you know?” he said complacently, grabbing her hands, prying them off his stomach and using his weight advantage to hold her lower body down while he pressed her wrists against the bed on either side of her head.

“Get off!” Hermione cried, bucking beneath him in an attempt to upset his balance and knock him over.

It annoyed her that it had been so easy for him to subdue her and yet at the same time, there was something exciting about it. Maybe it was the fact that they’d been rolling around on the bed stark naked or the way Ron’s eyes had ranked down her body briefly before snapping back up and locking on her face again. Maybe it was the fact that he’d hardened right before her eyes, but she had to admit it to herself. As infuriated as she was by the fact that she was all but helpless in her current position, she was aroused as well.

“GET OFF!” she shouted again, planting her feet firmly on the mattress and heaving her lower body against him while trying to twist it at the same time.

“You... you’re... Bloody hell,” Ron swore, his eyes going wide as he stared down at her red face. “This turns you on.”

“It does not,” she lied, the color in her cheeks becoming even more prominent as embarrassment was added to the mix of emotions she was feeling. How could she possibly be turned on by the fact that he’d wrestled the control away from her? She was a control freak for heaven’s sake. She always wanted to be the one that was in charge.

Except in the bedroom, a little voice whispered in the back of her mind. It excites you when he exerts himself.

“Does too,” Ron retorted with a smirk.

“You’re one to talk,” Hermione snapped, dropping her eyes down to his erection, hoping she’d be able to shift the blame, and the embarrassment, onto him.

“I didn’t do that,” Ron informed her, his ears coloring ever so slightly. “Not by myself anyway,” he added. “You helped,” he stated, smirking again. “You were annoyed, but you were turned on too, and that annoyed you even more. I could feel it. Just a little,” he admitted, when Hermione subconsciously arched one of her eyebrows at him. “But it had to be you,” he said, releasing her hands. “There’s no reason for me to be annoyed,” he chuckled, “I’m the one that came out on top.”

“PRAT!” Hermione cried, smacking him in the shoulder when he let go of her and pulled himself into a more upright position.

“You like it,” Ron sniggered, his blue eyes sparkling. “Admit it.”
“I will not,” she retorted in a dignified voice.

“Admit it or I’ll have no choice but to torture it out of you,” Ron replied, shooting her one of his lopsided smiles. He was definitely enjoying this. He had her dead to rights and they both knew it. Even so, this was Hermione he was talking about and Hermione never admitted defeat, a fact that he was counting on.

“An empty threat,” she shot back with a smug smile of her own. “I’m not the one that is ticklish.”

“Maybe not,” Ron said, licking his lips and allowing his eyes to roam down her slender body once more. “But, I still know how to make you squirm,” he announced, reaching around behind his back and thrusting his hand between her thighs. “I knew it,” he proclaimed triumphantly, one finger slipping between her folds for the briefest of moments to confirm what he already knew. “Let’s hear you deny it now,” he jeered, grinning down at her arrogantly.

“Smug prat,” Hermione replied, unable to stop herself from smiling when she felt an unexpected wave of accomplishment surge through her for a brief moment. What’s he done that he’s so proud of? she wondered, realizing that it was Ron’s emotions she had sensed.

“You better knock that off or I might start calling you ‘bighead boy’,” she threatened, managing to take him by surprise and insult him at the same time. That ought to teach you to feel smug, she thought, knowing how much he’d hate having his ego compared to Percy’s.

Right on cue, Ron’s mouth fell open in indignation, but he recovered quickly. Far quicker than Hermione would have expected in fact. Probably because he could sense that she didn’t really mean what she said.

“Well, it is getting rather large,” he said crassly, glancing down at his erection and giving her a cheeky smile. “Not that I heard you complaining earlier,” he added, once she’d gasped.

Gottcha, he thought, chuckling softly to himself. I know how to shock you too.

“I can’t believe you just said that,” Hermione said, still gaping at him in amazement.

“Stop trying to change the subject,” Ron shot back, moving his finger upward so he could touch her where she was the most sensitive. “Admit it,” he demanded, gently stroking her in a circular motion, just like she’d taught him to do. “Admit that you were... that you are turned on. There’s no denying it, love,” he said, holding her eyes with his own as he stopped caressing her and dipped his finger into her body. “You are so bloody hot,” Ron growled out when she whimpered and he felt her tighten around his finger. “You drive me crazy, Hermione. Do you know that? You have no idea how much I want you,” he said, his chest rising and falling in rapid succession as he pulled his finger back and pushed it into her again.

Although the truth was that Hermione did know. She’d have to be blind not to see the way his body had responded. But it was more than that. She could see it in his eyes as well. His bright blue eyes had darkened to a smoky cobalt color and they now burned with desire. The same desire he was transmitting directly into her body, not just with his actions or his words, but through the bond they shared. Hermione could feel Ron’s want, his need, course through her and combine with her own. What she didn’t realize was that she was sending it right back to him, essentially creating a feedback loop of ever-increasing desire between the two of them.

“Oh God, Mione,” Ron groaned loudly, when her lusts slammed into him and intensified his own. He’d wanted to wait. He’d wanted to tease her and drag it out. He’d wanted to make sure that she enjoyed herself before he made love to her again, but suddenly everything was different and he
didn’t know if he’d be able to wait that long.

“It’s all right,” Hermione said, almost as if she’d sensed his hesitation. She didn’t give him time to react. She sat upright, wrapped her arms around Ron’s torso, and pressed her lips against his neck before he had a chance to reply. “I want you too,” she whispered, her breath hot against his skin. “Now,” she demanded, licking her way up to his ear and falling backwards, pulling him down on top of her in the process. “I want you now,” she said, just before his mouth came crashing down on top of hers and he silenced her with a hungry kiss.

“OH... OH, GOD!” Hermione shrieked in astonishment, when Ron surged forward one final time and the coil of desire wound tightly within her snapped without warning, causing her entire body to shudder right along with his mere seconds before his arms gave out and he fell on top of her. “OH GOD, RON!” she half shouted, half moaned, as the sweet wave of release washed over her, shooting darts of pleasure all the way down to the tips of her toes.

That wasn’t supposed to happen, was the first coherent thought to pop into her mind as Ron somehow managed to roll off her and they both fought to regain their breath. *It wasn’t supposed to be like that.*

She wasn’t supposed to have an orgasm from mere intercourse alone. It just didn’t make sense for that to happen yet. It was far too soon. This was all too new. Not just for her, but for him as well. They were both too inexperienced for that to happen. All of the books had warned her that she’d have to become accustomed to it first. And yet clearly, the books had been wrong, because it had happened and it had been glorious.

*MY GOD!* she thought, her brown eyes popping open as she replayed the past ten minutes over in her mind and realized that they’d come undone at the same time. *It was him!* the part of her mind that had to analyze everything situation shouted. *That’s why you lost control so quickly. You were feeding off of him. You were feeling what he was feeling.*

*OH! MY! GOD!* she cried out in her head, as several different questions occurred almost simultaneously. *Does it always feel like that for him? Is it always going to be that intense? Will I feel it every time he has an orgasm, or will it only work like that when we’re together? Maybe it was just a fluke. Maybe it’ll just be this one time and once we get used to it, I won’t feel him anymore. I wonder if he could feel me as well. Maybe he was feeding off me too and that’s why he...*

But she never did finish the thought. In fact, all of the questions she’d been pondering were lost when Ron’s arm snaked around her side and her stomach flipped without warning. For a moment she thought the fluttering sensation she was feeling was nerves, but no sooner had that thought occurred to her, then the butterflies in her stomach took flight and soared straight to her heart. That’s when she recognized it for what it really was. It wasn’t nervousness that she was feeling, it was love. She could feel how much Ron cared about her. It was pouring off him as he pulled her closer and the sheer weight of it was overwhelming.

“Mione?” he said, opening his eyes and coming up on his elbow to study her when he heard her breath catch. “What’s wrong?” he asked anxiously, sensing her distress. *BUGGER!* “Did I hurt you?” he asked, fighting down his own wave of panic when he saw the tears glistening on her cheeks. “Merlin,” he groaned miserably. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you tell me I was...”

“No,” Hermione interrupted, opening her eyes and smiling at him. “It’s not that,” she insisted. “It’s... I can feel you,” she said, placing a hand on her chest just above her rapidly beating heart. “Right
here. I can feel you. I can really feel you,” she said, shifting onto her side and pressing her face against his neck. “I had no idea,” she mumbled against him. “No idea that it was that strong. There was always part of me that was worried that maybe what you felt wasn’t the same, but it is. Oh Ron,” she cried happily, thrusting her left hand into his hair and giving him a fierce kiss. “I love you too. I love you so much it actually hurts. Can you feel it?” she asked, drawing the emotion forward and purposely trying to broadcast it outward. “Can you feel me?”

“BLOODY HELL!” Ron yelped, his eyes going wide when the happiness and the contentment he’d been feeling increased significantly. “Is that you?” he asked, staring at her and seeing the same adoration that was currently coursing through his body reflected back at him from her glassy eyes. “How are you... stop it,” he said, when his own eyes started to sting and he realized how much it was affecting him. Before I do something girly like burst into tears, he continued in his head, shifting uncomfortably and averting his eyes as he tried to cope with the onslaught of emotions threatening to engulf him.

“It takes your breath away, doesn’t it?” Hermione asked, smiling at him as a fresh stream of tears spilled down her cheeks. “It’s one thing to hear the words,” she whispered, “and another to actually feel them. I didn’t expect it to be so strong. It’s...Oh Ron,” she moaned, throwing herself against him and hugging him again tightly when she felt his embarrassment and the fear that was lurking beneath it. “You aren’t going to lose me,” she said, knowing that she’d hit the mark when his head jerked up. “I’m not going anywhere,” she assured him. “This isn’t just about protecting Harry, or you, or myself either, for that matter. This is what I want. You’re the one that I want. I’m not going to change my mind about that. Even once the war is over, I’m not letting you go. You’re stuck with me.”

Until death do us part, he thought, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it out loud. Why tempt fate?

“You don’t know that,” he said instead. “You can’t predict what’s going to happen. You might not have a choice. I might not have a choice,” he said, his voice breaking.

“DAMN IT!” Ron swore loudly. “Look what you’ve done,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “You’ve turned me into a girl with all this emotional rubbish. I don’t want to think about this. I don’t want to talk about it and I most definitely don’t want to feel it, so stop sending that sympathetic pity shit my way.”

“Pity?” Hermione snapped back. “I don’t pity you, you daft git. I love you.” Although sometimes I have to ask myself why. “And when you’re upset I want to comfort you. The two go hand in hand, so get used to it.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he stated again. “Blokes don’t get all feely and moan about their fears or their problems.”

“Well maybe they should,” Hermione shot back. “When was the last time brooding solved a problem?”

“You’re such a girl sometimes,” Ron groaned, flopping over on his back and covering his eyes with his arm.

“I was certain that you’d figured that out before now,” Hermione teased, settling down beside him and resting her head on his chest. “How thick can you be?” she added, snuggling into him when he moved his arm off his face and wrapped it around her shoulder. “Do you feel better now?” she asked, meaning now that they’d had a nice bicker and things were back on familiar ground.

“Any time,” Hermione assured him, closing her eyes and listening to the comforting rhythm of his heart thumping beneath her ear. “What time is it?” she asked after lying beside him in silence for a few minutes.

“Dunno,” Ron mumbled groggily. “We’ve still got time,” he added, not even bothering to open his eyes and look at his watch. Not that he would have been able to, since the arm he was wearing it on was wrapped around Hermione’s back and he was too comfortable to go to all the trouble of moving it. “They won’t be back for a while though. A short nap won’t hurt. Wake me up in a half-hour,” he mumbled, yawning again, “and we can have one more go before they get back.”

“You’re incorrigible,” Hermione teased, hiding her smile against his chest.

“And you love it,” he countered with a grin of his own. “I know. I can feel it.”

You’re right, she thought happily, but she decided it was best to keep the comment to herself and let him get some sleep. He was going to need it.

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“Fivemoreminutes,” he grumbled, rolling over and turning his back to whoever was speaking to him. The fact that something was off about the voice didn’t seep into Ron’s fatigued mind until the person that was trying to rouse him poked him in the shoulder and spoke again.

“You’re late,” the voice said, this time much louder. “Get up!”

What the hell? Ron thought, finally realizing that the timbre of the voice speaking to him was much deeper than it should have been. “Mione?” he mumbled, rolling over and reaching for the spot where she had been sleeping.

“If you try and snog me in your sleep, I swear I’ll deck you,” Harry said, pulling his face away from Ron quickly and taking a step backwards. “Best mate or no best mate.”

“Shuddup,” the redhead shot back, now fully awake, despite his wishes. “You weren’t the best mate I was hoping to find hovering over me when I woke up,” he continued, opening his eyes and glancing around the room. “Where’s Hermione?”

“Downstairs where it’s safe,” Harry shot back. “Now I see why she asked me to come up and get you. She was afraid you were going to attack her or something.”

“Shuddup,” Ron groaned again, sitting upright and running his fingers through his already tousled hair. “What did you wake me up for anyway?” he asked, staring at the closest window.

“I told you,” Harry replied, studying his best friend closely and debating with himself about whether or not he ought to ask the question that had been on his mind all night, “she asked me to come up and get you. You’re late.”

“For what? It can’t be time for classes yet. It’s still dark outside.”

“Yeah,” Harry retorted with a soft laugh. “That darkness is called night, and on this particular night you happen to have rounds, so you might want to consider getting dressed before Hermione gets tired of waiting for you and sends Ginny up here to get you moving.”

That definitely got Ron attention. The last thing he wanted was his sister barging into his room
unannounced and catching him starkers. It was bad enough that she knew what he’d been doing. She
didn’t need to see any evidence of it. It might give her ideas of her own.

Pushing that thought aside, Ron flipped his covers back, jumped out of bed, and quickly threw on
the clothes he’d been wearing earlier in the evening.

“So,” Harry said, shifting back and forth a bit, but no longer able to contain himself. “Er... you and
Hermione went through with it then?”

“Yup,” Ron replied, purposely keeping his eyes on the trainers he was lacing up.

“So.. um--” Harry mumbled, “You’re... um... married then? Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Ron said, his ears flushing slightly when he looked up and realized his best mate was
staring at him eagerly.

Oh, to hell with it.

“So how was it?” Harry blurted out, his curiosity finally getting the better of him. “I mean, I don’t
want the details or anything,” he added quickly, his face even darker than Ron’s now. “Just, you
know, how was it in general? Was it what you expected?”

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“It was...um...”

“Yes?” Ginny asked keenly, sitting on the very edge of her chair and leaning forward as if she
couldn’t wait for Hermione to answer her question. “Well, come on. How was it?”

“Er...” Hermione mumbled softly.

“Was it awful?” Ginny asked, making sure to keep her voice low so no one else would hear what the
two of them were talking about. “I can’t believe that you actually went through with it,” she said,
before her friend even had a chance to answer her. “Ron is such a git sometimes and now you’re
stuck with him and... and... just tell me already. I’m dying here. What was it like.”

“It was... um...”

“It was bad, wasn’t it?”

“It most certainly was not.”

“So it was good then?” Ginny asked, her bright brown eyes twinkling in the firelight.

“Yes, it was perfectly lovely,” Hermione assured her.

“Perfectly lovely?” Ginny repeated with a snort. “That’s code for it sucked, but I don’t want to hurt
his feelings or damage his fragile ego.”

“It is not,” Hermione stated, shooting Ginny an indignant look as if she were the one that had just
been insulted. “I was just trying to spare you the gory details because this is your brother we’re
talking about,” she continued, “But if you really want to know it was--”

“Yes?” Ginny prodded. “It was...”

“It was hot,” Hermione replied. Yes. I’d say that word sums it up nicely. Hot. Scorch the sheets,
steam up the windows kind of hot.

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“Was it what I expected?” Ron asked, restating Harry’s question while he cast around in his head searching for a way to describe his experience without revealing anything too personal about Hermione. “No,” he finally answered, deciding that honesty was probably the best course of action. “It was better.”

“Better?” Harry questioned, his green eyes going wide behind his glasses. He’d heard Dean and Seamus discuss it enough times, and even though he didn’t believe half of what they said, he still had a fairly active imagination and if the real thing was better than what he could imagine, that was saying something.

“Oh yeah,” Ron said, nodding his head back and forth as if to emphasize that fact. “It was...” he started, then stopped for a moment, searching for the perfect word to use. “It was bloody brilliant.”

“Really?” Harry asked, mostly because he couldn’t think of anything else to say. “Wow, that’s... um... that’s really great.”

“Boy, I’ll say,” Ron muttered under his breath. “It was just... really intense, you know?” he said, after looking at his best friend closely and thinking about how curious he’d be if their positions were reversed. “It was different than... well, you know, anything I could do to myself.”

“What did she feel like?” Harry asked without thinking. He cringed almost as soon as the words left his mouth, wishing that he could take them back. Ron was extremely protective of Hermione. Hell, he was protective of Hermione. If either one of them heard another bloke talking about her in a questionable manner they’d take it upon themselves to defend her honor, even if that meant cursing the hell of the offending party. So Harry was more than a little surprised when Ron turned bright red, not with anger, but with embarrassment and actually fumbled out an answer to his question.

“Er... hot,” he said, averting his eyes again. “Just... um... really really hot. And soft. It’s...er... not really something that I can describe. I mean the words don’t do it... don’t do her justice. She was just...really really...um... hot.”

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“Ron is a lot of things, but hot isn’t one of them,” Ginny scoffed.

“You’re just blinded by the fact that he’s your brother,” Hermione shot back, hoping that the embarrassment she was feeling didn’t show. “But he’s... it was... Okay,” she sighed, searching for a way to get her point across without giving Ginny too many details. “You know the way we fight?” she finally said. “Well, it was like that,” she added, after her friend nodded her head. “When Ron and I argue we’re totally focused on each other. When we row, Ron throws himself into it completely. He says and does whatever pops into his head. But he always seems to know exactly what button to push and when to push them. Once we get started it’s like what we’re arguing about doesn’t really even matter anymore because it’s moved beyond that and developed into a competition to see which one of us can push the other one over the edge first. Well, it was the same thing, only without the anger and with a little less screaming.”

“EEEWWWW YUCK!” Ginny cried, her entire face wrinkling up in revulsion at the mere thought of her brother being vocal in bed. “Too much information,” she moaned, closing her eyes and holding up one hand to stop Hermione from going any further. “That’s just... EEEWW! You made him scream? Gross. That’s just... eeeww.”
“You’re the one that kept pushing,” Hermione said in a serves you right kind of voice. “I warned you that you didn’t really want to hear the details.”

“So you went out of your way to make me sick just to prove that you were right?”

“I was right,” Hermione chuckled. “You should have left it at ‘perfectly lovely’.”

“I hope you realize that I’ll never be able to look at the two of you together again with having horrific flashes of the pair of you in some lust induced frenzy trying to see who’ll cry uncle first.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Hermione said, “It was--”

“Lovely,” Ginny said quickly, cutting her off before she could finished. “Perfectly lovely. Yeah, I get it,” she said, as Hermione glanced down at her watch and sighed loudly. “So, uh... which one of you actually did cry uncle first?” Ginny finally asked against her better judgment. She didn’t really want to know and yet at the same time she did. If only it wasn’t Ron we were talking about.

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“All right. I’m coming already. Hold your hippogriffs, will ya?” Ron mumbled to himself, grabbing his school robes and throwing them on when he felt Hermione’s impatience surge through him.

It’s not like the rule breakers are going anywhere, he thought with a sigh, before disregarding the feeling and redirecting his full attention to Harry, who was looking at him oddly.

“Er... look Harry, can we, you know, finish this conversation later? I mean, I’m not trying to put you off or anything,” Ron added before Harry had a chance to answer. “But you know how Hermione gets and she has a thing about being late for rounds.”

“Right,” Harry replied, nodding his head in understanding. “You better get going then. You’re already late.”

“We can finish this when I get back,” Ron said, as he followed his best friend out of their dorm room and into the hall. “As long as Finnigan isn’t within earshot.”

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“Speak of the devil,” Ginny said, taking in the wide smile on Hermione’s face, then glancing over her shoulder to find her brother and Harry descending the stairs. “So much for girl talk,” she griped when Hermione jumped up and hurried over to meet the two boys at the foot of the stairs.

“Mmmm, you smell good,” Ron said, placing both of his hands on her waist and pulling her against him as soon as she was within range. “Sorry I kept you waiting,” he whispered. “I thought you were going to wake me up.”

“I decided to take a bath instead,” Hermione replied, shrugging her shoulders and biting her lips to hold back her laughter when he started to pout like a petulant child that had missed out on a treat. “You really are incorrigible,” she whispered into his ear, her cheeks blooming with color when she felt his arousal shoot through her.

My God, she thought. All I had to do was mention the word bath. Is it really that easy?

“Didn’t we already establish that fact?” he asked, leaning forward to give her a quick kiss.

“There will be none of that while we’re on rounds,” Hermione scolded, yanking her head back and
pushing him away before he could reach her lips.

“But we’re not on rounds yet,” he replied with a lopsided smile.

“Sickening, aren’t they?” Ginny said, looking at Harry and pretending to shove her finger down her throat.

“Maybe not,” Hermione said, disregarding Ginny’s comment and addressing Ron’s instead. “But the first year rule is still in effect,” she stated.

“Bloody first years,” Ron grumbled under his breath, unintentionally transmitting his frustration and annoyance to Hermione, who immediately frowned.

“What’s the first year rule?” Harry asked, looking at Ron and then Ginny, who shrugged her shoulders.

“You know Hermione and her blasted rules,” Ron griped. “I’m not allowed to touch her in front of the first years. Isn’t that the most ridiculous thing you’ve ever heard?”

“It is not ridiculous,” Hermione snapped. “And you are allowed to touch me, just not in a way that is inappropriate.”

“Meaning I can’t touch her,” Ron said to Harry.

“We’re Prefects.”

“So bloody what?”

“Oh, I get it,” Ginny chimed in. “You’re afraid that it will diminish your standing in their eyes. You’re worried they’ll lose respect for you if they know you have a boyfriend and do things like snog in empty classrooms.”

“No,” Hermione objected, “It’s because they’re eleven and it will--”

“Gross them out,” Ron finished, rolling his eyes as he restated the excuse she’d given him. “Yeah, whatever,” he added, knowing full well that his sister’s explanation was a lot closer to the mark.

“It grosses me out,” Ginny informed them.

“That’s just a fringe benefit,” her brother retorted, his whole face lighting up.

“Are you going to instate a ‘Ginny’ rule?” she continued, as if she hadn’t heard him.

“Yeah, the snog in front of Ginny whenever you want her to bugger off rule,” Ron replied, smiling at his own joke. “I actually like the sound of that one. Can we instate a Ginny rule?” he asked Hermione.

“Oh, you’re hilarious,” Ginny snapped. “Too bad it’ll apply to Harry as well.”

“No, it won’t,” Ron argued. “We don’t snog in front of Harry and we don’t want him to bugger off, just you.”

“Ron!” Hermione hissed, smacking him in the shoulder. “That’s not true,” she said to Ginny. “Come on,” she said, pushing Ron towards the portrait hole. “We need to get going, we’re already late. We’ll be back around midnight,” she said to Harry, just before they crossed the threshold and disappeared from view.
Seeing as how Gryffindor Tower was located on the seventh floor, the Gryffindor Prefects usually started their rounds at the top of the castle and worked their way down through the lower levels. Of course most of the student population knew this, just like they all knew that the Slytherin and the Hufflepuff Prefects started in the sublevels and worked their way up. Knowing which Prefects were on patrol on any given night and what route they took was something any successful rule breakers could tell you. Hogwarts was a big place after all, and even with Filch and Mrs. Norris prowling around, it was still a fairly easy matter to avoid being seen. Especially when the rule breaker in question happened to have an Invisibility Cloak at his disposal.

He could follow the caretaker down the corridors all night long if he wanted to, and Filch would never know the difference. Unless that blasted cat was with him and she usually was. But it didn’t matter. He didn’t sneak out after curfew just to follow that pathetic Squib around. He had far more important business to attend to and if all went as he expected, the school could very well be short two Gryffindor Prefects by this time tomorrow.

“Wha?” Ron said thickly, turning away from the platter of goodies two house elves were offering him and spinning around to look at Hermione, who had already finished eating the sandwich she’d made for herself and was waiting for him by the kitchen door. “What’s so amusing?” he asked after swallowing the remains of the eclair he’d shoved in his mouth just before she’d burst out laughing. “Spotted someone out after curfew did you?” he asked, when he noted the Marauder's Map clutched in her hands. That explained the exhilaration and the sensation of triumphant glee that had unexpectedly jolted through him.

“I’ve got a present for you,” she said, a huge smile plastered across her face as she looked up from the map and met Ron’s gaze.

“There’s something really wrong with you being this excited about catching someone else breaking the rules.”

“This isn’t just someone,” she said, grabbing his hand and dragging him out of the kitchen before he had a chance to snatch up anymore sweets.

“If you aren’t going to tell me who it is, will you at least tell me where we’re going?” Ron asked, when they bypassed the classrooms on the first, second, and third floors and continued on to the fourth.

“The Library,” Hermione answered, as she hurried along ahead of him. “No, wait,” she amended, glancing down at the map again and stopping abruptly. “We have to go back to the stairs,” she said, spinning around and pushing past him. “He’s on the fifth floor now.”

“Who is?” Ron asked, yet again. “Aw come on,” he moaned, changing directions and following after her when she didn’t reply. “Just tell me already. This isn’t exactly my idea of a fun surprise. It’s not like you can ruin it for me.”

“He’s already reached the Prefect’s Bathroom,” Hermione said, whether to herself or to him, Ron wasn’t really sure.

“So it’s another Prefect you chasing?” he sighed. “Hey, wait a minute,” he said, a new thought
occurring to him. “You can’t just barge in on some bloke in the bath. Even if it is after curfew. Especially if it’s in the Prefect’s Bathroom, he thought, images of the things he’d like to do with Hermione in that pool sized tub springing to mind. “You wouldn’t want someone doing that to us if we were the ones in there together.”

“He isn’t going to take a bath,” she stated, “He’s... I think he’s looking for someone.”

“Who?”

“Us.”

“WHAT!”

“We missed the feast. Everyone noticed. Ginny told me. Seamus and Neville told everyone you were sick my the way,” she added, almost as if it were an afterthought.

Of course he noticed, she continued in her head. And now he’s checking all of the places he thinks we might go to snog. He’s hoping to catch us shirking our responsibilities so he can get us in trouble. Well, I’ve got news for him.

“Come on,” she said, increasing her pace. “If we hurry we might be able to get ahead of him and catch him at the next logical spot,” Hermione said, grabbing Ron’s hand to prevent him from slowing down as they sped up the stairwell.

“Which is?” Ron demanded.

“The Room of Requirement.”

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“Accio Invisibility Cloak!” Hermione shouted, pointing her wand at the doorway leading into the Room of Requirement, when it appeared out of nowhere, seemingly of it’s own accord, opened, and then closed again.

“Well, well, well,” Ron jeered, leaning back against the moving tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and pointing his wand at a Draco Malfoy, who had just materialized in the corridor in front of them. “What have we got here?” he asked, a huge smile plastered across his face. “Looks like the ferret thought he could sneak around the castle after hours and not get caught. I don’t care what anyone else says,” he stated jubilantly. “Revenge IS sweet!”

“Well then by all means, be my guest,” Hermione chuckled, balling Malfoy’s Invisibility Cloak up and shoving it under her arm as he glared at her murderously.

“I’m a Prefect,” Malfoy hissed, redirecting his attention to Ron, who was still holding him at wand point. “You can’t give me detention.”

“Oh, but I can,” Ron sang out triumphantly. “In fact, I just did. Consider yourself notified.”

“You’re free to take it up with the head of your house, of course,” Hermione chimed in with a smug look of her own. “You can bet we’ll be handing this Invisibility Cloak over to ours.”

“I have permission to be--”

“Bollocks,” Ron cut him off. “You wouldn’t have been hiding beneath that cloak if you’d had permission, which means your arse is mine.”
“Ours,” Hermione corrected him.

“All right, fine,” the redhead conceded. “Ours. I say we stun him and float his busted arse down to McGonagall, then sit back and watch while she rips him a new one. What do you say?” he asked Hermione.

“Well, I did say this one was all yours,” she replied. “Although technically we can’t stun him,” she added regretfully. “Unless he resists or tries to make a run for it. But I doubt he’s thick enough to try something like that. So,” she said, pointing her own wand at Malfoy, “I believe you know the way.”

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“You’ll pay for this, Weasley,” Draco hissed at Ron, who had just used a sticking charm to secure the blond Slytherin’s feet to the floor right outside McGonagall’s office so he wouldn’t be tempted to try and make a run for it now that Hermione had gone back upstairs to fetch their Transfigurations professor. “Mark my words. You and that filthy little Mudblood whore are dead.”

“Shut your bloody mouth!” Ron shouted angrily, tightening his grip on his wand, which was still pointed directly at Malfoy’s chest. “Or I’ll shut it for you,” he threatened. “Damn it,” he mumbled under his breath, feeling a powerful surge of anxiety wash over him almost as soon as the threat left his mouth.

Hermione had obviously felt his anger and she was worried about what might happen while she was gone.

“Hit a nerve, did I?” Malfoy jeered. “I suggest you get used to it, because you’re going to be hearing a lot more of it now that you’re having it off with filth like that. No self-respecting Pureblood will have anything to do with you. Not now that you’ve shoved your prick up that tainted Mudblood cunt.”

“I TOLD YOU TO SHUT THE FUCK UP!” Ron bellowed, taking one step forward then catching himself when Hermione’s anxiety levels increase and her apprehension threatened to drown out his rage.

How the hell was he suppose to deal with two conflicting desires at the same time? He couldn’t very well give into his anger and knock that smirk off Malfoy’s pointy face, if he was afraid to do it. Although, truth be told, it wasn’t so much the hitting Malfoy part that he, or more precisely Hermione, was worried about, it was what came after that. She was worried about what the consequences would be for him if he gave into temptation. He was lucky he hadn’t been expelled after the beating he’d given Draco on the Hogwarts Express. But if he staged a repeat performance, there was no telling what would happen. At the very least he’d lose his Prefect badge.

“Fuck!” Ron cursed loudly, forcing himself to take three steps backwards, instead of giving into to his own urge to sweep forward and wring Malfoy’s neck.

I know, he sighed in his head, knowing exactly what Hermione would say to him if she were standing there. He’s not worth it, he scolded himself for her. He’s just trying to provoke me. If I fall for it, he wins. I know. I know. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to stand here and let him talk that way about you.

“To hell with it,” the aggravated redhead said, flicking his wrist and muttering an incantation under his breath. “Let’s see you open your foul mouth now,” Ron said, leaning back against the wall and bringing one knee up in a casual pose, smirking at Draco, whose lips had just been glued together.
“What?” Hermione asked Ron, who was studying her intently as they left McGonagall’s office twenty minutes later.

“That was... I can’t believe you just did that,” the tall redhead exclaimed, both shocked and impressed at the same time. “Lying to Snape is one thing,” he said, as the two of them made their way back up to Gryffindor Tower, “but you... you just told a bald-faced lie to McGonagall. And you didn’t even have to take any time to think it up,” he continued, clearly in awe. “When she asked how you knew where Malfoy was, despite the fact that he was wearing an Invisibility Cloak, you came up with an answered just like that,” Ron said, snapping his fingers for effect, “and it sounded completely plausible.”

“What did you expect me to do?” Hermione asked, transmitting her embarrassment to Ron and causing his ears to flush right along with her cheeks. “I couldn’t very well tell her that I spotted him on the Marauder’s Map,” she added. “Especially with Malfoy standing there. He’d go straight to his father. Can you imagine what they’d do to get their hands on a map that shows where Harry is at any given moment? I had to lie. There was no other choice.”

“Obviously,” Ron agreed.

The fact that she couldn’t mention the map was a given. Harry would kill them both if they got his map confiscated. He just didn’t expect her to come up with a convincing cover story so effortlessly.

“But you were so bloody calm about it,” he continued. “I mean, you weren’t nervous, or worried, or anything. Not even a little bit. You were perfectly calm the whole time. If I didn’t know any better.... it was almost like you believed it yourself.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Hermione said, brushing it aside.

“But how do you do it?”

“I’m not going to teach you how to lie,” she snapped.

“I know how to lie,” Ron retorted. “I just don’t know how to fool people into believing me.”

“That’s because you wear your heart on your sleeve,” Hermione explained. “Everything you think and feel is right out there for everyone to see. When you get caught doing something you shouldn’t be doing, it’s written all over your face. It doesn’t matter what you say, because you’ve already given yourself away. That’s what a Legilimens does,” she stated. “He uses your emotional reactions to read you. When people lie, they usually call forward the memory of what they know to be true. A Legilimens waits for you to do that and then extracts the memories from you. That’s how he knows that you’re lying. Because in that split second that you think about what really happened, he’s able to draw the memory out and see it for himself. But you only think about it that way because you know that you’re lying. If it was the truth, the memory wouldn’t conflict with the answer you gave to his question and there would be no emotional reaction. That’s why Harry is supposed to clear his mind at night and why he needs to learn to control his emotions. His emotions are what trigger the memories and give him away.”

“Huh?” Ron asked, the blank expression on his face giving way to genuine confusion as he tried to sort out what she’d just told him.

“Maybe you should just read that book on Occlumency that I gave Harry,” Hermione answered, when she not only saw, but felt how confused he was.
“But you weren’t using Occlumency,” Ron said, his brow knitting together. “Because you don’t know how and McGonagall isn’t a Legilimens.”

“It’s the same principal though,” Hermione tried to explain. “That story I told her about how we checked the Room of Requirement at the beginning of our rounds and about how I left a spell behind to alert us if anyone showed up after we’d moved on, was completely plausible. And when I was telling her that story, I wasn’t thinking about what really happened. I was thinking about the story I was telling her as if it were true, because it very well could have been true. Does that make sense?”

“No,” Ron moaned. “How can you think about something that you know is a lie as if it were the truth?”

“The point is, I didn’t call forth the memory of what really happened. I pushed it aside and blocked it, and the emotional reaction that goes with it, out like you’re supposed to when…. Oh, never mind,” she sighed, realizing that he still wasn’t really getting it. “Read Harry’s book and then what I just said will make a lot more sense.”

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“You are still going to come up to my room later, right?” Ron asked, once they entered the deserted Common Room together and Hermione made a beeline for the stairwell leading to the girls’ dorm.

“It’s late,” she replied, having no choice but to stop on the second step, because Ron had grabbed her from behind.

“So?” he whispered in her ear, before turning her around so she was facing him and tightening his grip on her waist. “I took a nap, remember?”

“But I didn’t,” Hermione said, almost as if she were hoping to discourage him. She was unable to keep the pretense up however, and broke into a smile mere seconds after the words left her mouth. “All right,” she acquiesced, shaking her head, disappointed with herself because she wasn’t able to block out his...urges,” she finished, after hunting for a tactful way to put it.

“You haven’t done a very good job of it then,” he said with a lopsided smile.

“Yes, I know,” she sighed. “Thank you so much for pointing out the obvious.”

“But why are you trying to fight it?” he asked, genuinely curious. “You want to. I know that you want to. You know that you want to. So why fight it?”

“Because now is not the time or the place?” Hermione replied.

“Hello?” Ron said, pulling one hand off her waist and sweeping it across the wide-open space before them. “Empty Common Room. Looks like a pretty good place to me.”

“It won’t be empty for long,” she insisted. “Your sister is bound to be waiting for me upstairs. In fact,
I wouldn’t be surprised if she wasn’t camped out in the hallway just outside my door. And I’d wager Harry is waiting for you as well. Now is not the time."

“But...” Ron moaned, despite the fact that he knew she was probably right. Harry had enough sense not to come downstairs looking for them, but Ginny wouldn’t be put off so easily. “But,” he said again, glancing over at the empty couch longingly. “Just for a little while?” he asked, hopefully.

“No,” Hermione stated firmly.

“Just for ten minutes?”

“It won’t end there and you know it.”

“But... you can just go up there and ... not without at least giving me a good night kiss?”

“Nice try,” Hermione chuckled, “but I’m not falling for it.”

She knew perfectly well what would happen if she gave in. One kiss would lead to another and then another, each more heated than the next. And if they weren’t careful, they were liable to get caught up in another one of those feedback loops and feed off each other’s desires until they forgot where they were and shagged each other senseless right there on that sofa. She knew it and Ron knew too, which is why he was pushing. She had to get out of there before her resolve cracked and she gave in, because she really did want to give in.

“I’m not falling for those puppy dog eyes either,” she informed him, “or that cute little pout, so you might as well save yourself the trouble.”

“Aw, you’re no fun,” Ron groaned, sounding both resigned and thoroughly disappointed. And yet disappointment wasn’t the emotion she was picking up from him, because he hadn’t really given up yet.

He was still hopeful and Hermione could feel it. But there was more to it than just that. There was also anticipation and an eagerness that didn’t quite make any sense, because it wasn’t sexual. But then she replayed his words over in her mind and realized exactly what it was he had done.

You’re no fun.

He wasn’t complaining. His wasn’t feeling let down. When being forthright about what he wanted didn’t work, he hadn’t given up. He’d simply switched gears and now he was trying to use stealth tactics on her. Ron wasn’t the best chess player in Hogwarts without a reason. He knew how to read his opponents and he was perfectly willing to use their weaknesses against them if need be. He knew full well how Hermione would respond to a challenge. He was daring her to prove him wrong.

DAMN HIM! Hermione thought, unwittingly transmitting her irritation to Ron, letting him know that the gig was up before she even opened her mouth to reply.

“Uh oh,” Ron said with a slight grimace.

“Oh my God!” she cried, sensing that his arousal increase as he made that statement. “I can’t
believe...” she started, then stopped herself before she got any further into her rant. “Yeah, I’m going to punish you,” she said instead, pushing his hands away and turning her back to him. “I’m going to leave you down here to deal with that on your own,” she added, tromping up the stairs and out of sight.

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For a moment all Ron could do was stand there in stunned disbelief and stare up the empty stairwell. She’d left. Hermione had actually walked away from him, despite the fact that she wanted to stay. Surely she wasn’t serious about him taking care of himself. And yet, the longer he stood there, the more certain he became that she was. He could feel her regret flood into him just as he realized that she wasn’t simply teasing him. She’d really gone to her room and she wasn’t going to come back down anytime soon. That’s when his own disappointment set in.

Hermione apparently felt it, wherever she was, because the regret she was feeling increased significantly.

At least you know she’s not really angry, he told himself as he slowly trudged over to his own stairwell. Because if she were, you’d be sleeping alone tonight. Which you’re not, he though happily. But you are going to have to wait, he added, sighing loudly as he climbed the stairs, because waiting wasn’t something he was good at.

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“You’re back earlier than I would have expected,” Parvati said as soon as the door opened and Hermione entered their shared dorm room. “Ginny Weasley was looking for you. It must be pretty important,” she added as her roommate swept past her without so much as a glance.

“Yeah, she’s only been by four times in the past hour,” Lavender piped in as she combed her long blond hair.

“But we told her that you probably wouldn’t be back for a while seeing as how you do such a thorough job of searching the castle when you’re on rounds.”

“Not to mention the occasional strip search,” Lavender whispered to Parvati just loud enough that she could be sure Hermione would hear her.

“Excuse me?” Hermione cried, taking the bait and spinning around to confront her roommates. “What exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“You know perfectly well what it means,” Lavender shot back. “You and your boyfriend, off on your own for hours at a time, ‘searching’ in all those empty classroom.”

For a moment, Hermione considered denying the fact that she’d ever sink so low as to snog Ron in an empty classroom, let alone that she’d already done it once while they were supposed to be on rounds, but then another thought occurred to her and she ran with it.

“I’m not the one that got caught in the Room of Requirement tonight,” she replied flippantly, before disregarding her roommates and allowing them to digest that juicy piece of gossip. “That out to keep them out of my business for a while,” she thought, hiding her smile by turning her back on them as she began removing her clothes.

“Oooh really?” Parvati all but squealed from her bed, coming up on her knees in her excitement. “Who was it?”
“Who was who?” Hermione asked, purposely playing coy so they’d think that she accidentally let that information slip and didn’t want to talk about it.

“Who was the couple you caught in the Room of Requirement?” Lavender asked eagerly, her brush having long since been dropped on the bed, where it lay forgotten.

“I never said it was a couple,” Hermione replied evasively as she slipped into her pajamas.

“Why would anyone want to go to the Room of Requirement by themselves?” Parvati asked Lavender, who shrugged her shoulders. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Unless they were meeting someone from another house there,” Lavender said, her whole face lighting up when Hermione froze beside her bed. “I’m right, aren’t I?” she asked gleefully, taking Hermione’s lack of a denial as confirmation.

“Well,” Hermione finally said, draping her dressing gown over the chair next to her desk, so she could retrieve it later without making any noise. “That’s pretty close to the story he fed Professor McGonagall. Only...”

“Only what?” Parvati asked impatiently. “Oh come on Hermione. You have to tell us now. I’ll never be able to get to sleep unless I know. Who was it?”

“I probably shouldn’t be telling you two this, but seeing as how the detention Ron gave him is being enforced, I suppose it’s only a matter of time before you find out who it was on your own so....”

“Ron Weasley gave someone detention?” Lavender asked in shock.


“NO!” Parvati cried, before dissolving onto a fit of giggles. “Malfoy?”

“Seriously?” Lavender giggled. “Oh my God. You two caught Malfoy? Who was he meeting? Did he tell you?”

“No,” Hermione replied, “but he had no choice but to answer Professor McGonagall’s questions. And if you believe the story he told her, than that twitchy little ferret was stood up tonight.”

“By who?” Lavender asked, her face alight with excitement.

“Well,” Hermione said, biting her lip as if she were contemplating whether or not she ought to tell them. “I don’t know if I should say, since technically she didn’t break any rules.”

Although why she should go out of her way to protect the likes of Pansy Parkinson was beyond Hermione. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she knew Pansy hadn’t done anything wrong. She knew for a fact that Draco wasn’t going to meet her in the Room of Requirement as he claimed. For one thing he’d gone to the Library and the Prefect’s bathroom first. Besides, if those two wanted to hook up after hours, they’d do it a dungeons somewhere, or one of the classrooms on the first or second floor, they wouldn’t hike all the way up to the seventh floor of the castle. There was only one reason Malfoy had claimed that he was supposed to meet Pansy in the Room of Requirement and that she’d never shown up. He knew that he could get her to back up his story if he needed to.

“But you do know who it was,” Parvati asked, unable to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

“Yes,” Hermione sighed, “I suppose the two of you will pester me the rest of the night if I don’t tell
you, so I may as well get it over with now so I can get to sleep. It was Pansy Parkinson.”

“Figures,” Lavender said, sounding more than a little let down. “She’s only been chasing after him for years. She must have spotted you and Ron before she got there.”

“Yeah,” Parvati agreed almost instantly. “She saw you and rather than risk getting in trouble herself, she left Draco hanging all on his own.”

“Typical Slytherin.”

“Unless,” Parvati continued. “Unless maybe you two didn’t show up until she’d already left. You know how boys are,” she said to her best friend. “Sometimes it takes them a while to recover from a heated snog. Maybe he needed some time to, well you know, and Pansy went back on her own.”

“You think?” Lavender asked, her alight with excitement.

“But if she’d already been there, why would Malfoy have lied about it?” Parvati asked, finding fault with her own theory.

“Well, maybe he was trying to protect her,” Lavender offered, so engrossed in the romantic spin she was putting on the story that she missed Hermione snort as she climbed into bed.

“Yeah, right,” Parvati scoffed. “This is Draco Malfoy we’re talking about. He’d hang his own mother out to dry if he thought it would save him.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Lavender said regretfully. “He is a bit smarmy, isn’t he? It’s a shame,” she sighed, “because he’s rather nice to look at. So I guess that means he really was stood up,” she sniggered. “By Pansy Parkinson no less. Merlin, talk about humiliating.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to tell Padma tomorrow. Unless you don’t want me to,” Parvati added half-heartedly when she heard Hermione gasp loudly from her bed on the other side of the room.

“What?” Hermione said, her entire face flooding with color as she realized exactly what she was feeling and why. DAMN HIM! she swore loudly in her mind, both mortified by the knowledge that Ron was taking care of himself as she’d suggested, and aroused by it at the same time.

“You don’t mind if I tell Padma do you?”

“Padma?” Hermione asked as if she no idea who Parvati was referring to. “Oh... yeah. Yeah, whatever,” she said, grasping the curtains surrounding her bed and yanking them closed.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Parvati asked, a little taken about by her roommate’s odd behavior.

“Fine,” Hermione called from behind the curtains. She was going to kill Ron for doing this to her while there were other people present to witness her reaction. “Just fine,” she lied. “I... um... I just remembered that I haven’t started on our Transfiguration essay yet, that’s all.”

“That’s not even due until next week,” Lavender said, rolling her eyes at Parvati, who was shaking her head sadly.

“Exactly,” Hermione said, struggling to keep her voice even as Ron got more involved in what he was doing and she started picking up on his pleasure as well as his desire. “Goodnight,” she squeaked, ending the conversation abruptly so she could focus her full attention on the sensations Ron was transmitting through their link as he sped towards his release.
It was well after one o’clock in the morning when Hermione finally parted the thick red curtains surrounding Ron’s four poster bed, removed her dressing gown, and slipped under his blankets. She’d assumed that he was asleep, not just because of his even breathing, but because she couldn’t sense any emotions coming from him. That being the case, she was rather startled when he rolled over on his side to face her almost as soon as she’d settled down beside him, threw one arm around her side, and kissed her sweetly.

“I thought you were asleep,” she whispered, when the brief kiss ended

“Mmmm,” Ron mumbled, kissing her again before replying, “Almost. Then again, maybe I am and this is a dreaming,” he said, sliding his hand down her back until it was resting on her arse. “In which case, you probably shouldn’t wake me up, because it’s a really nice dream,” he added with a yawn. “I was afraid you weren’t going to come,” he admitted after a few moments of silence.

“Well, that explains it then.”

“Explains what?” Ron asked in a groggy voice.

“You do realize that I wasn’t alone when you started abusing yourself,” Hermione said, pulling away from him, grabbing her discarded dressing gown, and dragging it towards herself.

“Huh?” Ron asked, opening his eyes just in time to see her pull her wand out of her robe and use it to Shield his bed so none of his roommates would hear them. “What are you on about?” he asked, as Hermione sunk down and snuggled up against him again.

“You’re little voyage of self-exploration,” she teased, no longer needing to see Ron’s ears turn red to know when it all clicked into place and he finally realized exactly what she was talking about.

“What?!” he said, his embarrassment now surging through them both. “You... Seriously?” he asked. “You could tell that I was....”

“Afraid so,” she declared, hiding her face so he wouldn’t see her smile and think that she was laughing at him.

OH! MY! GOD! Ron moaned in his head, as he slowly realized exactly what that meant. He’d never be able to touch himself again without her knowing exactly what he was doing. And worse, she found that amusing. What the hell have I gotten myself into?

“I considered doing it back,” Hermione said casually, snatching Ron’s pillow when he sat bolt upright and stared down at her in disbelief.

“SERIOUSLY!”

“After you were finished. Just to see if you could feel me as well,” she stated rather clinically. “But then I decided against it. If what I experienced is any indication, the sensations are much stronger when we’re together than when we’re apart. It wasn’t nearly as... satisfying,” Not for me anyway, she thought, “and it seemed rather cruel to get you all worked up and then leave you wanting,” she continued, “so I decided to wait.”

“Wait! You mean you’re... you’re going to do it now?” Ron asked, his blue eyes going wide with shock.

“Well, no,” Hermione admitted, finally succumbing to a bout of embarrassment that was all her own.
“Unless... You don’t really want me to, do you?” she asked tentatively.

“Would you?” Ron asked a bit too quickly, unintentionally broadcasting his enthusiasm to her. “Er... but you don’t have to,” he added, the moment he felt her react with mortification.

“But you want me to?” she asked, averting her eyes as she spoke.

“Well yeah,” Ron admitted, seeing no reason to deny it since he knew full well that she could sense what he was feeling. “I mean... it’s... er... hot, but I understand if you don’t really want to,” he stammered. “I mean, I don’t exactly fancy the idea of you sitting here watching while I do something like that either. It’s bad enough knowing that you know that I... er... that I did it,” he said in a near whisper, the bright red coloring in his ears spreading to his face as well. “So it’s... er... it’s all right.”

“What exactly are we talking about?” Hermione asked uncomfortably. “Do you want me to just lie here and think about you while I... um... while you watch, or are you going to... um... help.”

“Help?” Ron asked, extremely aroused, despite the fact that he was a little confused. “Help how?”

“Well, you know?” Hermione said, her entire face a brilliant shade of crimson now. “Why fantasize about kissing you when we can really do it.”

“So you fantasize about snogging me, do you?” Ron asked, a huge grin plaster across his face as his deep blue eyes took on a voracious gleam.

“Sometimes,” she admitted with a chuckle of discomfort.

“What else do you fantasize about?” Ron asked, without really thinking about the danger that was lurking behind his question.

“Probably the same things you fantasize about,” Hermione replied evasively.

Somehow I doubt that, he thought, but he wisely kept the comment to himself, knowing that if he said it out loud, she’d turn the tables on him and ask about what he fantasized about. The last thing he wanted was her to know what a pervert he was. Unfortunately, Hermione was already one step ahead of him.

“What did you think about?” she asked, shifting the attention to him in order to get it off herself. “Tonight, while you were...” She couldn’t bring herself to say wanking however, because she knew that it would embarrass him even more, so she left the question unfinished.

“Um...” Ron said, biting his lower lip and fidgeting uncomfortably as he tried to figure out exactly what to say. “Er... you know. Just... um... about what we did earlier and... er...”

“Yes?” Hermione pushed, her curiosity getting the better of her when he stopped speaking.

“Um... what I wanted to do when... er... when you got here. Stuff like that.”

“Oh,” Hermione whispered. “And... um... do you still want to?” she asked after a moment of silence in which neither of them seemed willing to look at the other. Although why she asked, she wasn’t entirely sure, because she knew full well that he did. The desire Ron was feeling had already coursed into her body and added to her own, intensifying the tingles and the aching sensation radiating from deep within her.

“Still want to what?” he asked, his voice squeaking slightly, the arousal he’d been feeling all but doubling when he realized she was asking if he wanted to re-enact his fantasy.
“You know, do it?” Hermione asked timidly. “What you were thinking about doing earlier. Do you still want to do that?”

“Don’t you....I mean, aren’t you even going to ask what it is first?” Ron asked, debating with himself about whether he ought to tell her that his fantasy had ended with her on top.

For a brief second the image of her straddling his thighs, her naked body slick with sweat, moaning as she rode him, clouded his mind. He saw himself lying under her, his hands on her hips. He saw himself rocking with her as he watched her breasts sway and bounce each time their bodies slammed into one another. He saw himself sit up and bury his face between those beautiful breasts so he could taste the sweat that was trickling down between them. Did he want to do that? Hell yes!

“I think I’d rather be surprised,” Hermione said, throwing caution to the wind, as she gave into her urges, reached up, and pulled Ron down on top of her.
Chapter 31: Adjustments

Unfortunately for Ron, the next day didn’t exactly go as he’d expected. In fact, as far as he was concerned, the entire weekend was a tremendous let down. He’d been thrilled when he’d woken up just before dawn on Friday morning and discovered that his new wife was still nestled beside him using his arm as her pillow. She’d spent the entire night in his bed, just as she’d promised, and what a night it had been. They’d made love, not once, but twice before finally succumbing to exhaustion and allowed sleep to come. And once he was awake, Ron had been secretly hoping that Hermione would wake up as well so they could do it again. Unfortunately Hermione didn’t seem to be so inclined.

Ron couldn’t help but touch her as she slept. It started innocently enough. At first he just wanted to brush the hair away from her face so he could look at her, but somehow he wasn’t able to stop there. His hand moved from her cheek to her neck, then down over her collarbone, and the next thing he knew, he was cupping her bare breast and caressing it gently.

But rather than responding as Ron would have liked, Hermione grunted at him and slapped his hand away, before rolling over on her side so her back was facing him. Sure, Ron had been a little disappointed, but he couldn’t help but find it slightly amusing as well, if for no other reason than because it was such a Hermione-type move.

Obviously she wasn’t a morning person, which he already knew, and he couldn’t exactly blame her for being tired. And since he was still fairly knackered himself, rather than push it, Ron simply threw his arm over Hermione’s side, pulled her back against him, and closed his eyes.

The day hasn’t even really started yet, he reasoned as he allowed himself to drift off once more, and we’ll have plenty of opportunities to be alone before it’s through. Maybe not before breakfast, but definitely after lunch, and again after classes let out, and we’ll have the rest of the night after dinner, and all day tomorrow, and on Sunday too.

That was Ron’s plan anyway. He fully expected to spend the entire weekend making love to his wife, even after she put him off when Defense Against the Dark Arts let out and he suggested that they wolf down their lunch and slip off to the secret chamber behind the mirror on the fourth floor until it was time to go to Potions with Harry. But that had been nearly three days ago. He’d suffered through three days with hardly any physical contact whatsoever and it was about to drive him stark raving mad.

Ron understood that she was sore. At least he’d understood the principle somewhat when Hermione finally broke down and confessed her problem after she’d abruptly ended their late night snogging session on Friday. But in his head, Ron made the mistake of likening it to having sore muscles after a strenuous workout and he made the further mistake of treating it as such. Needless to say, when he suggested she just needed to work through the pain, it didn’t go over too well. In fact, she hissed something about him being an insensitive prat before she jumped off the sofa and stomped off in a huff.

The worst part was knowing for a fact that she wasn’t pretending. She was genuinely hacked off at him and he didn’t understand why. But Ron did recognized her rage for what it was when he felt it pulse into his body. Not only that, he’d somehow managed to both insult her and hurt her feelings at the same time. The pain that gripped his heart once she’d abandoned the common room was almost as intense as her anger. In fact, Ron was fairly certain that the reason she was focusing so hard on
being annoyed with him was because she wanted to use her anger to mask the other things she was feeling.

He felt terrible, even though he had no idea what ‘insensitive’ thing he’d done. He certainly never meant to hurt her feelings. And even though he knew that Hermione could feel how sorry he was, her anger didn’t abate all that much and in a way he was thankful for that. It was easier to deal with her fury than it was to handle the sorrow lurking behind it, especially when he knew that he was the cause. He tried not to think about it as he dragged himself up to bed, but he knew that she was on the verge of tears. He knew it because his own eyes were stinging, and that knowledge made him feel even worse. But all he could do was lie in his bed and think, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, over and over again until he fell asleep and hope that it would be enough.

He knew that it hadn’t been the next morning when he followed Harry down to the common room and discovered Hermione sitting beside his sister on the same sofa the two of them had occupied the night before. She wouldn’t even look at him. She simply said hello to Harry and informed them that she’d already eaten with Ginny, before hiding her face behind her Transfiguration book.

“What did you do?” Harry leaned forward and asked Ron, who had a pained expression on his own face.

“No idea,” Ron sighed, shaking his head sadly as he allowed his best friend to guide him towards the portrait hole. “All I know is that it has something to do with me being an insensitive prat.”

“What else is new?” Harry tried to joke, having heard Hermione fling that particular insult at Ron so many times over the years that it had all but lost it’s meaning. “Still, it’s not like that should surprise her.”

“Yeah, well,” Ron replied miserably. “Maybe she’ll tell you what’s really bugging her.”

“Doubt it,” Harry said, as they ambled towards the Great Hall. “I don’t think she’s really comfortable discussing the more personal side of your relationship with me. I think she might be worried about putting me in a position where I’ll have to choose sides or something. But I can ask Ginny for you if you want. She obviously knows,” he said with a slight smile.

“Notice the death glare, did you?” Ron groaned, referring to the cold look his sister had given him.

“Kind of hard to miss, mate,” Harry said sympathetically.

“The worst thing about Ginny is, you never know when she’s going to back it up or let it go,” Ron said with a sigh.

“So you want me to find out for you?”

“No,” Ron replied, after giving it some thought. “You know Hermione. Sooner to later she’ll get over whatever it is long enough to lecture me about it. I don’t reckon I need to hear it from Ginny too.”

Unfortunately dressing-down Ron was exactly what Ginny had in mind, so when Hermione went down to the Library, to work on her Transfiguration essay, or more precisely to avoid Ron, Ginny stayed behind. She lay in wait in the common room and the instant the boys returned from breakfast, she pounced on her brother.

“OW!” Ron yelped when his sister punched him in the shoulder. But she didn’t let it go there. She immediately reached up, fisted his shirt in her hand, and literally dragged him away from Harry and back into the hallway he’d just come from.
“What the hell is the matter with you?” he asked, rubbing his shoulder after she let go.

“ME!” Ginny shrieked. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she shot back, placing both of her hands on Ron’s chest and shoving him against the wall. “How could you do something so... so... Oh for Merlin’s sake, Ron, what IS the matter with you? She’s your...your wife,” Ginny said, dropping her voice to a dead whisper, because the Fat Lady was obviously trying to eavesdrop from her portrait, “not your personal play park.”

“What are you talking about?” Ron asked, his confusion giving way to irritation.

“She’s a person with feelings and needs of her own. You can’t just have a ride anytime you want one,” Ginny snapped, the crassness of her statement causing her brother’s mouth to fall open. “Work through the pain?” she said in an exasperated voice as Ron continued to gape at her in horror. “Honestly! I’ll show you bloody pain you randy tosser. You better get your arse down to the Library and apologize to her right now.”

“For what?” Ron asked defensively.

“For making her feel like a piece of bloody meat.”

“What?” Ron exclaimed in surprise, just before his stomach plummeted. *Surely she doesn’t think... I didn’t...but... “But I never--”*

“Oh yes, you did,” Ginny hissed, glaring at him through narrowed eyes. “You totally disregarded what she told you. All you were thinking about was... you’re such a pig,” she snapped. “I don’t think I like what this,” she said, jabbing her finger into his chest just above the spot the Lânain talisman was resting, “is turning you into. I’ve got half a mind to tell Mum, despite the fact I promised Hermione that I wouldn’t. But I can still tell Bill,” she threatened. “And I will if you don’t stop acting like some smarmy Slytherin bastard who thinks he can own someone else and use them anyway he wants.”

“I do NOT treat Hermione like that,” Ron retorted indignantly, despite the fact deep down he was worried that maybe he had and he just hadn’t realize it. But the more he played their last conversation over in his head, the more it didn’t add up. They were snogging. She was fine. He was caressing her over her clothes. Still fine, and enjoying it as much as he was, he might add. It wasn’t until he tried to touch her under her clothing that she became embarrassed and told him that she was sore as he pushed him away.

But what was the big deal? It wasn’t like he’d ignored what she said. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t stopped when she’d asked him too. He did. Obviously telling Hermione to work through the pain hadn’t been the response she’d wanted to hear, but it was what you did when you had sore muscles. You didn’t just stop using them. It was the same thing he told her after she’d escaped from the Death Eaters and complained about the aftereffects of the Crucius Curse. Although in hindsight, he now realized that it hadn’t gone over too well then either.

Still, it was no reason for her to flip out or for her to get her feelings all bent out of shape. But she had. Not only did he hurt her, he insulted her too. He’d felt it after she left. Did Hermione really think that he treated her like a piece of meat, or had his sister just taken something that Hermione had told her and blown it out of proportion? Ginny had been opposed to the whole Lânain idea from the start. Maybe she was just using this as an excuse to tattle on him and get her own way. Ron knew from experience that she wasn’t beyond doing that. And she had the nerve to accuse him of acting like a Slytherin.

“Fine,” he shouted at his sister. “I’ll apologize. But not because you told me to,” he added. “Or
because you threatened me. But if she really thinks that, then she took what I said the wrong way, as did you,” he said resentfully, before shoving his sister out of the way and marching back to the common room to look for Harry so he could tell him more or less what was going on.

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“You look pretty good,” Harry said, when Ron stomped over the threshold and slammed the portrait closed behind him. “No bats attached to your face that I can see. I’ll admit I was a little worried that might be the outcome when she dragged you off.”

“Not worried enough to come help.”

“You apparently did okay on your own,” Harry said, shrugging his shoulders. “Besides, I figured you got yourself into that mess, it wouldn’t be right for me to shared your punishment.”

“Coward,” Ron said with a slight smile. “You’ll take on dragons or an entire forest full of gigantic spiders, and yet you’re afraid of a little girl.”

“She’s not so little anymore,” Harry replied with a chuckle, “and you’re afraid of her too.”

“Bloody girls. They’re all mental,” Ron complained, flopping down in the chair opposite his best friend. “Mum, Ginny, Hermione. All mental and scary as hell. Have you noticed that?” he asked. “They don’t make any sense. You never know what’s going to set them off and once they wig out, there’s no predicting what they’ll do. We’ve got wands too, plus we’re bigger than they are, so why is it that it’s so easy for them to intimidate us?”

“Hormone imbalance?” Harry offered, causing Ron to burst out laughing.

“Oh yeah. I’d love to hear you say that with Ginny within earshot. She’d bloody well eviscerate you.”

“Thus proving your point,” Harry chuckled. “Girls are vicious. Sure they look all sweet and innocent, but they don’t fight like blokes. What?” he asked, when Ron’s expression unexpectedly became sober and he flopped against the back of his chair again with a sigh.

“I have to go down to the Library and apologize to Hermione for something I didn’t even do,” Ron said, having felt her respond to the agitation he was unwittingly broadcasting through their link, before remembering that she was angry with him, and pushing her concern for him aside.

“If you didn’t do it why apologize for it?” Harry asked, not really needing to know what ‘it’ was to understand how unfair that was.

“Because it’s like I said,” Ron replied. “Girls are mental. And if I want her to talk to me again, I’m going to have to apologize.”

“For something you didn’t do?”

“Yup.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Harry said, his brow creasing ever so slightly.

“And girls do?” Ron asked, rolling his eyes.

“You’ve got a point there,” Harry admitted as Ron took a deep breath and stood up. “Apparently you understand them better than I do,” he added.
“What’s to understand?” Ron sighed. “As long as they’re always right and you admit to being wrong, even when you’re not, they’re happy.”

“And you have to keep her happy if you want to have anymore nights like Thursday, eh?”

“Now you’re catching on,” Ron said. “Well, I best go get it over with.”

“We have Quidditch practice at two,” Harry reminded his friend as he started to walk away. “You might want to set the alarm on your watch,” he added with a smirk. “You know, just in case you get distracted by all the making up and lose track of the time.”

“Shut up,” Ron groaned, his ears flooding with color as he ducked out of the room.

As Ron expected, the Library was all but deserted when he entered it. No one in their right mind came down here first thing on a Saturday morning. Most of the student population wisely used Saturdays to lie in and recoup from a week of strenuous classes and tedious homework. Of course no one ever said that Hermione was in her right mind when it came to schoolwork. The Library was one of her favorite places and she preferred it in the morning, when she could have it all to herself. She usually chose one of the tables in the back, near the windows, so she could feel the warmth of the sun on her back as she thumbed through the ancient texts. And that was exactly where Ron found her.

Typical Hermione, he thought with a slight smile, noticing that she had books and random sheets of parchment spread over three-quarters of the table already. But the smile died on his lips when she glanced up, saw him standing there, rolled her eyes at him, then refocusing her attention on the book she was reading.

He knew that she wasn’t happy to see him. His heart hadn’t leapt into his throat when she looked at him the way it normally did when she saw him. If anything, he felt as if someone had reached into his chest and constricted it. That was how seeing him made her feel. It hurt. He made her heart ache, and that knowledge made his own ache in return.

“Hermione?” he said sorrowfully, walking over to the table she was working at and sitting down beside her, despite the fact he knew full well that she wanted to be left alone.

But rather than speak to him, she pulled the book she was pretending to read off the table, dropped it to her lap, and shifted in her chair so he’d have no choice but to talk to her back.

“Don’t,” he said, somewhat irritated by her reaction. He’d come all the way down to the Library, on a Saturday, to apologize to her, for something that he hadn’t even really done, and she was still going to ignore him. But then he decided to change tactics.

If she didn’t want to talk to him, that was fine. He didn’t need her to listen to his apology.

He didn’t even have to say anything. She might be able to tune out his words if she really set her mind to it, but she couldn’t block his feelings. At least he didn’t think she could, so rather than speak, Ron pushed down the irritation he’d been feeling and focused instead on how miserable and helpless she made him feel when she ignored him like this.

“That’s not fair,” Hermione said quietly, when Ron felt her resolve soften, threw his arms around her and hugged her from behind.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his chin now resting on her shoulder as he leaned into her and thought
about how much he regretted hurting her.

“I know,” Hermione admitted with a sigh.

“I didn’t meant to upset you,” he whispered, focusing all his energy on how much she meant to him.

“I know,” she said again weakly, tears trickling down her cheeks when she felt the intensity of Ron’s love surge into her. “I love you too,” she said, transmitting her affection for him back in return.

“And I know that you aren’t my personal play park.”

“What?” she asked, momentarily puzzled by his bizarre statement.

I knew it, Ron thought when he felt her confusion. *Damn you Ginny!*

“And she told you why I was upset?”

“What?” she asked again, further puzzled by the fact he now felt mislead.

“It’s just something Ginny said,” Ron replied.

“You mean you only came down here because your sister told you too?” Hermione asked, feeling indignant once more.

“What?” Ron cried, pulling away from her when he felt her mood shift and he realized how close he was to losing the ground he just made up. “No. I mean she did practically assault me as soon as Harry and I came back from breakfast,” he admitted as Hermione spun around in her chair to face him, “but I would have come after you on my own.” *Eventually,* he added in his mind. “She did tell me where you were though.”

“And she told you why I was upset?”

“Um... She told me that I made you feel like a piece of meat,” Ron finally confessed. “But that’s not really true, is it?” he asked, his heart thumping against his chest far faster than it should have been.

Please say it isn’t, he thought miserably.

“Hermione?” he asked, when she diverted her eyes. “That’s not true,” he exclaimed, unable to keep himself from feeling somewhat insulted. “You know I don’t think that,” he continued, unsure if the shame he was experiencing was his or hers.

“I know,” Hermione admitted, looking up when she realized Ron felt affronted by her lack of faith in him. “But it’s still how you were acting,” she snapped back. She was the one that had truly been insulted after all. “How dare you tell me to work through the pain just because you wanted a shag.”

“That’s not why I said it,” Ron barked back indignantly. “I was trying to help.”

“Yeah, help yourself,” Hermione retorted, narrowing her eyes at him as she did so.

“No, I was trying to help you,” he said, his voice so loud now, it would have drawn the attention of the librarian, had she been there. “Because that’s what you do when you have sore muscles. You keep working them out. If I stopped playing Quidditch just because I was sore from practice, I’d never play in a real match. But I work through the pain, like you’re supposed to, and after I’m warmed up and I’m preoccupied with the game, I don’t even notice it anymore.”

“We’re not talking about Quidditch,” Hermione said crossly.

“The same bloody principle applies.”
“Does it?” Hermione snapped. “Really? And you know this how? Let me guess, Bill told you. Well once again, he’s wrong. It’s more than sore muscles, you idiot. It’s like... like when you have a really bad sunburn and your skins all raw and inflamed. You don’t want people touching it, or poking at it, or rubbing up against it because it hurts. And it’s not the kind of pain you can ignore or work through. It’s the kind you avoid, just like you avoid the sun until you’ve healed, because if you don’t, you’ll only make it worse.”

“Well why didn’t you just say that?”

“You didn’t give me a chance. I told you that I was sore. That should have been enough,” she stated, too irritated with him to feel much embarrassment this time around. “I obviously stopped you for a reason. What was I supposed to do? Tell you that your finger felt like a knife poised to rip me open? That it was all I could do to keep myself from crying out when you touched me there? I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.”

“So you let me hurt you’re instead? That makes a lot of sense.”

“It’s embarrassing,” Hermione groaned as she realized exactly how explicit she’d just been.

“Oh my God!” Hermione groaned, when she felt desire stir within him even as he prepared to count down the days. “Is that all you ever think about?”

“No,” Ron replied matter-of-factly, going to great lengths to stomp his barely formed arousal down. “I think about Quidditch. I think about chess when Harry and I are playing. When I’m hungry, I think about what I want to eat.”

“And when do you think about your schoolwork?” Hermione said, shaking her head sorrowfully.

“When you tell me to,” Ron replied with a lopsided smile, hoping that she’d appreciate his answer enough to give him a small smile of her own.

“In that case I think you ought to appreciate it for the next week or so.”

“A WEEK!” Ron cried in horror, all thoughts of being supportive forgotten. “As in seven full days and night? Aww come on Hermione,” he whined unhappily. “You can’t seriously expect me to go that long without...” he started, barely catching himself before he said the words ‘another shag’ and landed himself in a whole lot of hot water, “...without touching you,” he finished instead. “I understand that you need some time,” he said, “but come on. Don’t you think that’s a little... extreme? he finished in his head, snapping his mouth shut when she glared at him and he felt her irritation start to give way to something closer to genuine anger. He was hugging the line and he now knew it, so he wisely shut up.

“I could make it two if you prefer,” she stated.

“Now you’re just being mean on purpose,” he grumbled, crossing his arms in front of his chest and flopping against the back of his chair to pout about the injustice of it all. “Besides, you can’t,” Ron said, suddenly feeling much better as a new thought occurred to him. “Because if we wait that long the potion will wear off.”

HA! Take that, he thought, feeling both proud of himself for finding a loophole and a bit triumphant.
“Twelve days then,” she amended, threatening to push it to the limit without so much as batting an eyelash.

“I don’t think you can go that long,” Ron challenged, sensing that she wasn’t really all that annoyed with him anymore, which meant she most likely didn’t mean what she was saying.

“I can certainly go longer than you can,” Hermione countered, unable to hide the fact that she was mildly amused and grudgingly impressed by the how quickly he’d figured out that she might be bluffing a bit. “You can count on that,” she said, meeting his challenge with one of her own.

“Barely,” Ron chuckled, not falling for it. This wasn’t a contest of wills. There was more involved than simply seeing who could outlast the other. They were connected now and that changed everything. “Unless you’re saying that you were wrong,” he added with a smirk, “and we don’t actually feed off each other once we get...worked up. Too bad we do,” he said rather smugly, “because that means you can only hold out as long as I can.”

“So you admit that you’re the weak link?” she asked. “That you’ll cave before I do and drag me down with you? That’s not necessarily true though,” Hermione stated before Ron could come up with an answer. “If your urges get too annoying I can simply stun you, because once you lose consciousness I don’t have to put up with you’re feelings anymore.”

“Okay, you win,” Ron laughed softly, knowing that she was bluffing again, but taking her point. “But can you slip me a sleeping draught instead?” he asked good-humoredly. “At least that way I’ll be able to dream about you.”

“As if you’d be thick enough to take anything I offered you in a situation like that,” she joked back. “Then again...”

“Hey!” Ron whined. “So,” he said, testing the waters before Hermione could refocused her attention on her books, “I suppose you’re planning on working on this,” whatever it is, “all day long?”

“As opposed to...” she asked warily.

Okay, definitely not that receptive, Ron thought regretfully, realizing that it might not be such a good idea to bring up the secret chamber behind the mirror again just yet. Especially if he wanted to come across as being supportive of her newly imposed ban on shagging. Although snogging doesn’t necessarily have to lead to.... no, best just not even go there or you’ll likely set her off again.

“Er...Harry and I have Quidditch practice this afternoon,” Ron replied, “But I don’t suppose you really want to come to that,” he added, unable to hide the fact that he was almost as disheartened by that knowledge as he was by the knowledge that Hermione wouldn’t be sneaking into his room again anytime soon.

“Maybe for a little while,” she said, looking up from her book just in time to see him smile.

“Really?” Ron asked, feeling a flicker of excitement and twinge of nervousness.

“But if it’s really cold, I coming back in,” she informed him.

“That’s okay,” Ron said happily. He’d just have to make sure that he brought a blanket along when they went down to the pitch. The point was she said she’d go and since she hadn’t gone to a single practice during all the years Harry was on the team by himself, everyone would know that she was there to watch him.

“Okay, I’ll get out of your hair then,” he said, his heart far lighter than it had been when he first
entered the Library. “Let you get some work done,” he added as he smiled at her. “Practice is at two, so I’ll meet you in the common room about 1:30? How’s that sound?”

“Fine,” Hermione said, smiling up at him because he was so pleased and because his good mood was infectious. “Now go,” she said, waving him away, before he could distract her any more than he already had.

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“You two really need to buck down and practice every spare moment you can this week,” Katie Bell said, as she followed Jack Sloper and Andrew Kirke out of the Gryffindor changing room. “You think I’m joking?” she asked, paying no notice whatsoever to Hermione Granger or Terry Boot, both of whom were standing beside the doorway together, having cut off their conversation when the Quidditch captain emerged to lecture her Beaters. “We have our first match against Slytherin next week and it’s your responsibility to make sure that you’re capable of protecting the rest of your teammates. It’s not your heads they’ll be trying to knock off, you know? It’s Harry’s.”

“Yes, we know,” Andrew reply, glancing around as if he were tempted to make a run for it now that he was out in the open. “You’ve only told us 15 times during the past two hours.”

“Just make sure you’re down here an hour early tomorrow,” she insisted. “You too,” she added, pointing at Jack. “In fact, I want you two down here an hour early every night this week. No, I’m not kidding,” she said, when she saw the look on Andrew’s face.

“So you’re having another practice tomorrow?” Hermione asked, although she didn’t really know why she should find that so surprising. Now that the Quidditch season had officially started, all of the teams would be scheduling weekly practices, but as the first match of the year was between the Gryffindors and the Slytherins, they got top priority when it came to using the pitch this week. “And on Monday?” Hermione asked. “Because you know ...”

“Yes, yes,” Katie said with a sigh, cutting Hermione off. “Ron and Ginny have a Prefect meeting at seven. He already told me. Not that he’s getting out of practice, mind you,” she added, turning away from her Beaters, who took one look at each other and used the distraction Hermione had created to bolt. “They’ll just have to be a bit late. I’m sure McGonagall will overlook it.”

Professor McGonagall might, but she was a big fan of Quidditch. Hermione wasn’t.

“How late?” she demanded, fully prepared to demand that Katie let her friends off early if her answer was unreasonable.

“Oh no,” Harry groaned, as he and Ron emerged from the changing room, having showered and changed back into their regular clothes. “She sure didn’t waste any time telling Hermione, did she?” he asked Ron, who was looking at Terry Boot, rather than the two girls who appeared to be about square off.

“Don’t worry about it, love,” Ron said, shifting his broom to his left hand as he swept forward, placed his right hand on Hermione’s waist, and leaned forward to give her a chaste kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be there,” he whispered before he pulled back.

“Wow,” Ginny said, emerging just in time to witness something she never thought she’d see, her brother initiating a public display of affection. Shocking? Yes, but at the same time it was rather sweet.

But apparently Hermione didn’t agree, because she turned her scowl from Katie to Ron.
“Here, I’ll take that for you,” Ron said, snatching the blanket Hermione had been holding and tucking it under his arm, before reaching down and taking her hand in his.

“What’s the matter with her?” Ginny whispered to Harry, when she saw Hermione’s eyes narrow even further.

“I’m not sure,” Harry replied, unconsciously stepping back a bit. “But I’d say it’s more than the practice schedule.”

“I’m surprised to find you down here, Boot.”

Aw, Ginny and Harry thought at nearly the same time, realizing that the green-eyed monster had reared his ugly head.

“Ron,” Hermione all but growled out his name in warning, her smoldering brown eyes boring into him.

“What?” he asked, as if he didn’t know what she was so irritated about. “It’s not like I accused him of spying on the Gryffindor team or anything.”

Then again, he just had, only he’d done it in a round about way.

“I can’t believe you,” she hissed, jerking her hand out of his and taking a step back.

How dare he? The instant he finds me talking to another guy he gets all possessive, steps up, and claimed me as his like some dog marking his territory, Hermione thought. And when the kiss and the hand holding wasn’t enough to dishearten his competition to the point that he slunk off with his tail between his legs, Ron just had to start slinging around thinly veiled insults.

“What?” the redhead asked again, feeling her fury but not really caring.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said, not to Ron, but to Terry. “Just ignore him.”

“Excuse me!” Ron cried, his own anger surging through his veins now. NOT! BLOODY! LIKELY!

“Oh shut up already,” Hermione snapped back, causing several eyebrows to raise.

“Er... maybe I ought to just go,” Terry offered.

“Yeah, maybe you should,” Ron fired back, causing Harry to actually groan out loud.

So much for a calm, peaceful weekend, Harry thought, glancing at Ginny, who was standing beside him shaking her head at her brother’s stupidity.

“Er... okay,” Terry said uncomfortably, as he backed away. “I’ll...er... see you tomorrow then?” he said quickly to Hermione. “Right,” he mumbled, slipping around the side of the changing room before anyone could say anything else to him.

“Well?” Ron demanded, dropping the blanket and thrusting his broom back at Harry, before folding his arms in front of his chest and glowering at Hermione. “Are you planning on telling me what the hell that was all about?”

“What’s the matter with you?” Hermione retorted.

“ME?” Ron barked. “I’m not the one making dates with other people.”
“You are such a moron,” Hermione cried, throwing her hands up into the air as she spun around and stomped off.

“Do you believe that?” Ron said, after several moments of strained silence in which everyone just stood there staring at him.

“That you’re a moron?” his sister replied. “Absolutely,” she said in disgust, pushing past him and chasing after Hermione.

“At least this time you get to apologize for something you actually did do.”

“Shut up, Harry!” Ron exclaimed, as the two of them followed the girls back to the castle at a much slower pace. “What the hell is she doing with Boot anyway?” he grumbled to himself.

“Okay, I’ll admit it looked pretty bad,” Harry said, “but I’m sure it’s not an... actual date or anything like that. Maybe he just wanted some help on his homework or something,” he ventured, despite the fact that Terry Boot had managed to get remarkably good marks all on his own up to this point. But at least it was a plausible excuse, and it was closer to the mark than either of them knew.

It wasn’t until after dinner that Ginny finally gave in and told her brother’s best friend that Professor Vector had given Hermione’s class some rather complicated Arithmancy problems to work out by Thursday’s lesson and that Terry was actually Hermione’s assigned partner. Harry of course told Ron, as Ginny knew he would, and he urged her brother to apologize, yet again. But Hermione was far more reluctant to accept his apology this time around.

In fact, it wasn’t until Ron reminded her about how she’d reacted to Lavender that she finally relented. It was rather hard to condemn him for being a jealous prat after that. Ron hadn’t sent Terry soaring across the Quidditch Pitch, without the benefit of a broom, after all. She couldn’t very well criticize him for being jealous when she was just as bad in her own way. Of course the difference was, Lavender really had been chasing after him, unlike Terry. Plus, she’d caught him staring down another girls shirt. A fact which Ron conveniently forgot to mention, nor did he enjoy being reminded of it if the guilt and embarrassment he experienced after Hermione brought it up was any indication. But to his credit, Ron didn’t try and argue that point or explain it away.

“So really,” Hermione said quietly, as the two of them sat side by side at one of the tables near the portrait hole ‘calmly discussing’ the matter so as not to traumatize the younger students who were littered around all over the common room. “I could spend all day tomorrow staring at Terry’s bum and at best we’d be even. Of course you know I wouldn’t do that,” she said, when Ron’s mouth fell open. “And even if I did, all it would prove is that I don’t fancy him. Which you know full well,” she added, “since you can sense my feelings.”

“Yeah, yeah, all right,” Ron said, already having been subjected to the portion of the lecture where she asked him if she was attracted to Boot and then basically forced him to admit that the only time he’d felt any type of arousal from her was when she was sitting in the stands watching him guard the rings. But just because she wasn’t interested in Boot, didn’t mean he wasn’t interested in her. And up until this point, Ron had always thought of Terry Boot as a fairly decent bloke.

Then again, he silently reminded himself. *He is friends with that tosser Michael Corner and I never did like him. Guilt by association and all that.*

“You do trust me don’t you?” Hermione asked.
“Of course I do,” Ron replied without even needing to think about it. “It’s him I don’t trust.”

“We’ll be in the Library, surrounded by other students,” she said, as if that made the slightest bit of difference.

“So?” Ron said obstinately. *That wouldn’t stop me.*

“What am I going to do with you?” she said in exasperation.

“I can think of a couple things,” Ron replied with a lopsided smile. “But you won’t be able to do any of them until sometime next week,” he said glumly.

“Ron!”

“What? It’s the truth.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“Yes, you’ve already told me that,” he said blithely. “The difference is, this time you don’t really mean it.”

“Stop reading me,” Hermione said softly.

“Stop broadcasting it then,” Ron replied, with another smile.

“It’s your fault.”

“Nuh uh,” Ron disagreed with a chuckle. “You’re the one that responded to the idea of me having randy thoughts about you,” he said, making sure to keep his voice down. “And then you called me pathetic because you were receptive to the idea. I’d say that’s a bit of the pot calling the kettle black, wouldn’t you?”

“Shut up,” Hermione moaned, her face flooding with color even as she picked up on how amused Ron was and tried not to smile herself. “And don’t think about things like that right now,” she said, forcing herself to put his suggestion and the images it lead to out of her mind. “All that’s going to do is make it harder on both of us.”

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How right she was. The more Ron tried not to think about it, the harder it became to put the forbidden thoughts out of his mind. It might not have been so bad if he could have convinced Hermione to slip out of the common room for an impromptu snog, but she would have none of that and went up to her room instead.

Playing chess with Harry helped Ron clear his mind for a while, but once they turned in themselves and he was alone, in his bed, with the curtains drawn, the thoughts returned. And the worst part was, he couldn’t do anything about it. He couldn’t banish the thoughts from his mind, nor could he take the matter in hand and alleviate the tension without Hermione knowing precisely what he was doing. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, he had to contend with his concerns about what would happen if he gave in and did it anyway.

To begin with, it would be embarrassing. And there was the possibility that it might offend her, or even worse, hack her off again. Hermione hadn’t expressly forbidden him from doing it, or even asked him not to, but her discomfort was his fault and as such, he felt obligated to suffer right along with her. If he gave in to temptation it would just prove that he was a slave to his hormones. And
even that he might be able to live with. What really held him in check was the comments Hermione had made after the first time she’d felt him ‘abusing himself’ through their connection.

I considered doing it back, he heard her voice speak in his head. *After you were finished. Just to see if you could feel me as well. But then I decided against it. It wasn’t nearly as satisfying and it seemed rather cruel to get you all worked up and then leave you wanting.*

“Cruel indeed,” he mumbled to himself.

How was he supposed to enjoy it when he knew that he’d work her up and then leave her in a state where she had no means of finding relief. The release he’d experience obviously wasn’t strong enough to trigger one of her own and she couldn’t take care of herself right now because she was too tender. How guilty would he feel, waking up from a deep, restful sleep, knowing that Hermione spent the better part of the night tossing and turning in her own bed due to the unrelenting frustration he’d caused.

Looks like I’m going to have to get used to taking cold showers again, he moaned in his head, throwing the covers off himself and climbing out of bed.

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Unfortunately Sunday was even worse than Saturday, albeit for different reasons. To begin with Ron hadn’t slept very well, which meant he started out the day cranky, and it didn’t help that Hermione seemed to be on edge as well. They managed to bicker their way through most of breakfast, about what even Ron wasn’t quite sure.

By the time she went to the Library to work on her Arithmancy homework with ‘her partner’, Ron was in a foul mood. Sulking in the common room wasn’t exactly the way he wanted to spend his morning, nor did he want to actually work on his own homework and sneaking down to the Library to check up on Hermione was out of the question. In the end, Ron and Harry went up to the Astronomy tower and spied on the Slytherin teams practice until Madam Hooch came out on the pitch with Katie Bell and forced them to leave so the Gryffindor captain could get to work with her beaters. Assuming that was their cue to get their own behinds down to the Pitch, the boys mounted their brooms, having had the foresight to bring them along, and flew down to the field.

By the time their practice let out, Ron’s stomach wasn’t the only thing growling. He was itching for a fight and couldn’t resist snapping at everyone he came in contact with hoping that someone would take the bait. Unfortunately Ginny didn’t come back up to the common room after practice and Harry didn’t enjoy a good row, so he had no choice but to sit there and wait for Hermione to come back from the Library.

The longer he sat there waiting, the more steamed he became. Not just because she was still gone, but because it gave him time to reflect on his abysmal performance at today’s practice. He’d played like shit because he was distracted and no matter how hard he tried to put everything else out of his mind and pull himself back into the game he just couldn’t seem to do it. If anything he got progressively worse, which only added to his frustration.

The day just flat out sucked and he wanted it to be over.

“Where the hell is she?” Ron said to no one in particular as he glanced down at his watch to check the time yet again. “Surely she must be hungry by now,” he grumbled, having refused to go down to dinner himself until Hermione showed up.
She’s probably already eaten and gone back to the Library, Harry thought, but given his best mate’s current mood, he decided to keep the comment to himself. *Maybe I should just go down on my own and eat with Ginny. Or I can go down to the Library and tell Hermione to get back up here so Ron can get something to eat and stop biting the head off of anyone that says two words to him.*

“Well, I’m going down,” Harry said as he rose up out of his chair. “You sure you don’t want to come?”

“No,” Ron barked, his arms now crossed in front of his chest as he tried to bore a hole in the back of the Fat Lady’s portrait with his eyes.

“Suit yourself,” Harry replied, making a mental note to bring some food back up for Ron just in case, as he shrugged his shoulders and marched out of the room, leaving his best mate alone to brood in silence.

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“I don’t think you should get your hopes up Lav,” Parvati said in a hushed whisper, leaning into her best friend and taking no notice of Harry who had entered the Great Hall and happened to be passing right behind them to get to the empty seat next to Neville. “I asked Padma about it and she said they were just working on a project together.”

“But Amanda Donovan said that she heard--”

“Amanda is only a 5th year,” Parvati interrupted. “She isn’t in their Arithmancy class. Padma is,” she added, “and she didn’t seem to be very surprised when I mentioned they’d been spotted in the Library together.”

“But Amanda is on the Quidditch team,” Lavender argued softly, “and according to her, Ron...”

Isn’t interested in you, Harry thought, fighting the urge to roll his eyes as he tuned out the rest of the girls’ conversation and settled down at the Gryffindor table.

“Ron upstairs brooding?” Ginny asked, glancing at her brother’s best friend as he sat down beside Neville.

“Yup,” he replied, grabbing for a bowl of roasted potatoes and dumping a generous quantity onto his plate before reaching for a platter of pork chops.

“Did Hermione ever turn up?”

“Still in the Library with Boot, I suppose,” Harry said, ready to tuck into his meal when he noticed Ginny was shaking her head and pointing towards the Ravenclaw table. Following her finger, Harry glanced over his shoulder and noted that Terry Boot was, in fact, seated at the table next to Anthony Goldstein.

“Oh,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Maybe she’s just avoiding him then.”

“So why didn’t she come down to dinner when Terry did?” Ginny asked.

“How am I supposed to know?” Harry snapped and then caught himself. “Sorry,” he muttered, slightly ashamed that Ron’s bad mood had rubbed off on him and he was now taking it out on an innocent party.

“It’s still hard for you, isn’t it?” Ginny asked, studying him intently. “The two of them being together
“It’s not that,” he replied, trying to put his finger on what exactly it was that was bothering him.

It wasn’t that they were together to the extent that he felt excluded. He’d seen more of Ron this weekend than Hermione had, but that wasn’t necessarily a good thing. In fact, now that he really thought about it, Harry realized that he probably spent more time with Ron than Hermione did on average, given that they had all the same classes and therefore the same breaks, not to mention they had Quidditch practices together and shared a dorm room.

It wasn’t the quantity of time; it was the quality of the time that was the issue. The dynamic between Ron and Hermione had changed. They were basically married to one another now and while his relationship with them hadn’t really been altered all that much, their relationship with one another had taken on a whole new level. The two of them were closer to each other now than they were to him in certain respects. Not that he wanted to snog Hermione, or watch Ron do it either for that matter. But they shared things with each other that they didn’t, or couldn’t, share with him.

The fact was they depended on one another more than they depended on him, and that knowledge bothered Harry. And the fact that it did bother him, made it even worse, because now he felt like he was being selfish for feeling that way. If he were really a good friend he would be happy for them instead of being jealous that they had something he didn’t. But he was jealous and even though he tried to fight it, there were times, like now, when he still found himself thinking about their relationship in terms of how it affected him.

It’s no wonder Ron is keeping whatever is really bothering him to himself, Harry thought, realizing that he hadn’t exactly been there for either of his friends recently. He’d been so caught up in himself and his own problems during the past year that he hadn’t really given any thought to anyone else’s problems. And now that he finally was trying, it was a little too late because while he’d been busy leaning on them, they’d gotten used to supporting one another. He’d tried to keep Ron distracted after Hermione left. He’d tried to give him something else to focus on, hence the visit to the Astronomy Tower to spy on the Slytherin’s Quidditch team, but obviously it hadn’t been enough. And beyond offering a distraction, Harry was really at a loss as to what he ought to do.

“It’s hard to explain,” Harry said, knowing that Ron was sulking upstairs and basically biding his time until Hermione showed up, because she was the one that knew how to deal with his various moods and make him feel better. She knew how to do it because he, Harry, had always stepped aside and let her do it, just like he’d always stepped aside and let Ron deal with her. He’d done it because it was easier and because dealing with other people’s emotions made him uncomfortable.

It made Ron uncomfortable too, he told himself, but he still did it. He did it because someone had to.

“You can give it a try,” Ginny suggested.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Harry replied briskly, before packing his mouth full of potatoes so he wouldn’t be able to answer anymore questions.

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“Ron?” Hermione called out as she knocked on the door of the 6th year boys’ dorm, having ventured upstairs when she entered the Gryffindor common room and found it all but deserted. “I know you’re in there,” she said, feeling her stomach flip in response to his as the guilt he was feeling continued to eat away at them both. “I’m coming in.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he stated the instant he heard the door open. “So just go away and
“You would have locked the door and Shielded the room if you wanted to be left alone,” Hermione countered, marching over to the bed he was hiding in. “So don’t give me that rubbish. And even if you did want me to go, I still wouldn’t leave,” she added. “I’m not going anywhere until you stop doing this to yourself,” she insisted, “because you’re driving me insane.”

“I’m driving you insane?” Ron asked, coming up on his knees and wrenching the curtains surrounding his bed open so he could meet her angry gaze with one of his own. “It’s all my fault, is it? Because I’m not supposed to feel anything even though I know you’re on a date with some other bloke.”

“It wasn’t a date,” Hermione practically shouted, irritated with him for purposely being thick and trying to divert her attention by changing the subject. “And you know it.”

“Yeah well, maybe it should have been,” Ron shouted back. “Because--”

“Don’t you say it!” she shrieked. “Don’t you dare. I told you what I’d do if I ever heard you say something like that about yourself again,” she warned, knowing exactly where this conversation was heading.

His frustration had given way to anger while she was still in the Library trying, unsuccessfully, to tune him out so she could get at least a modicum of work done on her project. But all that pent up energy and emotion needed to be released and when she didn’t return straight away and give him the row he wanted, he had no one to vent it on, so he turned it all on himself. Ron was now so riddled with self-doubt and self-loathing that Hermione actually found herself struggling to hold back tears.

“Stop,” she moaned. “Please just stop. It hurts,” she said, her eyes welling up. “It hurts me to see you like this. To see what you’re doing to yourself, to feel it,” she added, swiping her hand over her cheeks. “Because it’s not true.”

“Says you,” Ron muttered, flopping over on his back and disappearing behind the curtains surrounding his bed once more.

“If you were really that worthless don’t you think I’d pity you?” she asked, shifting the curtain out of her way and climbing on the bed with him. “Is that what I feel when I look at you?” she pressed. “Pity? Have you ever felt that from me? Is that what I’m feeling now?”

“No,” he admitted somewhat reluctantly, not even bothering to look up at her.

“What am I feeling?”

“Anger.”

“No, that’s you,” she replied almost before he got the word out. “Try again.”

“I don’t want to play your bloody games, Hermione,” Ron barked. “And I don’t want to talk about it. Just... leave me alone.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she retorted. “Not until we’ve worked through this. Now tell me what I’m feeling.”

“Stop it,” Ron groaned when he felt her love and compassion grip his heart and twist into something painful. “I don’t want to feel that,” he said, referring to the grief he was causing her.
“I don’t want to feel it either,” she replied honestly. “So stop doing this to yourself. Stop doing it to me.”

“I can’t help it,” he admitted miserably, rolling over on his side so his back was facing her.

“This isn’t just about Quidditch, is it?” Hermione asked, crawling up the bed on her hands and knees, and settling down beside him.

She knew full well that he’d had a bad practice today because she’d been able to feel his level of frustration increase the longer he was out on the Pitch. Quidditch was definitely part of it, because he was beating himself up. But more than that, he was worried. He was afraid that he’d mess up during the actual match and not only would he make a fool of himself, he’d let all of Gryffindor House down in the process. She knew that was what he was afraid of because she could feel the guilt and sense of worthlessness that went along with his fear, but now Hermione realized there might just be more to it than just that. She now suspected that he might be anxious about something else as well, she just wasn’t sure what.

“I can’t help you unless you tell me what it is,” she said, reaching out and placing her hand on his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“Everything,” Ron moaned, his voice hovering somewhere between fury and desolation. “What isn’t bloody wrong?” he asked, rolling over to face her again. “There’s a maniac after my best friend. His twisted band of followers have broken out of prison and they’ve already come after you once. The first Hogsmeade visit is coming up, but we can’t set foot in the village because he might be there waiting for us and I still haven’t told Harry that we can’t go, because I don’t know how he’ll take it. And as if that weren’t enough,” Ron continued, the complaints just rolling off his tongue now, “I’m rubbish at Quidditch. I can’t block a single bloody ring, which means we’re going to lose and it’ll be all my fault.”

“Malfoy will never catch the snitch,” Hermione interrupted, trying to be helpful and yet not really succeeding. “The Slytherin’s will need to score off you 16 times more than we managed to score off them in order to win. Which isn’t going to happen. And you don’t need to worry about Harry. I’ll tell him about Hogsmeade,” she added, almost as if it were an afterthought. “What?” she asked, when Ron gape at her in disbelief.

“That’s not the bloody point.”

“So you aren’t worried about losing to Slytherin then?” she asked, sounding somewhat confused. “Just about making a fool of yourself in front of the whole school?”

“Thank you so much for reminding me,” he groaned, flopping over on his back again and staring up at nothing. “I feel so much better now that I know you think I’m rubbish too. What I can’t figure out is what the hell you’re doing here with me. Especially now that I know you think I’m a fool. Why would you want to be saddled with someone mediocre when you could have--”

“I swear to God, if you say Terry Boot I’ll have no choice but to hex you.”

“What happened to us?” Ron asked, sitting up and locking his eyes on Hermione so she was able to see his misery as well as feel it. “Just a couple days ago we were happy. Weren’t we?” he asked. “I know I was. I thought you were too. I really thought that I made you happy and now?” he said, shaking his head sadly. “Now it’s all ruined and I still can’t figure out what the hell happened. I know I hurt your feelings and that somehow I insulted you without even meaning to and we just... we never really came back from it. You said you were okay, but you’re... you’re not happy anymore and you barely even let me touch you.”
“It’s not you, Ron,” Hermione tried to assure him as she reached out for his arm.

“Spare me the it’s not you, it’s me speech,” he cut in.

“It’s the bond,” she said, managing to take him by surprise.

“What?”

“It’s not you,” Hermione stated. “I think it’s the bond,” she said with a sigh. “The book warned that it might be disruptive, I just didn’t... I think we’re feeding off each other again,” she stated. “Only in a negative way this time. I didn’t mean for...” she started and then stopped. “I’m sorry about your practice,” she said instead of whatever it was she’d been about to say. “I think that might have been my fault,” she admitted.

“I knew you were irritated when I left,” she tried to explain, as Ron looked at her questioningly. “And that you’ve been frustrated because... well, because I pulled away and put a halt to our extracurricular activities for a little while. And I’ll admit that I’m a bit frustrated by that as well, but I think it might be worse for you.”

No, you think? a sarcastic voice rang out in his head.

“But it’s not because I don’t want to be with you,” she stated. “It’s because I do,” she assured him, “but I know that we won’t be able to stop once we get started. I know we’ll feed off each other and when things get heated, I won’t want to stop you and... it just seemed better not to even go there until I was sure that I could handle it. I didn’t realize that you’d get so frustrated this quickly,” she explained. “I didn’t realize I’d be frustrated as well, but I am and having you feel my frustrations, as well as your own, certainly isn’t helping matters,” Hermione continued, “but you are feeling it because of the bond,” she added, “and that’s just making it worse.”

“I felt your frustration and your irritation with me while I was in the Library with Terry, and I just couldn’t seem to concentrate or get anything done,” she rambled on, going out of her way to speak fast so he wouldn’t have a chance to interrupt her before she got it all out. “I tried to block your feelings out like the book suggested, but it was like the harder I tried not to feel them, the more distracted I became and I just... I wasn’t getting anything accomplished and that just made it worse, because I was angry with myself for not being able to focus. I was disappointed with myself and I think I might have accidentally transferred that to you while you were at practice. I just wasn’t thinking about the fact that I was sending all my own frustrations back to you and that you were taking it all on yourself and then sending it back to me and... well...that’s the reason you couldn’t concentrate; why neither of us could. It’s the stupid bond. We just... we need to get used to it, that’s all.”

“Used to it?” Ron asked, staring at her in disbelief. “Are you telling me that any time you’re in a bad mood, your bad mood will become mine, and vise versa, and that we’ll continue to feed off each other until one of us explodes and bites the head off the other one?”

“It’s not like we don’t do that anyway,” she replied.

“HERMIONE!”

“We just have to get used to it,” she reassured him. “Figure out how to recognize the negative feelings as belonging to someone else and then block them out.”

“What if I can’t?” Ron asked, trying not to sound as panicked as he felt. He didn’t want to spend the next two weeks fighting with her about nothing. He had a match on Saturday. What if this whole
bond thing got worse instead of better? How was he supposed to play if he still couldn’t concentrate?

“Then we let it wear off,” Hermione stated matter-of-factly.

“No bloody way,” Ron barked, panic gripping him again for an entirely different reason. “And it isn’t about the sex,” he added the instant he saw one of her eyebrows arch, recognizing the gesture as the warning that it was because he could feel the suspicion that flashed through her as she did it. “Didn’t you hear what I said about You-Know-Who and his followers being after you and Harry? Just because we aren’t going into Hogsmeade doesn’t mean I’m going to let you walk around unprotected. We’re maintaining the blasted link,” he stated adamantly. “Even if it means I have to give up Quidditch.”

“How do you do that?” Hermione asked, her whole demeanor softening. “One minute you have me so agitated I want to bang my head against the wall and scream, then you turn around and say something so sweet that I just... But you aren’t going to have to give up Quidditch,” she said, unable to keep from smiling now. “I appreciate the gesture though.”

“I sure as hell can’t play like this,” he sighed.

“You’ll do better tomorrow,” Hermione assured him.

“Yeah, right,” he muttered under his breath, looking at her doubtfully.

“You will,” Hermione insisted. “You’re not angry anymore are you?” she asked, but she didn’t give him time to reply, since she already knew the answer. “And our Transfiguration essay isn’t due until Thursday, which means technically you could take the night off and go to bed early so you’ll be well rested. Of course if you do that, you’re going to have to buck down and work doubly hard tomorrow night. But if you promise me that you’ll devote the entire night to your homework,” she said with a slight smirk, “I’ll promise to make sure you aren’t frustrated before practice.”

“That sounds a lot like blackmail to me,” Ron said with a cheeky smile of his own.

“I prefer to think of it as incentive,” Hermione replied jovially.

“You certainly know how to motivate me,” he laughed, reaching out, taking her hands in his, and then using them to pull her down on the bed beside him.

“So we’ve got a deal then?” Hermione asked.

“Absolutely,” Ron replied, lightly running his index finger down her neck. “You will help me though?” he asked, smiling to himself when he watched her shudder under his touch. “With the essay,” he clarified when he felt her arousal deepen after he’d asked his question and he realized that she’d misinterpreted what he wanted help with. Not that he wouldn’t like that kind of help as well; it just wasn’t what he’d been referring to. “Because you know Harry and I will just flub it up and spend the whole night going around in circles without you.”

“I’m not doing it for you if that’s what you’re asking,” she replied, her eyes shut as she enjoyed his tender caresses. “But I will proof read it for you when you’re finished.”

“And you’ll explain anything that I’m confused about?” Ron asked, replacing his finger with his lips and kissing her neck briefly, before nuzzling against her and speaking again directly into her ear. “Because you know it makes more sense when you tell me things. You just have a knack for explaining complicated spells.”

“Yes,” Hermione sighed, pressing her body more firmly against his as she answered him, finally
allowing her own hands to wander a bit.

Ron was definitely what Hermione would label a ‘visual learner’. He paid close attention to what was going on around him and naturally took in things both she and Harry missed. Not only that, he was able to read people based on nothing more than their body language. A quintessential hallmark of a visual learner. He also had an uncanny ability to visualize things or formulate plans, and then see them come to fruition in his minds eye before he acted them out, which explained why he was so good at chess.

The problem was, without something visual to focus on when he was studying, Ron tended to loose focus and pay attention to other things going on in the room because they were more interesting. Like Harry, who was obviously a ‘kinesthetic learner’, Ron tended to get bored with lectures and tedious reading that didn’t have any pictures or visual references to stimulate him. What he needed, what both boys needed in a situation like that actually, was a practical demonstration, because simply reading about the proper way to cast a new spell wasn’t enough.

Harry learned best through movement, by having Hermione demonstrate new spells for him step by step and then mimicking her actions. Harry was definitely a ‘hands-on’ learner. He had to try things for himself in order to work out the kinks. Ron learned by watching Hermione teach Harry how to do things. Once he visually saw it done correctly, everything that he read and hadn’t understood usually clicked into place. Once he saw the proper wrist movement in conjunction with the incantation, not only was Ron able to mimic it, he could usually remember the new movement and keep it separate from another spell that required a similar flick of the wrist. But it definitely helped having Hermione be the one to demonstrate the spells for him, because he was especially attuned to her body language and that made it easier for him to pick up on the subtle changes in the way she held her wand, as opposed to say the way someone else, like McGonagall, did.

The fact that Ron was such a visual person did have its upside however. Not only was he able to read Hermione’s body language and use it to gauge her mood with a high degree of accuracy, he was also very good at visualizing images he’d seen in the past and replaying them in his head. A skill that unbeknownst to Hermione, he’d been using with more and more frequency ever since the two of them had started making the most of their alone time together. And at the moment, Ron happened to recall a rather provocative image he’d seen in that book Bill had given him. Something he’d been eager to try out, but as of yet, hadn’t had the nerve to mention.

It was obviously something that at least one of his brothers had been greatly interested in as well, because not only was that particular page warn, it appeared to have been dog-eared more than once. Although why anyone would need to mark the page in order to find it again, was beyond Ron, considering the name of the position and the page number on which it could be found happened to be the same.

With that specific image replaying in his mind, Ron looked at Hermione and silently tried to judge whether or not he thought she’d be receptive if he suggested they try it. She was relaxed and comfortable. Not only that, she was clearly in the mood. He could feel that as well as see it. Her hands were roaming pretty freely down his backside after all. If he played his cards right and suggested it in a way that was subtle, she just might go for it. She’d already admitted to him that she was frustrated too. And the position contained on page 69 of his secret book would definitely help alleviate that. As long as he kept himself under control, didn’t use his fingers, and was gentle, there was no reason she shouldn’t enjoy it just as much as he would.

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“Merlin’s beard!” Neville yelped, freezing in the doorway of his dorm room and turning a brilliant
shade of red the instant he opened the door and the sounds issuing from behind the curtains of Ron’s four poster bed registered with him.

“What?” Seamus asked, coming up behind Neville just as he stepped back into the hallway and slammed the door shut. “OY! Weasley, you wanker!” Seamus bellowed through the now closed door, after taking in Neville’s startled expression and his obvious embarrassment, then using them to jump to the wrong conclusion. “Haven’t you ever heard of a Shield Charm?”

“I don’t think that’s what he’s doing,” Neville said, not to Seamus, but to Harry, blushing even deeper as he spoke. He couldn’t be certain of course, because it had only been for an instant, but Neville was fairly certain that the moans he’d heard had been come from more than one person.

“No way!” Seamus cried out jubilantly, reaching around Neville to get at the doorknob.

“Don’t even think about it,” Harry cried, grabbing the eager Irishman by the back of the shirt and hauling him away from the door.

“If he’s snogging some bird in there, that’s against the rules,” Seamus exclaimed, his eyes dancing with mischief. “Which he knows, seeing as how he’s a Prefect and all. Bloody hell!” he cried, as the further implications of his statement hit home. “They’re both bloody Prefects. Do you know that this means?” he asked Neville, who just stared back at him blankly. “We just caught perfect Prefect, Hermione Granger, breaking the rules in a big, BIG way.”

“Will you shut up?” Harry hissed, glancing down the hallway nervously. “Before someone else hears you.”

“You knew!” the sandy haired Irishman cried, pointing a finger at Harry. “Of course you knew. I bet you’ve even been covering for them, haven’t you? If he gets to sneak girls up here, so do I?” Seamus continued, instantly hitting on a way to work the situation to his advantage.

“Not if I kill you, you don’t,” Ron growled, throwing the door open and staring into the hallway to make sure no one else was within earshot to hear what Seamus was carrying on about. “Now get in here,” he said, grabbing a hold of Neville, who happened to be closest, and pulling him into the room, “and shut the fuck up.”

“Language Ron!” Hermione admonished, from where she now stood beside his bed.

“I knew it!” Seamus cried triumphantly, hurrying into the room without Harry even needing to push him along. “You two are soooo busted,” he said, a huge smile plastered across his face as he took in Hermione’s disheveled hair and swollen lips. “Your shirts on inside out,” he said, laughing when Hermione’s eyes immediately darted down to check. “Not yours,” Seamus guffawed. “His,” he said, pointing at Ron, who was now just as red in the face as both Hermione and Neville.

“Not a word about this to anyone,” Ron said, managing to sound threatening despite his embarrassment.

“Yeah, right,” Seamus laughed.

“You have no one to blame but yourself then,” the redhead snapped, spinning around and locking his eyes on Hermione. “Obliviate him.”

“What?” both Hermione and Seamus said in disbelief at nearly the same time.

“If you aren’t going to go along, we’ll have to modify your memory,” Ron said, hoping his threat might bring his bothersome roommate around.
“What about Neville?” Seamus shot back. “Are you going to have her Obliviate him too?”

“I can trust Neville,” Ron retorted. “He knows how to keep his mouth shut. You don’t.”

“Ron, you can’t seriously...” Hermione started to say, but she was cut off before she had the chance to finish.

“I’m not going to,” Ron stated, “you are. If you don’t he’ll tell everyone,” he explained. “And then people will start talking and I’ll have to beat the hell out of half the bloody school. Best to just nip it in the bud now before it gets out of hand.”

“He isn’t going to say anything,” Hermione said, the connection she had with Ron having clued her in on the fact that he wasn’t entirely serious. If he wanted to play the bad cop, she was going to have to play the good one. Then again, good wasn’t exactly the appropriate word for what she knew Ron had in mind.

“Sure, getting us saddled with a detention might be somewhat satisfying,” she said, knowing that Seamus was likely to want a little pay back, seeing as how Ron had personally given him a detention for mouthing off not all that long ago. “But is it worth what he’d be giving up?”

“Aye, right?” Seamus scoffed. “And what exactly might that be?”

“You said it yourself,” Ron replied. “If I can sneak girls up here, so can you. Provided no one else catches on, that is,” he added. “Because once it becomes common knowledge... well, that’s the end to all of our fun.”

“You seriously expect me to believe that she’d sit back and do nothing, even though she knew I was bringing girls up here?” Seamus asked, his eyes now locked on Hermione, seeing as how she was the one that was usually the stickler for the rules.

Unless that rule applies to her, he thought with a smirk. In which case she appears to be only too happy to ignore them. Weasley must be more persuasive than I gave him credit for. I wonder what McGonagall would say if she knew what her perfect little pet student was up to?

“It only seems fair,” Ron replied for Hermione, when she crossed her arms in front of her chest and remained silent.

He knew what she was thinking. He’d have known even if he hadn’t felt the resentment that was coursing through her body, because it was written all over her face. She didn’t like the fact that Seamus thought he had her cornered. She wanted to wipe that smug smirk right off his face. And it would be so easy for her to do, because technically they weren’t doing anything wrong. The rule they were supposedly breaking stipulated that there was to be no cohabitation between unmarried students. Unmarried being the key word there. Technically they could snog anywhere they wanted. They could do it right under Snape’s hooked nose if they were so inclined, provided they were willing to reveal their secret marriage. And therein lay the problem. As much as she’d like to, she wasn’t willing to divulge that particular bit of information, especially to someone with a mouth the size of Seamus’. So as much as she hated it, Hermione knew that she had no choice but to go along and let him think that he had her dead to rights. But it irked her to no end to do it.

“I want to hear it from her,” Seamus retorted.

“Fine,” she spat out her reply, clearly bothered by the fact that she had to agree. “I won’t do anything. Not as long as no one outside this room knows what’s going on,” she added. “But if I catch the younger students following your lead, I’m putting a stop to the whole thing.”
“Meaning the bird in question has to be a 6th year?” Seamus asked.

“No, you can sneak a 7th year in here if you like,” Ron replied with a smirk. “Provided you can find one desperate enough that is.”

“Sod off, Weasley. I can get a 7th year before you can.”

“The difference being I don’t want one,” Ron retorted. “Where are you going?” he asked, shifting his attention to Hermione, who was slowly inching her way towards the door, hoping no one would notice.

Up to my own room to dig a hole, crawl in it, and die, she thought.

“I don’t especially want to hear anymore details about what he’s planning,” she said in way of an excuse. “It’s better if I just go now and let you boys work the details out amongst yourselves. Just...er... no,” she said, shaking her head as if she’d changed her mind mid thought. “I don’t even want to know the details once you’ve work them out. Whatever Ron decides is fine with me,” she said, her eyes now glued to the floor.

“Am I hearing things, or did she just give Weasley permission to make decisions without consulting her?” Seamus asked Harry, who was damn near as startled as the rest of his roommates.

“Looks like,” Harry responded, trying not to goggle at Ron when he turned his back on the rest of them and followed Hermione over to the door.

“Okay, whatever spell he used on her, I want to know how to cast it.”

“Wait a second,” Ron said, completely missing the Irishman’s comment because he was so focused on Hermione. “You are going to come back up later, right?” he asked, purposely lowering his voice.

“No,” she replied in a tone that all but screamed, ‘are you crazy?’

“Please,” he said, dropping his voice even lower and subtly running his finger down her arm as he reached for her hand. “I’ll get rid of them,” he whispered hopefully.

“Absolutely not,” she said, giving his hand a gentle squeeze, then slipping out of the room and into the hallway before he had a chance to say anything else.

“Thanks a lot, Finnigan,” Ron barked, spinning around to face his roommates once more. “Way to ruin what was shaping up to be a perfect evening.”

“You’re dreaming if you think she’s going to do anything other than snog you up here,” Seamus replied, despite the fact he was no longer completely sure of that fact.

Weasley had already proven that he had a knack for getting Granger to do unexpected things. Not only had she hexed Lavender Brown clear across the common room in a fit of jealous rage, now he had her breaking school rules and sneaking up to his bedroom. Clearly Seamus didn’t have her pegged as well as he thought he did, but he wasn’t willing to admit that.

“Neville here has a better chance of having it off with Loony Lovegood,” the Irishman pressed on, moving towards the doorway Ron was currently blocking. “Now if you don’t mind,” he said, pushing Ron to one side so he could get through it, “I’m going to go downstairs, scare up a bird of my own, and see if I can’t have myself a right good pash. If there’s a tie hanging on the doorknob the next time you come up, don’t bother trying to get in because the room will be occupied.”
“Tosser,” Ron mumbled, once Seamus had brushed by and closed the door behind him. “Er... sorry about that,” he said apologetically, turning around to look at Harry and Neville, both of whom were staring at him. “I’m sure Hermione wouldn’t object if you two wanted to... you know, sneak a girl up here yourself every now and then.”

Hermione might not, but you probably would, Harry thought, floored by the fact that the first girl that popped into his head at Ron’s suggestion happened to be his best friend’s little sister. Although as he’d already mentioned to Ron, Ginny wasn’t really all that little anymore. She’d grown up.

And she’s filled out in all the right places, a little voice in the back of his head added.

Shut up! he shouted at the voice in his head. That’s Ron’s sister. You can’t have thoughts like that about her.

Unfortunately for Harry, it was already too late. The thoughts were there now, whether he liked it or not, and for some reason they weren’t so easy to just put out of his mind.

“We’ll just do what Seamus suggested then,” Ron continued, blissfully unaware of the impure thoughts his best mate was having about his baby sister. “Just put a tie on the doorknob when the room’s occupied and you don’t want to be disturbed,” he said, the color in his ears bleeding down and over taking his face once more. “You two okay with that?”

“With what?” Harry asked, having missed everything Ron said.

“With putting a tie on the doorknob as a sign the room is occupied?” the redhead replied.

“Isn’t that a bit obvious?” Harry said, trying to pull himself together. “I mean anyone walking down the hall is bound to see that and Hermione said if anyone else found out ...”

“You might have a point there,” Ron admitted. “You got any better ideas?”

“You could charm the doorknob,” Neville suggested, taking both boys by surprise. “Make it hot or something. Because I might not even see a tie if I was in a hurry or distracted,” he admitted, “but I’d definitely notice if the doorknob was hot. I mean how can you not notice something like that? There’s no way you could forget what it means either, plus you’d have to actually touch the doorknob to know.”

“Works for me,” Ron said after taking a moment to mull Neville’s suggestion over in his head. “What about you, Harry?”

“Huh?”

“I’m sure Hermione will know the perfect spell,” Ron continued, glancing at his best friend and smirking because he had a fairly good idea what was distracting him. Already thinking about who you want to bring up, eh? “Something warm enough to get your attention, but not so hot that it’ll really burn you. And something that isn’t too complicated,” he said, after glancing over at Neville again. “I wouldn’t want to flub it up because I was distracted or anything,” he added. “But just in case, try and remember to lock the door and Shield the room as well.”

“Like you did?” Harry asked.

“It wasn’t like we were planning on doing anything like that,” Ron said defensively. “We were just talking and...”

“And one thing lead to another,” Harry finished for him. “I get it. Only the next time something like
that happens, do us all a favor and stop long enough to lock the door. Not that it really matters now I suppose,” he added. “You and Hermione are going to have to find somewhere else to snog anyway,” he added, when Ron looked confused. “Because now that you’ve given Seamus free reign, you’ll have a hard time getting in here yourself.”

“Naw,” Ron disagreed with a cheeky grin. “He still has to waste his time trying to find someone that’s interested and then talk her into it. I’ve got him beat on both counts.”

“Okay, that’s enough!” Harry said quickly, holding his hand out to stop Ron. “I don’t really want to hear about how you talked her into it. It falls under the category of too much information.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you,” Ron replied with a chuckle.

“Good.”

“Although,” Ron added, smiling even wider, “that’s not all I talked her into. Somehow, and don’t ask me how, because I don’t really know, I managed to get out of doing a lick of homework tonight and the best part is, it was her idea. Can you believe that? What do you say we make the most of it? You up for a game of chess?”

“Naw,” Harry said, shaking his head slowly as he declined his best mate’s offer. “I need to get started on those relaxation exercises Tonks told me about. You know to help me with my...Occlumency,” he added quietly, after glancing over at Neville who was now attending his Mimbulus Mimbletonia, to make sure he wasn’t paying attention.

“So what?” Ron asked. “You’re just going to go lie in your bed and practice relaxing? Isn’t that called going to sleep? I’d think you’d have that down by now, seeing as how you do it every night.”

“Actually I think I’m going to go to the Room of Requirement,” Harry replied, popping his trunk while Neville’s back was still turned. “It’ll be quiet there and Tonks said I should do it in a place where I wasn’t likely to be interrupted, at least until I got the hang of it and could tune other people out.”

“So what?” Ron asked. “You’re just going to go lie in your bed and practice relaxing? Isn’t that called going to sleep? I’d think you’d have that down by now, seeing as how you do it every night.”

“Actually I think I’m going to go to the Room of Requirement,” Harry replied, popping his trunk while Neville’s back was still turned. “It’ll be quiet there and Tonks said I should do it in a place where I wasn’t likely to be interrupted, at least until I got the hang of it and could tune other people out.”

“Why don’t you use the Prefects’ Bathroom?” Ron asked. “The password is...”

“No, that’s all right,” Harry said, despite the fact he was tempted by the offer. A nice long soak in a pool size tub of hot water would definitely be relaxing, especially after two days of Quidditch practice. The problem was, Malfoy was a Prefect and the last thing Harry wanted was to get caught by him using a room that technically was off limits. “I better not risk it,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble or anything. The Room of Requirement will work fine,” he assured his friend as he made for the door.

“You won’t need that,” Ron said, when Harry fished his Invisibility Cloak out of his trunk and balled it up in his arms to help disguise it somewhat. “Ginny has rounds tonight. Even if she does catch you out after curfew, it’s not like she’s going to reprimand you anything.”

“Ginny doesn’t do rounds on her own,” Harry reminded him. “I’ll probably be back before curfew, but I think I’m going to take this along anyway, just in case. I’m sure you’ll find another way to entertain yourself until I get back,” he added with a smirk of his own as he stepped out into the hall. “Only please don’t be doing it in the common room when I get back, because I really don’t want to see the two of you going at it again.”

“Couldn’t do it there even if I wanted to,” Ron replied glumly. “Bloody first year rule, remember? And apparently the Room of Requirement is now taken.”
“There’s always the Prefects’ Bathroom,” Harry shot back. “Although now that I think of it, you should definitely nix that idea,” he added, coming to an abrupt halt and spinning around to look his best friend in the eye. “Kind of hard to enjoy yourself when you know Moaning Myrtle is spying on you from the tap.”

“What!” Ron yelped, his eyes bugging out as he mouth fell open in horror at the mere thought of Myrtle watching him take a bath. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Harry asked, shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly. “I could have sworn that I did. Oh well, so she saw you starkers a few times.”

“Oh well!” Ron cried in horror, thinking back on all the times he’d allowed himself to fantasize about Hermione while he was in that room because he’d thought he was alone. “Bloody buggering hell! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Who saw you starkers?” Neville asked, Ron’s shouts having drawn his full attention.

“Moaning Myrtle,” Harry replied.

“Who?”

“The ghost that haunts the girls’ toilet on the second floor. She likes to spy on people in the Prefects’ Bathroom.”

“Oh,” Neville said, and then the lights clicked on. “Oh!” he said again, understanding exactly why Ron’s face was the same color as his hair. “That’s... well, that kind of sucks actually. Wait a minute; she doesn’t spy in the other bathrooms does she?”

“I don’t know?” Harry answered honestly. “I hadn’t thought about it actually.” I suppose she could, but... no... “I don’t think we need to worry,” he replied. “She’s only ever come out to talk to me that one time when I was in the Prefects’ Bathroom and she swore that she looked away while I was getting ready to get in the water. I’m sure she did the same with you,” he said to Ron, who was still gaping at him. “Well, I better get going if I want to get anything done before curfew,” he said, spinning around and starting down the hall again on his own.
Chapter 32: Seduction

What the hell was that all about? Harry asked himself as he stalked past the overstuffed chairs Lavender and Parvati were occupying, slipped through the portrait hole, and ambled towards the corridor that would eventually lead him to the Room of Requirement. I don’t fancy Ginny. She’s Ron’s little sister for Merlin’s sake. He’d bloody well pulverize me if he knew what I was just thinking about. I can’t have thoughts like that about her.

Obviously you can, a sarcastic little voice piped up in the back of his mind. Seeing as how you just did.

But it isn’t her, Harry argued with himself, not really. Ron mentioned bringing girls up to our room and Ginny just happens to be a girl, that’s all.

An attractive girl, who you want to snog, the voice taunted.

I do not.

So why were you thinking about it then?

Ron was the one that brought it up, Harry insisted. This is all his fault really. Not that it would stop him from killing me if he ever found out I fancied his sister, which I DON’T, but still, how am I not supposed to think about doing those kinds of things when I know for a fact that he is?

That’s what it is, Harry decided, finally hitting on a means of justifying his actions. I can’t stop thinking about doing it because I know he is. But just because I’m randy and Ginny happens to be the first girl to pop into my head, that doesn’t mean I fancy her, or that I really even want to do those things with her per se. The only reason I thought about her at all is because other than Hermione, she’s the only other girl I’m really close to or comfortable with.

Which is exactly why you shouldn’t be thinking about doing things like that with her in the first place, he scolded himself as he continued to march down the hallway, walking right past the tapestry of Barnabas the Balmy and his dancing trolls without even noticing. Ginny is your friend, not some shag toy you can play with and discard as soon as you get bored. She deserves better than that.

Not that it really matters, because she’s not interested in me like that anymore, he made a point of reminding himself. Anymore than I’m interested in her.

Good thing too, because Ron really would kill me. Not that I’d blame him. I’d want to kill me too if did something like that to her, he admitted to himself, jerking his eyes off the ground when they landed on the base of the man-sized vase that was situated at the end of the corridor.

“Damn,” Harry muttered, spinning around when he realized that he’d walked right past the stretch of wall where the door he wanted was concealed.

Get a grip already, he admonished himself as he trudged back towards the blank space opposite the tapestry. You have to be able to concentrate if you want to get in, he reminded himself, closing his eyes and banishing all thoughts of redheads from his mind so he could focus on envisioning what it was he was going to need. But all he really needed was a quiet place, so he pictured the Gryffindor common room in his mind and started pacing.
Harry had just made his second pass in front of the blank wall and had turned around to make his third and final one, when an unexpected voice rang out behind him.

“What are you doing?” Parvati Patil asked, unable to contain her curiosity. She’d just seen him walk back and forth in front of the same spot with his eyes closed twice after all.

“What’s it to you?” Harry shot back, not only irritated with her because she’d broken his concentration, but with himself as well, because he hadn’t realized she was there and she’d actually managed to startle him.

“Nothing I guess,” Parvati replied somewhat cautiously. “I just saw you heading this way and thought you might be starting the D.A. up again or something, that’s all. I wasn’t trying to snoop or anything,” she said, despite the fact it wasn’t exactly true. She’d seen him leave the common room on his own, with nothing but a balled up cloak tucked under his arm and her curiosity had been peaked, so she’d decided to follow him.

“Well, I’m not, so you can leave.”

“But you are trying to get into the Room of Requirement? Is that how you do it?” she asked, having always wondered how it was that Harry and his friends managed to find the secret room in the first place, let alone how they managed to get inside. When she’d shown up for the D.A. meetings the year before, the doorway had always been visible and one of them was usually manning it, but when she walked down the corridor on her own after the meetings, or before they started, the wall where the doorway ought to be was always smooth and vacant. “You just walk back and forth in front of the wall until the door appears?”

“Something like that,” Harry admitted. “But you have to concentrate and I can’t do that with you standing here yapping at me.”

“Sorry,” Parvati said quietly, before shutting her mouth and taking a few steps backwards so she wouldn’t be in his way, but she obviously had no intentions of leaving. She did refrain from speaking however, and simply stood there instead watching him as if she expected him to perform some impressive feat of magic.

“All you have to do is walk back and forth in front of the spot where the doorway should be while thinking about what it is that you need,” Harry said quickly, hoping against hope that if he explained how to get inside, she’d go away and try it on her own later.

“And what is it you need tonight?” she asked coyly. Unfortunately for her, the fact that she was trying to flirt with him when right over Harry’s thick head.

“Peace and quiet,” he replied rather tetchily. “So if you don’t mind.”

“Why not just go to the Library then?” she asked, not buying his explanation. “It’s always quiet there. Unless you’re planning on meeting some lucky girl here,” she added, studying him closely to see if she’d hit close to the mark.

“No,” Harry snapped, intentionally using an exasperated tone of voice. “I’m just going to be working on some homework, if you really must know.”

“Uh huh,” she said in a placating manner, clearly not buying a word of it. “Without your books, or your notes, or so much as a quill. Homework. Right. And who exactly are you going to be working on this ‘homework’ with?”

“No one.”
“Maybe I can help you then.”

“I don’t think so,” Harry retorted. “Professor Tonks specifically told me that I should work on it alone.”

“Ooooh,” Parvati said excitedly, her whole face lighting up. “So it’s Defense Against the Dark Arts is it? Did she teach you some new spell? Is it something we’re going to learn in class later? Oh, can’t I see it? Just show me once and then I’ll leave you alone to practice. Please,” she added in a sickening sweet voice, batting her eyelashes as she did so.

“It’s not for class,” Harry sighed, taking his glasses off for a moment and rubbing his own eyes with the palms of his hands. “It’s just some relaxation exercises, okay? Nothing big or flashy or impressive about it,” he stated as he put his glasses back on, hoping against hope that the truth would disappoint her and put her off a bit. “All I’m going to do is sit there and try and clear my head.”

“You mean like meditation?” Parvati asked, not even remotely put off by the boring nature of the truth. “What form are you going to use?”

“Form?” Harry asked uncertainly.

“Yes?” Parvati replied. “Are you going to try Concentrative Meditation and focus on your breathing to relax or are you going to use a form of Mindfulness Meditation? Did Professor Tonks give you a mantra?”

“A what?”

“A mantra,” Parvati repeated, taking in Harry’s confused expression and elaborating a bit. “You know, a word or phrase to use in order to focus your mind. Something to repeat when random thoughts intrude and you need to refocus. You don’t have to tell me what it is, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Good thing because I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he replied.

“So you don’t have a mantra then,” she said, more to herself than to Harry. “So you’ll be focusing on your breathing instead? I supposed that makes sense. You are just starting out after all. I could help you if you like,” she said gamely. “I mean just to get started. Make sure you’re using the proper breathing technique and sitting in the proper pose. That kind of thing.”

“Um....”

“It really is terribly important that you start off right. If your posture isn’t properly poised you’ll never get it right,” she insisted. “I’d think Professor Tonks would be here to walk you through it herself. Unless she’s already done that.”

“Er... yeah, she has,” Harry said, despite the fact he really didn’t know what Parvati was talking about.

The term poised made him think of some ballet dancer balancing on a toe and Tonks couldn’t do something like that without falling flat on her face even on her best day. The thought of her even attempting it was actually rather humorous. Parvati however, was a very good dancer, at least as far as Harry remembered. She had managed to get him through the opening of the Yule Ball, despite the fact he had no idea what he was doing, and she obviously knew more about meditation than he did. Maybe she could help him.

“How do you know so much about this stuff anyway?” Harry asked, looking at her in a
contemplative manner as he tried to make up his mind.

“Meditation is a Hindu practice,” she replied straight away, “and my father believes that it is the key to good health and happiness,” she added, rolling her eyes a bit as if she didn’t quite share his point of view. “He made sure both Padma and I received the proper instruction. It’s good for relaxation and focus,” she continued, “but personally, I’ve never gleamed much enlightenment from it. But if you’re trying to use it to enhance your ability to focus so you can learn some complicated DADA spell, I can definitely help you with that.”

“Well, Tonks did walk me through it,” Harry said, after a few seconds of silence had elapsed, “but it was a couple weeks ago,” he admitted, “and I haven’t really had time to try it out on my own since then. I suppose if you really want to help, a few pointers wouldn’t hurt.”

“The first thing you’re going to have to do is get comfortable,” Parvati said, after giving Harry the time he needed to concentrate and make the door appear. “You should probably start by taking some of your clothes off,” she said completely non-pulsed, tugging her own jumper over her head as she followed Harry into a duplicate version of the Gryffindor common room.

“What?” he asked, spinning around just in time to see her toss her jumper aside and crouch down on the hearthrug to remove her shoes. Unfortunately for Harry, Parvati wasn’t wearing anything but a formfitting black tank top under her jumper, and as tight as it was, in her current position, he had a straight shot view down the front and he couldn’t help but stare at the ample amount of cleavage that was showing.

“You’ll need to take your shoes off,” she stated when she looked up and saw him just standing there gawking at her. “Here, I’ll help,” she added, trying not to smirk when she came forward on her knees and untied his trainers for him.

She hadn’t purposely set out to entice him with the view, but seeing as how he’d finally noticed her, she couldn’t say she was exactly sorry about it either.

Maybe Lavender was onto something, she thought, recognizing the keen look in Harry eye because it was very similar to the one he, and all the other boys in the immediate area, had been directing at Lavender just before Hermione walked in and hexed her clear across the room for trying to seduce her boyfriend.

I usually prefer something a little more subtle, but this seems to be working so.... I might as well go all the way and there is no possible way he’ll be able to misconstrue this, she thought, locking her large brown eyes on his trousers momentarily and slowly running them up his body until she was looking directly into his wide eyes.

“You’ll need to unbutton those,” she said without so much as blushing.

“What?”

“Your trousers,” she explained as she sat back on the hearthrug, never taking her eyes off his shocked face. “I told you,” she said, slowly peeling off her socks, then crossing her bare legs and placing her feet on her thighs after she bunched her skirt up just enough so it wouldn’t be in the way. “You need to be comfortable,” she explained, “and I have a feeling that your trousers may be a bit... constricting. Actually, unbuttoning them might not be enough,” she added, smiling to herself when she noting the fact his eyes were glued on her exposed thighs. “You should probably take them off altogether.”

BLOODY HELL! Harry’s mind screamed, his entire face flushing. If he did that, she’d know...
exactly how much watching her disrobe was affecting him. Then again, maybe that’s what she wanted. No, he told himself, despite the fact he was no longer sure of anything.

She couldn’t possibly be suggesting what he thought she was suggesting, could she? Had she seen what he was looking at? Did she already know what he was thinking about? Did she know how much the sight off her baring so much of her lovely brown skin was affecting him? And if she did, why wasn’t she embarrassed? Why wasn’t she covering herself up?

Unless she’s doing it on purpose, Harry thought, his already wide eyes getting even larger behind his glasses. Is that why she was just sitting there like that, letting me ogle her? Is that why she wants me to take my trousers off? Unless, Harry thought with mounting horror, Unless this is some kind of whacked out test. Maybe she just wants to see if I’m thick enough to take my trousers off so she can run back to the common room and laugh about it with all the other girls. OH DEAR GOD! This can’t be happening.

Who says it can’t? his libido piped in. She’s beautiful and you already know that she’s interested. Hermione told you and she wouldn’t lie about something like that. Why are you fighting it?

Because I can’t.

Who says you can’t? he argued with himself, biding his time by removing his own shoes with his toes. Ron and Hermione are doing it, so why shouldn’t you? A good snog never hurt anyone.

But I can’t, he exclaimed, slowly peeling off his jumper, despite his better judgment. I don’t even know how.

Then this is a perfect opportunity to learn. All you have to do is follow her lead and do whatever she does just like you did with the dancing.

But what if I’m wrong? What if it isn’t what she wants? Maybe she really is just trying to help me get comfortable because it will help with the meditation stuff. If that’s all she’s trying to do and I try something else, I’ll make a complete berk out of myself.

“Er...,” Harry stammered, unbuttoning his trousers and feeling thoroughly exposed as a result, despite the fact he still had plenty of clothing on. “What now?” he asked, sitting down on the floor opposite Parvati and looking at her nervously.

“Are you comfortable?” she asked casually, allowing her eyes to dart down to zipper for the briefest of moments, before refocusing on his face again.

“Are you comfortable?” she asked casually, allowing her eyes to dart down to zipper for the briefest of moments, before refocusing on his face again.

“Er...I guess so,” Harry replied, his face heating up yet again.

“You’re going to need to sit upright,” she instructed, straightening her own back and thrusting her chest out in the process. “Like this,” she said, showing him the proper stance “You have to keep your spine completely straight. You don’t want it to be rigid though,” she added. “You want to be comfortable and natural. Just try and keep your shoulders back and your chin up and you should be fine.”

“Shoulders back,” Harry repeated as he stared at her, his eyes focused several inches below her shoulders and his body anything but relaxed. “Chin up. Right. Now what?” he asked, after forcing himself to adopt a similar pose.

“Relax your muscles and let all your tension wash away,” she instructed, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. “Start at your head,” she said, after letting the breath out. “Focus on the tension as you breathe in and push it away as you breathe out, then work your way down. Do the same thing with
your eyes. Breathe in,” she said, sucking in a deep breath, oblivious to the fact Harry was watching her chest rise and then fall, “and let it and the tension out,” she said after exhaling. “Move down to your jaw, then to your neck, then down to your shoulders,” she explained. “Slowly work your way down your entire body. Focusing on any tension you are feeling as you breathe in and force it to leave your body as you exhale. Breathe in deeply at first, then less and less, so that by the time you reach your feet, you’re breathing is slow and natural. You want it to be calm. You want it to mirror the way your body feels. It should be nice and slow and relaxed just like you are.”

“You aren’t relaxing,” she said, after opening her eyes and looking at him. “Take a deep breath and hold it,” Parvati insisted. “Now close your eyes and focus on your neck. Feel the muscles there. Pull any tension you are experiencing in them forward. Now exhale and push the tension out. Imagine it leaving your body. Imagine yourself forcing it out. Now take in a new breath, fresh and clean, and concentrate on your shoulders.”

“That’s right,” Parvati said softly when he complied. “Now let it out and move to your chest. Just breathe in and let it out,” she said as she watched him.

Little did she know it wasn’t his own chest he was thinking about, it was hers. The way it rose and fell with each breath she took. The way the firelight dancing across the room from the fireplace shimmered against her smooth skin. The way her sleeveless top hugged her body and the perfect roundness of the breasts it concealed. So full and firm. He imagined himself reaching out and touching them, cupping them both so he could feel the weight of her in his hands. He imagined his fingertips running over her flawless skin. He imagined her nipples hardening against his palms in response. He wanted to feel them. He wanted to see them. He wanted to take them in his mouth and....

OH GOD! This is sooo NOT what I’m supposed to be thinking about.

“Think of meditation as going to the bottom of the ocean, where everything is calm and tranquil,” Parvati explained while Harry silently cursed himself.

What are you doing? he rebuked himself. She told you that you weren’t supposed to be rigid, and yet here you are, thinking about her body instead your own and look what that’s gotten you. You’re so hard now you can barely think straight. Way to go, Potter. How do you plan on getting out of this one?

“There might be a storm brewing on the surface,” Parvati continued in a soft voice, despite the fact Harry wasn’t really listening, “but below, where you are, the water is unaffected. It doesn’t matter how high the waves get now because where you are it is peaceful and silent.”

The hell it is.

“When a wave from the outside world comes crashing down, you will not feel it. You will be unaffected. Feel your fears, your doubts, your worries, and all the other earthly turmoil you’re experiencing ebb away.”

“Just take a moment, to breathe,” Parvati instructed in a serene voice. “Breathe slowly and evenly now. Concentrate on your breathing. Use your imagination and feel yourself breathing out all the rubbish you want to get rid of. Let it ebb away with the waves on the surface and focus on your breathing.

Yeah right, Harry thought. No way in hell this is going to just ebb away. As soon as she leaves I’m going to have to help it along. And she better go soon or she’s liable to notice what’s going on, because my trousers are bloody unbuttoned, he reminded himself, shifting uncomfortable. SHIT!
“I don’t think it’s really working,” Harry said, his green eyes snapping open behind his glasses. “But thanks for trying. You don’t need to waste anymore of your time sitting here trying to help me though,” he added quickly. “I reckon I can work it out on my own from here.”

“You really think so, do you?” Parvati asked, a coy smile playing across her lips that sent a jolt of terror through Harry’s body. “I suppose you could at that,” she added, licking her lips and dropping her gaze to his lap, “but it wouldn’t be nearly as fun.”

OH DEAR GOD! Harry screamed in his head. She knows.

“You won’t be able to concentrate on your breathing with that,” she said unabashedly, forcing herself to look into him dead in the eye and batting her eyelashes again as she spoke. Somehow she managed to do it without blushing too much, but she couldn’t help but feel brazen.

Coming on this strong wasn’t Parvati’s usual style, but this was Harry Potter; The Boy Who Lived; the most eligible bloke is all of Hogwarts. Not only was he rich and famous, he was actually good looking to boot. And yet despite all of that, he wasn’t some smug pretty boy with an ego the size of one of Hagrid’s monsters that was in need of constant stroking. In fact, Harry had no idea what a catch he was, which made him all the more appealing. If she could land him, she’d be the envy of half the girls in the school and for a payoff like that, Parvati was willing to take a few risks. If she had to take a leaf out of her best friend’s book and be a bit brazen to do it, then that was exactly what she was going to do.

“There are other ways to relax and experience a bit of Nirvana,” she forced herself to say in a seductive tone of voice. “I could help you with that too, you know?”

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“Looks like the room is free,” Ron leaned down and whispered into Hermione’s ear the instant they cleared the portrait hole and he spotted Seamus loitering around a group of fifth year girls, no doubt trying to chat them up. “It would be a shame to let it go to waste,” he continued unabashedly.

“You’re shameless,” she sighed, but it was more for show than anything else. Ron knew perfectly well that she didn’t really disapprove as much as she was pretending to. “We just got finished--”

“I wasn’t finished,” he interrupted, “and I know for a fact that you didn’t get to finish either, because--”

“It was nearly curfew,” Hermione argued, this time completely sincere.

“So what?” Ron countered, “There was no way anyone was going to find us there,” he argued. Ginny didn’t know about the secret chamber behind the mirror on the fourth floor after all, and she was the one doing rounds.

At least she better not know about it, Ron thought to himself. If Ginny knew about it, she might be tempted to use the space herself with some wanker she found attractive, but had the good sense not to tell him about. Especially now that they’d taken the time to clean the place up a bit and Hermione had transfigured the blanket she’d smuggled down in her rucksack into a mattress. No, he most definitely did not want his sister knowing about, let alone using, and his private space.

“And even if we did get caught out in the hallways once we left,” Ron continued to argue, “we’re Prefects.”

“Exactly,” Hermione stated. “And a fine example we’d set. We give Malfoy a detention for being out after curfew, then turn around and do the same thing ourselves, only to have your sister let us
off.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“RON!”

“Hermione,” he countered with a smile.

“Come on,” she said, shaking her head as she took his hand in hers and tugged him towards one of
the worktables. “You have an essay to start.”

“But you said I didn’t have to do any homework tonight,” he whined, coming to a dead stop in the
center of the room.

“That was before, when I thought you were going to go to bed early.”

“We can still do that,” he said, fixing her with a cheeky grin. “Let’s turn in early,” he said in a quiet
voice, pulling her towards the stairwell that led to the boys’ dorm. “It’s the best idea you’ve had all
night, and that’s saying something.” It had been her idea to go down to the secret room behind the
mirror on the fourth floor and turn it into their own private love nest after all.

“Is that all you ever think about?” Hermione asked, yanking her hand out of his.

When Ron spun around she was scowling at him, or attempting to anyway, but she wasn’t able to
sustain it for very long. She didn’t really want to fight with him now that they’d made up. So she
glowered and went through the motions, because she thought she ought to, but they both knew that
her heart wasn’t in it.

“Recently,” Ron admitted, opting for honestly instead of a denial, seeing as how she could read him
just as easily as he could read her. “But it’s not my fault I’m mad about you.”

“Mad being the operative word in that statement,” Seamus said, coming up behind Hermione and
looking at Ron as if he wanted to retch. “You can add nauseating and whipped to that list as well.”

“Says the bloke that couldn’t find a ‘bird’ willing to go upstairs with him,” the redhead countered.

“Sod off, Gingernut,” Seamus snapped.

“Forget it,” Ron said, not to Seamus, but to Hermione who had bristled at the Irishman’s statement.

Most people, Seamus included, would have assumed that it was due to the fact he’d cursed in front
of her, but Ron knew the truth. He knew it because he could sense what she was feeling and he
recognized the sensation very well. It was the same thing he felt whenever someone called her a
‘mudblood’, only to a lesser degree. But she was still aggravated and insulted, not because Seamus
had curse, but because he’d followed it up with a slur about red hair. She was offended on his behalf
and she fully intended to tell Seamus off for it.

Ron couldn’t help but be a little flattered by that knowledge and yet at the same time, he realized that
Hermione didn’t really comprehend why the comment hadn’t bothered him as well. What she failed
to understand was the fact that Seamus didn’t really mean anything by it. It was just the way blokes
were with one another, especially when they were friends. They could insult one another without
any provocation whatsoever and it didn’t mean a blessed thing. Only in this case, Ron had given
Seamus provocation. He’d made fun of Seamus, so Seamus had ridiculed him in return. No harm, no
foul, and no reason to blow it all up into something it wasn’t and make a scene.
“It’s not a big deal,” Ron added as he steered Hermione, who was still glaring at Seamus over her shoulder, back towards the study tables. “What do you say to a game of chess?”

“But your essay—” she started to complain.

“It’s only nine,” Ron said, cutting her off before she had a chance to get going. “I’ve still got plenty of time to work on the bloody thing. Just one game.”

“Fine,” Hermione relented, “but if I win,” she added with a smirk, “you really do have to start on your essay tonight, WITHOUT anymore complaints.”

“Aren’t you going to ask what I want when I win?” Ron asked with a lopsided smile.

“Oh, I know perfectly well what you want,” she replied. “And don’t think I’m going to let your urges fluster me.”

“And you’re still willing to play?”

“Yes, I believe I am,” Hermione said somewhat smugly, dropping her rucksack on the ground beside the vacant table. “You go get your chess set,” she instructed, “and I’ll go get my transfiguration notes. You’ll be needing them, along with those books we just brought back from the Library, once we’ve finished playing.”

As if, Ron scoffed in his head, sniggering to himself as he turned around and headed for his dorm.

Harry had to hand it to Parvati; she was a very patient teacher. As of yet, she hadn’t complained once. Not when he pulled away from her without warning to remove his glasses. Not when he bumped her nose with his, not once, but three separate times. Not when his teeth accidentally knocked against hers. Not even when he got more comfortable with the actual snogging part and found the courage to let his right hand slide off her shoulder and brush the part of her anatomy he’d been thinking about ever since she removed her jumper. She hadn’t objected once. If anything she seemed to welcome it, encourage it even. His hands weren’t the only ones wandering now by any means.

A fact which quite frankly stunned Harry. Even though it really was happening, all of it still seemed so unreal. Parvati Patil, one of the most beautiful girls in his year, was snogging him. Not only that, she’d just brushed the palm of her hand down the front of his trousers, causing him to suck in a huge breath.

Harry tried not to groan at the contact, assuming that it had been accidental. He didn’t want to break whatever spell they were under or scare her off. But rather than jerk her hand away, as Harry expected she would the instant she realized what had happened, Parvati left it right where it was and only then did he realize that what she was doing was completely intentional.

“Did Cho ever touch you like this?” she cooed into his ear, her slender fingers dancing up and down the outside of his pants, touching him in a way no one else had ever touched him before. “Did she ever do this?” she asked, no longer teasing him, but pressing her hand firmly against his cloth covered erection.

“SHIT!” he hissed loudly, jumping clear off the sofa they were sprawled out on when she squeezed him briefly.

“She didn’t, did she?” Parvati said, slowly sliding her palm back and forth across the length of him,
drawing a guttural groan of pleasure from him for her efforts.

“Noo...OOO...Oh... God,” he tried to answer, but without meaning it to, his reply turned into another moan instead. Not that Parvati seemed to mind. In fact, she was actually smiling at him.

She couldn’t help but feel proud of herself when she noticed the way Harry’s eyes bugged out, before he clenched them shut that is. The way he was reacting to her, it was just so obvious that she was the first person to ever touch him in this way. She’d wondered about it when they’d first started kissing, because Harry seemed rather inexperienced for having had a girlfriend. And Cho Chang wasn’t exactly a shrinking violet. But apparently she hadn’t gone nearly as far with Harry as rumor had it she went with Cedric. A fact which surprised Parvati, but pleased her as well.

It was rather thrilling really, knowing that she was the only girl to ever touch him in this way. And if she played her cards right, she was in a position to be his first. Maybe not his first girlfriend, but his first at everything else that mattered. But she’d have to take it slow. If she pushed him too far, too fast she’d likely scare him off and that was the last thing she wanted.

Maybe I shouldn’t even be doing this, Parvati thought, and yet she left her hand exactly where it was until the doorway leading into their facsimile of the common room unexpectedly swung opened and David Devane, one of the fifth year Gryffindor Perfects entered the room and spied them on the sofa.

“BLOODY HELL!” Devane swore, just as a second person, this one with long red hair entered the room.

Her eyes immediately darted to the bits of clothing strewn across the floor, before jumping up to Parvati, who was furiously attempting to smooth out her rumpled skirt. In that instant Ginny fixed the older girl with a satisfied look that all but screamed, I’m going to enjoy this, but the look vanished when her eyes fell on the person sitting next to the raven haired beauty on the couch.

Harry spun around to face the doorway just in time to see redhead gasp.

“GINNY!” he yelped, his face turning a brick red, not with embarrassment but with shame. “It’s... it’s not what you think,” he said without even taking the time to think about it. He knew it was lame the instant he heard the words out loud, and yet he couldn’t stop himself. He didn’t know why he felt so guilty, but he did and before he even had time to register that fact, he was trying to explain everything away so she would close her mouth and stop gaping at him with that hurt expression on her face.

“What I think,” Ginny said, recovering enough to squared her shoulders and place one hand on her hip as she bristled, her eyes jumping from Harry, to Parvati and her swollen lips, then back to Harry again, “is that you and your girlfriend,” she spat the word out venomously, “have just earned yourselves a big fat detention.”

“But... but that’s Harry Potter,” David said to Ginny, goggling at her in disbelief. “I thought you two were... he’s your brother’s best friend. You aren’t seriously going to give him a detention.”

“THE HELL I’M NOT!” Ginny snarled, turning her anger on her fellow Prefect. How dare he stick up for Harry when he’d just been caught cavorting around the castle with that... that... shameless hussy. “It’s after curfew,” she snapped, feeling the need to justify her outburst. “And they are clearly violating the rules. They’re lucky detention is all they’re getting. I’ve got half a mind to march them down to McGonagall’s office and let her give them the same lecture she gave Malfoy.”

“That’s a bit extreme,” David said, somewhat taken aback by Ginny’s reaction to the whole thing and clearly uncomfortable. “They’re Gryffindors,” he added, as if that would make all the difference.
“Which is why we’re letting them off with just the detention.” Ginny retorted. “But I will be telling McGonagall about this,” she said, turning her glower on Parvati again. “You can count on that,” she hissed, before spinning around and stalking out of the room.

“You two better go back to the real common room,” David said to Harry after taking a moment to glance around the duplicate version they were standing in. “Don’t worry,” he said quietly, glancing over at the doorway Ginny had stomped through to make sure she really was out of earshot. “I’ll see if I can’t talk her out of it. It’s not really that late yet.”

“Don’t bother,” Harry sighed, detention being the least of his problems at the moment.

“Don’t be silly,” Parvati reproached Harry, jumping off the sofa, grasping David’s forearm, and giving him a gentle squeeze in gratitude. “It’s so sweet of you to offer,” she said amiably. “I really do appreciate it. We didn’t realize it was after curfew. Time must have gotten away from us. I really am terribly embarrassed,” she said, turning on the charm and trying to talk both her, and Harry, out of this mess.

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“You’re cheating,” Ron grumbled with indignation as he watched Hermione reach for her Knight, then abruptly change her mind and castle her King with her Queen’s side Rook instead.

“I beg to differ,” she stated, looking up at Ron once she’d finished swapping the positions of both her pieces and smiling at him. “I’ve seen you use this move plenty of times.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Ron complained. “You knew what I was planning,” he said in an accusatory manner. “And that’s why you moved your King instead. Because you’re cheating.”

“I am not,” Hermione insisted. “Reading your opponent is part of the game.”

“Their body language, not their mind,” he said accusingly.

“I’m not reading your mind,” Hermione countered, still smiling and clearly enjoying herself. “Just your feelings. It’s not my fault you get all excited every time you see me about to make a move you consider a mistake.”

“That is sooo not fair,” Ron moaned, flopping back against his chair and glowering at his chess pieces as if they were responsible for revealing his plans to her instead of him.

“Sure it is,” she chuckled. “You can read me the same way I can read you. That makes it fair.”

“The difference being, I don’t make mistakes when it comes to chess,” he groused.

Not keeping your emotions in check while we play seems like a mistake to me, Hermione thought with quite a bit of satisfaction. A mistake I was counting on actually, she continued in her head, hence the bet. But she decided there was no reason to admit that fact out loud, as he’d obviously figured it out on his own.

Then again, what was the fun of beating Ron at chess if she couldn’t rub it in just a little?

“Then why haven’t you beaten me yet?” she countered with a smirk.

“Because you’re CHEATING!”

“You’re just bent out of shape because you know that you’re going to have to start your essay,”
Hermione retorted. “Honestly, if you put half as much effort into doing your schoolwork as you do trying to get out of it, you’d already be finished and it wouldn’t be an issue.”

“This game is not over yet,” Ron said, pulling himself together and studying the board in hopes of formulating a new plan of attack, one he was bound and determined NOT to reveal to her via their connection. He’d just concentrate on being irritated no matter what move he spotted and let her try and read him through that for a while.

But almost as soon as he devised a new strategy, the portrait hole swung open and Ron forgot all about his resolution. All the irritation he’d been feeling went right out the window when he spied the girl clutching his best friend’s arm. It was replaced with both shock and horror when she leaned forward and kissed Harry on the cheek, before dashing off towards the stairs leading up to the girls’ dorms.

“What is it?” Hermione asked, sensing Ron’s bewilderment and spinning around in her chair to see what he was gawking at, only to spy Harry standing by the portrait hole, his eyes locked on Ron’s and his face beet red.

“She just...” Ron sputtered, standing up and pointing at Harry over Hermione’s shoulder. “And then she just ran off,” he stammered, swinging his finger towards the now empty stairwell. “And...and.... Bloody hell!” he said, as their best mate hurried over, a panicked expression on his face.

“Will you shut up,” Harry hissed the instant he was within range.

“Something you want to tell us?” Ron asked, abandoning his attempt to explain things to Hermione and pulling himself together enough to formulate a coherent sentence.

“No, not especially,” Harry replied, glancing around the room nervously.

“That’s funny,” Ron countered, “because I could have sworn she just kissed you.”

“Who?” Hermione asked in surprise, scanning the room herself.

“Parvati Patil!” Seamus cried gleefully as he scurried towards the trio. “You sly dog. Why didn’t you tell us that you and Parvati were having it off?”

“Because we’re not!” Harry insisted, his face even redder now than it had been before, which was saying quite a lot. “So shut up about it already. I think there may be a couple kids over in the corner that haven’t heard you yet.”

“Parvati?” Hermione said, her eyes jumping from Harry, to Ron, who was able to confirm it without so much as nodding his head.

He wasn’t quite as appalled by the idea as Hermione was, but he wasn’t exactly happy about it either, although to his credit he was trying to keep that to himself.

“You’re barking if you think you’re going to be able to keep a lid on this,” Seamus chortled. “In case you hadn’t noticed, Potter, that was Parvati Patil who just kissed you and when she was finished, she ran that way,” he said, pointing towards the girls’ dorms, “to find Lavender Brown, no doubt. There won’t be a girl in those dorms that doesn’t know every detail of what happened within the next ten minutes, so you may as well spill your guts as well. Soooo,” Seamus said, rubbing his hands together excitedly. “What exactly did happen?” he asked, arching one eyebrow suggestively.

“Wait,” Hermione said, taking everything Seamus said in and jumping several steps ahead of
everyone else. “You didn’t ask her to go to Hogsmeade, did you?”

“What!” Harry asked, his mouth dropping open in surprise. Why in the world would she think I’d do something like that? he wondered, and then it dawned on him. Of course. They’re a couple now, which means they’ll probably want to go to Hogsmeade on their own and do couple things.

“What’s Hogsmeade got to do with any of this?” Ron asked, the agitation he was feeling kicking up several notches because even as he was asking, he realized what Hermione was about to do.

ARE YOU MENTAL! he shouted in his head, knowing that Hermione couldn’t hear his thoughts, but that she’d pick up on what he was feeling just the same. You can’t tell him that he’s not allowed to go NOW! You have to wait until he’s in just the right mood and... oh, right. If he really did just spend the past hour snogging, he ought to be in a pretty good mood, but still...

“Just because they snogged doesn’t mean Harry wants to ask her out,” Ron said out of the blue. “Why are you just assuming that--”

“You can’t just snog a girl and then pretend it never happened,” Hermione countered before he even finished the rest of his statement, spinning around and focusing her full attention on Ron.

“Why not?” Seamus asked, echoing what both Ron and Harry were thinking.

“OH FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE!” Hermione shouted, indignation coursing through her body and directly into Ron’s, which was fairly odd for him seeing as how he agreed with Seamus for the most part. “And you wonder why it is that no self-respecting girl would be caught dead with you.”


“Not that it matters in this case,” Hermione continued, totally disregarding Seamus now that she was in full on know-it-all mode and refocusing her attention on Harry, who was about to be on the receiving end of her lecture. “I’m sure you would never treat a girl that callously, but even so, you can’t ask Parvati, or anyone else, to go to Hogsmeade with you...”

“Hermione,” Ron tried to interrupt, but if she heard him, she didn’t acknowledge it.

“... because you’re not even allowed to go,” she finished.

“What!” Harry shouted, when her words sunk in. “Says who?”

“McGonagall,” Ron answered quickly, jumping to Hermione’s defense before she had a chance to incriminate herself. Technically it was true. It might have been Hermione’s idea, but ultimately it was McGonagall’s decision.

“WHY THE HELL NOT?” Harry yelled, becoming angrier by the second.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hermione retorted sarcastically. “Maybe it has something to do with the fact that Voldemort is after you. And will you please STOP FLINCHING!” she shouted not only at Ron, but at Seamus, who had sucked in a deep breath and taken a step away from her. “It’s just a name like any other. It’s not like he’s going to materialize in the middle of the room if I say it out loud. Voldemort. Voldemort! VOLDEMORT!” she said, her voice getting progressively louder so that by the last time she uttered his name, every person in the eerily silent common room was gaping at her. “Oh, forget it,” she snapped. “You explain why we can’t go. I’m going to bed,” she said to Ron, before spinning around and stomping past the stunned onlookers towards the girls’ stairwell.
“Could we please slow down a bit,” David complained as he followed after Ginny, who was storming down yet another corridor on the first floor, flinging classroom doors open at random. “It’s fairly late,” he continued, watching her pop her head into the Muggle Studies room, only to do a cursory search, then pull back and heave the door shut. “We’re not likely to find anyone else now, especially with all the noise you’re making,” he added. “Unless you count Filch, because we’re close enough to his office now that he’s liable to hear you.”

“So bloody what?” Ginny snapped, instantly feeling bad for taking her bad mood out on David. He didn’t deserve to bear the brunt of her anger. He hadn’t done anything wrong.

And neither did Harry, she reminded herself for what felt like the hundredth time since she’d walked away from him, not that it did much good. It wasn’t even Harry she was really angry at anymore, it was herself. She was the one that had just made a complete and utter fool out of herself after all.

It’s not like I have any kind of claim on him, she scolded herself. *He doesn’t owe me anything. He’s free to be with anyone he wants. Even that gossip-mongering bint. It’s none of my business who he snogs.*

Ok, so you didn’t expect it to hurt that much but.... but did you really have to pitch a fit?

What he must think of me now? All that time I spent trying to convince myself, and everyone else, that I was over him and for what? So I could blow up the instant I saw him with another girl. MY GOD! Could I have been any MORE obvious? I might as well charm a flashing sign on my back that reads, ‘I still fancy Harry Potter’, and prance around the common room wearing it.

Why, WHY, WHY, didn’t I just keep my big mouth shut and let David handle it? But I just had to blow up and make it obvious that I still have feelings for him. Not only does Harry know now, Parvati does too, which means the entire school will know by this time tomorrow. It’s going to be like the bloody singing valentine incident all over again. Stupid. Stupid. STUPID! That’s what I am.

“There goes Mrs. Norris,” David said, pointing at the tail end of the cat that had just leapt out of nowhere in front of them and darted behind one of the tapestries that lined the wall, no doubt to retrieve her master.

“So?” Ginny replied, shrugging her shoulders as if she didn’t care. “It’s not like Filch can punish us for doing our job,” she said to her fellow Prefect, as she glanced into yet another empty classroom, “And that’s all we’re doing.”

“Speaking of which,” David said, noting that at least some of what he said must have sunk in because she was no longer slamming the doors as she exited the rooms, “Are you seriously going to turn Potter and his friend into McGonagall, or were you just saying that to scare them? Because if you were trying to scare them, you did.”

“They deserve it,” she replied tersely, although what she really meant was she deserves it. She being that superficial, gold digging, trollop Harry had been snogging.

What in the world was he thinking? she asked herself yet again. *Is that really the kind of girl he wants? Someone that’s more interested in his reputation than she is him? A shameless hussy that will throw herself at him, bat her eyelashes, and giggle at every inane thing he says in an effort to stroke his ego?*

Bet that’s not all she stroked, a little voice chimed in from the back of her head, forcing her to admit to herself why it was that his trousers had been unbuttoned. *That complete and utter slag. She took advantage of him, I’d be willing to wager on it. She knew that he was clueless and used that to her*
“So you are going to tell McGonagall then?” David asked. “Because if you are, we’ll need to get our stories straight and all.”

“What?” Ginny asked, coming back a bit, but still not paying all that much attention.

“Our explanation about what happened. You know, the reason you gave them detentions,” David replied. “Are you going to tell her it was because we caught them out after curfew or are you going to mention what they were doing? She’s going to ask me about it too you know?” he added, when Ginny didn’t reply. “I’m going to need to know what it is you want me to tell her. Ginny,” he said, his voice getting louder in an effort to regain her attention. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Of course I am,” she lied.

“So what are we going to tell her?”

“Nothing,” Ginny replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“But... you just said that...”

“Yes, well, I’ve changed my mind,” she said matter-of-factly, moving ahead of him again as they continued to walk down the corridor so she wouldn’t have to see the disbelieving look he was shooting in her direction.

What was there for David not to understand? He’d said it himself when they were in the Room of Requirement. Harry is her brother’s best friend. He’s practically family and the Weasleys look after their own, even when they’re annoyed with one another. So as much as she’d love to knock Parvati off her high horse and saddle her with a detention, there was no way she could do it without dragging Harry into it and getting him in trouble as well.

“So we’re not going to tell McGonagall then?” David asked.

“Not unless you want to.”

“Me?” David asked in surprise. “Why would I want to do something like that? Potter’s never done anything to me and he has enough on his plate to deal with without us adding to it.”

“Well, that’s that then,” Ginny said, more to herself than to David, although she wasn’t really talking about the detention any longer.

If Harry wants to waste his time running around with that cheap tart, it’s his business. There’s nothing I can say or do about it. I just have to suck it up and pretend that it doesn’t bother me. No point pining away for him. It’s never going to happen. I just need to accept it already and move on.

“Say, David,” Ginny said, coming to a full stop and spinning around to face her fellow Prefect. “Do you have any plans for Hogsmeade yet? Before we start our patrol I mean. Because if you don’t, I thought maybe you’d like to meet up at the Three Broomsticks or something. Maybe get a butterbeer before we start.”

“You mean like a date?” he asked, clearly taken by surprise.

“It doesn’t necessarily have to be a date,” Ginny replied, her ears heating up significantly, but hidden from view by her long red hair. “Unless you feel inclined to pay,” she added, the heat spreading to her cheeks. “I just thought it would be easier to meet up before we started our patrols, you know?”
“Yeah?” David said, unable to keep from smiling. “Yeah, it is a good idea, actually. We don’t actually start our shift until one, so how about we meet at noon?” he asked uncertainly. “Is that too early? Because if there’s some other place you need to go first...”

“Noon works for me,” Ginny replied.

“So it’s a date then?”

“Yeah, okay,” Ginny said, her eyes now glued on her shoes. “Er...” she said somewhat uncomfortably, not sure how to proceed now that the Hogsmeade situation had been settled, “...we... um...better get going,” she finally finished. “We still have two more floors to get through before we’re done.”

“Unless we split up,” David suggested, obviously feeling the awkwardness himself. “You do the ground floor and I’ll take the dungeons,” he said. “We can meet in the Entrance Hall when we’re finished and go back up to the tower together.”

“Yeah, okay,” Ginny agreed, relieved that the pressure she was now feeling to put on a happy face and sustain a pleasant conversation with her soon to be date, had just been released. With the two of them separating, she wouldn’t have to concentrate on making small talk, she’d be free to mope and belittle herself for her own stupidity all she wanted. At least for the next half-hour or so.

“Right,” David said, after the two of them had reached the marble staircase and started to descend to the ground floor. “Well, I’ll meet you back here then,” he said, when they reached the bottom and before Ginny had a chance to do more than nod her head, he turned to the right and continued down the stairwell that would take him to the dungeons.

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Hermione wasn’t all that surprised to find her dorm room vacant when she stormed into it. If the giggles emitting from the room down the hall were any indication, that’s where her roommates were. Big surprise, she thought, slamming the door shut behind herself and allowing the aggravation she was feeling to kick up another notch.

Already off gossiping about it, she fumed, stomping her way to her bed and sagging down on top of it. If they know what’s good for them they’ll stay out there, she thought, glowering at the door, because even closed, it didn’t create a sufficient barrier to block out the squeals of the faceless teenage girls that were on the other side gushing over the details her best friend’s love life.

“You all think this is just some big game,” she muttered under her breath, pulling her wand out of her pocket and using it to cast a Silencing Charm on the door in an effort to quash the offensive noise. “Idiots.”

What was Harry thinking? she asked herself, flopping over on her back and staring up at the thick canopy above her bed. It would be different if he actually fancied her, at least then I could understand taking that kind of risk, but he doesn’t.

Is it possible that he’s actually thick enough to believe that no one was going to find out? Of course they’re going to find out. She’s the biggest gossip in our year, for Merlin’s sake, and she’s only interested in him for the bragging rights to begin with.

Oh Harry, why is it you always have to jump in headfirst without thinking about the consequences? Would it really kill you to take five minutes and...

“...you really don’t think he’ll mind us doubling?” Hermione heard Lavender ask as the door opened...
and the blonde walked into the room, followed by her best friend.

DAMN! Hermione swore in her head. She’d Shielded the door, but she hadn’t bothered to lock it.

“Because Ethan is a seventh year and he’s a Hufflepuff,” Lavender continued, not even bothering to glance in Hermione’s direction, “which means Harry isn’t likely to know him. It will be our first date and I’d feel better about it knowing that you were there, you know?” she added. “Just incase it doesn’t work out. But it’ll be your first real date with Harry too and I don’t want to ruin that, so if you think he’ll mind…”

“I don’t see why he should,” Parvati replied, walking over to her nightstand, picking up a brush, and running it through her already sleek hair. “We’re only talking about a couple of butterbeers with friends, right?” she said. “It’s not like it’s going to take up the whole day. I mean either you’ll hit it off with Ethan or you won’t. HEY! I know,” she said excitedly, tossing her brush on her bed and spinning around to face her best friend with a huge smile on her face. “We’ll just invite Hermione and Ron. They’re a couple now, plus they’re friends with Harry. I’m sure that would…”

“Hermione and Ron don’t appreciate the fact that you’re attempting to use them as a bargaining chip to manipulate their best friend,” Hermione said rather scathingly from her bed, instantly drawing both girls’ attention. “And even if the invitation were genuine,” she added as she sat upright once more, “and not part of another scheme, they’d still decline.”

“It’s not like that,” Lavender said, clearly taken aback and surprised to discover that Hermione had been in the room since before they entered.

“No, really,” Parvati insisted, when Hermione snorted. “You misunderstood what I was saying.”

“No, I don’t think I did,” Hermione retorted, sounding even more offended now that her intelligence had been called into question. “And just so you know,” she shot back tetchily, “Harry isn’t going to appreciate you trying to make plans for him without consulting him first. Besides, you’re wasting your time. Harry isn’t going to ask you to Hogsmeade. He isn’t even going.”

“What?” Parvati asked, her face falling.

“Of course he is,” Lavender insisted. “Why wouldn’t he go?”

“Well for starters, Professor McGonagall rescinded his permission.”

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It took less than five minutes for the minor disagreement between roommates to somehow escalated into a full on brawl, and much to the chagrin of the male population of Gryffindor Tower, or those that had still been in the common room when the shouting began, the two on one cat fight broke out in the only part of the tower they couldn’t access. But just because they couldn’t see the girls, didn’t mean they couldn’t hear them or imagine what was going on. Those that hadn’t scurried off to collect their friends, were congregating around the foot of the stairwell leading up to the girls’ dormitories when the Gryffindor Prefects returned from their rounds.

The occupants in the 6th year boys’ dorm however, were still peacefully unaware of the commotion, with the possible exception of Ron, who had sensed Hermione’s irritation give way to genuine anger. But he had quickly explained it away as a simple escalation in her bad mood and opted to try and tune it out for several reasons. The chief one being that he was trying to remain focused on Harry, who still hadn’t shown much of a reaction to the explanation of why neither he, nor his friends, were going to be allowed to visit Hogsmeade anytime soon.
That all changed however, when there was an abrupt knock on the door and David Devane, popped his head inside looking for his fellow prefect.

“Oy, Weasley,” he said, spying Ron sitting on the edge of his bed directly across from Harry, who had already changed into his pajamas and was lying on his own bed. ‘Just thought you two might like to know that your girlfriends are having themselves one hell of a fight up in the girls’ dorm. Ginny went up to try and put a stop to it but--”

“Damn it, Hermione!” Ron grumbled loudly, jumping to his feet.

“Come on,” Seamus said, all but pushing Neville towards the door. “This is too good to miss.”

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“...just because you’re jealous that he finds Parvati more attractive than he does you,” Ginny heard Lavender Brown’s voice carry down the stairwell as she shoved several boys out of her way so she could get by.

“OH, FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE!” she heard Hermione screech, as she finally made it to the foot of the stairs and bolted up them. “Even you two can’t be that daft.”

“It’s not enough that you have Ron all to yourself,” Lavender shouted, “Now you want Harry too.”

“That’s right,” Ginny heard Parvati agree as she hurried down the corridor filled with girls who were listening to the argument. “You made your choice!”

“THAT’S RIGHT, I DID!” Hermione bellowed, “AND STOP TRYING TO TURN IT INTO SOMETHING THAT IT ISN’T. Contrary to what you might think,“ she added, lowering her voice just a bit, yet somehow managing to make it even more menacing in the process, “Ron isn’t some sort of consolation prize. He isn’t the runner up in some contest for my affections. I’m with him because he IS the one I want! But that doesn’t mean that I don’t care about Harry or that I’m going to sit back and watch you toy with him just because you can.”

“It’s none of your business what I do with Harry, so JUST BUTT OUT!” Parvati shouted just before Ginny made it to the open doorway of the 6th years’ room.

“I MOST CERTAINLY WILL NOT!” Hermione screeched at the top of her lungs. “Harry is my friend and if you think I’m going to sit back and watch you parade him around like some trophy you just won, you’ve got another thing coming. He’s a person with feelings and if you hurt them, you’re going to answer to me,” she stated, yanking her hand off her hip and jabbing her finger in Parvati’s face. “YOU GOT THAT!” she shrieked, raising her voice again because some idiotic boy had apparently tried to get into the girls’ dorm and the staircase was now wailing loudly.

“That’s enough,” a deep voice called out behind Ginny, causing her, and many of the girls who were standing in the doorways of their own rooms, to jump and spin around in astonishment. It took a few seconds for the realization that a boy actually had made it up the stairs to sink in, even as they watched him stalk down the hallway. When it finally did click, there was a chorus of screeches, as many of the girls realized they weren’t wearing anything but their night clothes, followed by a flurry of door slamming as they all ducked for cover in their rooms.

“How did you...” Ginny started to ask her brother, once she managed to pick her jaw up off the floor.

“HERMIONE!” Ron yelled over the continued wailing of the staircase, but either she didn’t recognize the voice as belonging to him, or she didn’t care that he’d somehow discovered a way to
beat the stairs, because she continued with her rant without so much as acknowledging his presence.

“If you think this is some kind of game you’re wrong. DEAD WRONG!”

Lavender and Parvati did notice however, and both of them gaped openly at Ron as he swept into their bedroom without invitation.

“You think you won a prize tonight,” Hermione said to Parvati, “but all you managed to do was turn yourself into a....”

“That’s enough,” Ron said forcefully, latching onto Hermione’s arm and pulling her away from her stunned dorm mates. “Do you want Harry to hear you?” he asked. “Do you really think that’s going to make things any better? What are you doing?”

“She needs to know,” Hermione replied, pointing her finger at Parvati. “And so what if Harry can hear me. He obviously needs the reminder.”

“Not like this, he doesn’t,” Ron countered. “All you’re going to do is make things worse, so shut up already.”

“Don’t you tell me to shut up!” Hermione yelled, redirecting the full force of her anger at him. “It’s my room. I’ll say whatever I want to in... How did you get up here?” she asked, stopping mid rant and gaping at Ron in amazement when she finally realized just how wrong it was for him to be standing in middle of her room.

“I don’t know,” he replied honestly, his ears flushing significantly. “The stairs were a bit slow on the uptake tonight. They didn’t collapse until Harry realized I’d made it to the top and tried to follow me.”

“Harry tried to come up?” Parvati asked, before locking eyes with Lavender, who looked like she was trying to stifle a giggle.

Not for a snog, you dizzy cow, Ginny thought, as she stepped into the room and shut the door behind herself. “Hermione isn’t the only one that looks after her friends,” she said, referring both to Harry’s reason for trying to get upstairs, as well as her own reason for butting in.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lavender asked defensively.

“You have a brain,” Ginny retorted, “Work it out on your own.”

“Obviously they don’t,” Hermione said with a sigh, “Parvati doesn’t have a clue about what it is she’s done to herself.”

“What are you talking about?” Parvati asked, her dark eyes jumping from the two girls to Ron, who was shaking his head in exasperation. “I haven’t DONE anything.”

“Yes, you have,” Ginny piped in. “You’ve turned yourself into a target.”

“A target?” Parvati asked, narrowing her eyes at Ginny as she spoke. “You mean just because some girls might be jealous?”

“How can you possibly be that thick?” Hermione exclaimed loudly. “You there the day they attacked Diagon Alley. You saw what happened.”

“Hermione,” Ron said in a pained voice, but yet again, she ignored him.
“Why do you think they took me in the first place?” she pressed on, not even stopping long enough to allow Parvati to answer. “Because they knew that I was close to Harry. Because just like the two of you, they were stupid enough to believe everything Rita Skeeter wrote.”

“What’s that have to do with anything?” Lavender asked, her brow wrinkling up in confusion.

“They thought Hermione was Harry’s girlfriend,” Ginny replied almost instantly. “They wanted to use her to get to him.”

“They wanted to use me as bait to draw him out,” Hermione corrected. “And when they found out that Harry and I were nothing more than friends, Bellatrix Lestrange--”

“STOP IT!” Ron shouted, not wanting to hear anymore. But even though his outburst cut off Hermione’s words, images of the things he’d seen in Dumbledore’s Pensive kept playing over in his mind.

The way Hermione had screamed. The way that twisted bitch had laughed as Hermione withered around on the floor in pain. The ways she’d endured that blasted curse just to protect him. How she’d tried to goad Bellatrix into killing her in an attempt to end her suffering because she didn’t think she could take much more. Ron didn’t want to remember those things. He didn’t want to see them in his mind. He hated that Hermione had been put in that position; that he hadn’t been able to save her. Thinking about it made him feel weak and helpless and angry.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Hermione said, sensing exactly what it was Ron was feeling and reaching out to reassure him. “It didn’t happen because of you and there was nothing that you could do. But she needs to know. She needs to know so it doesn’t happen to her too.”

“What are you talking about?” Lavender asked.

“They tortured her,” Ginny replied somberly, “with the Cruciatus Curse. Because she was close to Harry and by hurting her, they were in effect hurting him. They used the Cruciatus against her five times and she still wouldn’t give them Cho’s name. It took the Imperius Curse to drag that out of her and even that wasn’t enough to get a truly accurate answer. How long do you think you’ll be able to stand up to them; to that?”

“How do you...” Ron started to ask his sister, but Hermione replied before he even had a chance to finish.

“Because I told her,” she said, before turning around to face Parvati again. “And now I’m telling you. Being close to Harry, having him care about you, that comes at a price. Harry is great and I love him, but it’s not all fun and games. If you really want to be close to him, you have to be willing to accept that. You’ll have to be willing to make sacrifices, like not going into Hogsmeade for instance, and you have to do it without making it seem like it’s a burden. If that’s not something you’re willing to do, you need to back off now, before one of you gets hurt.”

“What is the meaning of all this racket?” Professor McGonagall said sternly as she threw open the door and swept into the room, her tartan dressing gown fluttering behind her. “Ms. Granger I’m surprise that you would participate in, let alone instigate somethi...” she started to say, but cut off abruptly when her eyes jumped from the girls she was about to berate to the tall redhead standing amongst them.

“MR. WEASLEY!” she cried in surprise, before her mouth snapped shut and her lips pursed. “Unless I am quite mistaken this is the girls’ dormitory. You will remove yourself this instant and wait for me downstairs.”
“Yes, Professor,” Ron replied, dropping his head and scurrying for the door as soon as he saw her disbelief give way to outrage, outrage that was now directed at him. The truth was he couldn’t get out of the room fast enough. No way in hell was he going to stand around or make matters worse on himself, or Hermione, by arguing with McGonagall. He’d just have to wait downstairs as she instructed and pray that she at least gave him a chance to explain himself before she started doling out punishments. In the meantime he had to come up with an explanation and quick, because ‘I don’t know, the stairs let me up so I kept climbing,’ probably wasn’t going to cut it.
Chapter 33: Narrow Escapes

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll clear out,” Ron warned the boys hanging out at the foot of the girls’ stairwell as he scurried to the bottom. “McGonagall looks to be in rare form tonight and she’s coming back down. It’s too late for me,” he said miserably, locking eyes with Harry and shaking his head sadly. “But you can still save yourself if you make a run for it now.”

“You let her see you?” Harry asked in disbelief. “Why didn’t you hide or something?”

“Where?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replied. “In her bed, under it, behind it even.”

“I wasn’t anywhere near a bed,” Ron shot back.

“Well, somewhere else then,” Harry countered. “You must have realized something was up when the stairs stopped shrieking. Obviously we didn’t shut them off, so it had to be--”

“I couldn’t hear the stairs once I was in Hermione’s room.”

“That must have been some loud shouting,” one of the fifth year boys leaned forward and said to a friend, who nodded his head in agreement.

“So you actually made it into their bedroom?” Neville asked, using an awed tone of voice. “There weren’t any...extra security measures once you make it upstairs? I always assumed there’d be other barriers, you know, that the stairs were just the first in a series. But you actually made in inside a girl’s dorm room. Wow.”

“How’d you do it?” someone asked.

“Yeah, what’s the trick?”

“Did you put a Hover Charm on your shoes so they wouldn’t actually touch the steps,” a seventh year asked curiously. “Because I’ve considered doing that myself. Just didn’t have the bollocks to test it.”

“Way to go, Weasley,” another chap said as he clapped Ron on the shoulder in a congratulatory manner.

“What were they wearing?” Seamus inquired, but his excitement waned a bit when Ron’s head snapped around and the red head’s expression changed from disbelief to annoyance. “All right,” the young Irishman backtracked a bit when Ron’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t have to tell us what Hermione sleeps in, just the others. Did you see anything lacy or see-through?”

But before Ron even had a chance to open his mouth, the words, “BED! NOW!” were barked out behind them and the boys jumped to it. “Except for you, Weasley,” Professor McGonagall added when Ron attempted to scurry off with the rest of them.

DAMN! he swore in his head, giving Harry a fleeting look before spinning around to face the music.

“Wait,” McGonagall ordered, walking right past Ron and up the boys’ staircase to ensure that her command was carried out. The last thing she wanted was half the male population in the tower.
lingering around the hallway eavesdropping in hopes of learning how to beat the stairs themselves.

Once she was sure that the boys had, in fact, gone to their rooms, she marched back down, shut the door at the bottom of the boys’ stairwell, and cast a Silencing Charm on it with a quick flick of her wand.

“Explain yourself,” she demanded, slipping her wand back into the pocket of her tartan dressing gown and fixing Ron with a disapproving look.

“Um,” he sputtered as he tried to think of something to say. “Er...I... uh...” he mumbled, shifting uncomfortable and glancing over his shoulders at the open doorway of the girls’ stairwell.

“Miss Granger is not coming down to help you,” McGonagall stated, crossing her arms in front of her chest when Ron’s eyes returned to her. “So you may as well stop stalling and explain how it is that you managed to get up those stairs.”

“I don’t know,” Ron groaned miserably, saying the first thing that popped into his mind. “Honest, Professor, I really don’t know. They just didn’t work.”

“Nonsense,” McGonagall argued. “I’ve been teaching here for nearly forty years, Mr. Weasley and in all that time, not once have those stairs malfunctioned. Now what spell did you use?”

“I didn’t use any spells,” Ron insisted. “I didn’t do anything.”

Fortunately for Ron, playing stupid wasn’t just an act he was putting on. He couldn’t have explained it, even if he’d wanted to, because he really didn’t know and that made it easy for him to stick to his story. Even threatening him with detention didn’t help jog his memory the way Professor McGonagall had hoped it would, it did however get the excuses flowing. Or one excuse to be more precise, as the fact that he was a Prefect was the only explanation Ron could come up with on such short notice and even he didn’t buy it. He’d been a Prefect the year before and the stairs hadn’t allowed him up then, so why would they now?

In the end, McGonagall decided that if Ron couldn’t, or wouldn’t, explain what it was that he’d done, than he’d just have to show her. So she dragged him over to the foot of the girls’ stairwell and insisted that he climb back up to the top in her presence, assuming that he’d either set off the alarm, or reveal his method. Regrettably, it didn’t exactly work out that way.

“You must have done something to yourself then,” McGonagall stated, the third time she watched Ron reach the pinnacle of the stone steps without triggering any sort of response.

“I did not,” he insisted, spinning around and looking down at the common room. “It’s not my fault the stupid stairs don’t work,” he grumbled under his breath as he marched back down. “It’s not like I broke them,” he stated a bit louder. “I didn’t do anything to them.”

Even if I’d wanted to, I didn’t have time.

“I heard about the fight and ran up to stop it and that’s--”

“Even if they are malfunctioning,” McGonagall cut in, despite the fact she still wasn’t entirely convinced that they were, “you know full well that you aren’t allowed up there, so you had no business climbing those stairs in the first place.”

“But Professor,” Ron objected. “I was just trying to--”

“I repeat,” McGonagall stated in an adamant tone of voice, “there is NO reason for YOU to be up there.

“But--”
“Ten points will be deducted from Gryffindor,” she continued, raising her voice above Ron’s, “in addition to the five points Miss Granger and Miss Patil have each lost. And to ensure that it doesn’t slip your mind or happen again, you will be receiving--”

“Not another detention,” Ron whined, clearly feeling hard done by. “I didn’t even do anything this time.”

“You were caught in the girls’ dormitory, were you not?”

“But Professor, the only reason I went up there in the first place was to break up the fight and --”

“That is why we have female Prefects, Mr. Weasley. That is their responsibility,” McGonagall stated with a stern look, “not yours. Surely you must have noticed that your sister, a Prefect, was, in fact, on her way to handle the situation herself. I understand that you feel you have a responsibility to look after your friends,” she added, softening her demeanor a bit, “and as admirable as that is, your protective tendencies towards Miss Granger don’t give you cause to go up those stairs. Do I make myself perfectly clear, Mr. Weasley? Just because you can, at this particular moment in time, does not mean you will. You are not to go up those stairs again for any reason. End of discussion. And I will be taking this matter to the Head Master in the morning,” she added, as she made for the portrait hole, “so you can rest assured that whatever the problem is, it will be rectified immediately.”

“Yes, Professor,” Ron replied rotely, no longer caring about her punishment now that there was the possibility of an even worse fate looming on the horizon. The question was, would Dumbledore actually contact his mother or would the detention suffice? He’d gladly do three if that’s what it took to keep his mum in the dark, because she wouldn’t care about his reasons for going up those steps anymore than McGonagall had. All she’d care about was the fact that he’d broken yet another rule and managed to land himself in hot water again.

Fortunately, Dumbledore didn’t deem it necessary to contact Mrs. Weasley about her son’s excursion into the girls’ dorm. Nor did he seem all that worried about mending the charms on the staircases. In fact, he didn’t seem to be concerned at all when McGonagall told him about what had happened. The only reaction she got out of him was mild surprise, followed by altogether too much amusement for her liking.

“Mr. Weasley made it into the girls’ dormitory?” Professor Dumbledore asked from behind the desk in his office, glancing up at the head of Gryffindor House with considerable interest. “You don’t say?” he added, his eyes twinkling as the smallest trace of a smile touched his lips. “How extraordinary.”

“It most certainly is not,” McGonagall retorted in a disapproving tone of voice, when his smile widened. “This is not a matter to be taken lightly.”

“A bit sooner than I would have expected,” Dumbledore muttered, more to himself than for her benefit, “but what’s done is done and...” I see no reason to worry about it as of yet. It may even be for the best.

“You expected this to happen?”

“Come now, Minerva,” Dumbledore replied lightheartedly. “The male population of Hogwarts has been trying to come up with a means of getting past those stairs since... well, since the school was established and the charms were put in place, I’d imagine. I, myself, gave it a shot or two in my
“youth,” he added with a chuckle.

“Really, Albus, this is serious,” McGonagall argued. “If there is an actual problem with the stairwell in Gryffindor Tower, it is only a matter of time before the other dormitories are similarly affected.”

“I don’t think we need worry about that. I’m sure it is just a small glitch,” Professor Dumbledore replied, knowing full well that it was Ron and not the charms on the staircase that had been altered.

The young Prefect might have unwittingly stumbled across one of the more obscure loopholes in the magic that had been set in place to safeguard the virtue of the female students, but even if he knew why it was he’d been allowed to pass, which was highly unlikely, he wasn’t going to reveal his secret marriage to anyone. His new wife had very wisely insisted that they keep all knowledge of the Coupling Potion, and what she planned on using it for, under wraps. He had to give them credit; they’d done a remarkable job of it so far. Apparently they’d even managed to successfully brew the potion and take it without his realizing that things had progressed that far. If Hermione hadn’t made the mistake of revealing her plan to Ron in the boys’ bedroom at Grimmauld Place, which just so happened to be connected to his office via a painting, he’d be in the same position Professor McGonagall was in, uninformed, anxious, and highly suspicious.

Unfortunately for McGonagall, the Head Master decided not to clue her in just yet. He saw no reason to have anyone else interfering while the newlyweds tried to acclimate and cope with the effects of the potion. It was bound to be difficult enough on them simply having their own emotions surging through one another, they didn’t need the emotional turmoil of anyone else, say an over protective mother or a concerned professor, thrown in mix. What they needed now was time and the opportunity to adjust. They had to work out the kinks on their own, because learning through experience was the only way they’d become efficient at using the bond they’d forged to their advantage. Yes, time was what they needed. Time and a little practice.

“Gum drop?” he asked, grabbing a small plate of brightly colored Muggle candies off the corner of his desk and offering them to McGonagall, who gaped at him.

“Pardon?” she asked, more than a little surprised to find herself being put off by the Head Master. It was quite obvious to her that he knew more than he was saying. Not only was he not surprised that Weasley had somehow managed to get into the girls’ dormitory, he wasn’t the slightest bit concerned about it. Something was definitely up, and Dumbledore obviously knew what it was. Then again, he did seem to know pretty much everything that happened within the walls of his school and he usually had a perfectly reasonable explanation for keeping people in the dark about certain occurrences. Those people didn’t often include her however.

“Gum drop?” Dumbledore repeated, holding the plate of sweets a little higher. “They really are quite good. Very well,” he added, setting the plate back down on his desk and standing up when she failed to retrieve one. “Although one or two won’t ruin your appetite,” he added, grabbing a candy off the plate himself and popping it in his mouth. “Shall we go down to breakfast then?” he asked, sweeping his arm out in front of himself and pointing at the door leading out of his office. “After you.”

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“You’ve been enjoying yourself far too much this morning,” Hermione leaned forward and whispered in Ron’s ear as he held the doorway of the Transfiguration classroom open for her and Harry walked through it.

“What do you mean?” he asked, feigning ignorance, as Seamus and Neville pushed past Hermione, who had come to a dead stop in front of them, so they could follow Harry inside to take their regular seats.
“All the attention,” Hermione said quietly. “Did you really think I wasn’t going to notice just because I wasn’t there? It started even before you came downstairs this morning. And the more everyone pesters you about it, the more you eat it up. I know, because I can feel it.”

“Where were you anyway?” Ron asked, genuinely curious. “We checked the Library after we finished eating and you weren’t there.”

“I was with your sister,” Hermione informed him, albeit reluctantly. She didn’t really want to tell Ron how upset Ginny was just yet, because it was likely to upset him as well. It would be better to wait until Ginny had a chance to work through her feelings somewhat and come to terms with what she saw. Besides, it was a completely different issue and she wanted to stay focused on the one she was trying to press home.

“Why?” Ron asked, looking at her suspiciously now that he realized she was feeling apprehensive and didn’t want to talk about it.

“Because she needed someone to talk to about a few things,” Hermione whispered back. “But that’s not the point. The point is, this whole situation is turning into fourth year all over again. Pretty soon you’ll be making up outlandish stories about how you got upstairs and then you’ll get all smug, even though none of it is true, and I don’t like it, so knock it off.”

“You don’t like it,” Ron scoffed, “Of course you don’t. It’s taking the attention off you and that whole mess you started with Parvati,” he added, as he stepped back into the corridor with her and let the door swing shut. “No one’s talking about that now, are they?”

“You take that back.”

“I will not,” Ron replied. “It’s the truth and we both know it.”

“I’m not the one that needs the attention of everyone in school focused on me to feel validated,” she snapped. It was a low blow and Hermione knew it. She felt bad the instant the words left her mouth, but Ron had put her on the defensive, mostly because she knew he was right to a certain extent, and when she was on the defense she had a tendency to lash out and draw blood in return because it was a good way to sidetrack her opponent.

“No, you just want every girl in Hogwarts to think dating Harry is tantamount to suicide via Dark Wizard,” Ron countered, unwilling to let her comment distract him because it was what she wanted. “Harry is going to go ballistic when he finds out about that.”

“I take it you haven’t told him then?” Hermione said, feeling uneasy all over again for an entirely different reason. The truth was, part of the reason she’d been so eager to go to breakfast early with Ginny was because she, too, wanted to avoid Harry. She’d assumed that he probably knew most of what happened in the girls’ dorm by now and that, coupled with the whole Hogsmeade ban and her role in it, was bound to have his dander up. She’d hoped that by giving him a little space and showing up just before classes started, she’d only have to contend with the silent treatment and not a full on, in your face, confrontation. Not just yet anyway.

“Hell no, I haven’t told him,” Ron replied. “And I’m not going to either. You are.”

“Why would I do that?” Hermione asked. If he didn’t know yet that meant she still had time to come up with a plan. She might even be able to explain to him why this whole Parvati thing was a bad idea before she admitted what she’d told her roommates and he blew up at her.

“Because if you don’t tell him, Parvati will,” Ron informed her. “Who would you rather he hears it
“You,” Ron said, shaking his head back and forth. “You dug your own hole,” he added. “I already got a detention trying to pull you back before you fell in it. Now that you have, I’m not jumping in after you. No way. If I tell Harry for you, he’ll think I agree with what you did and then he’ll be hacked off at both of us.”

“You got a detention?” Hermione asked, unwittingly sending the guilt she was feeling straight at Ron. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for--”

“You didn’t ask me to come up there,” he said, letting her off the hook when he could have easily kept her squirming. “I did that all on my own, so stop feeling guilty already.”

“I really am sorry, Ron,” Hermione said. “I don’t know how things got messed up so quickly. I just...she insulted me... she insulted both of us actually and it got out of hand, but... she’s not right for him. You agree with me on that much, I know you do. I felt it.”

“It’s what Harry thinks that’s important,” he reminded her. “He’s going to do what he wants to do. Okay, so I’d prefer it if he picked someone... better,” he confessed, realizing there was no point denying it, as she already knew the truth. “Someone that can... well you know,” he said, instead of finishing the statement he’d been about to make. “Do I think he’s going to find what we have together with her? Probably not,” he admitted.

Absolutely not, he corrected in his head. *No way in hell two people that are that high maintenance are going to be able to cope with one another. Harry needs someone who is easy going and can make him laugh, but still knows when to knock the sails out from under him and bring him crashing back to earth.*

“But if she’s who he wants,” Ron continued out loud for Hermione’s benefit, “then she is right for him, at least right now. Whether we approve or not is beside the point and scaring the hell out of every girl in this school, just because you think they’re unsuitable, isn’t going to do him any good. He needs to have a little fun in his life.”

“Which one are you exactly?” she retorted. “The pot or the kettle? What is your strategy for dealing with anyone that happens to show the slightest bit of romantic interest in your sister?”

“That’s different,” Ron insisted.

“Of course it is,” Hermione retorted, rolling her eyes. “The pot doesn’t think he’s black.”

For a moment she considered mentioning the fact that Ginny had a date for Hogsmeade, not only to prove her point, but because it was the perfect opportunity to reveal the information. If, or more precisely when, Ron freaked out about it, she could use his own argument against him. Ginny deserved to have a little fun too, after all. But then she changed her mind.

David seemed like a nice enough bloke from what Hermione knew and she didn’t want to set Ron on him for no reason, especially considering they’d be seeing him tonight at their weekly Prefect meeting. Ginny wasn’t serious about him anyway. He was just the transitional guy; someone she was more or less going out with just to prove to herself that she could move on and have fun with someone other than Harry. Hermione actually felt kind of sorry for him in a way, which is why she’d warned Ginny not to drag it out too long if it looked like he might be developing feelings for her that she couldn’t reciprocate.
“I’m serious, Hermione,” Ron pressed on. “Harry has already lost far too much. That monster is slowly taking away everyone that he cares about. First his parents, then Sirius, and now with the attacks on the Muggle-borns...it’s no coincidence that happened on his birthday. He wanted Harry to know it was personal. He wanted him to blame himself. He can’t get to all of us just yet, but he can stick it to Harry in other ways. He can’t make us abandon Harry, but if he can make Harry fear for our safety, he might just pull away from us on his own and do You-Know-Who’s job for him.”

“If he isolates himself, he’ll be vulnerable and we can’t let that happen. Don’t you see,” Ron continued his rant. “This is just one more thing that twisted sod is trying to take away from him, only this time there is someone else right in front of him that he can blame. Ultimately it’s You-Know-Who’s fault, but you’re the one Harry is going to hold accountable if you don’t watch what you say and do a little damage control. And the first step to that is telling him what you said to Parvati and why, so come on,” he said, reaching for the door again.

“Now?” Hermione asked, jerking her hand out of his when he grabbed it.

“No,” he replied, when he sensed her panic. “You obviously can’t tell him something like that in the middle of Transfigurations. Maybe during Charms,” he joked to lighten the situation a bit. “I’ll just have Neville hit him with a wayward Cheering Charm and then you can have at it. Seriously though,” he said, grabbing her hand again and tugging her along behind him as he entered the room. “You should probably do it during the lunch break. Hey!” he snapped, his attention now completely focused on the girls that had taken their normal spots to Harry’s left. “Those seats are spoken for,” he said rudely to Parvati and Lavender. “We’ve only been sitting there for the past six years, so move it.”

There, Ron thought contentedly, when the girls glared at him and moved to their normal table behind the trio, where they proceeded to whisper, no doubt about how rude he was, as they unpacked their bags. That ought to keep her from ratting Hermione out before lunch. If she can’t talk to him in private, she can’t squeal.

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“Ready?” Ron asked Hermione quietly, as the rest of the class packed their notes away after their Double Transfiguration class had ended.

“Can’t I do it once the afternoon classes are over?” she said softly.

“Do what?” Harry said, unsure whether or not he ought to be asking. What if the two of them were talking about some private lunchtime encounter they had planned?

“Hermione has something she needs to tell you,” Ron replied.

“It can wait,” she insisted, focusing her attention on her rucksack when Harry’s expression changed from curious to wary.

“No it can’t,” Ron countered. “Because unlike some people, you insisted on taking Herbology, which means your afternoon classes don’t actually let out the same time as ours. You need to do it now.”

“If it’s about Hogsmeade,” Harry said, his attention jumping from Hermione, to Ron, and back to Hermione again. “I already--”

“It’s not,” she sighed as she stood up. “Well, it is in a way but... can we discuss this somewhere else?” she asked, glancing over at Professor McGonagall, who had been watching the three of them
rather closely throughout their lesson.

“What have you done now?” Harry asked, his green eyes narrowing a bit behind his glasses as he crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“No, she’s right,” Ron said, glancing at McGonagall from the corner of his eye as Harry bristled. “Let’s take our stuff back up the common room,” he suggested.

“Well, it could have been worse,” Ron said to Hermione, as the two of them watched Harry storm away from them and through the portrait hole twenty minutes later.

“How?” she asked, sinking down into a chair and running one hand through her hair in frustration.

“Um... he could be hacked off at me too,” he offered. “No seriously,” he added, when she shot him a reproachful look. “At least this way I can slowly bring him around, because you know, he’ll still be talking to me and all.”

“Ron,” Hermione groaned, feeling worse than ever. “You aren’t helping.”

“Well, not yet,” he replied. “I’ve got to give him a chance to cool off first, don’t I?”

“I meant me,” she sighed.

“Well obviously I’m still going to be talking to you,” he replied, purposely being thick to lighten the mood up a bit. “You’re my wife,” he added quietly, sitting down on the arm of her chair. “It’s expected. Come on, love,” he said, chucking softly when she attempted to shove him off her chair in retaliation for his comment. “We may as well go get something to eat before Charms.”

“Do you think we should bring...” she started to say, looking at the book bag Harry had left sitting in the middle of the common room, as she took the hand Ron was offering and allowed him to pull her up.

“No,” he replied, before she even had a chance to finish. “I doubt he’ll even show up,” he added, grabbing her bag off the floor and slinging it over his shoulder with his own. “Just take extra good notes,” he said, taking her hand in his again, “and I’ll make sure he gets them later.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said, as she allowed Ron to pull her towards the portrait hole. “For staying with me while I... for looking out for me.”

“That’s my job, isn’t it? I mean it’s expected,” he replied, surprising Hermione by reacting to her appreciation with embarrassment.

“That’s not why you do it,” she said astutely.

“I know,” he said awkwardly, as the two of them stepped into the corridor. “Come on,” he added, tugging her towards the stairs.

“Why are you embarrassed?” Hermione asked, biting back a small smile when she saw his ears redden when she pointed out what he was feeling.

“I guess I’m just not used to you being... appreciative,” he finally admitted. “I mean, I’m not used to feelings it. It’s just... odd. It’s like I’m grateful to myself all of a sudden and that’s just... wrong.”

“Sorry,” she said, despite the fact they both knew that she wasn’t. “I can try feeling something else.
“How’s that?”

“Oh great,” Ron chuckled, but he was unable to contain his smile. “Just remember it’s your fault when I get a big swelled head from loving myself, so no fair telling me off.”

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The morning of the first Hogsmeade visit dawned bright and clear. It would have been a perfect day as far as Ron and Harry were concerned, if not for the frigid wind and the fact that they weren’t allowed to go into the village with everyone else. And as if watching their classmates queue up in the Entrance Hall after breakfast wasn’t bad enough, the trio spotted Ginny descending the marble staircase just as they mounted it to return to the tower and the boys realized where she was heading.

“Wait a minute,” Ron demanded, stepping to the left and trying to block her path before she could scurry past them and join the crowd. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Obviously you know where I’m going,” she retorted. “Or you wouldn’t have that ‘you get away with everything and it’s not fair’ look plastered across your face. Now kindly step out of my way before you make me late.”

“Late for what?” Harry asked without taking the time to think about how it sounded. It was only after the question had been asked and he glanced at Ron, who had narrowed his eyes and was glaring at the students milling around the door suspiciously, that Harry realized they’d both jumped to the same conclusion and that he didn’t like it any more than Ron did.

“Don’t bother,” Hermione said to Ginny. “I’ll handle it. You go and... have fun,” she said, trying to convey her message without giving too much information away. She had no intentions of telling Ron about his sister’s date until she was sure that he wouldn’t be able to interfere. “Only remember to be careful,” she added, stepping aside so Ginny could continue down the stairs unimpeded.

“Yeah right,” the young redhead replied, looking back over her shoulder and rolling her eyes. “As if Bill is going to let me out of his sight long enough for anything to happen.”

“Bill?” Ron said, clearly confused. “What’s Bill doing in Hogsmeade?”

“Didn’t he write you?” his sister replied. “He volunteered to help Tonks and the other teachers with the patrols today, or so he said. More likely than not it was Mum that volunteered him. Guess he didn’t bother telling you, since you got out of doing patrols yourself.”

“So you’re meeting Bill then?” Ron asked, visibly relaxing.

“Hadn’t planned on it, no,” Ginny replied, glancing at Harry briefly before continuing, “In fact, I plan on dodging him until after my date.”

“DATE!” Ron yelled, as his sister disregarded him, shoved her way past the students waiting for their friends at the foot of the stairs, and headed straight for the door, where Filch was waiting to check her name off his list. “WHAT DATE? Since when does Ginny have a date?” he asked, rounding on Hermione, after his sister ducked out the door without answering his question.

“Who’s she meeting?” Harry asked.

“And why the hell didn’t she ever mention it?” Ron added.

“Gee, I wonder,” Hermione said cynically. “Could it be because she knew you’d react just like this?”
“Like what?” Ron barked.

“Just forget it,” Hermione said, making her way up the marble staircase again. “It’s not a big deal, all right. Just let it--”

“It is too a big deal,” Ron insisted as he followed her up the stairs. “If it weren’t, you two wouldn’t be hiding it, so who is it? Who is she meeting?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“It is so my business. She’s my sister and--”

“What’s she doing going into Hogsmeade in the first place?” Harry asked, taking both of his friends by surprise with his resentful tone. “If it’s too dangerous for us, she shouldn’t be going either. What?” he asked, when both Ron and Hermione stopped bickering and spun around to stare at him.

“You sound like Ron,” Hermione said, looking at him curiously.

“Yeah well,” he said uncomfortably. “Did you ever think that maybe it’s because Ron is right?”

“No,” she replied, not buying his excuse. If he really thought Hogsmeade was too dangerous for Ginny, he would have been worried about Parvati too. Of the two of them, she was the more obvious target now that word of their encounter had spread through the school, and yet he hadn’t said anything when she left with Lavender. Besides, Bill was going to watch Ginny like a hawk. Anyone that wanted to get to her was going to have to go through him, and probably Tonks as well, in order to do it.

“Well, I am,” Ron said. “See, even Harry agrees.”

“That doesn’t change anything,” Hermione stated.

“Yeah it does,” Ron disagreed. “It makes it two against one and that means we’re right.”

“No,” she corrected, “it makes it two against two and you’re still wrong. David is a perfectly nice boy and--”

“David?” Harry said to himself, tallying all the blokes with that name up in his head trying to figure out which one it was. “David who?”

“Devane?” Ron growled at nearly the same instant, zeroing in on the David that Ginny had the opportunity to spend the most time with. “You mean to tell me that bloody tosser has been sneaking around the school with my sister after hours and you never thought to mention it?”

“They aren’t sneaking,” Hermione replied, rolling her eyes at him. “They’re doing their Prefect rounds, which you were perfectly well aware of.”

“I didn’t know they were doing rounds the way we do rounds,” Ron retorted.

“If by that you mean checking empty classrooms and such for students that are out of bounds--”

“No, that is not what I mean,” Ron interrupted, “and you know it.”

“Please spare me the details about what you two actually do in empty classrooms,” Harry said quickly.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Hermione sighed. “They aren’t doing anything of the sort. If you must
know, this is their first date,” *and she’s not even really that interested*, she thought, but she kept that
bit of information to herself because she knew that Ginny wouldn’t really want Harry to know. “And
you are not going to corner him tomorrow night before their rounds,” she added, looking directly at
Ron now, “and make an issue out of it.”

The hell I’m not.

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“At least he’s a Gryffindor this time,” Harry said out of the blue, as he followed his best mate out of
the castle and the two of them mounted their brooms. *Which means I can keep an eye on him*, he
added in his head.

“Who?” Ron asked, pushing his broom to the limits just to keep up with Harry’s Firebolt as they
zoomed towards the Forbidden Forest.

“That David bloke,” Harry replied, banking to the left just before he reached the trees and headed for
the Quidditch pitch to do a couple laps.

“Oh, him,” the redhead replied, none too happy about the reminder.

It had been nearly two hours since his sister had announced that she had a date and then left them
standing in the Entrance Hall. That was a long time to still be dwelling on the subject, as Harry
obviously was. It had been long enough for them to return to the common room, for Ron to beat
Harry at chess more than once, and then announce that he was bored.

Of course that comment had really been directed at Hermione, who had buried herself behind a pile
of books as soon as they stepped through the portrait hole. What he was trying to hint at was the fact
that he’d love to drag her upstairs and take advantage of the fact that his dorm was empty and would be
for a good long time. But when he tested the waters, he realized that Hermione wasn’t going to
have any of that.

Not that he really expected her to go for it. They’d discussed it the night before, when she’d snuck
into his room and climbed in bed with him, and she’d decided that it would be bad form to leave
Harry on his own while everyone else was in Hogsmeade. Although by the time they returned to the
common room and he’d made his comment, she hadn’t really been paying all that much attention to
Harry, or him either for that matter. In fact, his comment had barely even registered with her. She’d
been too engrossed in her rune assignment to pay much attention to what he said.

It had been far easier for her to tune out his words as opposed to what he was feeling though. That
was something she couldn’t ignore entirely, unfortunately she responded to it with irritation, so Ron
quickly gave up. It made more sense to back off now and let her finish her assignment, so he could
have her undivided attention later. If he continued to pester her or distracted her to the point that her
annoyance turned into genuine displeasure, he’d only wind up sleeping alone for the rest of the
weekend. And that being the case, when Harry suggested they go flying, Ron jumped at the
opportunity.

“So what do you make of him?” Harry asked, drawing Ron out of his own head and forcing him to
focus on him once more.

“Devane?” he questioned. “I’m not blind like Hermione. Just because he’s a Prefect doesn’t mean he
isn’t also a lecherous sod that’s only after one thing.”

“That’s what I thought,” Harry mumbled to himself. “So what are you planning on doing about it?”
“What can I do?” Ron replied, bringing his broom to a stop and hovering beside his best friend. “You know how Ginny is. She isn’t going to listen to anything I have to say. If I bring it up she’ll just call me a prat and tell me to butt out. And if I pull him aside and threaten him, and he tells her about it, not only will Ginny jump all over me, but I’ll have to deal with Hermione as well.”

“Speaking of which,” Harry said, motioning towards the grounds with a nod of his head. “What up with that?” he asked, as they watched Hermione amble towards to Quidditch pitch. “I didn’t expect her to surface again until she was finished with her essay.”

“Me either,” Ron admitted, even more surprised by her unexpected appearance than Harry was. “I better go see what she wants,” he said, his brow knitting together as he glanced at his friend momentarily before shooting Hermione a disconcerted look. “Why don’t you wait here?” he added, pointing his broom towards the ground and descending before Harry had a chance to answer.

Something wasn’t right. Ron wasn’t quite sure what it was yet, but he knew something was off. There was no reason for Hermione to postpone her homework and seek them out, unless something was wrong. But that wasn’t what worried him. What really bothered Ron was the fact that he hadn’t felt her coming. He hadn’t even realized that she was outside and looking for them until Harry pointed her out and that didn’t make sense.

Normally when they were separated for a brief period of time and she saw him again, say after her late afternoon class, or in the morning after they’d spent the night apart, he felt her react the instant she saw him. It had become somewhat commonplace for them to experience a brief jolt of emotions when they were reunited, whether it be happiness, love, basic contentment, or just a feeling that things were the way they were supposed to be now that they were back together. She always felt something, only this time, whatever she’d been feeling when she spotted him had gone unnoticed.

Maybe there is something wrong with the link, he thought, quickly doing the math in his head and realizing that it had been just over two weeks since they’d taken the potion. Two weeks and two days to be exact. Long enough for the rudimentary version of the potion to wear off. But they hadn’t taken that version, they’d taken a more advanced form and they had been maintaining it regularly.

But maybe that’s not enough. Maybe she made some sort of mistake with her calculations or maybe it’s just not possible to maintain it without drinking the stuff every couple weeks. If she tried to check up on me while I was outside and realized that the link wasn’t working right, that would explain why she came out here, he told himself as he landed in front of her and dismounted his broom.

“It makes sense that she’d want to take it again, while everyone was still in Hogsmeade.”

“What is it?” Ron asked, studying her face closely looking for any sign of anxiety, but he couldn’t help notice that she was looking up at Harry, rather than at him. “What’s wrong?” he asked, even more on edge now than he had been before, because as far as he could tell there was absolutely nothing wrong with her. She didn’t look worried and when he concentrated on trying to sense how she was feeling, he didn’t feel any anxiety. Not at first anyway. It wasn’t until she picked up on what he was feeling that he felt her react with concern of her own.

“Nothing,” Hermione replied, giving him a weak smile before glancing up at Harry again for the briefest of moments.

“I thought you were working on your essay,” Ron said, before she had a chance to get anything else out.
“Oh, that,” she said dismissively, quickly refocusing her attention on him. “I finished it.”

Something is definitely not right here, Ron thought as he looked at her skeptically. If there wasn’t a problem with the link, then there was no reason for her to come after him. None that made any sense anyway. She’d been fretting about that blasted essay all during breakfast. It wasn’t until they’d returned to the common room and she sat down and actually got started on it, that the annoying feeling of having something important that he needed to get done, but wasn’t doing, actually left him.

There is no bloody way she punched that essay out in an hour. She told me last night that she had at least two hours of translations to do before she could even really get started and that she wanted to do it while the common room was empty.

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“Harry and I are busy, Hermione,” Ron stated abruptly, being curt on purpose. “What do you want?”

“The castle is practically empty,” she replied, without the slightest bit of annoyance in her voice or her eyes. “I thought maybe we could spend some time together.”

“Is that so?” Ron asked, just as Harry landed on the ground behind him. “Just the two of us, eh? You sure you wouldn’t prefer Harry?” he asked when he noticed her glance at him again.

“Prefer me to what?” Harry asked, looking from one friend to the other in confusion. “What’s going on?” he asked, as he stepped in front of Ron. “Did something happen?”

It’s about to, the redhead thought, dropping his broom and using the split second when Harry stepped forward and blocked Hermione’s view, to pull his wand out of his back pocket.

“Don’t get too close,” Ron said, surprising Harry by grabbing the back of his jumper and yanking him backwards rather forcefully. “That’s not Hermione,” he stated, stepping in front of his startled friend and pointing his wand directly at the bushy haired imposter facing them.

“What do you mean that’s not Hermione?” Harry asked, goggling at Ron.

“Ron?” she said, clearly as astounded by his announcement as Harry was.

The problem was, Ron wasn’t buying it. The real Hermione, wherever she was, wasn’t feeling surprised, anymore than she’d felt insulted or angry about the rude way he’d dismissed her. This person standing in front of them might look like Hermione, but Ron knew that it wasn’t, which meant that either someone had a really sick sense of humor, or it was a Death Eater in Polyjuice disguise. He was dead certain of it now and with that certainty came a jolt of panic that wasn’t his own. The real Hermione had picked up on his fear as well as his anger. She knew something was wrong, seriously wrong, she just didn’t know what it was and not knowing terrified her.

“Harry?” the imposter said, stepping to the side so she could look him in the eye as she appealed to him to intercede on her behalf. But when she moved, Ron moved with her and continued to blocked him from view.

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“Don’t,” he growled, his eyes riveted on her hands. It didn’t matter who he was talking to. Whether it was a prank gone wrong or a Death Eater, whoever this was, they had no right to speak to Harry.

The fact that she turned to him was what clinched it for Harry. The real Hermione would never do that. She was more than capable of handling Ron on her own, wand or no wand. She wouldn’t just stand there and let Ron hold her at wandpoint, anymore than she’d look to him to play the hero and come to her rescue. She’d square her shoulders and browbeat Ron into submission herself with a verbal assault that would probably be heard clear up at the school.
His mind made up, Harry reached for his own wand, and that’s when it happened. In that split second that his confusion gave way to suspicion, his scar ignited. He hadn’t felt so much as a twinge since his birthday and in the blink of an eye, the connection he had with Voldemort surged to life. Surprise, disappointment, frustration, and rage that was not his own coursed through Harry’s body, along with a great deal of loathing and a modicum of concern.

“STUPEFY!” Ron bellowed, the instant Harry cried out behind him and slapped his hand over his forehead. The jet of red light hit the Hermione-like doppelganger square in the chest as she was drawing her wand.

It wasn’t until she keeled over backwards that Ron became one hundred percent sure that he hadn’t made a mistake. If the real Hermione were unconscious, he wouldn’t be able to feel her fear pumping through his body, but it was still there, stronger than ever, because she now knew that he was worried about Harry. But he couldn’t focus on Hermione right now. Wherever she was, she was safe. Harry was the one who needed him. He was the one that had cried out in pain and dropped to his knees as Ron cast his spell.

“Harry?” he shouted, watching his best friend clutch his stomach and retch all over the grass. “Are you all right, mate? She didn’t...”

“Not her,” Harry managed to get out, before throwing up again. “Him. He’s angry,” he said, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his jumper as the piercing pain in his forehead eased a bit. “Really, really angry. He didn’t expect us to figure it out. Not so soon. He’s worried because he doesn’t know how we did it, but mostly he’s just angry.”

“He’s not... here is he?” Ron asked, tightening his grip on his wand and looking fearful as he glanced towards the Forbidden Forest. It was a dark, dank place full of giant spiders and Merlin knows what else. A perfect place for Voldemort to lie in wait and watch as his trap was sprung.

“No,” Harry replied, forcing himself to stand up again.

“Then how’d he know?”

“I think... I think he was watching through...”

“Through you?” Ron asked, looking at Harry with wide eyes.

“No,” Harry said again, although he couldn’t be certain of that fact. But surely if Voldemort had been watching through him, even if he’d been trying to do it subtly, he would have known. His scar would have prickled at the very least, wouldn’t it? But he hadn’t felt anything. Not so much as a hint that Voldemort was close or watching him, not until he realized that they’d recognized his Death Eater for what she really was and his plan of luring them away of their own volition had been thwarted. “No,” he said again, “I think it was her. I think he was watching through her so I wouldn’t catch on.”

But Ron was only half listening to him by this point, because the relief that was flooding through him was far too strong to be solely his own, which meant that Hermione was close enough to see them with her own eyes.

“Bugger!” Ron swore loudly, when he spun around to face the castle and saw the billowing black robes of the professor sprinting across the grounds in front of her. “What did she bring that git for?”

“Step back, you fools!” Snape barked as he barreled at them, his own wand drawn.

“Harry!” Hermione shouted, running up to them as they stepped away from the stunned Death Eater
sprawled out on the ground. “Ron!” she cried, throwing herself at him without bothering to slow down and nearly knocking him off his feet in the process. “Are you all right? What happened?”

“What is the meaning of this?” Snape demanded, narrowing his dark eyes at the form on the ground, before whipping his head up, and glowering at the boys. “I assume this is your doing, Potter,” he said. It was only after he glanced at Ron, and saw that he was the one with his wand in hand, that Snape realized his mistake.

“What did you bring him for? Why not Dumbledore or anyone else?” Ron whispered to Hermione, who was standing right beside him now, staring at her duplicate in shock as Snape levitated her with his wand and bound her securely with a flick of his wrists.

“Your wand,” he demanded, shoving his hand under Hermione startled nose, when he’d finished with her double.

“WHAT?” Harry cried out indignantly, while Ron tightened his grip on his own wand and glared daggers.

If there was a fake Hermione lurking around the school, there could be a fake Snape as well. One false move and Ron was bound and determined to curse the Potions Master as well. Hell, he might curse him anyway, just for the sheer enjoyment of it, and claim that he’d done it because he thought he was a Death Eater afterwards.

“Perhaps you are the real imposter,” Snape said to Hermione with a sneer.

“Why would she go to you for help or bring you out here, if she were the fake?” Harry shouted, outraged on his friend’s behalf.

“No one asked for your opinion, Potter,” Snape barked back. “So shut your mouth and keep it to yourself for a change. Your wand,” he said to Hermione again.

“Don’t give it to him,” Ron said, raising his own wand a bit higher just to make sure that Snape would notice and have to focus most of his attention on him. There wasn’t much doubt in Ron’s mind that the Potions Master could take him in a duel, but he couldn’t take all three of them at the same time. If he made a move against one of them, the other two would nail his slimy arse and they all knew it.

Things might have gotten ugly then, had Dumbledore not shown up, followed almost immediately by Hagrid, who had his crossbow in hand. As panicked as she had been, Hermione had realized that she didn’t have time to try and get into Dumbledore’s office herself if she wanted to get to Ron and Harry before something happened, so she sent a group of second years she encountered in the corridors to do it, while she continued to look for another teacher to assist her. Tonks or McGonagall would have been her preference, as they were both members of the Order as well as people she trusted implicitly, but they were in Hogsmeade, along with most of the other professors who were either enjoying their day off or supervising the Prefects on patrol. Snape wasn’t just the first professor she encountered; he was pretty much the only choice she had at that point.

Fortunately for everyone, Dumbledore took control of the situation the instant he arrived, directing Hagrid to escort the trio up to his office, after informing them that they were to remain there until he and Professor Snape had dealt with their ‘guest’ and returned to question them.

“You heard im’,” Hagrid said, placing his oversized hand on Harry’s shoulder and giving him an encouraging shove that nearly knocked him off his feet. “Whacha waitin’ fer? You too,” he said to Ron and Hermione. “Let’s go.”
“Will you please stop that,” Ron said, after he’d watched Harry pace around Dumbledore’s office like a caged animal for nearly thirty minutes. “You’re making me tired just watching you.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Harry shot back impatiently, using his friend’s remark as an opportunity to vent a little bit of the anger and frustration he was feeling. “Just sit here and be all calm about it like you two?”

“Just because I’m not climbing the walls doesn’t mean I’m not just as angry about all this as you are,” Ron replied, despite the fact that he could see how Harry might jump to that conclusion.

If it weren’t for the fact that Hermione hadn’t let go of him since she’d found them on the Quidditch pitch, he’d probably be pacing a hole in the floor right along with Harry. Either that, or he’d have suggested that they use their brooms to duck out a window and find out what was going on. But she needed him where he was, sitting right beside her, holding her hand. She needed the physical contact to remind herself that he was really okay, because below the surface of her own anger, the fear about what might have happened was eating away at her and Ron knew it. He could feel it eating away at him too and he knew if he let go, or left her alone before she was ready, she’d let that fear get the better of her.

“Are you sure you didn’t see where she came from?” Hermione asked the boys, who had already told her everything that had happened in detail, twice. “Because she didn’t just appear in the middle of the pitch, she had to walk there from somewhere. Either she came from inside the castle, or from the forest, or from Hogsmeade. You must have seen which direction she came from,” she said to Harry, who was pacing again.

“I already told you that I didn’t.”

“Well, I doubt it was the castle,” Hermione said, more to herself than anyone else. “Because all the passageways are blocked now, although... she could have used the one that connects the Shrieking Shack to the Whomping Willow.”

“What’s it matter?” Harry ranted. “Anyone that was with her is long gone by now.”

“Don’t you want to know where she was trying to take you?”

“It doesn’t matter where,” he retorted. “All that matters is that he’d be waiting there. What I want to know is how you knew it wasn’t really Hermione,” Harry said, coming to an abrupt halt and staring at Ron.

“Yes, I’d very much like to hear the answer to that question myself,” the Minister of Magic said as he opened the door behind Harry and stepped into the Head Master’s office, followed almost immediately by Kingsley Shacklebolt and another man that Ron had seen in the Auror Department of the Ministry when he visited his father, but did not know. “You two did catch the Death Eater, did you not?” he pressed when no one replied.

“Who was it?” Harry asked, rather than answer the questions that was put to him.

“Bellatrix Lestrange,” Kingsley replied flatly.

“THAT TWISTED COW!” Hermione shrieked, trembling with rage as she jumped to her feet. “She did this on purpose,” she exclaimed loudly. “She wanted you to think that I’d betrayed you, that I’d hand you over to be tortured and killed as part of some deal I cut to save myself. That evil hag,” she said. “Where is she? I want to see her.”
“Absolutely not!” Ron shouted the instant the words left her mouth. There was no way in hell he was going to let Hermione get anywhere near that tyrannical bitch. She’d just turn everything around for the sheer enjoyment of watching her mind games unhinge Hermione a bit more. Why give her the opportunity or the satisfaction? “It doesn’t matter anyway,” he added, “because we know you’d never do anything like that.”

“I want to see her,” Hermione insisted.

“It’s too late,” Shacklebolt replied. “She’s already been transferred back to Azkaban.”

“Azkaban?” Harry said, goggling at the adults in disbelief. “Why not just escort her to the gate and let her go if you were going to make it that easy for Voldemort to get her back?”

“Now see here,” Fudge cried, wincing when Harry said the Dark Lord’s name out loud. “I think we know a bit more about detaining prisoners than you do, Mr. Potter. Now then, Mr. Weasley,” he stated, disregarding Harry altogether, as he already knew he wasn’t liable to get much cooperation out of him. “I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Whatever,” Ron replied sullenly, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Fudge could ask all he wanted; it didn’t mean he had to answer, although he couldn’t be out and out rude about it like Harry, because Fudge might use it as an excuse to go after his dad. His mum had already mentioned that the Minister was looking for an excuse to sack him and he didn’t want to be the excuse.

“How did you know that the Death Eater was using a Polyjuice disguise?”

But rather than respond straight away, Ron glanced at the two Aurors who were standing there watching him, then back at the Minister, knowing that he couldn’t tell them the truth. “I ought to be able to recognize my own girlfriend when I see her,” he finally answered.

“Indeed” Fudge said, raising an eyebrow at the redhead’s unexpected response.

“But she looked just like your girlfriend, did she not?” the unknown Auror asked.

“It wasn’t so much how she looked,” Ron elaborated, trying to skirt his way around the question without giving a detailed answer if at all possible. “It was more what she said that gave her away.”

“And what was that exactly?” Fudge pressed.

“Why don’t you ask her?” the redhead shot back.

“Provided she’s even there when you arrive,” Harry said, not even bothering to hide the disdain in his voice.

“I’m asking you,” Fudge said, choosing to ignore Harry’s comment. Fortunately, Ron was spared from answering when the door flew open and Dumbledore walked in, followed by Bill, who looked just as perturbed to discover the Minister there as the Head Master did.

“Now Cornelius,” Dumbledore said reproachfully, “just because I informed you of Lestrange’s capture out of courtesy, that does not give you free reign to interrogate my students without the knowledge or consent of myself, their Head of House, or a family member. So unless my mind is even more addled than you maintain, I can say with reasonable certainty that I did not give you permission, any more than Professor McGonagall did, as I happen to know that she is currently indisposed recalling the students from Hogsmeade. And as Mr. Weasley here,” he said, nodding his head at Bill as he pressed on, “seems to be just as surprised to find you in this office as I am, I can only deduce that he did not give you permission to question his brother. That being the case,” he
added, when Bill nodded his head in agreement, “I will show you and your guards to the door.”

“I must insist on being allowed to question these...witnesses,” Fudge retorted. “This is now a matter of Ministry Security and it is of the utmost importance that we--”

“Be that as it may,” Dumbledore interrupted, “the ‘witnesses’ are minors and entrusted to my care, so unless you have written permission from their parents, or in Mr. Potter’s case, his legal guardian, I am afraid you will just have to make due with the statement I will provide you once I have amassed the facts myself. In the meantime, I believe you have a prisoner who is capable of answering any question you might like to pose. I daresay she knows a great deal more about this matter than these students. Good day, Minister,” he said abruptly, stepping away from the open door so his unwelcome guests could pass.

“Bloody Hell, Ron!” Bill exclaimed loudly, as Dumbledore escorted the Minister through the outer chambers and made sure he descended the spiral steps. “Between you and Ginny,” he said, shaking his head in exasperation. “First she gives me the slip in Hogsmeade and then I find out you’ve managed to go and get yourself attacked by Lestrange. Mum is going to go spare when she finds out about this, and somehow she’ll find a way to blame me, you just wait.”

“Is Ginny...” Ron started to ask.

“Fine,” Bill assured him, raking his hand through his hair and taking up Harry’s place pacing in front of Dumbledore’s desk. “Perfectly fine. Tonks found her in some ruddy out of the way teashop. I dragged her back here with me. She’s safely tucked away in Gryffindor Tower now, or at least she better be.”

“Madam Puddifoot’s,” Harry mumbled to himself looking rather stricken.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Bill replied. “Not exactly the type of place I’d expect Gin to feel comfortable in. Bit too frilly if you ask me. Although I suppose she knew I’d think that, which is likely why she chose that spot to begin with. Right handful, that one, always one step ahead of you.”

“Well now,” Dumbledore said to Bill, as he reappeared in the doorway. “I expect you’ll be wanting to fill your parents in on the situation before they hear about it from someone else.”

“Incompetent berk,” Bill mumbled under his breath, knowing that the someone else Dumbledore was warning him about was probably heading for the front door of the castle as they spoke. He’d have to make it off the grounds before he could Apparate, but his first stop would probably be the Daily Prophet, where he’d toot his own horn and take credit for the capture in an effort to repair his soiled image. It wouldn’t do to have his Mum find out about what happened by reading about it in a special edition of the evening paper. It would be far easier on her if she heard it from him.

“My fire is at your disposal should you care to use it,” Dumbledore added. “And please assure your parents that I will contact them with a more accurate account of what happened once the students are all accounted for and a few other matters have been dealt with.”

“Right,” Bill said, as he approached Dumbledore’s fireplace and grabbed a handful of floo powder out of an intricately carved bowl resting on a nearby table. “Keep and eye on Ginny,” he said to his brother, as he stepped into the hearth. “And yourself,” he added, throwing the powder at his feet. “The Burrow,” Bill said clearly, before vanishing in a blaze of green flames.

“Now then, Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore said, taking a seat behind his desk and focusing his attention on Ron. “I already have a fairly good idea how it is that you managed to recognize Bellatrix for who she was, or who she wasn’t I should say, but as Mr. Potter does not, why don’t we start with that
“Explaination first, shall we?”

“Er.”

“It’s quite clever really,” Dumbledore said to Harry who was looking back and forth between his friends, who were staring at the Head Master with wide eyes. “Although I’ve come to expect nothing less from Miss Granger, or do you prefer to be addressed as Mrs. Weasley now?” he asked with a knowing smile.

“Oh God,” Hermione moaned, covering her beet red face with both hands.
For a moment, it looked to Harry as if there were a contest going on between his friends to see which one of them could out blush the other. That is until all the color unexpectedly drained out of Ron’s face and he went from looking mortified to terrified in the blink of the eye.

“Perhaps we should stick with Granger for the time being,” Dumbledore suggested, his bright blue eyes twinkling. “We wouldn’t want to draw undue attention to what you’ve done.”

“Oh God!” Hermione moaned again even louder, her voice muffled by her hands.

“So you’re.... you’re not going to tell my Mum, then?” Ron asked fearfully. “Because her flooing here to kill me would DEFINITELY draw a lot of undue attention.”

And just like that, the reason for Ron’s distress made perfect sense. Harry knew about his friend’s secret marriage of course, having witnessed it himself, so Dumbledore’s innuendo hadn’t exactly come as a revelation to him. He was a bit surprised that the Headmaster knew that they’d performed the Lànain, but then, he reminded himself that Dumbledore always did seemed to know pretty much everything.

He could see where his friend’s would be embarrassed that the Headmaster knew. It wasn’t exactly an honorable ritual after all, but it wasn’t like they had to fear his reaction, as Dumbledore seemed to find the whole affair rather amusing. And Harry already knew, so it wasn’t like they had to be worried about his reaction either. Mrs. Weasley, however, was an entirely different matter. If Ginny’s reaction to the Lànain was any indication, and Harry strongly suspected that it was, Mrs. Weasley would go stark raving mad when she found out.

If only Harry had known that Dumbledore wasn’t actually talking about the Lànain at all, as it wasn’t part of Hermione’s original plan, and was therefore the one part of the equation the Headmaster knew nothing about, he would have been much more intrigued. But as Harry didn’t know this, he let Dumbledore’s comment pass without giving it very much thought.

“Tell her what, Mr. Weasley?” Dumbledore replied with a gleam in his eye, doing a convincing job of looking confused. “Was there a message you wanted me to relay to your parents?”

“NO!” Ron and Hermione both shouted at nearly the same time.

“Professor, please,” Hermione beseeched, jerking her hands away from her face and staring at him with wide eyes. “You can’t. Well, you could,” she amended, when it dawned on her that she was telling Dumbledore what to do. “But please don’t. It’s... it’s important that...”

“Yes, yes,” Dumbledore replied, holding one hand up to stop her. “I understand. You’re quite right, of course. The fewer people that know about the connection at present, the better,” he said. “Although your Head of House will need to be apprised of the situation and I don’t think you need keep Mr. Potter in the dark any longer.”

Connection, Harry thought, his brow knitting together in confusion. *What connection? Is he talking about them being married, or do those charms they’re wearing connect them in some other way I don’t know about?*

“But, Voldemort,” Hermione began.
“Is deliberately blocking Mr. Potter at the moment,” Dumbledore replied. “Unless I’m very much mistaken.”

“But,” Hermione continued to protest.

“What is Mr. Weasley thinking at this exact moment in time,” Dumbledore asked Hermione, shocking her into submission.

“Excuse me?”

“What is he thinking?” Dumbledore repeated. “What thoughts are running through his head?”

“He’s probably...”

“I’m not asking for approximations or guesses. I want you tell me word for word, what thoughts are running through his mind at this very moment.”

“I... I don’t know, sir,” Hermione admitted, looking just as bewildered as Harry felt.

“No more than Lord Voldemort knows what Mr. Potter is thinking at any given moment,” Dumbledore explained. “In order for him to be privy to his actual thoughts, Voldemort would have to attempt to possess him to some degree. Something, I daresay, he’ll be rather reluctant to try again on a whim, especially if Mr. Potter were in a highly emotional state, say after a foiled attempt to take one of his friends hostage. It is, after all, Mr. Potter’s deep-seated emotions that make it so difficult for Voldemort to possess him for any length of time in the first place.”

“But... but they’re still connected,” Hermione protested.

“As are you and Mr. Weasley,” the Headmaster reminded her. “Tell me, Mr. Weasley, what is your wife feeling at the moment?”

“Er...” Ron mumbled, his ears coloring again at the mere mention of the word ‘wife’. “Um,” he said, glancing at Harry apprehensively before refocused his attention on the Dumbledore. “She’s er... she’s embarrassed and ...um...anxious.”

Well, spotted, Harry thought sarcastically. What’s Dumbledore getting at anyway? Any idiot with eyes can see that she’s embarrassed, it’s clear as day.

“Well, spotted, Harry thought sarcastically. What’s Dumbledore getting at anyway? Any idiot with eyes can see that she’s embarrassed, it’s clear as day.

“About what?” Dumbledore pressed Ron.

“Um...” he said, shifting uncomfortable. “She’s um... embarrassed that you know she’s been breaking loads of rules,” he finally answered, the color spreading from his ears to his face while Hermione’s cheeks darkened even more significantly. “And she wants me to shut up now,” he added, knowing that she’d be hissing his name reproachfully under her breath right about now if it weren’t for the fact that the Headmaster was the one pressing him for answers.

“Indeed.” Dumbledore chuckled. “I have just a few more questions for you Mr. Weasley and then you may ‘shut up’ if you feel so inclined. Why is she feeling anxious, is it because she knows that I am aware of the fact that you’ve both been ‘breaking loads of rules’?”

“No,” Ron replied uncomfortably, “She’s worried about you telling Harry about the connection because she doesn’t want You-Know-Who to find out. And now she’s irritated because I told you and because I didn’t say his name,” he added, almost as if it were an after thought.

What connection? Harry thought again, more confused and suddenly on edge, because it was finally
dawning on him that they might not be talking about the Lănain at all, but something else altogether. And if that were the case, and Hermione really was worried about Voldemort finding out about whatever it was, then Dumbledore might be about to reveal the secret his friends had been keeping from him for his own good.

“And you know this how?” Dumbledore pressed.

“Er...”

“Are you privy to her thoughts, or is it an educated guess formulated by taking various other factors into account.”

“I guessed,” Ron admitted quickly.

“So while you know what she is feeling at any given moment, you do not, in fact, know what she is actually thinking?” Dumbledore asked. “You can speculate about it or interpret what the cause of those feelings is, using other factors, such as pervious experience and your extensive knowledge of the way her mind works, to formulate a conclusion, but in the end, it is still a guess? An educated guess, but a guess none the less, which means you could be wrong?”

“I suppose,” the redhead replied. But I’m not, he added in his mind.

“And was he correct,” Dumbledore asked, turning slightly in his chair and surveying Hermione over the rims of his half moon spectacles.

“Yes,” she admitted, dipping her head slightly and diverting her eyes to the floor.

“On all counts?” Dumbledore asked with a smile. “In that case,” he said to Ron, when Hermione’s blush returned in full measure, “you now have my permission to ‘shut up’, Mr. Weasley. I wouldn’t want you to spend the rest of the evening in the doghouse on my account. But I trust you do see the point I was making?” he added, glancing back and forth between the couple.

“Voldemort can sense what Harry is feeling, but he doesn’t know what he is actually thinking most of the time,” Hermione replied, after quickly pulling herself together. “He can speculate on the cause of those feelings, but he knows that there is a chance he could be wrong and the only way for him to know for sure if his interpretation is correct would be for him to possess Harry to such a degree that he was able to enter his mind.”

“But he can still watch us or eavesdrop through Harry, without completely possessing him,” she added, not ready to abandon her argument just yet. “The way Harry did when he saw Rookwood explaining to Voldemort why Broderick Bode was unable to steal that prophesy from the Department of Mysteries. He could be watching us right now.”

“There is always the possibility of that,” Dumbledore admitted, “but it is highly unlikely given the circumstances. Let’s ask Mr. Potter what he thinks, shall we?” he said, turning to Harry and looking him dead in the eye as he asked his next question.

“Do you believe Lord Voldemort is currently attempting to spy on us through you?”

“No,” Harry replied almost instantly. “I’d be able to tell,” he added when Hermione looked doubtful. “I’d feel him inside me when you look at me,” he said to Dumbledore.

“And yet you do not?”

“I don’t want to bite you, if that’s what you mean,” Harry answered.
“And your scar?” Dumbledore asked.

“Nothing,” Harry admitted. “Not so much as a twinge now.”

“As I suspected,” the Headmaster stated calmly. “It must be rather frustrating for him, knowing that his plan to lure you away from the school was thwarted so very easily this time around and that one of his most loyal followers was apprehended in the process. No doubt Veritaserum has already been administered and Bellatrix is being questioned about his whereabouts and future plans even as we speak.”

“Rather inconvenient, moving ones home base with Aurors already on your trail. And yet, you are sensing no emotional reaction whatsoever?” Dumbledore asked, despite the fact he already knew the answer. “No aggravation? No rage?”

“That can only be because he is intentionally blocking you. He knows that the connection you share goes both ways, after all. If he were to use it now, even to check up on us in an attempt to discover exactly how much we know, he would have to open himself up and risk revealing himself to you in return. He knows that you’re bound to be wary of such an intrusion right now. If he were going to try something like that, I’d expect it to happen when you’re nearly asleep and your guard is down, not while you’re wide awake, agitated, and sitting in my office.”

“You have been practicing those Occlumency exercises Professor Tonks showed you, correct?” Dumbledore asked Harry, who nodded his head in agreement. “It is essential that you clear your mind of all thoughts and emotions before you go to sleep,” he continued, “because that is when you are the most open; the most vulnerable.”

“Right now, any strong emotional reaction you experience would likely be attributed to the day’s events, should Voldemort even sense them through the barrier he has erected, but tonight, you must make a conscious effort to clear your mind before bed. If that is not something you honestly think you can do, you need to tell me now, and we will postpone this conversation until you feel that you can.”

“No, Professor,” Harry said, wanting to know exactly what his friends were hiding from him. “I mean, yes. I can do that. Clear my mind I mean.”

“Not only of thoughts, but emotions as well?” Dumbledore questioned.

“Yes, Professor.”

“A brief demonstration then,” Dumbledore instructed. “If you would.”

“What?” Harry asked, clearly startled by the unexpected request. “Now? In front you and... now?” he asked again, glancing at Ron and Hermione. “Wait,” he said abruptly, when he realized what Dumbledore was planning. “You’re going to use Legilimency on me,” he stated, “just to see how well I do, aren’t you?”

“When you’re ready, of course,” Dumbledore replied, drawing his wand out and setting it down on his desk. “Would fifteen minutes suffice?” he asked calmly. “Or do you need a bit longer?”

“Um...”

“Perhaps you should just have a seat and prepare yourself,” the Headmaster stated, “and I’ll wait until you appear to be ready. How’s that?”

“Er,” Ron said uncomfortably, as he watched Harry sit down in the nearest chair. “Do you...uh...
want us to leave or something?” he asked Dumbledore, clearly feeling as if he were about to witness something he shouldn’t. “Because Hermione and I can wait in the other room if you want.”

“No, Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore replied, “I don’t think that will be necessary. I’m sure Mr. Potter has explained how Legilimency works, but a practical demonstration is always helpful. Just step away from Mr. Potter,” he added, as Harry took one last look at his friends and then closed his eyes, “and remain quiet so he can concentrate.”

Harry tried to concentrate, he really did, but it was a lot harder to clear his mind when he knew that there was someone sitting directly across from him with a wand, poised to attack. How was he supposed to push the dread or the anticipation aside, when he knew the spell could hit him any second?

Then again, Professor Dumbledore obviously wasn’t going to sucker punch him with the spell the same way Snape had, the slimy git. Not only had Dumbledore warned him, he’d given him plenty of time to prepare himself for what was to come. But his fifteen minutes were ticking away, and if he didn’t get a hold of himself and make use of them, the end result would be the same.

Just concentrate on your breathing , Harry told himself, repeating the instructions Parvati had given him in the Room of Requirement when she thought he wanted to learn how to meditate. Concentrate on your breathing and relax, he thought, taking a deep breath and letting it out the same way he did every afternoon when he practiced. Focus on your thoughts and feelings as you breathe in, he reminded himself, mixing Tonks and Parvati’s instructions together to form something that actually worked for him, and push them out of your body as you breathe out. Just relax and breathe.

BANG!

The sound of Dumbledore’s palm slapping against the top of his desk resounded through his office a few minutes later, causing both Ron and Hermione to jump in surprise. Harry however, who was still concentrating on his breathing, barely seemed to notice and didn’t even bother to open his eyes.

“Very good, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said, his bright blue eyes still glued to the young man seated before him. “I think that will be enough. If you’re ready we may begin,” he stated, but he made no move to pick up his wand as Harry opened his eyes.

“Miss Granger,” the Headmaster stated instead, “could you tell us please, what three factors are the most important in dictating the ease with which a skilled Legilimens is able to target and extract specific memories from another person’s mind?”

“Physical proximity to the target,” Hermione replied almost instantly. “The closer the Legilimens is to his intended victim, the easier it will be to extract a memory. Eye contact is also essential,” she stated somewhat clinically. “Most people know this, and therefore look away when they are attempting to be less than honest with a Legilimens. However,” she continued, sounding as if she were quoting a book from memory, “an accomplished Legilimens is capable of verbally manipulating his target into looking at him through the use of insults or threats, and does so not only because it results in the necessary eye contact, but because it brings on the third prerequisite, a heightened emotional state.”

“And why is a heightened emotional state important?” Dumbledore asked, when she was forced to stop speaking and take a breath.

“Because our memories are tied to our emotions,” she responded. “And the Legilimens will be
counting on his victim’s emotional state to bring significant memories he wants to see to the surface.”

“For example, if he threatened to harm your family, you might unintentionally call up the memory of where your family is hiding, if for no other reason, than to convince yourself that they are safe and it is an empty threat. And once you’ve called that memory forward, your emotional distress makes it that much easier for him to pinpoint it and find out where they are, whereas he would have had to invade your mind and hunt through all of your memories at random otherwise.”

“Very good,” the Headmaster said. “Very good indeed.”

“I have a question though, Professor,” Hermione said. She’d read all about Occlumency and Legilimency, of course, in order to understand what it was Harry needed to defend himself against, but most Wizarding books were not interactive and they could only answer so many of her questions.

“Proceed,” Dumbledore said patiently.

“Since Harry and Voldemort are connected, and he can sense Harry’s emotions, even without the use of Legilimency, does that mean it is possible for him to access Harry’s memories without the close proximity or the eye contact?”

“Not without possessing him to a certain degree.”

“And if he did possess him,” Hermione continued without missing a beat, “would it be possible for him to force Harry to have a specific emotional reaction for the sole purpose of drawing forth a memory he wants to see?”

“In other words,” Dumbledore said, “you’re asking if Voldemort could use his connection to Mr. Potter to force him to think about the conversation we are about to have?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Not without penetrating so deeply into his mind that Mr. Potter would become aware of his presence and what he was attempting to do, at which point Mr. Potter would surely use his Occlumency skills, basic though they may be, to clear his mind of all thoughts and emotions before attempting to repel him. Elementary Occlumency requires skills similar to those used to resist the Imperius Curse,” Dumbledore explained. “Something Mr. Potter has shown a great aptitude for. With a bit more training, and a good deal of practice, I don’t foresee a situation the likes of which you describe coming to pass.”

“Stop arguing with him already,” Ron leaned over and muttered in Hermione’s ear. “And let’s get on with it already.”

“I’m entitled to have questions,” she retorted. “I spent a lot of time researching all of this and--”

“Yeah, right,” Ron scoffed. “That’s what it is. It has nothing to do with the fact that you don’t want Harry and me to know how to work that counter-curse of yours, because--”

“Counter-curse?” Harry asked, no longer able to contain himself, “What counter-curse?”

“Harry doesn’t need to know,” Hermione replied, acting as if she hadn’t heard him. “He’ll never need to use it. The whole point is to protect him, remember? And he can’t very well use it to protect himself.”

“Why the hell not?” Harry asked, indignation nipping at his meditation induced composure. “Would one of you please tell me what the hell you’re talking about?”
“And what’s your excuse for keeping me in the dark?” Ron demanded, paying no attention whatsoever to his best friend’s questions, or even noticing the fact that Dumbledore had sat back in his chair with a slightly amused look and seemed to be content merely to watch as the two of them bicker it out. “Other than the fact you’re afraid I’ll use it and--”

“I know for a fact you’ll use it,” Hermione snapped.

“And I can’t use what I don’t know, is that it?”

“Right in one.”

“But you can?” Ron shot back accusingly.

“Two for two. You’re not nearly as thick as you like to pretend,” she said scathingly.

“Hermione,” Ron growled out her name in irritation. “If you think I’m just going to stand back and let you--”

“You can rant all you want,” she retorted before he even had a chance to finish, “but I’m still not going to tell you.”

“WELL, ONE OF YOU HAD BETTER!” Harry shouted over them in order to get their attention. “I want to know what the hell you’re talking about,” he added, when his friends stopped harping on one other and broke apart to stare at him. “And I want to know now.”

“Apparently, Miss Granger has come up with a rather ingenious, albeit complicated, method of blocking the Killing Curse,” Dumbledore replied matter-of-factly. “Theoretically, of course.”

“She what?” Harry asked, gaping at Hermione incredulously. “But... but that’s impossible.”

“Is it?” Dumbledore asked, giving him a pointed look. “I’d think you, of all people, Mr. Potter, would know that it isn’t.”

“But…” Harry stammered, at a loss for what else to say. The words, ‘Holy Shit!’ sprang to mind, but he had enough sense not to say that in Dumbledore’s presence.

No wonder she doesn’t want Voldemort to find out. Talk about a power ‘the Dark Lord knows not’. This is HUGE!

“As curious as I am to hear the details of the actual counter-curse,” the Headmaster continued, refocusing his attention on Hermione, “I fear we’re getting a bit ahead of our selves. Let’s start at the beginning, shall we? With the Coupling Potion and how you’ve augmented it. Even Phineas here,” he said, motioning towards the portrait of Sirius’s great-great-grandfather, who was watching them silently from his frame, along with all the other portraits, “was grudgingly impressed by your... what was the phrase you used again?” he asked the scowling portrait, “Ah, yes, ‘Slytherinesque cunning’,” he finished with a soft chuckle. “And that is no mean feat, Miss Granger. It takes quite a lot to impress Phineas,” Dumbledore said, lowering his voice as if he were revealing a secret. “He isn’t particularly fond of students you see.”

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By the time Harry followed his friends out of Dumbledore’s office and began the march back to Gryffindor Tower, his head was literally spinning with all the information he’d taken in. Even now, after it had all been explained by both Dumbledore and Hermione, he still had a hard time wrapping his head around what he’d learned. It all seemed so unreal. His best friends were connected, much
the same way he was connected to Voldemort, only they had done it on purpose to protect one another, and ultimately to protect him. They’d brewed a restricted potion and then augmented it so they could act as human shields, should Voldemort try and send another Killing Curse his way.

And as if that weren’t enough, Hermione had come up with a counter-curse for them to use as a back up, just in case one of them didn’t happen to be close enough to step in front of him and take the curse that was meant for him. A counter-curse that was the exact opposite of the Killing Curse and would allow her to deflect Voldemort’s own spell back on him, from clear across a room if necessary, by sacrificing herself instead. If it all worked the way it was supposed to, (and Dumbledore hadn’t come up with any reasons why it shouldn’t work once Hermione had explained it all to them), Voldemort would unwittingly take himself out with his own curse, yet again. And this time, because he was in a new body, which was already weak and still completely mortal, there would be no coming back. Not for him anyway.

Even so, Harry had objected, vehemently, to his friends even considering the possibility of giving up their own lives for him, until Hermione explained that the sacrifice they made didn’t need to be permanent in order to protect him. Once she explained that the reason they’d taken the Coupling Potion in the first place was so they could bring one another back after it was all over, Harry had calmed down a bit, but he still didn’t like it. What if something went wrong?

He could definitely see why Ron was so against Hermione being the one to make the sacrifice, which she seemed hell bent on doing. He didn’t want either of his friends doing anything that drastic, but if they were thrown in a situation where one of them had to, he’d prefer it be Ron. Not because he valued his friendship any less, or because Hermione was a girl and should therefore be protected, or anything like that, but because, as he pointed out to Hermione, it was her spell. She was the one that had done all the research and created it and if, Merlin forbid, something did go wrong, it made more sense to have her there, and alive, to come up with some means of fixing it.

She’d argued of course, stating that as long as her heart was beating and her body was alive, they’d have up to two weeks to figure out how to get her soul, which would still be linked to Ron’s, back where it belonged. Two weeks, which Dumbledore reminded her, she’d spend in limbo, neither truly alive or dead, merely existing and unable to do anything but watch her friends suffer.

But in the end, Hermione’s argument about how they’d have Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey to help them didn’t mollify Harry, anymore than it did Ron. The plain fact was, she knew more spells than he and Ron put together and one of the key elements of her plan was keeping the body of the person that made the ‘sacrifice’ alive. If something went wrong before Dumbledore or Madam Pomfrey showed up, say if the CPR didn’t work for instance, they were going to need her brains to come up with a magical alternative on the spot.

“THANK GOD!” a high pitched voice shouted, instantly drawing Harry out of his own head. He hadn’t even realized that they’d reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, let alone the fact that Hermione had given the password and the portrait had swung open to reveal the common room.

“WHERE HAVE YOU THREE BEEN?” Ginny cried, as she stopped pacing and bore down on them. “I’ve been sooo worried,” she stated. “All Bill would tell me was that you were attacked on the Quidditch Pitch, but that you were all okay, and I had to wait here. What happened? Who attacked you? Was it ... him? How on earth did you get away? Are you sure you’re all right? Mum’s going to have kittens when she finds out about this. Is that where Bill went, to tell Mum and Dad? Is he coming back to help them search? ”

“Not here,” Ron murmured, after he’d stepped into the room and realized that it was full to bursting with other Gryffindor students, all of whom had gone quiet and were now staring at him and his
friends, some with fearful expressions, but most with keen interest, obviously eager to hear the answers to most of Ginny’s questions.

“Harry!” Parvati called out, disengaging herself from the crowd and stepping towards the foursome still standing by the portrait hole. “I’m so glad you’re all right. It must have been awful. I just can’t believe that there were actually Death Eaters here. And Professor McGonagall told us that we’re not allowed to leave the castle at all until the grounds and the forest have been thoroughly searched. It’s just awful.”

“You aren’t seriously upset about that, are you?” Ginny snapped. “The fact that you can’t go outside and your Hogsmeade weekend was ruined. Are you for real?” she asked incredulously. “By all means go outside and let them take you then. It would serve you right for being that stupid.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Parvati retorted. “Of course Harry knows that isn’t what I meant.”

“What did you mean then?” Ron asked.

“Well, obviously they aren’t after the rest of us,” Lavender replied, instantly coming to her friend’s defense.

“Whatever,” Ron mumbled under his breath, as he grabbed Hermione’s hand and started pulling her towards the stairwell leading up to the boys’ dorm, assuming that Harry would be right on their heels. He knew that Harry didn’t normally stick around when he was receiving this type of attention, and now he fully understood why that was. For once in his life, Ron Weasley didn’t want to argue with anyone. He didn’t want to talk to them at all or even stand there and look at their eager faces. All he wanted to do was get the hell away from them. All of them. Even his sister, who he knew would follow him upstairs, despite his wishes, and continue to pester him until each and every one of her questions was answered.

Of course Seamus realized where Ron was heading, and after giving Neville a shove to get him moving in the right direction, he met the redhead at the stairs. “It’s our room too,” he stated, stepping in front of Ron and bolting up the stairs, so he could get to their dorm room first, thus ensuring the Ron wouldn’t be able to lock him out.

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Nearly thirty minutes later, the 6th year Gryffindor boys and the two girls, still hadn’t come out of the room they had sequestered themselves in. Not even when David Devane had knocked on the door and informed them all that the Head Master had sent word they’d be eating in the tower tonight, and that he’d requested that the Prefects help oversee the meal when the food arrived.

Unfortunately for Ginny, neither Ron, nor Harry seemed willing to answer many of her questions, and even Hermione was remarkable tight lipped on the subject. Ginny knew that a lot of that had to do with the fact that Seamus was in the room, waiting to hear the answers himself, and they didn’t trust him not to run downstairs and blab everything he’d heard afterwards. If she could just get Hermione alone, Ginny knew that she’d open up, but going up to the girls’ dorm was no better than staying in the boys’, because Parvati and Lavender would likely be up there.

“Tell your boyfriend to bugger off,” Ron snapped at his sister when there was a second knock on his closed bedroom door. “Because if you don’t get rid of him,” he stated, perturbed by the fact Devane had come back, even though he’d been quite clear about the fact he had no intentions of helping with dinner, “I will.”

“RON!” Hermione admonished, from where she sat on the edge of his bed.
“Spare me the lecture about how we have responsibilities, Hermione,” he retorted, as Ginny stood up and approached the door. “The rest of the Prefects are more than capable of handling it. It’s not like they have to prepare the food or anything. If anyone misses out, it’s their own damn fault.”

“Is that so Mr. Weasley?” McGonagall asked, clearly visible in the doorway now that Ginny had opened the door.

“Er...sorry, Professor,” Ron replied, his stomach plummeting as he spun around and realized who it was that had actually been knocking. Even worse than the fact she’d likely heard him swear or that she knew he planned on shirking his Prefect duties, she’d caught two girls in his bedroom after he’d received a detention for going up to theirs.

“Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall stated, her eyes jumping from Ron, to Ginny and then Hermione, and finally landing on Ron again, “I’d like to have a word with you. Please step into the hallway.”

“Yes, Professor,” he said, rising off his bed with a downtrodden look, and shuffling across the threshold of the doorway as McGonagall stepped aside.

Harry waited until McGonagall had closed the door firmly behind them and then turned to Hermione, who he now knew could sense what Ron was feeling. “What are they talking about?” he asked, knowing that she’d have more insight than the rest of them did.

“I have no idea,” she stated, looking to all present as if she fully expected to be called out of the room and reprimanded next.

“Do you think she’s telling him off because he was rude to David and refused to go downstairs and help?” Ginny asked, sounding a little anxious herself. She was a Prefect too after all and she hadn’t gone down either.

“No, Hermione replied, unsure exactly what was transpiring beyond the closed door, yet certain that wasn’t it. Her own heart had just leapt into her throat in response to Ron’s, but not out of fear. She no longer felt any anxiety from him and the shame she’d expect him to feel, were he actually being scolded, never came. If she had to label what he was feeling, she’d say it was shocked. Whatever Professor McGonagall was telling him on the other side of that door, it had him fairly gob smacked.

“How the hell do you know?” Seamus asked, looking at her oddly.

“Well, obviously if that’s what it was, she’d have asked all three of us to step into the hallway,” Hermione replied, stating a fact that was both perfectly logical and something that Harry knew was a lie at the same time.

That isn’t how she figured it out, he told himself, amazed by just how quickly she’d responded. She hadn’t even taken time to think about it. She knows because she’s monitoring Ron’s feelings, but rather than admit that to Seamus, she came up with another explanation. An explanation that was completely feasible and so Hermione-like in its logic that it made perfect sense. If I didn’t know better, I’d have believed it myself. Is that how they’ve been hiding the connection from me? Am I really that gullible, or is she just that good? And even if she is, it doesn’t explain how Ron was able to slip it past me. He’s a terrible liar.

“What?” Hermione asked when the bedroom door opened and Ron stepped back into the room, as white as a sheet, clutching a large bag to his chest. “What did she say?”

But rather than respond, Ron simple shook his head and held the bag in his hand out for Hermione to take, as if it held all the answers. Ginny, who was still standing by the door, instantly relieved him of
it, but the bag was heavier than she’d expected. So heavy in fact, that she nearly dropped it and that’s when Harry heard the clink of metal against metal, and realized what it was.

“BLOODY HELL!” Ginny screeched her brown eyes bugging out when she opened the bag and peered inside. “Where did you get this?” she asked accusingly. “I’ve never seen this much gold, let alone held it in my hand. There must be 500 Galleons in here!”

“NO WAY!” Seamus cried excitedly. “Seriously?”

“More like one thousand,” Harry replied.

The bag in Ginny’s hands was about the same size as the one Fudge had given him after he won the Tri-Wizard Tournament and he’d seen the wanted posters in Hogsmeade last February, when he went on his one and only date with Cho.

“The Ministry was offering a thousand Galleons reward to any wizard with information leading to the recapture of any of the Death Eater’s that escaped from Azkaban last year,” Harry stated, when Seamus goggled at him.

“So that means they caught one then?” the Neville said.

“Using some bit of information you two provided,” Seamus added. “I wonder who it was.”

“Bellatrix Lestrange,” Hermione answered, glancing at him as she said it and watching him stiffen.

“And the Ministry didn’t catch her,” Harry informed them. “Ron did.”

“You did not!” Ginny cried, clearly aghast at this news. “Mum is going to kill you when she finds out that you chased after that mad cow.”

“I didn’t chase anybody,” Ron said, snatching his reward out of his sister’s hands almost as if he expected her to step in for their mother and confiscate it on her behalf. “She came after me. What was I supposed to do?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Ginny fired back sarcastically. “How about run for starters? She’s crazy. She could have killed both.”

“What do you think I stunned her for?” her brother retorted. “Twisted bitch,” he continued under his breath, “that ought to teach her not to try and impersonate Hermione. As if we were so thick we weren’t going to notice the difference.”

“She was impersonating you?” Ginny asked Hermione, her big brown eyes going wide again and then Harry saw it all click into place. “She polyjuiced herself, just like Mad-Eye kept saying she would, and ...and you knew that it wasn’t really Hermione?” she said to Ron. “Of course you knew, because...” but she never finished.

“You know,” Harry said, pointing his finger at Ginny in an accusatory fashion when she glanced at him and suddenly went quiet. “You wouldn’t tell me, but you told her?” he said, looking back and forth between his friends in astonishment. “I don’t believe this.”

“What’s he talking about?” Seamus asked Ginny, who shrugged her shoulders and managed to look just as bewildered by Harry’s outburst as he was. “They told her what?” he asked Harry.

“That’s it!” Ron shouted, walking over to his overly inquisitive roommate and pushing him towards the door. “Get out.”
“You can’t throw me out of my own room,” the Irishman snapped, shoving Ron back.

“I bet I can if I really try,” the redhead replied.

“We’ll uh... just go get some dinner before it’s all gone,” Neville said, stepping forward, taking Ron’s place, and ushering Seamus towards the door. “Want us to bring something back for you when we come back up?” he asked.

“No,” Harry replied, not the least bit hungry.

“But thanks, Neville” Hermione added, just before he closed the door.

“Well?” Harry demanded, as Ron locked the door and sealed the room with his wand.

“Well, what?” Hermione asked.

“You told Ginny,” he stated, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“Oh be reasonable, Harry, I had to tell someone,” Hermione replied. “You’re the one that pointed out that there was a chance things could go wrong when we were in Dumbledore’s office. I had to tell Ginny, so she could tell Madame Pomfrey what we’d done if the potion hadn’t worked the way it was supposed to. Stop trying to turn it into some kind of a contest, because you know why it is that I felt I couldn’t tell you.”

“Wait,” Ginny said, “So Harry knows about the potion?”

“He does now,” Ron said burying the reward money McGonagall had given him in the bottom of his truck, before closing the lid and plopping down on top of it. “Dumbledore told him.”

“But... Dumbledore? How’d he know?” she asked, clearly confused.

“That bloody painting in our bedroom at Grimmauld Place is connected to his office,” her brother groaned. “I’m never sleeping in that room again.”

“So Harry knows everything now,” Ginny said no one in particular.

“Well, that’s good.”

“And who else knows?” Harry asked, still sounding somewhat offended.

“No one that we know of,” Hermione answered.

“Although I did suggest maybe having Fred and George take some of the basic potion Hermione has saved,” Ginny announced, much to Harry’s surprise. He hadn’t even realized there was any of the potion left, let alone some of it in its original, unaltered form. “Because they are already so closely connected that being linked to each other for a couple weeks probably wouldn’t be all that disruptive. Plus I think it’s a good idea to have someone else try the basic version before we do. That was we’ll know more of less what to expect.”

“We?” Harry asked, his stomach dropping. “We who?”

“You and me, of course?” Ginny answered. “I thought you said he knew everything,” she said to Hermione, when Harry’s mouth fell open.

“No, you said that,” Ron reminded her.
“WAIT!” Harry said, holding his hands up in the air. “Wait. Just... wait. You,” he said, pointing at Ron, “want me and your sister, to take the potion. Me and Ginny? Linked? Like you two?”

“Don’t be thick,” Ron replied.

“You won’t be linked like us,” Hermione cut in. “It would only be a temporary connection. And even then it would only be as a last resort. You know, if Voldemort attacks the school or something. That way you and Ginny would have your souls protected as well.”

“And there will be no maintaining of any kind whatsoever going on,” Ron stated.

“The thing is Harry,” Hermione said, purposely ignoring Ron’s comment, “Any one that connects to you, also runs the risk of connecting to Voldemort. Originally I assumed that we’d just have you link yourself to Ron and myself, but now I think that might be too risky. But Ginny has had some experience dealing with Voldemort herself. I know it’s not quite the same thing, but she knows what it feels like to be possessed and have someone else in her head and ...well, it just makes more sense for you to be linked to her. But only when it is absolutely necessary. Hopefully it will never come to that. This is just another one of those backup plans.”

“But just so you know,” Ginny added, “I have our portion of the potion upstairs in my trunk and I’ve already added my blood too it. If you want I can go get it right now and we can add yours. That way it will be ready and all we’d have to do to protect ourselves when the time came would be to drink it.”

“Not now,” Hermione said to Ginny. “Harry has enough to process right now as it is, and Dumbledore said he needed to clear his mind before bed. Let’s not throw anything else at him right now. In fact, maybe it would be best if we all gave you some space so you could start on your Occlumency exercises,” she said to Harry as she motioned for Ron to get up and follow her to the door. “It’ll probably take you longer tonight. We can talk about the rest of this tomorrow and we’ll answer any questions you have left then, how’s that?”

“Fine,” Harry said somewhat begrudgingly as he watched his friends leave the room. He hated to admit it, even to himself, but he knew that Hermione was right. He was practically on overload with everything that had happened and all that he had learned. There was no way he was going to be able to just sit down and shut everything he was feeling off without putting a good deal of time and effort into it.

I might as well just face up to it and get started now.

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“Ron?” Hermione asked quietly, nuzzling against the warmth of his naked body and opting to use his chest to prop her head on instead of the portion of his pillow he’d left bare for her.

“Hum,” he replied groggily.

“Promise me you won’t spend any of that money on me.”

“Huh?” Ron said, pulled away from the peaceful sleep he’d fast been approaching when the concern she was feeling leached into his body. After all the crazy things that had happened to them that day and all the not so crazy things they’d just finished doing to one another to show how grateful they were to still be together, how could she possibly be thinking about his reward money, let alone fretting about how he as going to spend it?

“Promise me you won’t spend any of that money on me,” she said again.
“Are you mental?” Ron asked, now fully awake against his wishes. “You seriously want to talk about that right now?”

“I don’t want to talk about it at all. Just promise me.”

“No,” he said somewhat irritably. The phrase, ‘It’s my money and I’ll spend it on whatever and whoever I want’ sprang to mind, but even half asleep, Ron had enough sense not to say it out loud. Hermione had insisted on unshielding his bed once they’d finished fooling around so they’d be able to hear Harry if Voldemort tried to enter his mind while he was asleep. If he started a row now, they’d wake up all three of his dorm mates and that was the last thing he needed.

“Ron,” she said in a soft, yet insistent voice.

“No,” he stated again just as firmly, but he knew he couldn’t win this battle by sheer willpower alone. Hermione was like a dog with a bone when she got an idea in her head and she rarely let it go until she got her own way. Simply butting heads with her wasn’t going to accomplish anything. She’d just dig in a little deeper and go after him again. He was going to have to switch tacks if he wanted to come out on top or get her to drop the subject so they could get some sleep. Guilt seemed like the most effective strategy to use, Merlin knows it worked on him on the rare instances that she used it. He’d try a little guilt and see what that netted him.

“This’ll be our first Christmas together as a couple and it’s the first time I’ve ever had any money to get you, and everyone else,” he added for good measure, “anything nice. You aren’t seriously going to ask me not to do that, are you?”

“All I need is right here,” she said, tightening her grip on his side and giving him a brief hug before allowing her hand to roam over his stomach. “This is all I want.”

NOT FAIR! the rational side of his mind objected. How’s a bloke supposed to argue when she’s doing that?

“This?” Ron asked, using the arm that was wrapped around her back to pull her a little closer, “Or what we did before we wore ourselves out?”

NO YOU IDIOT! the rational side of him protested. You’re giving her exactly what she wants.

But I’m getting what I want in return, his rejuvenated libido piped in.

“Both,” Hermione replied, smirking ever so slightly as she reached forward and lifted the blankets up just enough to glance down the length of Ron’s body.

“I knew it,” she giggled, referring to the fact that she’d felt his arousal stirring within herself even before she saw the evidence of it. “You aren’t nearly as worn out as you’d like me to believe. You’re just trying to lull me into a false sense of security with the snuggling, hoping that it will lead to something else.”

“You started it,” he retorted, seeing no reason to deny what she’d claimed, as it was at least partially true.

“Well then,” she replied, sliding on top of him with a coy smile. “I suppose it’s only fair for me to follow through and finish it as well.”

“I thought you wanted to talk.” Ron chuckled, as Hermione’s lips descended to his neck.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she stated, between kisses. “A woman’s prerogative,” she added, with a
soft laugh of her own, as she shifted her legs to either side of his body, sat upright until she was straddling his stomach, and leaned sideways just enough to poke her arm beyond the curtains surrounding them to retrieve her wand off his bedside table. “Or maybe it was you that changed it,” Hermione added, a powerful jolt of lust shooting through her as Ron came up on his elbows beneath her and ogled her nude form as she cast her spell and Shielded the bed once more.

“Merlin, you’re beautiful,” Ron said, reaching forward with one hand to cup her bare breast as she tilted forward to stow her wand under his pillow for safekeeping now that she no longer needed it. “I’ll never get tired of looking at you. Or touching you,” he added, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her downward until she was flush against him again. “Or tasting you,” he said, rolling them both over until he was on top, before pressing his lips against hers.

“I want to taste every inch of your body,” he murmured, abruptly ending what had been a rather heated kiss and repositioning his lips on the ultra-sensitive spot on her neck just below her ear, causing her to moan and shudder beneath him.

“So soft,” he mumbled, slowly kissing his way down to her collarbone. “Beautiful,” he sighed, moving even lower and running his tongue between the valley of her breasts.

Ron knew that his words embarrassed her. He felt it every time he complimented her in this fashion. It didn’t matter how many times he told Hermione she was beautiful, there was still part of her that didn’t fully believe what he said. He felt her self-consciousness and her doubts lurking somewhere inside himself, despite the fact his yearning and his own urges were masking them to a large degree. He knew that she didn’t doubt him though, because if that were the case he’d feel suspicion, and there was never any of that. She believed that he believed what he was saying, she simply didn’t see herself the same way he did, which is what caused the embarrassment.

He could deal with a little embarrassment however, and he knew that she could as well, because in addition to that, there was also happiness and appreciation. Knowing that he found her attractive made Hermione feel good, the same way it made him feel good to know that she found him desirable in return. Not that he complimented her just to make her, or himself, feel good, most of the time he didn’t even realize he was doing it until he felt her react. He simply opened his mouth and said whatever popped into his head.

Under normal circumstances that wasn’t such a good thing, because more often than not, speaking without thinking had a tendency to land him in a whole mess of trouble when other people were present. But for some reason, when it was just the two of them, Hermione let him get away with far more than he ever expected.

The first couple times he’d mentioned something particularly crass that he wanted to do to her out loud, he’d actually flinched when he experienced her jolt of surprise. He’d fully expected her to recoil or at the very least tell him off, but it never happen. Sure, she’d blushed a good deal, but despite her embarrassment, hearing him say what he wanted seemed to arouse her nearly as much as it did him.

Ron knew that part of it probably had to do with their connection and the way it allowed them to feed off one another, but that wasn’t all it was by any means. Hermione was a passionate person and she enjoyed the time they spent alone together, but if she wasn’t in the mood when he was feeling amorous, or if she was focused on something else and didn’t want to be distracted, she wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him down, connection or no connection. They had to both be on the same page and want the same thing for the feedback loop to kick in, as it was now.

We definitely want the same thing, Ron told himself, as he experienced a surge of impatience that was not his own. Only you’re going to have to wait, he thought, chuckling in response to
Hermione’s unspoken plea, *because I fully intend on taking my time.*

“Patience, love,” Ron murmured, before sucking her nipple into his mouth and teasing the taut peak with a flick of his tongue. “There’s still a lot of you left to savor,” he added, abandoning one breast and moving to its mate. “I could spend the rest of the night right here.”

“But you won’t,” Hermione sighed, lacing her fingers in his hair as he zeroed in on one spot in particular and continued to kiss and suck her left breast until her flesh was marked.

“Why do you do that?” she asked, genuinely curious when he pulled his mouth away and she sensed the satisfaction he felt upon seeing the faint love bite on her body. “Is it some sort of territorial thing?” she asked, despite the fact he wasn’t feeling particularly possessive at the moment. “It’s not like anyone else is ever going to see that.”

“You’ll see it,” Ron replied, scooting down and kissing her stomach briefly, before sliding back up to attack her neck again, only this time he was careful not to mar her skin. “You think of me when you see them, don’t you?” he whispered into her ear as he nuzzled against her. “You think about all the things we do and how good I make you feel? You remember what it felt like to have my mouth and my hands roaming over your body.”

“That’s why I do it,” he said, moaning when he felt his own desire, combined with Hermione’s and surge back into his body through their connection, making him twice as lustful and even more desperate than he had been before he’d answered her question. “To remind you of how much I want you,” he said, bringing his chest down against her upper body, pressing his lips against hers, and kissing her deeply.

“Please, Ron,” Hermione whimpered when they surfaced for air, shifting her legs to the side and raising her knees to create a cradle for him to lie in.

“Need you so much.” Ron groaned, when Hermione’s tongue darted forward and ran across his lower lip at the same moment she wrapped her legs around him.

“Then take me,” she demanded, using her legs to drag his lower body downward until she felt his hard flesh brush against the void she needed him to fill.

“OH GOD!” Ron moaned loudly, pleasure shooting through his throbbing member when he finally made contact with her soft folds. So wet, he thought, closing his eyes and trying to steel himself against her desperation. *Wet for me,* he told himself, her zeal finally getting to of him. *Because she wants me. She wants this just as much as I do.*

He already knew that, of course, but knowing what she was feeling wasn’t the same as feeling the proof of her arousal against his sensitive skin. Sensing her emotions was stimulating, but feeling the way those emotions effected her body, the way *he* effected her body, was intoxicating. He simply couldn’t get enough of it, or her. Nor could he hold out against his own needs or hers any longer.

“Want you,” he moaned into her mouth, as they continued to kiss and her impatience finally got the better of both of them. “Can’t get enough,” he panted. “Want to spend... the rest of the... night... loving you,” he mumbled between kisses.


“Want you so much,” Ron muttered into her ear as Hermione unclenched her legs and slowly slid her hands down his back until they were resting on his firm buttocks. “Need you, Mione. Need to be
inside you,” he said, as she used her hands to draw him forward at the same time she arched against
him.

“Now,” she urged, as Ron reached down between them to position himself at her opening.

“Now,” he agreed, pushing against her until her soft folds gave way and the tip of his cock sunk into
her searing heat. “So good,” he moaned, applying more pressure and sliding past her tight walls,
slowly filling her, inch by glorious inch, until the entire length of shaft was buried in her center and
they were as close as humanly possible.

“So bloody good,” he mumbled, pulling his hips back and surging forward again with a soft moan of
pleasure as the slick heat of her body engulfed him once more. “So tight,” he groaned, thrusting into
her again, before forcing himself to stop and take a moment to just enjoy the sensation of her body
clenched around his.

She was so wet and Ron still marveled at how perfectly they fit together. The first few times they
made love, he knew that it had been uncomfortable for her, but they were past that point now, thank
Merlin. Hermione was still incredibly tight, even after all the times they’d been together, but it no
longer hurt her the way it once had.

Ron still took it slow and gave her body time to adjust to his invasion though. In the beginning he’d
done it because he could sense her trepidation. He knew that she was uncomfortable and that he had
to build slowly until they reached a point where the pleasure they were both feeling mixed with her
pain and drowned it out. He’d held himself back until he was sure that she was ready and wanted
more. Now he held himself back because he enjoyed it.

It was torture, but exquisite at the same time because he relished the anticipation, and he knew that
the longer he held himself in check, the longer their pleasure would last. All he’d wanted moments
ago was to sink into the tight heat of her body, and now that he was there and she was wrapped
around him, his every instinct was screaming at him to move. He longed to pull himself back and
thrust forward again and again, until the sensation of her silken walls rubbing against his shaft was
too much for either of them to handle and she convulsed around him as he exploded inside of her.
But the longer he held off, the better it would be when he finally did give in and allowed that to
happen.

And the longer he remained stationary, the more Hermione wanted him to move, which only served
to intensify the need they were both feeling. He could sense it, how much she wanted him, even as
her body stretched to accommodate him and throbbed in time with his own. She was poised on the
same edge he was and when he gave in to his base desires and took her, they’d fall together. She
might topple over the edge moments before him, or perhaps he’d lose control first this time, but either
way, they’d drag each other down. They always did, because of the connection they shared. One
orgasm always triggered the other, and in the end that made what they experienced twice as intense.

But right now, Ron wasn’t quite ready to dive over the edge. He wanted to linger and enjoy the rush
that came with being on the cusp of something that he knew would be both highly pleasurable and
intensely satisfying for them both. He wanted to relish the moment and take his time. In fact, if he’d
had his way, he really would have spent the entire night exactly where he was now, feeling exactly
what he was feeling. Lust, pleasure, longing, anticipation, and need all swirled together to combined
with an exquisite heat.

Not just the heat of Hermione’s body surrounding him, or the heat she felt from his body covering
her own, but a heat they created together. A fire forged by love and mutual desire that was almost
palpable; a burning need that raged though each of them. If only it were possible to stay where he
was and feel like this forever, but it wasn’t. Hermione’s needs were spurring him forward, at the
same time his own needs were driving her, and if he didn’t take the plunge soon and give into what they both wanted, the desire they’d built up for one another would peak and start to ebb away, only to be replaced with frustration.

That was something neither of them wanted, so with a sigh of pleasure, Ron began to move. He pulled out of Hermione slowly, then just as slowly surged back in, forcing her slick wall to part and accept him. Again and again he stroked his hard length in and out of her tight body, their pleasure and their need building with each leisurely thrust.

And as good as it felt, it wasn’t enough. He wanted more. She wanted more too and Ron knew it. He could see the yearning in her eyes as he filled her. He could hear it mixed in with the whimpers and the soft moans she let escape to urge him to quicken his pace. She wanted him to move faster, to take her harder and deeper. She wanted him to possess her. She needed to be fucked, just as badly as he needed to fuck her. The time for savoring was over. They’d moved past tenderness and caring and into blind need as their feedback loop continued to combine and intensify every lustful feeling they had for one another.

“Is this what you want?” Ron asked, placing his hands on either side of Hermione’s head, covering her mouth with his own, and plunging his tongue between her lips as he propelled himself forward and buried his cock deeply with a throaty moan.

He knew that it was, despite the fact that his tongue was firmly entrenched in her mouth and had prevented Hermione from answering. Not that she needed words to respond. The way she grasped his shoulders and arched beneath him was enough to convey her message, but she didn’t stop there. Each time Ron pumped her center, Hermione moaned into his mouth, encouraging him onward until the force of his strokes was enough to shake her entire body as he literally pounded her into his mattress.

Again and again Ron plunged deep into Hermione’s center, driving his hips against her harder and harder, as she pitched and moved beneath him, meeting each stroke as if she couldn’t get close enough. The sound of skin slapping against skin combined with their gasps and moans of pleasure as the two of them lost themselves in their union and the pleasure they were giving one another.

With each primal push, Ron felt his climax approaching. It was a race now to see which one of them would topple over the edge first and it was going to be close. When he heard Hermione wail and call out his name, Ron knew that she’d beaten him to the finish, but only just. The yearning sensation that had wound up in the pit of his stomach peaked and sprang free even as Hermione cried out and her muscles contracted around him. Ron just had time to buck his hips and bury himself to the hilt with a guttural groan when the force of his own orgasm rocked his body and he emptied himself within her.

And just like that, it was all over. Mere moments before they’d each been wound up tightly, completely focused on the pleasure they derived as they plundered one another’s bodies. The all encompassing need to find release had been all that mattered, and now they were sated and completely spent. It was all Ron could do to roll off Hermione before he smothered her as they both closed their eyes and struggled to catch their breath.

“Mmmmm,” Hermione moaned, throwing her arms over her head and stretching contently. “That was....”

“Hot,” Ron finished for her.

“I was going to say amazing,” she said, rolling on her side and forcing her eyes to open so she could look at Ron, who was smiling beside her. “But I suppose hot also sums it up nicely.”
“So, I’m hot am I?” he said somewhat smugly.

“Hot headed maybe,” Hermione retorted, giggling softly when Ron’s eyes snapped open and his face fell momentarily.

But it was impossible for him to truly feel wounded by her slight, no matter how much he pretended otherwise, because he could feel her love for him pouring off her as she continued to gaze into his eyes. Then just as suddenly as it began, her happiness was extinguished by grief and fear.

“What?” Ron asked, on full alert before her eyes even had time to glass over. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t bear it,” Hermione moaned, burying her face in the crook of his neck the instant he rolled over to face her.

“Can’t bear what?” he asked, pulling her flush against him and wrapping his arms around her.

“To think about what it would be like if I lost you.”

“Don’t,” Ron said immediately. He knew exactly what she was talking about because he’d experienced it himself not all that long ago and he didn’t want to be forced to remember how much it had hurt. “Nothing happened,” he said, hoping his words would be enough to soothe her. “I’m right here and I don’t plan on going anywhere.”

“Yet,” Hermione moaned against his skin. “But you do plan on being the one to make the sacrifice if it becomes necessary and I can’t bear it. It’s too soon,” she cried, as Ron stroked his hand down her back. “It’s not enough. It’ll never be enough,” she whimpered softly. “A few stolen moments here and there. How can that possibly be enough? I can’t live on memories alone. I can’t. I won’t,” she insisted, tightening her grip on him until it was actually painful. “I won’t,” she stated again, although whether she was reaffirming it to herself, or him, Ron wasn’t sure.

“It’ll be all right,” he said, ignoring the pain in his side where her fingers were digging into him.

“Don’t tell me that I’ll be all right, because I won’t,” Hermione snapped, pulling away just enough to look him in the eye again. “Anymore than you would be if it were me.”

“We can’t both do it, Hermione,” Ron said with a sigh.

“I know,” she moaned.

“It has to be me,” he pressed on. “Even Harry thinks so.”

“I know,” she said again weakly, diverting her tear filled eyes to his mattress. “But... I don’t want it to be.”

“I know,” Ron said, rolling over on his back and dragging her on top of him in the process.

“What if it doesn’t work?” she asked, pressing her head against his chest and trying to comfort herself a bit by listening to the rhythmic thump of his heart. “What if something goes wrong and I can’t get you back?”

“I have faith in you,” Ron replied, “You’re brilliant after all. If anyone can figure it out, you can.”

“But what if I can’t?”

“You will.”
“Ron.”

“Fretting about something that might not even happen isn’t going to do either of us any good right now. Let’s just get some sleep, okay? We’re going to talk all of this through with Harry and Ginny in the morning anyway. It’ll be all right, you’ll see.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah,” Ron replied, despite the fact they both knew it wasn’t a promise that was within his power to keep. “Hermione,” he whispered, a few moments later, when he was sure that she’d let the matter go for now.

“Hum?” she mumbled, as she slid off him and snuggled up against his left side in an effort to make them both more comfortable.

“I love you.”

“I know,” she replied, giving his side a light squeeze and transmitting her own affections back to him through their bond.

“I just thought you might like to hear it,” he said uncomfortable. “I know I don’t tell you very often.”

“You tell me all the time,” she disagreed. “Maybe not in so many words, but you feel it and I know.”

“All right then,” he said, mentally kicking himself because he knew that his ears were flushed with color and she could feel his discomfort. “Night then.”

“Goodnight,” she whispered, pushing her hand under Ron’s pillow and retrieving her wand so she could lower the shield she’d placed around his bed, just incase Harry needed them in the middle of the night.
As November sped into December and the Christmas break loomed on the horizon, Harry found himself too bogged down with Occlumency exercises, Quidditch practices, and his end of term schoolwork, to give all that much thought to Coupling Potions or ridiculously complicated spells that may, or may not, block an Avada Kedavra curse. Not that he forgot about either of them by any means. But as Ron and Hermione seemed to be perfectly happy, and neither of them had experienced any extreme side effects that he could see, Harry decided it was probably best to focus his attention on a threat that was much more imminent for the time being.

“Get a load of this one,” Ron said, his nose crinkling with revulsion as he stared down at an image of a bloke that had somehow managed to turn himself into something that looked like a cross between a cooked lobster and a catfish. “I don’t fancy looking like that.”

“How’s that any different than the way you look when you’re angry or embarrassed?” Harry joked. “You definitely have the coloring down.”

“Shuddup,” the redhead groaned. “Although,” Ron added, thumbing back through the pages of When Human Transformations Go Awry until he found the image he was looking for, “there’s a striking resemblance between you and this chap,” he said, pointing at a man with hair that resembled the quills of a hedgehog.

“Professor McGonagall didn’t assign this essay so you two could make jokes,” Hermione admonished the boys, not even bothering to look away from the book she was currently perusing. “Those are serious magical disfigurements and not something either of you should poke fun at.”

“Someone’s feeling a bit ‘catty’ today,” Ron retorted, after catching Harry’s eye and making a sound like an angry cat.

“Think it’s funny, do you?” Hermione snapped, jerking her eyes off her book and slamming it shut as she glowered at Ron. “We’ll see who’s laughing when I sit back and watch you botch all your spells. Maybe I should take a couple pictures of you in the hospital wing and give them to your sister so her entire class can have a laugh at your expense next year when they start Human Transformations.”

“Oh come on, Mione,” Ron moaned. “You have to admit that the whole cat thing was pretty funny.”

“I most certainly do not,” she stated, pushing her chair away from the table the three of them were sitting at in the Library so she could stand upright and gather a few of the closest books into her arms.

“Joke’s on you,” Ron sniggered, as they watched Hermione stalk off in a huff, “because I’ll be transfiguring Harry, unlike you, who will be partnered with Neville. She’ll wind up in the hospital wing before either of us,” he said to Harry.

“Better hope she doesn’t end up with lips like this,” Harry chuckled in return, motioning towards a picture of a witch whose mouth was bright purple, swollen to twice its normal size, and flanked on either side by three wriggling, squid-like tentacles, “because she’ll probably want you to kiss her and make her feel better.”

“Good point, that,” Ron replied, looking revolted again. “On second thought, maybe you should
partner with Neville.”

“Actually, I was thinking I should partner with Hermione, since she’s hacked off at you and all,” Harry said. “You’ll likely be safer with Neville.”

“So you aren’t going to ask Parvati to be your partner then?” Ron teased, casually flipping through his book once more.

“Do you think I should?” Harry replied, shutting the book he’d been leafing through and focusing all of his attention on his best friend. He’d been spending more time with Parvati recently, mostly when Ron and Hermione were busy with their Prefect duties and such, but it wasn’t something he ever planned and he still wasn’t sure what to make of it. He’d hoped that spending a little time with her might help him sort things out on his own, but all he’d managed to do was confuse himself further.

Maybe Ron will know, Harry reasoned. He knows more about women than I do, not that it takes much to accomplish that. Okay, so he isn’t exactly an expert on the opposite sex, but he has a mother, a sister, and a wife too, for that matter.

A wife that in all likelihood won’t be speaking to him for the rest of the day, he reminded himself, but still, he has to know something I don’t.

“I don’t know?” the redhead replied, sobering up considerably when he realized that Harry was seriously asking him for advice. “Do you want to?” he asked, knowing that they were no longer simply talking about who would practice spells with whom in class.

“How am I supposed to know?”

“I don’t know,” Ron replied with a shrug of his shoulders. “You just do, I guess.”

“You guess?” Harry pressed. “How did you know?”

“Who said I knew anything? All right,” Ron sighed, when Harry arched an eyebrow and gave him a disbelieving look. “I suppose I did suspect that I might fancy her a little by fourth year.”

“A little,” Harry scoffed. “Try a lot.”

“But it took me a long time to figure that out,” Ron continued somewhat uncomfortably, “and it’s not exactly the same as what I feel now. I mean it is, but it isn’t. Know what I mean?”

“No,” Harry said sardonically. “If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking you.”

“You must know some of what I’m talking about,” Ron stated, shifting in his chair and lowering his voice even more. “You fancied Cho, didn’t you? You thought she was pretty and thought about... you know, snogging and stuff. You got jealous when you thought about her doing those things with other blokes, right?”

“Obviously,” Harry replied in a near whisper, “but just because you think a girl is pretty, that doesn’t necessarily mean you fancy her. And just because you want to jinx the bloke she’s with every time you see the two of them together, that doesn’t mean you’re in love with her or anything. I mean, it could just be that you... you know, don’t like the guy she’s with because he’s a prat, or you don’t want to see her get hurts, or something like that, right?”

“Hold on,” Ron said, holding one hand up in the air as he tried to make sense of Harry’s ramblings. “Who are we talking about here?” he asked, sounding more than a little confused. “Because that last I heard, the only bloke Parvati has been snogging is you and you can’t seriously want to jinx yourself
for that. So who’s this other girl you think you might be in love with?”

“I never said I was in love with anyone,” Harry said defensively.

“But there is a girl you think you might fancy, other than Parvati,” Ron added. “Only she already has a boyfriend?”

“I never said I fancied her.”

“Do you think about her all the time?” Ron asked, noting the panic that flashed across Harry’s face briefly before he managed to hide it.

“It’s not like that,” he insisted.

“Uh huh,” Ron mumbled with a knowing smile.

“It’s not,” Harry persisted.

It’s not my fault I’m thinking about her, he told himself. *How can I not? You only told me that I was going to have to link myself to her and give her access to every feeling I have. And as if that weren’t bad enough, I’ll have to feel what she feels when she’s with that...that tosser.*

“Maybe that whole denial thing will work out better for you than it did me,” Ron joked. “Although... if you feel like someone slammed a knife into your heart every time you see her and this other bloke together, you may have a problem. And if you feel like someone has reached into your stomach and is twisting your insides into knots every time you see her, you definitely have a problem.”

“I felt that way about Cho, but I don’t reckon I was ever really in love with her.”

“But you did fancy Cho, which means you do know what it feels like. So, who is it?” Ron asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry replied instantly. “She already has a boyfriend, remember?”

Not to mention the fact that she’s your little sister, he continued in his head, hoping that if he reminded himself of the drawbacks enough times, he might actually be able to talk himself out of feeling what he suspected he might be feeling. *And even if you don’t go all big brother on me for having those kinds of thoughts about Ginny, it’s still not going to happen. It’s just too dangerous,* he reminded himself for what felt like the hundredth time.

Ron and Hermione were already at risk because they were close to him. He wasn’t going to put Ginny in that position too. Things were already bad enough.

She’s better off with Devane, even if he was a wanker.

“Sorry mate,” Ron said, and then a new thought occurred to him. “But it’s not... it’s not Hermione, is it?” he asked rather cautiously, unsure if he really wanted to hear the answer or not.

“Are you mental?” Harry retorted, a bit louder than he should have. “Hermione?” he asked, lowering his voice once more.

“What’s wrong with Hermione?” the redhead shot back defensively. “Okay,” he sighed, when Harry fixed him with an incredulous stare, “so she’s a bossy know-it-all that has to have everything her way. And maybe she’s a little obsessed with rules and schoolwork and bloody House-Elves, but other than that, there’s nothing wrong with her.”

“You mean besides the fact she’s like my sister?” Harry interjected.
“Okay, so there’s that too. But she’s still great.”

“Even though she’ll never appreciate Quidditch?” Harry asked rhetorically. He already knew the answer to that question of course, but he was hoping to prevent Ron from asking anymore questions about his love life by distracting him with other subjects, like Quidditch and Hermione. Unfortunately things didn’t quite work out that way.

“Cho likes Quidditch and look how that turned out,” Ron retorted. “Although she’s a Tornados fan and that pretty much says it all. What team does Parvati support?”

“Other than Gryffindor?” Harry asked. “No idea.”

“What about this other bird you’re interested in? Is she a Quidditch fan?”

“Oh yeah,” Harry replied with an emphatic nod of his head.

“So she plays then?” Ron asked casually. That was a point in her favor as far as he was concerned and it narrowed the field down considerably. “What position?”

“You are so obvious.”

“Fine, don’t tell me,” Ron retorted, as he watched Harry rise out of his seat and gathered up a few of the books Hermione had left behind for the two of them to use on their own essay later.

“Let’s go,” Harry said, lifting half of the pile off the table and tucking the books under one arm. “If we don’t get down to dinner soon you’ll be late for your detention.”

“Don’t remind me,” Ron moaned, snatching the remainder of the books off the tabletop and following his best friend across the room to Madam Pince’s desk. “I was really hoping that McGonagall had forgotten about that too,” he grumbled. “And the worst part is, she’s making me do it with Snape.”

“Seriously?” Harry asked, somewhat surprised by this information. When Professor McGonagall had asked Ron to stay after class that afternoon so they could discuss his detention, he’d just assumed that his friend would be serving it with her. “Talk about a punishment. An entire evening alone with Snape, if that’s not enough to keep you out of the girls’ dorm, I don’t know what is.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what McGonagall thought too.”

“RON!” Hermione shrieked, barging into the 6th year boys’ dormitory without even bothering to knock. “Where is he?” she shouted at Harry, the instant she spotted him sitting in the middle of his four poster bed with his knees crossed and his eyes closed.

It was the fear in her voice that cut through the peaceful nothingness Harry had been attempting to surround himself with. It was impossible to stay below the surface and let his concerns ebb away when one of his best friends was screeching at him like a banshee in a blind panic.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked, jumping off the bed and snatching his glasses off his bedside table as his stomach plummeted.

“Where’s Ron?” she asked again, looking around the room despite the fact he was obviously not there. “It’s after curfew and he’s not in the common room either and...”
“He had to do his detention tonight,” Harry reminded her, relieved that Ron’s absence was what had Hermione so worked up and it was nothing more serious, although her overreaction was still a bit puzzling.

“He’s not with McGonagall,” she stated definitely, still clearly on edge.

“No, he’s with Snape,” Harry agreed, but rather than calm her as he’d hoped, his statement set her off again.

“What?” Hermione cried, her brown eyes going wide with alarm. “You let him go down to the dungeon all by himself?” she admonished. “Oh, Harry, what were you thinking? What if Malfoy heard he had detention tonight and decided to lie in waiting for him?” she said, before spinning around and bolting for the door.

“Hermione!” Harry shouted, chasing her down the hall and catching her just before she reached the stairwell. “What’s going on? Has something happened? Because you can’t just go barging into Snape’s office for no reason,” he said, grabbing a hold of his friend’s shoulders and forcing her to turn around and look at him. “All you’ll do is get Ron in more trouble. You know how Snape is.”

“He’s already in trouble,” she retorted. “He’s afraid, Harry. I can feel it.”

“Afraid how?” Harry asked, on edge again himself.

If Ron was really in trouble that changed everything. This wasn’t like what happened with Sirius. Hermione had a direct link to Ron and if she said he was in danger, he probably was. On the other hand, Hermione was prone to overreacting these days, especially when the safety of him or Ron was an issue, so there was also a chance that she’d taken something relatively minor and blown it out of proportion due to her paranoia. Not that it really made all that much difference now, Harry was going down to the dungeons either way just to be sure. The question was whether or not he’d risk taking Hermione with him. If she was overreacting it would be best to just calm her down a bit and sneak out alone to double check.

“Is he grossed out afraid because Snape has him doing something disgusting, like pulling the legs off live spiders?” Harry asked, trying to come up with something that would scare Ron enough for Hermione to feel it without him actually being in danger.

“You’re sure?” he pressed, despite the fact Hermione was shaking her head before he even finished asking the question.

“If it were something like that he’d be revolted,” she replied, “and he’s not. He’s just... he was startled,” she explained. “Something happened that he didn’t expect and the shock turned to fear and mistrust, and now,” she said, closing her eyes and focusing on the sensations coursing through her body in an effort to distinguish her own anxiety from Ron’s, “now he’s resigned. He’s steadying himself for something awful and he’s afraid of it, whatever it is. Something terrible is about to happen,” Hermione insisted, latching onto Harry’s arm. “I know it,” she said, tears springing to her eyes. “We have to get to him before it does.”

“Right,” Harry said. He’d heard more than enough to convince him. “Not that way though,” he stated, turning around to face his room once more. “We’ll grab my Invisibility Cloak and go out the window on my Firebolt. It’ll be much faster. We’ll be on the ground in a couple seconds and then we can get into the dungeons though the Entrance Hall. Hermione?” Harry asked, turning around to look for her when he realized that she wasn’t following him.

That’s when he saw her clutch her stomach and drop to ground like a stone.
“HERMIONE!” Harry yelled, racing back to her as she let out a blood-curdling scream.

“GIIIIINNNNNNNNY!” he bellowed down the stairwell, praying that Ron’s sister was in the common room and close enough to hear him. He couldn’t just leave Hermione on the floor, writhing in pain, until someone else he trusted was there to take care of her.

“What happened?” Neville asked, as his round face appeared at the bottom of the stairwell. His eyes got about three times larger when he spotted Harry kneeling over Hermione, who was still on the ground.

“Get McGonagall,” Harry barked. “Tell her to get down to the dungeons. Now.”

“What about Hermione?” Neville asked, clearly concerned, despite the fact she’d stopped screaming and thrashing about, and was now simply lying on her side trying to catch her breath. “Do you want me to help you get her to the hospital wing?”

“No,” Harry snapped. He’d seen enough people in the throes of the Cruciatus Curse to recognize Hermione’s affliction for what it really was. And since he knew for a fact that no one had cursed her, that could only mean that someone had cursed Ron and somehow she’d felt it through their bond. “If there are Death Eaters in the castle she’ll be safer up here.”

“Death Eaters?” several voices questioned from the bottom of the stairwell, where many of the more curious students were beginning to congregate.

“You don’t think there could really be...”

“Did he say in the castle?”

“How could he possible know that?”

“Now Neville!” Harry yelled in an effort to get his startled roommate moving.

“If you don’t get out of my bloody way, each and every one of you is going to receive a detention,” Ginny shouted, shoving her way through the crowd at the foot of the stairs and finally appearing beside Neville, who took one last look at Hermione, then spun around, and ran towards the portrait hole to do as Harry ordered. “What happened?” Ginny asked, her eyes darting from Hermione, who was wincing, to Harry, who was helping her stand upright.

“Not here,” Harry said. “Help me get her to my room. Hermione will explain,” he said to Ginny, the instant they crossed the threshold of his dorm room and she kicked the door shut.

“Stay in here,” he ordered, letting go of Hermione’s arm and hurrying over to the trunk at the foot of his bed to retrieve his Invisibility Cloak. “No wait,” he said, abruptly changing his mind. “The girls’ dorm in safer. Take Hermione back to your room,” he instructed Ginny, “and don’t let her leave the tower no matter what she says.”

“You are NOT going down there without me,” Hermione shouted, crossing to the window even as Harry summoned his Firebolt out from under his bed.

“You’re in no condition to--”

“Don’t you tell me what I can and can not do,” Hermione barked, placing one hand on her hip. “I’m coming with you. You’re going to need me if...”
“And what happens if they curse him again and you feel it? The Invisibility Cloak will be of no use if you scream like that again. You’ll give us both away.”

“Will one of you tell me what the hell is going on?” Ginny demanded.

“Ron’s in trouble,” Hermione stated, her eyes never leaving Harry’s.

“Someone hit him with the Cruciatus Curse,” Harry elaborated, “and it took Hermione down too. That is what happened isn’t it?” he asked Hermione, despite the fact he could see the answer to his question in her eyes.

“Ron’s broom is under his bed,” Hermione stated for Ginny’s benefit, completely ignoring Harry’s question. “Either I’m going with you,” she told him, “or I’m going with her, but either way, I AM going.”

“Look, Hermione. We don’t have time to argue about this.”

“Agreed,” she replied. “So let’s go.”

“Fine,” Harry acquiesced, knowing that Hermione wasn’t going to stay put no matter what he said. And at least if she was with him, he’d know where she was and he wouldn’t have to worry about her quite as much. Ginny, however, was a different story. She didn’t know where Ron was, so she wouldn’t be able to follow them if they left her behind. “We may need that potion you have in your room,” he said to the agitated redhead. “We’ll wait here while you go--”

“Nice try, Potter,” Ginny cut him off, drawing her wand out of her pocket, “but I’m not daft. As if you’d be here when I got back,” she said, stooping over and dragging her brother’s broom out from under his bed. “You’re not getting rid of me that easy. In fact, you’re not getting rid of me at all, and the sooner you accept that the sooner we can go after Ron.”

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It was fortunate the threesome left Gryffindor Tower when they did, because no sooner had they touched down and dismounted their brooms, Hermione keeled over again. She did manage to keep herself from falling to the ground this time, mostly by using one of the large oak doors leading into the Entrance Hall of the castle to support herself. And although she grunted and balled her hands into tight fists when the pain ripped through her body, she somehow managed to refrain from crying out, much to Harry surprise and relief.

Either the curse was lifted almost as soon as it was cast, or Hermione and Ron together had enough adrenaline pumping through their bodies to dampen the effects, because she was moving again almost immediately. Harry assumed that their link was also interfering with the spell to a certain degree. What was meant for one person was obviously being split between two, otherwise Hermione wouldn’t be feeling it herself, she’d only sense what Ron felt. But she was feeling physical discomfort and the fact that they were both experiencing a portion of the pain, rather than the whole, likely made it easier for them both to withstand the effects.

“Are you all right?” Ginny whispered; as Hermione heaved herself away from the door she’d been using to prop herself up, while Harry pulled the one next to her open and clambered inside. “What about Ron,” Ginny asked when Hermione nodded her head in response to her first question as she followed Harry back into the castle and towards the stone stairs that lead down to the dungeons. “Do you think he’s okay?”

“He’s still conscious, if that’s what you mean,” Hermione mumbled as quietly as she could. “And
he’s not afraid anymore,” she informed Harry, who’d set his Firebolt against the wall where Ginny had deposited Ron’s broom and quickly unfurled his Invisibility Cloak. “He’s angry. Incensed really. What do you think that means?”

“You tell me,” Harry replied, throwing his cloak over the three of them and crouching down so his feet wouldn’t show. “You’re the one connected to him.”

“Obviously he doesn’t like being cursed,” Ginny whispered.

“Yes, but if it were Death Eaters doing it he’d still be afraid, wouldn’t he?” Hermione questioned. “But he’s not. He’s just feeling resentful and angry.”

“Maybe it really is Malfoy then,” Harry replied. “There’s only one way we’re going to find out. Come on.”

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Making their way down the corridors under the Invisibility Cloak was not as easy as it had once been. They’d grown quite a bit since first year, when Harry had received his father’s Invisibility Cloak as a Christmas gift and started using it to sneak around the castle with his friends. Now that they were older and taller, three people barely fit. If Ginny hadn’t been as short as she was, they might have had a real problem. As it was Harry and Hermione both had to crouch all the way to Snape’s office.

Struggling with the Invisibility Cloak became a moot point however, when Harry reached forward and cracked the door enough so the conversation taking place inside the closed off room seeped into the hallway.

Ron, who had a tendency to curse when he was upset, was stringing sentences together that probably would have had Hermione blushing, had the circumstances been different. Not that that was really so odd. The odd part was he was shouting them at Snape, who stunned all three of them by allowing Ron to get away with it.

“Stop your bellyaching, Weasley. I barely even hit you that time,” they heard Snape snarl. “Although,” he added somewhat reluctantly, as Harry pushed the door wide open and the three of them spotted Ron rising up off his knees with his wand in his hand, “you aren’t as incompetent as I gave you credit for. Not that that was really so odd. The odd part was he was shouting them at Snape, who stunned all three of them by allowing Ron to get away with it.

“PROTEGO!” Hermione and Ron shouted in unison, a split second before the word, “Crucio,” left Snape’s mouth.

“Expelliarmus,” Harry and Ginny cried together, throwing the Invisibility Cloak off even as they pointed their wands at the Potions Master, causing his wand to fly out of his hands into the air at the exact same instant a brilliant blue-white shield sprang up around Ron.

It was hard to tell whether Snape or Ron was more surprised by what happened next. The Potions Master barely had time to realize he’d been disarmed when the radiance of the shield that sprang up around his opponent lit up the entire room, momentarily blinding them all. Even as Snape turned his head towards the doorway where the three Gyffindors had materialized, his own spell collided with the barrier surrounding Ron and bounced back, catching him square in the chest and sending him
crashing to the ground.

Professor McGonagall arrived moments later, out of breath and clearly startled by the scene she was met with. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded, after pointing her wand at Professor Snape and lifting the spell that had him writhing on the cold stone floor of his own office. “What are you three doing down here?”

“He... he cursed Ron,” Ginny shouted, apparently the first to find her voice. “We saw him, Professor. He was using the Crucius Curse on my brother.”

“And how is it that you knew what was happening?” McGonagall inquired.

“We. Saw. Him,” Ginny replied, as if she hadn’t been clear enough the first time she said it.

“No, before that,” McGonagall asked, not nearly as surprised by the fact that a Hogwarts Professor had been using an Unforgivable on a student as the students themselves were.

“My question exactly,” Snape spat, rising up off the floor and shaking out his robes while glowering at Harry and his friends. “Even more important, how did you block that curse?” he hissed, his eyes jumping from Harry to Hermione, who was wobbling drunkenly behind her friends.

“HERMIONE!” Ron yelled, springing forward when the spots that had been dancing in front of his eyes due to the light that had briefly surrounded him started to dissipate and he realized what was about to happen. But before he could reach her, her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she keeled over one final time. Only this time, she didn’t make a sound, nor did she get back up.

“Hermione!” Harry echoed Ron, spinning around just in time to see her hit the flagstone floor.

“I can’t feel her anymore,” Ron stated as he rushed forward.

“Get out of the way, Potter,” McGonagall said, shoving both him and Ginny aside so she could assess Hermione’s condition.

“Don’t you touch her,” Harry shouted, glaring murderously at Snape and pointing his wand at him when he started moving to assisting McGonagall, who had already stooped over his unconscious friend.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Potter,” McGonagall cried.

“Actually, Severus,” Professor Dumbledore stated, as he appeared in the doorway and glanced down at Hermione’s prone form, “It may be prudent to take Mr. Potter’s advice in this instance. It wouldn’t be wise to touch Miss Granger without first asking Mr. Weasley for permission,” he continued, his eyes locked on the silver charm that had been dislodged from under Hermione’s shirt and was now clearly visible for everyone to see. “Unless I’m quite mistaken and that is not a Lànain talisman she’s wearing.”

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“MR. WEASLEY!” Professor McGonagall’s disapproving voice echoed through the room with the force of a small bomb being dropped.

“It’s not what you think,” Ron replied almost instantly, his eyes going wide with alarm as he glanced at his best friend and sister, obviously hoping for a little help, while he took a step away from his glowering Head of House. “I have one too,” he stammered, when neither of them came to his rescue, yanking the collar of his jumper down far enough for McGonagall, and everyone else present, to see
the silver talisman hanging around his neck. “So it’s not like I was trying to--”

“You allowed yourself to be collared with a Lànain talisman?” Snape hissed, nearly as horrified as McGonagall, albeit for a completely different reason. “Have you no pride?”

“What I think,” McGonagall shouted, her nostrils flaring with outrage as she stood upright once more, “is that you are going to remove those wrenched things this instant! It’s disgusting, absolutely disgusting. I’m appalled, Mr. Weasley, that you of all people, would stoop so low as to use an object like that. Let alone against a Muggle-born, who couldn’t possible understand the ramifications of--”

“She does too understand,” Ron snapped, clearly on the defensive now. “I told her everything, including the fact that thing will allow me to protect her.”

“Control her, you mean,” McGonagall corrected. “I highly doubt that she understood…”

“She does too,” the redhead insisted.

“…that by accepting that charm and allowing you to hang it around her neck, she was in effect betrothing herself to--”

“We’re not betrothed,” Ron interrupted, crossing his arms in front of his chest and looking surprisingly defiant. “We’re already married.”

“EXCUSE ME!” McGonagall exclaimed loudly.

“You’re what?” Snape asked at nearly the same time, clearly as stunned by this revelation as his colleague was. “The stairs,” he said accusingly, jabbing his finger in Ron’s direction as all the pieces suddenly clicked into place. “That’s how you beat the stairs and enter the girls’ dormitory. Found yourself a nice little loophole, did you? Thought you’d take advantage of it?”

“Now, Minerva,” Professor Dumbledore said, reading the expression on her face and interceding before the situation truly got out of hand. “What’s done is done and can not be undone.”

“He can and will remove that thing from around her neck,” she insisted.

“That would change very little, I’m afraid,” Dumbledore stated. “Those talismans are not the only magical bond tying them together, you see. They’ve also taken a Coupling Potion,” he stated, looking pointedly at Snape as he did so.

“Of all the half-baked schemes and ill conceived stunts you three have pulled over the years that has to be the topper,” the Potions Master hissed, managing to look both incredulous and exasperated at the same time. “One can only guess what you had to do to get your hands on the ingredients needed, and for what? Coupling Potions are all but worthless, you imbecile. Provided you can even figure out how to sort through the maelstrom of emotions bombarding you long enough to discern your own feelings from hers and function normally, you’ve bought yourself two weeks at best. Hardly the lasting magical bond you were looking for and not nearly enough to be deemed a legal form of marriage. It took longer for Granger to brew the potion.”

“That just goes to show what you know,” Ron said sarcastically, “because not only have we figured it out, we’ve been connected since October.”

“Have you completely lost your minds?” Snape shouted, sounding more alarmed than he did angry, which surprised Harry. One didn’t normally show cheek to Professor Snape and get away with it. “Two months?” he asked in disbelief. “You can’t do that, you fool.”
“Then it was surprisingly easy for something that can’t be done,” Ron mumbled.

“It can be done,” Snape retorted, the anger Harry expected long ago finally seeping back into this voice, “But there is a reason it’s not. At least not by anyone with half the sense of a mountain troll. The longer you’re connected, the more dependent you’ll become on the feedback you receive through the bond. If you don’t sever that link now, you never will,” he stated ominously, “at least not willingly. And when you are finally forced to do it, it will be like loosing one of your senses. The longer you maintain that bond, the more detrimental it will be when the connection is severed.”

“Am I to understand that you knew about this?” McGonagall said, whirling around and locking her furious gaze on Professor Dumbledore, who was kneeling over Hermione, examining her as best he could without physically touching her.

“The potion and it’s repercussions, yes,” the Headmaster replied, extending one palm over Hermione’s forehead and holding it millimeters from her skin as he skimmed his wand down her torso, “But the talismans came as a bit of a surprise, I must admit. Mr. Weasley,” he said, addressing Ron without bothering to look up. “I believe your wife has merely exhausted herself, but it would be most helpful if I had your permission to touch her.”

“What?” Ron asked, not really understanding what Dumbledore was asking him for and then it clicked into place. “Oh,” he said, realizing that the Headmaster was being overly cautious because he didn’t want to unwittingly call forth the talisman’s magic and wind up being hurled across the room like Lavender Brown. “Yeah, go ahead,” he replied, his ears flushing in a way they hadn’t when McGonagall and Snape were berating him. “I believe your wife has merely exhausted herself, but it would be most helpful if I had your permission to touch her.”

“Merely a courtesy,” Dumbledore said, allowing his palm to fall against Hermione’s forehead momentarily, before leaning down even further to examine the charm hanging around her neck. “I find it is always wise to ask first. May I?” he asked again, nodding his head towards the talisman.

“Yeah, okay,” Ron replied.

“Toujours pur,” Professor Dumbledore read the words engraved on the back of the charm out loud after spinning it around and examining it closely. “I’m sure Sirius would have been most amused by the irony,” he said with the slightest trace of a smile. “Apparently Kreacher wasn’t the only one to rescue a few choice items from the purge taking place at Grimmauld Place.”

“You’re not going to tell my Mum, are you?” Ron groaned. “Please Professor it’s not what it looks like. At least talk to Hermione first so she can explain.”

“Potter,” McGonagall barked, instantly drawing Harry’s attention away from Ron and onto herself. “If you and Miss Weasley would be so kind as to take Miss Granger up to the hospital wing,” she stated. “You will remain here,” she added, pointing a finger at Ron, who took a step forward to help, “until this matter is settled.”

“What about what HE did to Ron?” Ginny demanded, using her wand, which was still clutched in her hand, to point at Professor Snape. “How come nobody seems to care about that? He used an Unforgivable on my brother for Merlin’s sake. More than once. Isn’t anyone going to do anything about that?”

“Not just against Ron,” Harry added, wanting an explanation just as much as Ginny did. He couldn’t understand why Ron wasn’t making more of an issue out of it himself. “He used it against Hermione too.”
“Wait. What?” Ron asked, spinning around to gaping at Harry in surprise before narrowing his eyes and glowering at Snape. “When?”

“When he cursed you,” Ginny replied. “She felt it too.”

“You mean she sensed...” her brother started to say before he was cut off.

“No,” Harry insisted. “She felt it, actual physical, fall down on the ground and scream, pain.”

“But...but that’s not supposed to happen,” Ron said, all the color draining out of his face, causing his freckles to stand out even more prominently than usual. “The book didn’t say anything about sharing each other’s pain. It was only supposed to be emotional. If I’d known she was going to feel it too, I never would have agreed to—”

“You agreed to let him use the Cruciatus Curse on you?” Ginny shouted in disbelief. “Are you mad?”

“Enough of this foolishness,” McGonagall interrupted. “Professor Snape had his reasons, but that is neither here nor there. Mr. Weasley is fine. Miss Granger, for whatever reason, is not. You two,” she said, looking pointedly at Harry and Ginny, “will take her to the hospital wing and tell Madam Pomfrey exactly what happened. You,” she said, fixing her glower of Ron, “will remain here until I’m through with you.”

“Yes, Professor,” Ron and Ginny said at nearly the same time.

“Don’t leave her alone.” Ron leaned forward and whispered to Harry, as they watched Ginny levitate her off the ground with her wand so they could float her up the stairs rather than carry her. “I can’t sense anything when she’s asleep or unconscious,” he explained quickly, “but she’ll go spare if she wakes up alone and doesn’t know what happened, so stay with her.”

“That is exactly what I was talking about,” Harry heard Snape say, as he and Ginny left the room with Hermione in tow. “The paranoia is already setting in. He’s already become dependent on that link and now that it’s cut out, he becoming overly agitated and cagey. It’s only going to get worse. Mark my words.”

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“How is she?” Ron asked the instant he stepped around the curtain Madam Pomfrey had set up around Hermione’s bed and he spotted his best mate sitting in silence beside her, lost in his own thoughts. “Where’s Ginny?” he asked, tossing Harry’s Invisibility Cloak, which had been left in the hallway outside Snape’s office, into his friend’s lap.

“Madam Pomfrey was only willing to let one of us stay,” Harry explained in a near whisper. “And she wouldn’t have allowed that if Hermione hadn’t been so agitated when she woke up.”

“Yeah, I felt that,” Ron replied as he gingerly sat down on the edge of Hermione’s bed. “McGonagall was right in the middle of her lecture actually, not that I was paying all that much attention to what she was saying, mind you,” the redhead admitted. “You managed to calm her down pretty quick,” Ron continued, referring to Hermione. “What did you tell her?”

“That you were fine,” Harry replied, purposely keeping his voice low. “That you were with McGonagall and Dumbledore, and that you’d be here as soon as you finished explaining things.”

“Things, eh?” the redhead said, knowing exactly what Harry was referring to without him needing to say it. Harry had allowed Hermione to believe that he was telling the Headmaster about what Snape
had been doing as opposed to the truth. If Hermione had known that he was downstairs telling McGonagall and Snape what they’d done and why, no way in hell would she be lying in bed asleep.

“Did Madam Pomfrey try and get her to take a sleeping potion or something?” Ron asked, trying to match the emotional responses he’d felt from Hermione, during the brief time she was still awake, to logical triggers.

“Oh yeah,” Harry agreed, “that was fun. You might have warned me about that,” he added, noting that Ron didn’t appear to be all that surprised by the way Hermione had freaked out.

“Didn’t have time,” he answered with a shrug of his shoulders. “But I did tell you what happened to Fred that time Mum spiked her pumpkin juice with sleeping potion,” Ron added. “And about how she wouldn’t drink anything Mum gave her after that.”

“I didn’t realize she’s still worried that there will be a Death Eater attack while she’s out and unable to defend herself,” Harry said with a frustrated sigh.

“I was hoping she’d gotten over that,” Ron admitted. “Guess not, huh?”

“Apparently not,” Harry replied. “So,” he added, his piercing green eyes locked on his best friend. “You going to tell me what that was we walked in on and why you agreed to it, or what?”

“Oh that,” Ron replied nonchalantly. “That was my detention,” he continued, as if it were common practice for Snape to use Unforgivables on students as a form of punishment. “Bet Umbridge is looking pretty good now, isn’t she?” he attempted to joke, but it didn’t go over so well with Harry.

“Do we really have to get into this now?” Ron sighed, when Harry’s intense gaze didn’t waver.

He’d just spent the past hour being grilled about every little detail of Hermione’s plan, only to have Snape throw everything they intended into question by reminding them all about what Harry had said about Hermione feeling the effects of the Cruciatus Curse through their bond. If she felt the effects of a Cruciatus Curse directed at him, who’s to say she wouldn’t be affected by a Killing Curse as well. What if by trying to protect one another, all they did was ensure that they were both killed by the same spell instead?

The smug bastard, Ron thought, replaying the victorious ‘I know more than you do after all’ gloating expression Snape had worn, over in his mind.

“Ron,” Harry said softly, yet insistently, making it evident that he had no intentions of letting the matter drop.

“Fine,” the redhead groaned. “Dumbledore thought it would be a good idea for me to know what to expect. He thought it would be useful for me to... um... learn how to tolerate it somewhat... just incase...er... incase...”

“Incave Voldemort decides to have another go at you just to get at me,” Harry finished for his friend, making it blatantly obvious that he’d mulled it over and come up with the explanation before Ron even showed up. “So he thinks Voldemort is going to send more Death Eaters after you, huh? No doubt over the Christmas holiday.”

Happy Fucking Christmas, he thought bitterly.

“So your entire family is now in danger because of me?”

“I didn’t say that,” Ron said defensively. “And neither did Dumbledore,” he added, when he saw
Harry withdrawing, not just mentally, but physically as well.

“Right,” Harry said, rising up out of his chair and stepping away from Hermione’s bed. “Well, you’re here now,” he said, glancing at Hermione briefly and taking a few more steps towards the door. “And you should be the one to stay, so I’m just going to... er... go to bed then.”

“Harry,” Ron said louder than he meant to, wincing slightly as he jumped off the edge of Hermione’s bed and watched his best mate beat a hasty retreat out of the room. “Bugger it all,” he swore, knowing full well that Harry was off to brood, not sleep.

“Don’t swear,” Hermione said groggily behind him, catching him by surprise. Whether it was his raised voice, or the motion of her mattress moving as his weight sprang up off it, he’d woken her up and that was the last thing he’d wanted to do. Now he was going to have to face the questions all over again, unless he could distract her.

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Fortunately distracting Hermione did not become an issue that evening. Even without a sleeping potion, she was so wiped out from throwing all her energy into creating a strong Shield Charm, that she fell asleep again almost as soon as Ron kicked his shoes off and climbed up on the small hospital bed to lie beside her. Needless to say Madam Pomfrey was not pleased to find the two of them together that way in the morning.

There was nothing quite like being woken at the crack of dawn by someone standing over you and screeching your name. For a second, Ron feared that Professor McGonagall had actually contacted his mother, as she had threatened to do the second time he’d refused to take the Lânain talismans off. But even as he sat bolt upright on the bed, he remembered that Dumbledore had talked her and Snape into keeping the matter quiet.

Besides, if it had been his mother standing there, the words ‘Ronald Bilius’ would have proceeded Weasley, not ‘Mr.’ She wouldn’t be content to stand there and wait for him to climb off the bed of his own accord, either. She’d likely drag him off herself.

Even so, Ron’s heart was still racing and he nearly jumped three feet in the air. Hermione, he knew, hadn’t fared much better. She had been just as startled as he had and she was even more mortified.

“OUT!” Madam Pomfrey scolded. “Get out of that bed at once. This is a hospital wing, Mr. Weasley, not a... wait a minute,” she said, doing a complete about face when she noticed the way he’d grimaced and the deep breath he’d sucked in as he tried to detached himself from Hermione and scramble out off her bed. “What’s the matter with you?” she asked, when his feet touched the ground and he damn near fell flat on his face.

“Nothing,” Ron said, trying not to groan out loud when every muscle in this body began to throb in protest of supporting his weight.

Bloody buggering hell! That hurts.

“Where does it hurt?”

EVERYWHERE!

“Why didn’t someone wake me up if you were in that much pain?” she asked, despite the fact Ron had yet to answer her. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing, I'm fine,” he lied, going to great efforts to stand completely upright, although he didn’t
dare try and take a step with her scrutinizing him the way she was.

“Nonsense,” Madam Pomfrey declared. “I can’t possible help unless you tell me what happened to you.”

“It was the Cruciatus Curse,” Hermione answered for him, opening a whole can of worms Ron would have just as soon left sealed. He would have groaned out loud rather than in his head as he watched the nurse’s eyes go wide, except he knew that she’d take it as further evidence that he was in pain and needed her help. But he already knew that there was nothing she could do for him. His mother had explained that the night Hermione escaped from the Death Eaters and he’d asked her to do something to ease Hermione’s pain. However, that didn’t mean Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t force him drink a whole host of horrible tasting potions just incase.

“The Cruciatus Curse?” she repeated, clearly not expecting that answer. “Why wasn’t I informed immediately?” she questioned. “Potter told me that the two of you cast a Shield Charm at the same time,” she stated, “Is that what you were attempting to block?” she asked, turning to Hermione, before looking at Ron again. “But surely... they wouldn’t leave you behind, so why weren’t you brought in with Miss Granger?”

“He was with Professor Dumbledore,” Hermione replied, much to Ron’s chagrin.

HELLO! he cried out in his head, knowing full well that Hermione could feel how reluctant he was to answer any of these questions. Why are you still talking? I know you recognize the ‘shut up’ vibe, so shut up already.

Unfortunately, Hermione seemed all too eager to spill everything she’d seen, despite his wishes, and if he didn’t do something, and quick, she’d mention the fact that it was Snape doing the cursing to Madam Pomfrey. Worst case scenario, she’d believe Hermione, go straight to Dumbledore, and the Headmaster would probably tell her about the Coupling Potion. That wasn’t something Ron really wanted to happen. The more people that knew about what they’d done, the more likely it was that his mother would find out. Then again, she might just think Hermione had knocked a few screws loose during her fall.

Fall? Yeah that could work, Ron thought, impulsively pitching sideways and allowing himself to collapse on the ground in order to distract them both.

“RON!” Hermione cried, snapping up into a sitting potion, despite her own stiffness, as she watched him topple over.

In the end, the ploy worked out even better than Ron hoped it would. A bit too well actually. Not only did Madam Pomfrey stop asking questions and start fussing over his condition again, she helped him into the nearest empty bed and then promptly scurried off to gather up whatever potions she thought would help.

The upside was he had enough time to tell Hermione that Snape had not been attacking him and to convince her that the less said about his voluntary detention, the better. The downside was, he was now confined to the hospital wing, for the time being any way, and he had to take his medicine.

“Ewww,” he groaned, shuddering violently as a result of the horrid concoction he’d just been forced swallowed. “I hope you’re happy,” he said to Hermione under his breath as Madam Pomfrey walked off to lock her potions back up.

“Maybe they’ll make you feel better.”
“If by better you mean sore and nauseous.”

“Well, I didn’t tell you to fall down.”

“I wouldn’t have had to if you had just shut up about the whole—”

“Nice to see some things never change,” Ginny said, as she stepped into the room and caught her brother and Hermione bickering. “I take it that means you’re feeling better,” she said to Hermione, before locking her eyes on her brother. “And you,” she said, wagging her finger at him. “If you think playing sick is going to stop me from tearing into you, you’ve got another thing coming. What the hell is the matter with you?” she demanded. “You damn near scared me to death, not to mention Harry and poor Hermione. So let’s hear it. What were you thinking?”

“Didn’t Harry tell you?”

“Yeah, that’s another thing,” Ginny retorted. “What the hell did you say to him anyway, because he’s locked himself in his room and won’t come out? Although,” she added, “he didn’t really do that until after he had that big blow up with Parvati in the common room this morning, which was kind of funny actually.”

“I mean it wasn’t,” she said, shifting enough to look at Hermione again, “because she made things even worse and Harry is more hacked off now than when he came back last night,” she explained. “But at the same time it was because she’s just so clueless. You know what I mean?” she asked.

“You should have seen the look on her face when he shoved her away and told her the only thing he wanted was for her to leave him alone. I mean, come on, what was she thinking? You can’t pester him into opening up when he’s in one of his ‘woe is me, my life sucks’ moods. You have to let him brood for a little while and then you get in his face. Isn’t that right?” she asked Hermione.

“And of course it helps to know what he’s brooding about in the first place, so spill,” she demanded, rounding on her brother again. “What did you say to set him off?”

“What makes you think it was me?”

“Oh gee, I don’t know,” Ginny shot back sarcastically. “Maybe it was Hermione. Maybe she was talking in her sleep or something. Get real. It was you.”

“It was Dumbledore’s idea, not mine,” Ron insisted. “I’m the one that had to stand there and let Snape curse me just so I could prove to all of them that I was capable of handling it, and now Harry’s got it into his head that You-Know-Who...”


“...is going to attack the Burrow during the Christmas holiday or something.”

“And as if that weren’t bad enough,” Ron said, glancing around the hospital wing just to make sure no one else was around to overhear him, “you three come busting in with McGonagall in tow, and then Dumbledore shows up and tells them about the Lánain and the Coupling Potion, and then you just leave me there to deal with the fall out all by myself.”

“HE DID WHAT?” Hermione shrieked, her entire face flooding with color. “He told Professor Snape?”

“No,” Ron replied, sharing her embarrassment. “He told Snape AND McGonagall, who proceeded to have a whole litter of kittens because I refused to remove that charm you have hanging around...”
your neck.”

“OH GOD!”

“Oh God is right! I would have happily changed places with you. What I wouldn’t have given to be unconscious at that moment.”

“RON! This is serious.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Okay, promise me you aren’t going to freak out,” he said, feeling Hermione’s anxiety and impatience course into his own body.

“Just tell me.”

“Well you see, the thing is...er... I never meant for you to feel it,” he said, intentionally lowering his voice, despite the fact they were the only people in the room. “I mean obviously if I’d known you were going to, I wouldn’t have agreed to let him curse me. But I didn’t know and you did feel it and well... Snape made a big stink about that after he found out. And he...er... sorta brought up the fact that if we shared the effects of one Unforgivable, we might wind up sharing the effects of another.”

“In other words, if one of you gets hit with the Killing Curse, it’ll kill you both?” Ginny asked, horrified by the mere thought.

“That was one of the possibilities,” Ron agreed somewhat reluctantly, because he could sense that Hermione was on the edge of loosing her cool.

“And the other possibilities were?” she asked, keeping her voice calm despite the fact she was anything but on the inside.

“Well,” Ron mumbled. “Dumbledore thinks it’s more likely that the spell would be divided between both of us, sorta like what happened last night, and since neither of us would receive a full dose, neither of us would snuff it.”

“That sounds… good,” Ginny said.

“The not snuffing it part is good,” he agreed.

“But?” Hermione asked.

“But we’d both be too messed up to be of any use to Harry,” he admitted.

“And then there is the possibility that whoever gets hit will snuff it, just like you planned,” he added quickly. “And because their body will shut down instantly, the physical connection would be severed before the effects could be transferred to the other person and diffused. So if that happened, things would work out exactly the way you want them to.”

“I don’t want any of this to happen at all,” Hermione snapped.

“You know what I mean,” Ron retorted. “I knew you were going to bite my head off when I told you about this.

“You’ll know when I bite your head off.” Hermione glared at him.

“Oh, so what was that then?”

“You two can flirt later,” Ginny cut in. “We have more important things to do right now. Like
figuring out how we’re going to tell Harry about this when he’s already in a mood.”

“Well, as long as you’re at it.” Ron sighed.” You can add telling him that we’re all staying here during the break, at least the beginning part of it anyway. Dumbledore wants us to test this whole share the effects of a curse thing out with Tonks while everyone else is away,” he explained to Hermione. “You know, just see how various curses effect us and such. McGonagall is going to write to your parents and tell them that we’re being offered special Defense lessons. You might want to start by telling Harry that actually,” he said to his sister, making it clear that he knew she was going to drag Harry out of his room and tell him everything before either he or Hermione were released from the Hospital Wing and had a chance to do it themselves. “Because it’ll probably cheer him up a bit, not only will he not have to worry about the Burrow being attacked, he gets to spend half the holiday helping Tonks hex us.”

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“Of all the irresponsible...” Madam Pomfrey mumbled, trudging back over to her charges once the Headmaster had explained the reason behind Ron’s unconventional detention and departed. “Hogwarts Professors using Unforgivables on students...” she raged under her breath, “…to prepare them for... Honestly! Keep them away from the fighting, I say,” she said, her voice getting louder with each word she uttered. “Don’t encourage them.”

“And you,” she said, zeroing in on Ron and glowering at him in disapproval. “You actually gave your consent to this.... this madness?”

“Well, yeah,” Ron replied meekly, unsure whether he really ought to respond. “It made sense at the time,” he muttered when the nurse arched one eyebrow at him.

“It most certainly does not make sense,” Madam Pomfrey hissed.

“Then why did Dumbledore suggest it? What?” Ron asked Hermione when she rolled her eyes at him and she shook her head.

“It really doesn’t make a whole lot of sense,” she replied.

“Does too.”

“Whatever you say,” Hermione said in a placating manner, although her face clearly said, ‘That’s because you’re an idiot.’

“So can we go now or what?” the redhead asked, redirecting his attention to the school nurse, who looked as if she’d like nothing more than to lock the doors and keep them contained in the hospital wing for the rest of the weekend, if not the duration of the war. “Because a nice long soak in the Prefects’ bathroom is sounding mighty good about now. Unless you want first crack at it,” he added, glancing at Hermione again as he swung his feet over the edge of his bed and stood upright.

“I’d rather check on Harry first,” she replied.

“So can we go?” Ron asked Madam Pomfrey again.

“I suppose,” she said, albeit reluctantly. Neither of them was seriously ill or injured after all and keeping them bedridden wasn’t going to fix what ailed them. A hot bath however, might relax the muscles enough to relieve some of the pain and stiffness they were suffering from. “Only do try and stay out of trouble from now on.”

“We do try,” Ron said, as he and Hermione left the hospital wing together. “Maybe not all of the
time,” he added, as they stepped into the corridor, “but some of the time.”

“And when exactly would that be?” Hermione asked.

“On those rare occasions you tell us to and we actually listen,” Ron said with a cheeky smile. “So do you want me to walk you up to the tower?” he asked, knowing that Hermione didn’t really like walking around the castle on her own.

“No, that’s all right,” she replied. “You go take your ridiculously hot bath. I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance you’ll come with me?” he asked hopefully. “I promise I’ll be good and keep my hands to myself. Even if I let you control the temperature?” he added, when she shook her head. “How about if I agree to use those girly smelling bubbles you like? Aw, come on,” Ron whined, when Hermione shook her head again. “Who’s going to wash my back?”

“How about Moaning Myrtle,” she suggested flippantly.

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m to sore for that kind of fun and it’s entirely your fault.”

“I’m sore too. Why do you think I promised to be good?”

“Because having Myrtle spy on us would ruin the mood.”

“That too, but...”

“I’ll be fine on my own,” Hermione stated, sensing how reluctant Ron was to let her out of his sight. “I’m going straight to the tower.”

“No detours in the Library or anything like that?”

“I already told you that I wanted to check on Harry, so unless he’s hiding in the Library...”

“Okay,” Ron agreed, before she had a chance to say anything else. “I’ll try not to take too long,” he said, as he started walking towards the staircase that would take him to the Prefects’ bathroom on the fifth floor, “and when I get back, the three of us can go down and get some lunch or something.”

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“Look,” Hermione heard Harry say gruffly as she approached the half open door of his dorm room fifteen minutes later, “I already told you that I didn’t want to talk about it, so drop it.”

“With me, you mean,” Parvati’s voice rang out shrilly, stopping Hermione dead in her tracks before she reached the door. She’d expected to find him with Ginny, not Parvati. “You didn’t seem to have a problem talking about it with her.”

Her, Hermione repeated in her mind. That one little word explained so much. Harry wasn’t arguing with Ginny at all. He was arguing with Parvati about Ginny. She had to be the ‘her’ that Parvati was in a snit about. Who else could it be? And obviously that meant that Ginny had already been up to see Harry and she’d managed to sort him out somewhat. At least enough that he’d unlocked his bedroom door and let Parvati in. But rather than make up, as Parvati no doubt expected, they were fighting again and that presented something of a problem.

Logically Hermione knew that she ought to turn around and walk back down to the common room, because their disagreement was none of her business. Then again, if she allowed it to continue,
Parvati was going to undermine all of Ginny’s work and put Harry back in a funk. Yet, if she tried to intercede, she’d probably just make things worse and Ron would definitely not be happy when he found out she’d been meddling in Harry’s private affairs again. Unsure what to do, Hermione just stood where she was and listened to them as she tried to make up her mind.

“What do you want me to say?” Harry shouted back. “It wasn’t like she gave me much of a choice.”

“Oh, so she forced you to open up, did she?” Parvati retorted, evidently not buying a word of his excuse. “Why didn’t you tell her to get out of your face and leave you alone like you did me? Let me guess. It’s because she’s your friend and I’m not.”

“I did tell her that,” Harry fired back. “The difference is she didn’t listen.”

“So it’s my fault now, is it?”

“You’re the one that walked away.”

“Yes, because you told me to,” Parvati shouted back, as she threw open the bedroom door, “And just so you don’t forget what it looks like, here’s me doing it again,” she said, stomping into the hallway and slamming the door shut behind herself.

But rather than storm off, as she’d obviously intended to do, she came face to face with Hermione and froze. “What are you doing?” she snapped, clearly surprised to discover that they’d had an audience. “Aren’t you supposed to be in the hospital wing or something?”

“Don’t,” Hermione said when Parvati lifted her head in the air with as much dignity as she could muster and started moving past her when she didn’t answer her question straight away. “He isn’t going to chase after you,” she warned. “Harry doesn’t play those kinds of games. Don’t walk away from him unless you really mean it.”

“Funny, I don’t recall asking for your advice,” Parvati replied defensively, flipping her plaited hair over her shoulder as she did so. “And I’m getting rather sick of other people pointing out that they know my boyfriend better than I do, as if that were my fault. You want to lecture somebody,” she said, pushing past Hermione and trudging down the hallway towards the stairs, “I suggest you go lecture him. He’s the one acting like an arse.”

“Harry, open this door,” Hermione shouted, after pounding on it two separate times and getting no response. “I know you’re in there and I’m not going to leave. You may as well just open the door now because--”

“What do you want?” he asked, flinging the bedroom door wide open and retreating to his bed before his friend even had a chance to enter his room. “If you came up here to tell me what happened with Ron and Snape, I already know. I know about the whole holiday plans thing too,” he added, before she had a chance to respond. “Ginny told me everything and it’s fine. Seriously, I’m actually glad we’re staying here, so you can go back downstairs and tell Ron that he doesn’t have to avoid me or anything like that. I’m fine with it. All right?”

“First of all, Ron’s not avoiding you,” Hermione stated, shutting the door behind herself and walking over to sit on the edge of Harry’s bed, “he just wanted to take a bath before lunch. Secondly, you’re not fine and I know why, so don’t bother denying it. I heard you and Parvati arguing when I came up to check on you.”

“And now you’re going to tell me exactly what it is that I did wrong,” he said resentfully.

“Not unless you really want me to,” Hermione answered.
“So you do think that I’m the one that’s in the wrong then?”

“I can’t answer that,” she replied, despite the fact she strongly suspected that he was. “Maybe if you told me what you’ve supposedly done.”

“When you find that out, let me know,” Harry replied sarcastically, “because none of what she was shouting made any sense.”

“Well, I just caught the end of it,” Hermione stated, “but it seemed fairly obvious to me. She’s jealous.”

“Of what?” Harry asked incredulously.


“Not this again,” Harry groaned, replaying some of the comments Cho had made about Hermione during the course of their short-lived relationship over in his head. “How many times do we have to tell people that article Rita Skeeter wrote about us was a load of bunk? I mean, come on. You’re with Ron, for Merlin’s sake. Everyone knows that. Why would she be jealous of--”

“Not me,” Hermione interrupted. “Well, maybe a little,” she amended, after thinking it over for a moment. “But I was referring to Ginny.”

“Ginny!” Harry yelped. “Why would anyone think that?”

“She is the one that Parvati was shouting at you about, isn’t she?”

“But why would she be jealous of Ginny? We’re just friends,” Harry said defensively.

“And therein lies the problem,” Hermione sighed, trying to come up with a way to explain the situation that would be simple enough for Harry to understand and yet not be critical enough to put him on the defensive. Harry didn’t deal with criticism well. If she flat out asked him if he was intentionally leading Parvati on, she’d set him off. And if she threw too much information at him too quickly, or if he wasn’t open to hearing it just yet, he’d simply deny everything and tune her out.

“What? I’m not allowed to have friends of the opposite sex now? When did that become a crime? You’re starting to sound way too much like Ron. You realize that, don’t you? It’s the whole Krum thing all over again.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” she replied. “It’s just...”

To hell with tact, he’s already making excuses, he’ll stop listening next.

“...you tell Ginny things. Private things. Things that matter,” she tried to explain. “You allow her to get close to you in the same way you allow Ron and I to get close to you. You trust her enough to open up and you show her a side of yourself that’s vulnerable. That’s something I can only assume you don’t do with Parvati and that’s bound to make her feel like she’s less important to you than we are.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Hermione said quickly, holding one hand up in the air to stop her friend from interrupting when she saw the defensive look on his face. “You’re trying to protect her,” she said, as Harry crossed his arms in front of his chest. “I get that and I’m sure Parvati’s tried to justify it to herself in the same fashion. But the fact is, you are keeping her at arms length and in the dark about a huge portion of your life, and that’s bound to sting, no matter what the reasons.”
“But if she knows why I’m doing it then--”

“Put yourself in her shoes for a moment,” Hermione fired back before he could get rolling with the excuses again. “It’s like you have two distinctly different categories, friend and girlfriend, and she can only fit into one of them.”

“Maybe you should ask yourself why that is? Maybe there is a legitimate reason you feel more comfortable talking to Ginny about certain things than you do her. Maybe not,” she added, when his brow creased and he looked as if he was about to start arguing again. “But I’ll tell you this much, if our situations were reversed and it was Ron keeping me in the dark while he shared all his problems with some other girl, I’d throttle him.”

“Except Ron wouldn’t do that,” Harry cut in. “Why would he want to go talk to some other girl? The only reason he tells you those kinds of things is because you force him to.”

“The same way Ginny forces you,” Hermione reminded him. “But, you’re missing my point.”

“Which is?” he asked warily.

“That no matter what Ron’s reasons were, it would hurt. I’d feel betrayed and I wouldn’t put up with it.”

“Put up with what?” a familiar voice asked, as the bedroom door swung open and one of the redheads in question entered the room. Only his hair was more auburn in color than it normally was, due to the fact that it was still damp. “What have I done now?” he groaned, as he spied his friends seated side by side on Harry’s bed.

“Why aren’t you lounging in your bath?” Hermione asked.

“You tell me,” Ron replied, yanking the shirt he’d slept in over his head and tossing it on the floor, before moving to his trunk and retrieving fresh one. “You’re the one that went and got all concerned,” he added, as he pulled the fresh shirt on. “So what’s up?”

“Nothing,” Harry replied automatically.

“Harry’s had another fight with Parvati,” Hermione said at nearly the same moment.

“That’s it?” Ron asked, both relieved and a little surprised. “That’s what you’re fretting about?” he asked Hermione. “That’s why I couldn’t relax? And here I thought it was something important.”

“It is important,” Hermione insisted.

“To you maybe,” Ron said, looking at Harry and rolling his eyes. “But Harry’s not you and he doesn’t want to talk about girly stuff like that,” he added, shifting his gaze back to Hermione, “so stop pestering him.”

“Just because you’re an insensitive wart, that doesn’t mean you should encourage Harry to be one as well. Most girls aren’t willing to put up with that for very long.”

“I can think of a few who are,” Ron retorted, plopping down on the edge of his best mate’s bed beside Hermione and giving her a quick peck on the cheek. “And they’re the best kinds,” he added with a snigger, as she shoved him away, “because they accept you warts and all. You wouldn’t want me to pretend to be someone I wasn’t,” he stated, “anymore than I’d want you to. How boring would that be? What would we bicker about if I wasn’t such an insensitive prat and you didn’t call me on it?”
“Did it ever occur to you that Harry might like to have a girlfriend that is actually speaking to him?”

“Oh please.” Ron chuckled. “How many times has he seen us have a row?”

“Today?” Harry asked in jest. “This week? This month?”

“My point exactly,” Ron replied. “It’s no big deal. It’s just what couples do. They fight, they make up, fight again, make up. It doesn’t mean anything. Whatever’s got her knickers in a twist, she’ll get over it eventually. So can we go to lunch now or what? I’m starved. What?” he asked when Hermione’s mouth fell open and she continued to gape at him as if he had a spider sitting on top of his head.

“That’s... You’re unbelievable,” she eventually stammered out.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Ron said, standing upright and grasping Hermione’s hands so he could pull her into a standing position as well.

“It wasn’t meant as one,” she stated, allowing Ron to drag her towards the door as Harry got up and followed them.

“I know,” Ron admitted with a chuckle, as all three of them walked down the hallway, “but I’m going to pretend that it was that way we can skip ahead to the make up portion of the afternoon after lunch.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Impossible to resist. I know,” Ron retorted with one of his lopsided smiles.

“See how easy it is,” he said to Harry, as the three of them descended into the common room together. “I’m not the only one pretending. She wants us to believe that she’s offended and hacked off at me, but she’s not. A little irritated maybe, but a little bit of the Weasley charm and she caved.”

“Shut up,” Hermione groaned, because she couldn’t very well deny what he’d just said. Not with him linked to her and sensing everything she was feeling. Sometimes she really did hate that connection. It was so much easier to keep Ron in line and on his best behavior when he didn’t know when she was bluffing.

“Just tell her that you’re sorry for whatever it is that she thinks you’ve done,” Ron suggested to Harry as they walked through the portrait hole and started winding their way down the corridors.

“I’m not going to grovel,” Harry said rather resentfully. “I didn’t do anything.” She’s the one that walked out on me, he reminded himself.

“Take it from a bloke that’s been there,” Ron advised. “It doesn’t matter if you did it or not. Just apologize now and save yourself the hassle of doing it later when she’s even more hacked off at you.”

“No.”

“Suit yourself then,” Ron said with a shrug of his shoulders. “So what do you think? You up for a little chess after we eat?”

“And when precisely do you two plan on studying for your exams?” Hermione asked rather tetchily. “You do realize that we have less than two weeks before--”
“Kinda hard to forget with you constantly reminding us,” Ron retorted. “Although Merlin knows we’ve tried. So what do you say, mate?”

“Yeah, sure,” Harry replied, “why not?”

“You just had to ask,” Ron moaned under his breath, knowing that Hermione would likely spend the next thirty minutes or so happily listing the reasons why they shouldn’t spend their afternoon playing chess now that Harry had opened the door by posing his rhetorical question.
Chapter 36: Gobsmacked

The last few weeks of the term seemed to drag on forever as far as Harry was concerned. The closer the Christmas holidays got, the longer the days seemed to get and knowing that there was an actual end in sight only seemed to make the deluge of schoolwork the sixth years needed to finish before their exams all the more excruciating. Even Ron had finally stopped putting it off and got down to work, although Harry suspected that had a lot to do with the fact that Hermione’s anxieties were now eating away at him and try as he might, his best mate simply wasn’t able to ignore them anymore.

It worked out great for Hermione however, because she didn’t have to actually be present to keep the boys on task. It took her all of one evening in the Library to discover that she could bury herself behind a mountain of books and stay there all night long if she felt so inclined and the boys would more or less continue working on their own assignments without her supervision. Not that either of them really wanted to, of course, but the mounting unease that was gnawing away at Ron, kept him from enjoying any of the breaks they tried to take and without him to distract Harry or join in when Harry was attempting to distract himself, they both seemed to get a lot more accomplished.

Of course that didn’t mean that Harry didn’t take breaks. Just because Ron gave in and snatched his notes back up within five minutes of putting them down, albeit with quite a bit of grumbling, that didn’t mean Harry was going to follow suit straight away. And more often than not, it was during those moments when he was trying to avoid his own school work that Harry found his mind drifting to the advice his friends had given him concerning his personal life.

He tried to focus on what Ron said a bit more than the things Hermione mentioned, however. Not because they hadn’t both made valid points and given him sound advice. It was simply that Ron’s advice was more comfortable to contemplate, whereas Hermione’s brought up issues he didn’t really want to think about. Of course there were times when he couldn’t seem to help himself.

The truth was, despite what he’d told his friends there was part of him that wanted to apologize to her. Thinking about apologizing however, and actually doing it were two completely different things, and no matter how often he thought about it, Harry never did actually break down and say the words. If he were the one to apologize, he’d be admitting that he was the one in the wrong, and while there was part of him that knew he was to a certain degree, he wasn’t going to admit it.

Besides, he was entitled to have friends of his own and he could talk about anything he wanted with them, whether Parvati liked it or not. All right, so technically his feelings for Ginny might not be strictly platonic, but they were mostly platonic and totally one sided, as she was still seeing David Devane, so what was the big deal? It wasn’t like he’d cheated on her with Ron’s sister or anything. All he did was talk to her for Merlin’s sake.

And of course Harry continued to use the fact that Parvati had been the one that had walked out on him as an excuse to hold himself back. If anyone should apologize, he reasoned it ought to be her. It didn’t matter that he’d told her to leave him alone, he’d told Hermione and Ginny that many times during the course of their friendship and neither of them ever listened.
Just because he pushed Parvati away, that didn’t mean she had to go. If she had really wanted to stay, she would have, but she didn’t and that just proved that no matter what she said, she wasn’t really all that concerned about him. Parvati had left him, not the other way around. She was the one that proved she wasn’t dependable. Why should he be the one to apologize?

Then again, Ron did have a point when he mentioned that all couples fought. He and Hermione had been snipping at one another for six years and it didn’t seem to damage their relationship any. Not that he necessarily wanted a relationship like theirs and yet at the same time he did. Maybe not one that was quite as volatile, but the deep seated intimacy they shared had to be nice. Yes, it was true they could break into a fight at any given moment, and over the most asinine things, yet they knew each other so well that most of the things they shouted at one another seemed to just roll off without sticking. And while he’d seen Hermione walk out on Ron in the middle of a row more times than he could count, even Harry couldn’t hold it against her, because just like Ron, he understood why she did it.

It wasn’t as if Hermione was really abandoning Ron. She didn’t walk away from him because she didn’t care about him; she walked away because she did. When Hermione left mid-rant, it was usually because she was worried that they’d reached a point where one of them was going to say something they’d truly regret in the heat of the moment and then not be able to take it back. Sometimes it was just better for both of them if she pulled back and gave them the space they needed to cool off. And it wasn’t as if she wasn’t going to come back eventually. She’d always come back and all three of them knew it.

That was the thing with Hermione. No matter how angry she was or how much she might disapprove of something he or Ron did, when push came to shove, she would put that aside and support them when they needed it. If one of them was in trouble, they knew that they could count on her to help bail them out, no matter what. But could the same be said about Parvati?

All right, so it was true that maybe he hadn’t really given her the chance. He did keep her at arms length when it came to certain things. Hermione had been right about that. And as much as he’d like to pretend that it was just because she was safer not knowing certain things, deep down Harry knew that wasn’t strictly true. Ginny would be a lot safer not knowing half the things she knew, and yet he had still opened up to her. And no matter how many times he reminded himself that it would be better for her entire family if he distanced himself from her, Ginny kept putting herself smack dab in the center of his problems and he continued to allow it. What did that say about him?

It’s just that... she’s so easy to talk to, Harry told himself, attempting to justify his actions with a half truth, because that way he wouldn’t have to explore any of the other things motivating him. And yet even as he said it, he knew there was more to it than that. Much more.

It wasn’t just that she was easy to talk to; it was that she didn’t let him get away with not talking about the things that were bothering him, and sometimes that was exactly what he needed. He didn’t want to talk about Voldemort and how he was mucking up the lives of everyone he cared about and yet at the same time he did, at least on some subconscious level. He must, because when he did let it out, he usually felt better. But he couldn’t talk about those things with just anyone. It had to be with someone that he knew he could trust; someone that would keep the information to themselves and not get all freaked out or be too judgmental.

Ron and Hermione were great and all, and Harry knew that they were always willing to listen and that they’d be only too happy to help him with any problem he had, but sometimes it was just easier telling Ginny things. In a lot of respects it was like talking to Ron, only she was better at keeping secrets. Ron had that whole connection thing going with Hermione, in addition to their relationship, and that made it nearly impossible for him to keep secrets from her. He could, and would, if Harry
asked him to, but Harry didn’t want to put him in that position, especially when it wasn’t necessary. Besides, they already worried about him too much as it was.

Sometimes it was just easier with Ginny. She didn’t wince every time he mentioned Voldemort by name and he didn’t have to feel quite as guilty around her. Of course that probably had a lot to do with the fact that Voldemort hadn’t singled her out as a target yet. She did have personal experience dealing with him herself, but that was all Lucius Malfoy’s doing.

“Finished,” Ron groaned, snapping Harry out of his reverie when he slammed his Charms textbook shut. “Finally,” he sighed, shoving his now complete homework towards Harry before flopping back in his chair and closing his eyes. “It only took forever. You better look it over quick,” Ron added, opening his eyes and doing a quick scan of the room just to make certain Hermione hadn’t returned from the Library while he wasn’t paying attention, “because if Hermione catches me letting you copy, we’re both going to be in a whole lot of trouble.”

“Don’t worry,” Harry replied, spinning Ron’s finished essay around just enough so he could read it, but not enough that what he was doing was obvious just in case Hermione returned sooner than expected. “I’m nearly finished myself,” he added, as he jumped to the end of Ron’s parchment and skimming over a few of the references he’d made so he could look them up himself. “I’ll just tack this part on in my own words,” he said, “and then we can start practicing for the D.A.D.A. exam.”

“As if you need the practice,” Ron answered. “You practically help Tonks teach the class. She’s always using you to help her demonstrate stuff. Guess you’ll need to bone up on your wandless magic now, since we know we’ll be starting that after the break. Good thing too. Hermione’s already stressed out enough as it is. Throw something she can’t do on her first try at her just before exams and she’d have a nervous breakdown or something.”

“And take you down with her.”

“Exactly,” Ron replied. “Think Tonks will go over it with us during the break?” he asked Harry, who was now glancing back and forth between his textbook and the sheet of parchment he was busily scribbling on. “The wandless magic I mean?”

“I doubt it,” Harry answered. “I got the feeling it was just going to be curses and stuff. You know,” he said, as he continued to write. “Just to see which ones affect one of you and which ones affect both of you. Stuff like that. But hey, look on the bright side. Maybe you can earn yourself some extra credit.”

“Shut up,” Ron moaned, his ears darkening significantly at his best friends jest. “I’m not that bad.”

“Sure you aren’t.”

“It’s not my fault Hermione is mental right now.”

“I know,” Harry replied with a chuckle, “but that doesn’t make you becoming all homework obsessed as well any less funny.”

“I am not obsessed,” Ron insisted, the redness now spreading to his face. “I’m just... motivated,” he said, after taking a moment to hunt for the appropriate word. “That’s all.”

“Yeah, right,” Harry scoffed.

“No, seriously,” Ron said, lowering his voice significantly. “Hermione’s...well let’s just say she’s been compensating me for taking the initiative in some very creative ways, if you know what I mean. If I had known that doing my homework without being nagged to death first was going to turn her
on that much I would have--"

"As happy as I am for you, mate" Harry interrupted, "I really don’t want to hear the rest of that sentence."

"Oh, but I do," someone with a strong Irish brogue piped in behind them. "So exactly how often are you two getting 'creative', Weasley?" Seamus asked.

"As if I’d tell the likes of you, Finnegan."

"Creative in what way exactly?" Seamus asked, completely undeterred by Ron’s retort. "If you tell me I might actually leave you alone."

"A likely story," Harry jeered, but he knew there was no getting rid of Seamus now. He’d sit there and pester them until Ron blew his top or Hermione returned from the Library with Ginny and her mere presence chased him away, whichever came first. In the meantime, Harry had an essay to finish, so he may as well tune them out and get back to it.

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After midnight, Ron groaned in his head, after flipping over to look at the clock resting on the bedside table in his room at the Burrow. It was nearly one o’clock in the morning and he still couldn’t sleep. Harry didn’t seem to have any problems though. His breathing had been deep and steady for the past forty-five minutes and somehow that only seemed to make Ron feel worse about his own insomnia. How was it that his best friend, who had so much weighing down on him, could sleep peacefully on a cot, while he spent an hour and a half tossing and turning in a comfortable bed, brooding about something as trivial as the fact that he hadn’t been able to be alone with Hermione since they left school? His problems were insignificant compared to Harry’s, and yet he was the one awake.

Maybe I ought to give those Occlumency exercises a try, Ron thought, flopping over on his back and staring up at the posters of the Chudley Cannons that were pinned to the ceiling above his bed. But all I do is think about her when I close my eyes.

Not that it’s entirely my fault, he reminded himself. I’m not the only one doing it, he thought, taking solace in the fact that Hermione, at least, was just as frustrated and wide awake as he was. The difference was, she was trying not to focus on her unfulfilled urges anymore.

As if that’s going to work, Ron thought, picturing her lying on her cot in Ginny’s room, trying to distract herself by reading over the Apparation booklet his father had gotten for her from the Department of Magical Transportation for the hundredth time.

Like you don’t have the ruddy thing memorized by now, he said in his head, almost as if he thought she’d be able to hear him and rather than continue reading, she’d see reason, throw her study materials down, and meet him in the bathroom for a late night tryst.

If only she would. It had been five days. Five bloody days since they’d been together in that way and it was starting to wear on him. Hermione had practically moved into his dorm room when the rest of the students went home for the holidays, but that all changed when Professor Dumbledore called the four of them to his office on Christmas Eve and created the Portkey out of a Christmas cracker so they could return to the Burrow. He’d gone from spending every single night with Hermione, to sleeping alone again, and he was not happy about it.

Not that Ron was really alone. Harry was there, of course. But that caused a bit of a problem in and
of itself. Not just for him, but for Harry too, no doubt. It wasn’t that Ron minded sharing a room with Harry. It was just that there was no way for either of them to have any sort of privacy in his bedroom at home. So as frustrated as Ron was at the moment, he was unable to take the matter in hand, so to speak, and alleviate the problem himself. In his bed at school, with the curtains drawn and Silencing Charms cast was one thing, at home, without spells to hide what he was doing, was quite another and it was not going to happen. Not even with Harry sound asleep.

Maybe a cold shower, Ron thought, climbing out of his warm bed and throwing a dressing gown on to stave off the chill. Or a not so cold shower with Hermione, he amended.

It was the dead of winter after all. He might be thick at times, but he wasn’t daft enough to actually use the cold water method if there were other options. And Hermione was still awake, which meant he might be able to convince her that they did have other options. It wasn’t like Fred and George were going to Apparate in on them this late at night.

Bloody Tossers, Ron groused.

The fact that Hermione flat out refused to be alone with him in his room was entirely their fault. They just had to go and Apparate into his bedroom when they left their shop on his first night home. They never stopped to think that it might not be Harry he was with. Nor did they have the decency to look ashamed or even apologize when they caught him and Hermione in the middle of a snog. They simply stifled their sniggers and proceeded to gush about how good it was to see them.

It wasn’t until Hermione recovered from the shock of being interrupted and told them point blank that they were wasting their time sucking up, because Ron had already given what was left of his reward money to Bill, that they reverted to their normal, smart arse selves, made half a dozen remarks about how whipped he was, and walked out of his room, leaving the door wide open.

Bloody wankers.

But all of his meddlesome brothers were asleep now. Which meant they didn’t need to worry about any of them Apparating in on them unannounced. Then again, they did all share the same bathroom. What if one of his brothers needed to use it? They weren’t going to bother knocking this late at night. They’d just pop right in and that could be bad. Really, really bad. Especially if he actually managed to get Hermione in there with him. If one of his brothers saw her starkers she’d blame him for it. There was no doubt about that. But some risks were worth taking and it wouldn’t hurt to ask. Not as long as she was up anyway.

Fortunately Ron realized rather quickly that Hermione was not, in fact, in his sister’s bedroom once he knocked. If she had been, he would have felt her react to the unexpected noise, but she didn’t react. She wasn’t startled or surprised. All he sensed from her was the same restlessness and frustration he’d been feeling ever since the two of them had gone to their separate beds. So rather than knock again, and risk waking his sister, he went to the next logical place, the room with the most books in it, and looked for her there. Only when he reached the living room, a quick scan was all it took to see he’d chosen the wrong place, which meant there was only one spot left to check.

“There you are,” Ron said, after pushing the kitchen door open and spying the familiar head of bushy hair hidden behind a massive book.

“What are you doing up?” Hermione asked, lowering her copy of *Hogwarts, A History* to the table as she reached for the steaming cup of hot cocoa that was resting in front of her.

“Gee, I wonder,” Ron said sarcastically, as he pulled the chair closest to her away from the table and fell down on it. “Say, you don’t mind if I borrow this for a minute, do you?” he asked, snatching her
book up before she had a chance to protest. “It’s exactly what I need. If this boring old thing doesn’t put me to sleep, nothing will.”

“Hardy har har,” Hermione groaned. “Your wit never ceases to astound me,” she said, trying to grab her book back, only to have Ron jerk it away. “Now if you’re quite finished making fun of my choice of reading material, I’ll take that back.”

“Aw, what do you want to read this dreary thing for?” he asked, hiking the book over his head when she leaned into him, so he could keep it out of reach. “How many times have you read it anyway? A hundred?”

“Give it back,” Hermione hisses, leaning forward even further, causing Ron to lean backwards in his chair in order to keep possession of the object clutched in his right hand.

“But you didn’t say the magic words,” he retorted, unceremoniously dropping the book on the floor behind him, wrapping both of his arms around Hermione’s back, and using them to pin her against his chest. “And now you’ll have to pay,” he said, just before he kissed her.

“If you’ve ruined my book, you’re the one that’s going to pay,” Hermione threatened, once she regaining enough of her wits to jerk her head back and put both of her hands on his chest for leverage so she could push herself away from him.

“Funny,” Ron retorted, tightening his grip as she struggled to break free. “You seem to be the one having trouble here, not me.”

“Just you wait,” she said, feeling far more confident than Ron thought she should. He was the one that had the upper hand, wasn’t he?

“You wouldn’t seriously curse an unarmed man?” he asked, diverting his eyes to the tabletop and scanning it for her wand, because he now knew that she had it somewhere close by. She wouldn’t be feeling so sure of herself if she didn’t.

“That’s bloody unfair, you know?” he said, using his right arm to hold her in place while he searched the pockets of her dressing gown with his left.

“Aha,” he cried triumphantly, when his fingers closed around the object he was looking for and he dragged it out of her pocket. “Now I have you completely at my mercy,” he joked, releasing his hold on her and jerking her wand up so it was between them.

“You’re forgetting one very important thing,” Hermione shot back, still as smug as ever and just as aroused as he was.

“Oh yeah?” Ron asked with a cheeky smile. “And what’s that, love?”

“In order to properly ravish me,” she said, as she slid off her own chair and onto his lap, causing the familiar ache building inside them both to increase significantly. “And I know that’s what you intend to do,” she added, placing one hand on his chest and burying the other in his thick red hair just as she felt his lust course into her body and combine with her own. “Someone has to shield the room. And since you can’t do that yourself without receiving an official warning, you’re going to have to give me back my wand so I can do it. And when you do, your arse is mine.”

“Merlin, I love it when you talk dirty to me,” Ron groaned, darting his tongue out to wet his lips, as he stared at hers with a hungry look in his smoldering blue eyes.

“That wasn’t dirty.”
“Sure it was,” Ron insisted. “You just threatened to have your wicked way with me and I’m not foolish enough to pass up an offer like that. You win,” he said, flipping her wand over in his hand and offering it back to her. “My arse, and the rest of me, is all yours.”

As the green flames surrounding him dissipated and he stepped from the hearth into the kitchen of his family home, Charlie Weasley was met with a sight that was so inconceivable, that for a moment he actually thought he might be have Floo’d into the wrong house by mistake. If the half dressed figure leaning over the kitchen table, snogging the living daylights out of a girl, who was mostly hidden from view, hadn’t had the tell tale Weasley red hair, Charlie might have actually tried to make a discreet exit before being spotted. But as the figure did have red hair, and Charlie was fairly certain he was in the right place, he just stood there, rucksack in hand, and tried to make sense of what he’d Floo’d in on.

From the looks of it, one of his brother was about to shag in their mother’s kitchen, on the very table his family was going to congregate around in the morning to eat their breakfast. What kind of daft fool did something like that? No one in his right mind would violate their mother’s space in that fashion.

It had to be Bill. It was the only logical explanation. Bill and that Veela girl he was dating. She’d turned her powers on him and now that he was bewitched, he’d completely lost his mind and forgot where he was. That had to be it. The problem was, the person trying to tear the clothing away from the girl splayed out on the table had short hair. He was tall enough to be Bill, but he had short hair and that changed everything.

“HOLY SHIT!” Charlie shouted, dropping the bag he was holding to the ground in shock when he realized he was about to see far more of his baby brother than he ever wanted to see. “RON!”

“WHA!” Ron yelped in surprise, as Hermione shrieked beneath him and madly tried to sort out her nightgown. “CHARLIE!” he cried, after standing upright and spinning around to see who had unshielded the room and interrupted them. “Where’d you...what are you doing here?” he asked, his entire face flooding with color as the mortification Hermione was feeling surged into his body.

“IT BETTER NOT BE!”

“No, wait!” Ron cried, only Charlie quickly realized that the comment was directed at Hermione and not himself, because even as he said it, Ron spun around to face her. “You can’t,” he insisted, stepping in front of her and blocking Charlie’s view of her once more. “He’s my brother.”

“He won’t remember that I did it,” Hermione stated, the embarrassment she’d felt upon being caught in a compromising position having diminished when she realized Charlie had seen Ron’s charm. There was a bevy of emotions surging through her now. Fear, no doubt from Ron. Shame, desperation, but along with those there was resignation and a good deal of guilt, because Hermione
knew what she had to do. She didn’t want to do it, but the situation had to be dealt with before it got out of hand and she was the only one that could do it.

Won’t remember that she did what? Charlie thought. None of this made any sense. His baby brother had something that looked suspiciously like a Lànain talisman hanging around his neck. But that didn’t make any sense. Ron was a bloke, and those despicable things were only used to collar women. But if it wasn’t a Lànain talisman, then why was he going to such efforts to hide it? And why was Hermione clutching her dressing gown to her neck as if her life depended on it?

Something very dodgy was going on here, and there was more to it than the fact that Ron had something around his neck that he didn’t want anyone to see. He’d been snogging, no, damn near shagging, his girlfriend on their mother’s kitchen table.

A girlfriend who Charlie remembered as a sweet, albeit bossy, little girl, who always toed the line and followed the rules. She was supposed to keep his brother out of trouble. But apparently Ron had more influence over her than she did him, because somehow he’d gotten her to break the mother of all rules, and in his parent’s house no less.

And now... Holy shit... now that sweet little girl had her wand out and pointed right at him.

“Get out of my way,” Hermione said to Ron, although her eyes were riveted on Charlie’s hands as she said it. “It’ll be better this way.”

“No, wait,” Ron implored, holding his position between them. “At least let me try and explain first and if that doesn’t work then you can do it.”

For a second there, Charlie was actually worried that Hermione was seriously going to attempt modifying his memory, but then he remembered they were only sixth years and sixth years couldn’t do magic away from Hogwarts. It was a bluff. A damn convincing bluff, but a bluff none the less. When did Ron become such a good actor?

“Nice try,” Charlie said, unwilling to let their not so subtle threat distract him. “I might have even fallen for it if it weren’t for the fact that--”

“Shut up, you moron,” Ron cried, doing a bang up job of looking genuinely concerned. “If you dare her to do it, I won’t be able to stop her.”

“You know, this whole good Prefect, bad Prefect routine you have worked out to intimidate the ickle kiddies at school isn’t going to work on me. Now stop stalling and start talking. That better not be what I think it is,” Charlie said, making the mistake of closing the distance between them and reaching around Ron to get at Hermione in order to see if she had something similar hanging around her neck. “And you better pray that I don’t find one of them on--”

“Back off,” Ron warned, cutting Charlie off before he had a chance to finish his own threat. And no sooner had the words left Ron’s mouth, then Charlie discovered he had no choice but to comply. The instant he touched Hermione’s shoulder, the painful buzzing sensation that shot through his arm, forced him to let go.

“GOD DAMN IT, RON!” Charlie cried out, as he yanked his arm back. “That hurt!” he said, shaking his hand as if it was asleep and he was trying to get his circulation flowing again.

“Yeah, well, I told you not to do it,” Ron replied, evidently not feeling the slightest bit of remorse about what he’d just done. “Consider yourself lucky we worked out how to repel people without sending them flying clear across the room while we were having those extra defense lessons with
Tonks,” Ron added, when his brother’s mouth fell open and he continued to gape at him, “because I could have done that if I’d wanted to.”

“Hermione was afraid of what you’d find if you searched her and that fear was all it took for me to perceive you as a threat and trigger the magic. I don’t need my wand to do it, so I won’t get in any trouble. If you had been a Death Eater, you’d be flat on your arse, halfway across the room by now. But as you’re family and all, I went easy on you,” he said, “but I trust you got the point.”

“You’re mad!” Charlie said, his blue eyes wide with horror now that he had proof positive of what his brother had done. “You can’t use a Lânain talisman on a Muggle-born.”


What the hell was he supposed to say to that? The magic works, Charlie repeated his brother’s asinine statement over in his head as he tried to wrap his mind around what he’d just discovered. His baby brother had gone around the bend. He’d slapped a Lânain talisman on his girlfriend. The same girlfriend who was obsessed with freeing House-Elves. She was going to bloody well kill him when she found out that wasn’t just a pretty necklace she was wearing. And if she didn’t, his mother would.

“Oh God,” Charlie moaned, as an even more horrifying thought occurred to him. “You haven’t... you aren’t...” But he saw the truth on his brother’s face before he even finished asking the question. “You consummated it?” Charlie cried in disbelief, causing both Ron and Hermione to blush again. “How could you do something like that without telling her what it would mean?”

“Why is it that you all think Ron is capable of doing something like that?” Hermione asked. “Why do you just assume that I don’t know what we’ve done? Do I come across and particularly gullible or uninformed? Maybe it was my idea. Did you ever even consider that possibility?”

If he had been just a bit closer to the table, Charlie might have actually considered banging his head against it to make this nightmare he was stuck in stop.

“So you ... you do know what it means to...”

“Of course I know,” Hermione sighed, before he even had a chance to finish the question.

“And you’re okay with that?” Charlie asked incredulously.

“Why shouldn’t she be?” Ron said defensively.

“How about the fact that you’re both sixteen for starters.”

“Actually, Hermione is seventeen,” Ron corrected.

“What?” Charlie asked, goggling at his brother as if he were speaking Gobbledegook. “What the hell does that matter? You’re still too young to be--”

“Well, it does matter, see,” Ron stated. “Because she isn’t just pretending that she’s going to curse you, she really is going to do it if you’re not careful. She’s thinking about doing it right now, as a matter of fact. I can tell because she’s feeling guilty again.”

“Oh by all means,” Charlie cried, throwing his hands up in the air in exasperation, “be my guest. In fact, if you don’t do it, I might just do it to myself. I just had to come home for New Years,” he ranted, as he began pacing back and forth in front of them. “Thought it would be nice to surprise Mum, but nothing’s going to top your surprise.”
“Hi Mum, nice to see you. Nothing new with me, but hey, guess what? Ron has some news. He slapped a Lânain talisman on Hermione and now the two of them are married. Isn’t that great?”

“You’re a dead man. You realize that? She’s seriously going to kill you.”

“Not if you don’t tell her,” Ron said almost instantly.

“So she can kill me when she finds out I knew and kept it from her?” Charlie retorted. “I don’t think so. Unless...” he added, coming to a halt in front of Ron and looking at him intently. “Unless you’re willing to compromise. If you take those things off right now, I won’t say a thing.”

“Well?” Hermione said, crossing her arms in front of her chest and looking pointedly at Ron.

“What?” he asked in surprise. “Are you turning this into some kind of test or something?”

“He’s just the warm up act for your mother, so how are you going to respond?”

“Bugger off, Charlie and keep your nose out of our business. There, are you happy?” he said, glancing at Hermione and rolling his eyes.

“You can’t say something like that to your mother,” Hermione shot back.

“But he’s not my mum and I can tell him to bugger off all I want. Besides, you can’t exactly modify her memory after she finds out, so what are you going to do?”

“Nothing. You’re going to handle your parents and I’m going to handle mine. Unless you’d rather be the one to explain all of this to my father.”

“How’s that fair?”

“Will you two give it a rest?” Charlie snapped, unable to believe how easy it was for them to side track one another with their bickering.

Unless, he thought, they aren’t distracted at all and they’re simply trying to throw me off.

“Fine,” Hermione snapped. “You want me to take care of your family too; I’ll take care of your family.”

“What Ron meant,” she said to Charlie, “is that we have perfectly good reasons for doing what we’ve done and you aren’t going to be able to change our minds or talk us out of it. You’re just going to have to trust that we know what we’re doing and it’s better for everyone if you don’t say anything about it right now.”

“If you don’t believe me, you can ask Dumbledore,” she added, almost as if she hoped dropping his name would add some validity to her claims. “He’ll tell you what he thinks you need to know and anything he doesn’t mention, he’s keeping quiet for a reason.”

“Wait? You expect me to believe that Dumbledore knows about this? He knows that you two are... married.”


“And Harry and Ginny of course,” Hermione added.

“You told Ginny?” Charlie said in disbelief.
“Don’t look at me,” Ron sighed, the instant his brother’s eyes widened again. “That was her brilliant idea,” he added, nodding his head in Hermione’s direction. “But that ought to tell you something. Ginny is okay with all of this, now that she understands why we did it.”

“Enlighten me then. Why exactly did you do it?”

“I’d think it would be fairly obvious,” Ron responded. “I mean I just showed you. We did it so we could protect each other,” he said, looking at his brother as if he were dimwitted.

“I told you what I would have done to you if you’d been a Death Eater. They can’t touch her now,” he stated. “Those bastards will never touch her again. Not as long as I’m alive to prevent it. Don’t ask me to take that thing off and make her vulnerable again, because I won’t do it. I can’t. When she escaped I made a promise to myself that I’d keep her safe and that’s exactly what I’m going to do. I don’t care what it takes.”

“But you didn’t have to consummate the union for that part of it to work,” Charlie said, his voice softening significantly. He knew about Hermione being taken prisoner of course, and he knew how badly Ron had taken it. Bill had told him everything, including what he’d seen in Dumbledore’s Pensive after she’d escaped. “I mean you could have just remained betrothed. You still would have been able to protect her. You didn’t have to--”

“We wanted to,” Ron interrupted. “We’ve wasted enough time. So much that we almost lost the opportunity to be together at all. I’m not going to waste anymore. This is what we both want, Charlie. You don’t have to like it, but you do have to accept it, because you’re not going to change my mind. Hermione and I are married and that makes her family. And it doesn’t matter what you say,” Ron said. “I know you aren’t going to run to Mum and tattle on us like Ginny used to do when we were kids. You and Bill have always looked out for us when you could and I know you’re not going to stop doing that now. There might be part of you that wants to tell Mum, but you won’t.”

“Seriously,” he said to Hermione, “he won’t. He’s just blowing smoke. Must come from being around all those dragons. But he won’t rat us out, trust me.”

“All right,” Hermione said, using her wand to lower the shield on the kitchen door, before squirreling it away in the pocket of her dressing gown.

Ron believed what he was saying. She could feel his confidence in his brother and that was good enough for her at this particular moment in time. She just wanted to duck away somewhere and pretend this awkward conversation had never happened.

“In that case, I’m going to bed.”


“No, it’s late and I’m tired,” she said, moving towards the door, throwing it open, and pushing through it, before he had a chance to argue any further.

“Oh that’s just great,” Ron said, turning away from the empty doorway and glowering at his brother. “I hope you’re happy. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get her alone in this house? Now that you’ve ruined everything, I might as well go to bed too,” he added, spinning around and stomping towards the door himself.

“Thanks a lot,” Charlie heard Ron mutter as he ducked through the door, and then it was silent. Or it would have been if his heart hadn’t been thumping wildly against his chest and his mind hadn’t been racing with a whole host of information, most of which still didn’t make all that much sense.
“Mione, wait,” Ron said in a voice barely above a whisper as he chased her back up to his sister’s bedroom. “Don’t go to bed yet,” he added, catching her just outside the door.

“It’s late Ron,” she replied softly, without even bothering to turn around and face him. It was easier to refuse him when she didn’t have to look into his eyes and see how disappointed he was. It was bad enough to feel it; she didn’t want to see it too.

“Look, I know you’re embarrassed, but Charlie isn’t going to bother us anymore tonight. He isn’t going to bother you at all. I’m the one he’ll corner when Mum isn’t looking. So why don’t we just go back downstairs for a little while and-- ”

“I can’t believe you still want to.”

“What’s wrong with wanting to?” he whispered. “I miss you.”

Damn it, Hermione swore to herself. Hearing the words was one thing, but feeling the sincerity behind them was quite another.

Ron wasn’t just saying what he thought she wanted to hear, he meant it. He really did miss her. She could feel it pouring off of him. He felt the same emptiness she felt. Spending their days together in the presence of other people wasn’t enough to fill the void completely. He missed the intimacy of being together as much as the act itself. This wasn’t just about sex; it was about connecting, at least in part. How could she possibly turn him away when that was what he wanted?

“I’m tired of sleeping without you,” he insisted. “Just... come up to my room and stay with me in there. Harry won’t mind. We don’t have to do anything,” he added, almost as if he thought it was the physical aspects she was objecting to tonight.

“You know it won’t stop there,” Hermione said, slowly spinning around to look at him.

“What I want is to spend a night with my wife,” Ron stated. “Don’t pretend you don’t want that too, because I know that you do. I know you’re still embarrassed about Charlie catching us. If you’re worried about Fred and George barging in at the crack of dawn, Imperturb the room so they can’t Apparate in.”

“That’ll make it even worse, because then they’ll know for sure that I’m in there,” she sighed.

“Hermione,” Ron groaned her name in frustration. “Then just come downstairs with me for a little while. Please.”

“All right,” she finally relented. “Just... just give me a minute,” she added, opening the door to his sister’s bedroom, slipping inside, and closing it firmly behind herself before he had a chance to respond.

Only it took much longer than a minute for the door to open again. It felt like ten or fifteen, although it was probably closer to five. But it was still long enough for Ron to wonder if Hermione really had any intentions of coming out again, a fear that was amplified when the door finally did opened and his sister exited the room instead of Hermione.
“Don’t even think about using my bed,” Ginny hissed, as she stepped over the threshold looking both tired and disheveled. “Knowing that the two of you are together in my room is bad enough.”

“You owe me big for this,” she said, shoving her brother out of her way and moving past him. “Huge,” she added, throwing her arms out in front of herself and holding them wide apart to emphasize that fact, since she had to keep her voice down. “As in when I want to borrow that Invisibility Cloak you gave Hermione for Christmas, the one that’s hidden in your trunk at school, you’re going to give it to me no questions asked.”

“And I mean it about my bed,” she warned, shuffling towards the staircase. “It’s off limits. Conjure on your own damn bed.”

“What the...”

“Shush,” Hermione whispered from the doorway, latching on to Ron’s arm and pulling him into Ginny’s bedroom.

“What did you tell her?” he asked, as Hermione shut the door and used her wand to shield the room.

“It was easier than I thought it would be actually,” she replied. “I just told her that we had to maintain our link or it was going to wear off, and none of us wants that to happen.”

“And she bought that?” he asked suspiciously. “She just hopped out of bed and left?”

“Well, it’s the truth,” Hermione said, waving her wand over the cot she’d been using since they arrived and transfiguring it into a bed large enough for the pair of them to sleep in comfortably. “And she couldn’t very well disagree with the fact that her room is the only one in this house, beside your parents’, that your brothers don’t barge into unannounced.”

“You used our Invisibility Cloak to bribe her,” Ron grumbled, as he watched Hermione situate the blankets so they were covering the newly enlarged bed. “If I’d wanted her to know about it, I would have given it to you here and not while we were still at school. Now she’s going to ask me for it every time she wants to sneak off and snog that prat. This is just bloody great.”

“Stop complaining,” Hermione rebuked him as she shed her dressing gown. “If it’s really mine, then I can share it with anyone I want,” she stated, knowing full well that Ron had used Christmas as an excuse to splurge and buy something for her that he’d always wanted for himself. He’d given it to her as a gift, but in his mind it was theirs to share.

Not that she had a problem with that. It made sense given the fact that the three of them could no longer fit under Harry’s cloak together without the boys both stooping down so low it was nearly impossible for them to walk.

Besides, that was the way it was supposed to be when two people were married; they shared things. But just because Ron was willing to share his Invisibility Cloak with her, that didn’t mean he wanted to share it with anyone else, especially his sister.

“You’re missing my point,” Ron grumbled.

“No, I’m not,” she shot back, unbuttoning the front of her nightgown and letting it fall to the floor, before stepping out of it and climbing into bed. “You don’t mind if I use it to sneak up to your room anytime I want, but heaven forbid Ginny do something similar with it.”

“She doesn’t need to be in Devane’s room.”
“Ginny is old enough to decide what’s best for her herself,” Hermione stated, as she burrowed under the blankets to starve off the cold. “And if she wants to sneak into a boy’s room, that’s her business.”

“As a matter of fact,” she added with a slight smile. “That’s exactly what she’s doing as we speak. Sneaking into your room so your mum won’t catch her on the couch and realize what’s going on. But you don’t mind if she’s sneaking into Harry’s room,” she said, giving him a shrewd look. “It’s everyone else you object to.”

“Harry isn’t going to take advantage of her,” Ron said, as he watched Hermione snuggle into her pillow and get comfortable. There was no point denying what she said. She could read him like a book and she knew exactly what he felt when it came to the subject of their best friend and his sister.

“No, he has Parvati for that,” she replied, unable to keep the disapproval she felt out of her voice. “You really should talk to him about that, you know. He isn’t doing himself any favors. Girls talk. A LOT. And he’s going to wind up with a bad reputation if he keeps it up. Maybe if you just gave him a few tips on how to be a bit more sensitive to...”

“Are you mad?” Ron cut in before Hermione had a chance to really get going. “No way in hell am I going to tell Harry something like that.”

“You wouldn’t treat me the way he’s treating Parvati.”

“You aren’t Parvati. Thank God!”

“Ron.”

“She made her own bed,” he argued. “Harry didn’t ask her to butt into his life. She went after him, not the other way around. Besides, it’s not as if she’s in it for the right reasons either and unless I’m quite mistaken you were the one screaming at her about that up in the girls’ dorm, were you not? And now suddenly you’re taking her side?”

“I am not taking her side,” Hermione shot back defensively. “It’s just... you had your parents and your brothers to teach you how to show a girl proper respect and what that entails. Who does Harry have to teach him those things, expect us? He certainly isn’t going to be comfortable talking about it with me, so that leaves you. And you need to say something to him, otherwise he’ll continue to emulate Seamus.”

“Blokes don’t talk about stuff like that with their mates,” Ron griped, as he quickly shed his pajama bottoms and climbed into bed next to her. “I mean we do talk, obviously, but I’m not going to be all girly and tell him he has to be sensitive and worry about her feelings and all that rubbish you’re on about. Harry doesn’t even fancy Parvati and it’s not like he asked her out or anything. It’s not his fault she’s too dense to get a clue. Maybe if he’s a little bit ruder, she’ll actually get the hint and sod off.”

“Ronald Weasley!”

“What?” he said defensively. “You don’t think she’s right for him either. Besides, Harry is old enough to decide what’s best for him by himself,” he said, intentionally using her own words against her. “If what Ginny does is her business, then the same holds true for Harry, so as his friends we should just butt out.”

“You’ve completely missed the point,” Hermione groaned, flopping back against her pillow in exasperation.

“I don’t think I have,” Ron replied, flipping over on his side and using one hand to prop up his head
as he stared down at her. “You have one set of standards for Ginny and a completely different set for Harry.”

“And you don’t?”

“You’re damn right I do. Ginny is my sister. It’s my responsibility watch out for her.”

“Which is exactly the reason you should have that talk with Harry,” Hermione stated, bringing the conversation right back to where it started and catching Ron a bit off guard in the process.

“Oh really?” he asked, rolling his eyes at her nonsensical girly logic. “And how exactly did you jump to that conclusion?”

“Oh, so you wouldn’t have a problem with Harry treating your sister the same way he’s been treating Parvati then?”

“What the hell are you talking about, Hermione? Why would Harry...” he started to say, and then he cottoned onto what she was hinting at. “Harry isn’t interested in Ginny,” he stated. “I already told you, he fancies someone else.”

“Yes, I know,” Hermione replied, forcing herself not to roll her eyes back at him. “The problem is, Harry needs to be pushed a bit before he’s going to do anything about it. Why do you think I sent that ‘someone else’ up to spend the night with him in your room?”

“You did what? But I thought... no,” Ron argued, unwilling to accept that reason when there was a less complicated one to latch onto, “she went up there so we could be alone, not so she could be alone with Harry.”

“That too,” Hermione agreed. “This way we all get what we want. And I know that deep down you were hoping this would happen when she dumped Michael, so don’t bother pretending that you’re opposed to the idea.”

“But Ginny doesn’t fancy Harry anymore,” Ron fired back, too stubborn to give up just yet. “If she did, she wouldn’t be seeing that tosser Devane?”

“David Devane is a perfectly nice boy.”

“Just because he’s a Prefect, that doesn’t automatically make him a nice guy,” Ron grumbled. “Malfoy is a Prefect and he’s a--”

“That is hardly a fair comparison,” Hermione cut in, before he had a chance to say what he really thought about Malfoy. “You don’t like David because he’s not Harry,” she added, “Unfortunately for David, deep down, Ginny feels the same way. Just because she’s trying to move on, that doesn’t mean that she has. But once she realizes Harry’s coming around, she’ll drop David. Mark my words.”

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It had to be close the six in the morning when Harry woke up and realized that he needed to use the loo. He tried to ignore it, because it was such an inconvenience. Not just because the bathroom was several floors below the room he was sleeping in, but because it was the dead of winter and he knew it would be cold when he got out of bed.

Nothing like a blast of frigid air to wake you up when what you really want to do is roll over and fall back asleep, he grumble to himself, as he gave in to the inevitable, reluctantly threw his covers off,
and stumbled out of his warm bed.

If it hadn’t been dusky when he opened his eyes and glanced at the window to gauge how much longer he’d have to lie in, Harry wouldn’t have even bothered getting up. But it was still a deep blue outside, which meant he’d have time to fall back asleep, provided he didn’t allow himself to wake up completely in the first place. Even so, he wasn’t going to waste time fumbling around for his glasses and looking for a dressing gown. He wasn’t liable to meet anyone in the hallway, so he opted to make a run for it as he was, so he could get back in bed as soon as possible.

And that strategy worked, because he was back in Ron’s bedroom and sliding back under the covers of his bed in no time. The problem was Harry happened to look at his best mate’s bed as he was doing it, and that’s when he realized he wasn’t sharing a room with Ron anymore. Not unless the twins had slipped him some sort of hair growing potion the night before, which was entirely possible, but even that wouldn’t explain why the leg jetting out from beneath the orange bedspread was shorter than it should have been by several inches.

Not just shorter, Harry realized, as he snatched his glasses off Ron’s bedside table and thrust them on, so he could clearly see what was in front of him. More shapely and smoother as well, but with just as many freckles, he thought, allowing his eyes to wander over the speckled calf and up the exposed thigh.

That’s not Hermione, that’s Ginny, he realized, taking note of the fact that the further up her leg his eyes wandered, the fewer freckles were visible against the creamy skin illuminated by the pale morning light.

I wonder where the freckles end, Harry thought. Or if they end at all. Maybe she has them all the way up.

Stop it, he chastised himself, closing his eyes to avoid the temptation of scrutinizing her any further. Not that it mattered all that much because the image of what he’d just been staring at was still crystal clear in his mind.

That’s Ginny you’re talking about, not some tart flashing a bit of leg for you to ogle. You shouldn’t be looking at her like that and you definitely shouldn’t be thinking things like that. Not about Ginny.

I do not fancy Ginny. It doesn’t matter what Hermione thinks, it’s just hormones. I don’t fancy Ginny. I can’t.

If only Harry actually believed what he was telling himself. But rather than contemplate what he really felt about his best friend’s little sister, as Hermione had suggested he do, Harry did what he’d been doing for the past few weeks. He pushed his feelings and all of the questions he preferred to leave unanswered aside, and focused on a topic that was safer to ponder.

Where’s Ron? he asked himself.

“Oh right,” he said, throwing himself back into his pillow with a sigh.

If Ginny is in here, that probably means Ron spent the night with Hermione in her room.

And there they were, images he didn’t want to have, running thought his head again. But the mental pictures of Ron and Hermione spending the night together quickly transformed into images of him and a girl with long red hair; long red hair that spread out on her pillow as she lay beneath him and wrapped her freckled legs firmly around his body.

STOP IT! Harry shouted in his head. You can NOT do this.
It was bad enough that he’d been dreaming about her ever since Hermione lectured him about sorting out his feelings, but to fantasize about her while she was lying less then five feet away from him was taking it too far.

How was he not supposed to think about her though? She was lying right there, wearing God knows what, in a bed that was damn near beside him. There was no getting away from her now. And as long as she was there, the nagging questions were there as well.

It had been so much easier to put off thinking about her when they were still at school and he could avoid seeing her. Hogwarts was a big place and it had been a simple enough matter for Harry to disappear when he wanted to. It certainly didn’t hurt that Ginny was a fifth year and so bogged down with holiday homework that she spent every afternoon in the Library for a solid week trying to get it out of the way.

But now that they were at the Burrow and restricted to the house, there was no way he could avoid Ginny for any length of time. He couldn’t pop down to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and distract himself by helping Tonks work with Ron and Hermione. He couldn’t sneak off to the Owlry or visit Hagrid anytime he wanted. He couldn’t even use his Occlumency as an excuse anymore, because Dumbledore had taken over where Snape had left off and after a handful of intense lessons during the first week of break, he’d stated that he was satisfied with Harry’s progress and reduced their meetings to once a month.

The one saving grace about being at the Burrow was that someone else was always around, so while he couldn’t avoid Ginny altogether, he didn’t have to be alone with her either. Until now that is. It was just the two of them now; alone, in a bedroom, with nothing to do but... sleep.

Only Harry knew he wasn’t going to be doing anymore sleeping this morning. If he nodded off and had a dream about her while she was in the room, it could lead to some awkward questions.

Then an even more horrifying thought occurred to Harry. What if this isn’t just a one time thing? What if she spends every night up here so Ron and Hermione can be together?

OH GOD! This is so not good. I can’t sleep in the same room as Ginny, but how am I supposed to tell Ron that without explaining why? What the hell am I going to do?

“Stop it,” a groggy voice grumbled, only this time the words were spoken out loud and not in Harry’s head. “Can’t you see I’m trying to sleep here?” Ginny mumbled, her face still buried in her brother’s pillow. “And believe it or not,” she said, rolling over so her back was to him, “it’s rather hard to do that with you flopping around like a gigantic fish out of water, so knock it off.”

“Sorry,” Harry said guiltily. He had thrown himself back into his pillow as he contemplated his situation. More than once actually. He’d even groaned. At least he was fairly sure he had. But the truth was, he hadn’t been paying all that much attention to how much noise he was making. He could set off a box of the Weasleys’ Wildfire Whiz-bangs in the middle of the room and Ron would likely sleep right through it. He’d just assumed that Ginny would be as sound of a sleeper as her brother was. Obviously not. “I’ll just get up and...”

“Can’t,” Ginny’s muffled voice cut in. “Not until Ron comes back,” she added, rolling over on her back and throwing one arm over her eyes as she yawned. “If Mum sees you’re up, she’ll insist that Ron get up as well. It’s his duty to be a ‘proper host’ and all that rubbish. Can’t have her barging in here to drag him out of bed when he’s not here, so you’re just going to have to stay put for a little while. Just... read a book or something. That’s what Hermione does. What time is it anyway?” she asked, covering her mouth and yawning again.
“Just after six,” Harry replied, after pulling his arm out from under his covers and glancing at his watch.

“Well, Ron won’t be up until he smells food,” Ginny said, her eyes still shut tightly. “Especially with what Hermione had in mind, so it looks like you’re stuck with me. For the next couple hours anyway. And now that you’ve woken me up, it’s your responsibility to keep me entertained.”

That’s not what she meant, Harry groaned in his head, trying to will his body not to react to her unintentional proposition. Bugger it all. Now I’m going to have to stay in bed until she leaves. What did I ever do to deserve this torture?
Chapter 37: The Snog Frog

?The next time you and Hermione decide to shag in the kitchen while the rest of us are asleep,? Bill said, as he threw open the door to his brother?s bedroom and walked inside completely uninvited. ?Do us all a favor and remember to take your clothes with you when you leave,? he finished, heaving Ron?s balled up dressing gown and pajama top at the lump in his bed.

?Unless you really do want Mum to find out what you?ve been up to,? Charlie added, stepping into the room behind Bill and shutting the door. ?You?re lucky I took pity on you and brought those upstairs with me.?

?CHARLIE!? Ginny shrieked, sending the chessboard that was set up on Harry?s bed tumbling as she sprang up and threw herself at her brother, who staggered backwards in surprise. ?What are you doing here??

?Me?? Charlie asked, his eyes jumping from Harry, to Bill, who seemed just as startled as Charlie was to find his baby sister on Harry?s bed. ?What are you doing in here,? he demanded. ?Where?s Ron?? he asked, when Bill yanked the blankets on their brother?s bed down and they both realized the lump underneath was nothing but a pillow.

?Forget I asked,? Charlie said, at the same instant Bill Apparated out of the room. ?Obviously he?s with Hermione,? he added, when Ginny finally stopped trying to squeeze the life out of him and took a step back. ?So this is how it is?? he asked, grabbing the collar of her nightgown on impulse and tugging it to the side so he could see if she had a chain hanging around her neck.

?What are you doing?? Ginny asked, batting her brother?s hand away from herself. ?Stop looking at me like that,? she demanded. ?I slept in Ron?s bed, not Harry?s. You aren?t going to find any marks on my neck, or anywhere else,? she assured him. ?Not that it?s any of your business,? she added as an afterthought. ?If I wanted to snog Harry, I would, and you?re big brother antics wouldn?t stop me.?

?What about L?anain talismans?? Charlie asked somberly, narrowing his eyes and glowering at Harry. ?You two sporting a pair of those??

?WHAT?? Ginny cried in alarm.

?NO!? Harry said at nearly the same time, his eyes going wide behind his glasses as Ginny?s older brother continued to stare him down.

?What are you talking about?? Ginny asked, recovering enough to try and feign confusion.

?Don?t pretend you don?t know what I?m talking about,? her brother cut in, finally looking away from Harry and directing his scowl at his sister instead. ?Ron already admitted that you both know what he?s done, so you might as well fess up.?

?Huh?? Harry said in shock, locking eyes with Ginny, who seemed equally surprised.

Ron wouldn?t really admit something like that, would he? Harry asked himself. *No way? Not unless he had to. I best keep my mouth shut and follow Ginny?s lead on this one. She has more experience dealing with Charlie than I do.*
Seriously, Charlie,? Ginny said, wrinkling her brow together and doing a convincing job of looking confused. ?I have no idea what you?re talking about. Why would Ron--?

I saw it,? Charlie stated, taking two steps backwards as he cut Ginny off, so he could look back and forth between the pair to gauge their reaction. ?I Flooed in while they were snogging in the kitchen and I saw the talisman hanging around Ron?s neck. And I know Hermione had one too, so don?t bother.?

?Oh that,? Ginny lied straight-faced. ?That?s just one of those rubbishy old protection charms. He gave Hermione one for her birthday.?

?Bollocks,? Charlie cried. ?Ron knows that protection charms don?t work, and they certainly don?t hurl people across the room.?

?He did not,? Ginny said despite herself, her brown eyes going wide with surprise. Ron wasn?t thick enough to use the Lànain against his own brother, was he? Okay, so he probably was, but in order to do that, Ron would have to perceive Charlie as a threat to Hermione in some fashion.

?What did you do to Hermione?? she asked.

?Nothing.?

?Liar.?

?You?re one to talk,? Charlie retorted.

?You?re the one making thing up just to see if you can trick us,? Ginny shot back.

?Look, Ginny, I know that they?re married,? Charlie stated point blank. ?And I know that you two know, because they admitted it. Of course Hermione was just using me as a test run for Mum, and then she was going to Obliviate me, but that?s an entirely different matter.?

Now that sounds like Hermione, Harry thought.

In fact the more he thought about it, the more that made perfect sense. Hermione was prone to over reacting these days, especially when she felt his safety or Ron?s was an issue. She didn?t know Charlie as well as she did the other members of the Weasley family, certainly not well enough to predict what he?d do with that sort of information. Harry could definitely see why she might feel it was safer for all of them to just take that knowledge away. So why hadn?t she followed through? Why hadn?t she Obliviated him?

?I know that you know exactly what I?m talking about,? Charlie reiterated. ?So you might as well save yourself the trouble of denying it, because I?m not going to buy your innocent act this time. You know what?s going on and you?re going to tell me.?

?Why?? Ginny asked, crossing her arms in front of her chest defiantly. ?You seem to have all the answers already,? she added, giving him a look that said I can be just as stubborn as you can. ?I?m not saying anything until you tell us what the hell is going on, starting with this nonsense about Ron hurling you across the room.?

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?BILL!? Mrs. Weasley shouted, when her son surprised her by materialized in the center of the kitchen with a loud crack. ?Honestly?? she said, snatching a bowl of porridge off the counter and setting it down on the table beside her husband, who was perusing Hermione?s morning edition of
Ron had just shut off the water to the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist when a loud
crack on the other side of the shower curtain announced the arrival of one of his brothers.

Bloody tossers, he swore under his breath, all set to yank the material separating them aside so he could tell whoever it was off for entering the room without knocking first. What if it had been Hermione in the bathroom instead of him? When were they going to get it through their thick skulls that they couldn’t just pop into a room any time they wanted to while she was here? But before he had a chance to do it, the shower curtain moved aside, seemingly of its own accord.

?Bill?? Ron said in surprise, when his brother?s perturbed face appeared in front of him and two hands slammed down on his shoulders to prevent him from turning around. ?What are you doing?? he asked. He’d expected Fred or George, not Bill.

?DAMN IT, RON!? Bill shouted, his eyes locked on the silver charm hanging around his brother?s neck, rather than his startled face. ?How could you do something so stupid? What in the world made you think you could get away with this?? he asked, dragging Ron out of the bathtub and pushing him towards the door.

?Charlie told you--?

?You’re damn right he did,? Bill said, throwing the door open and shoving his brother through it. ?He also told me that Tonks knew about this. I’m going to kill her the next time I see her,? he ranted, as he marched his brother up the stairs.

?Will you shut up before Mum hears you,? Ron hissed, scurrying to his room as quickly as he could, now that he realized that was where Bill was trying to direct him. If he had to have this conversation again, and apparently he did, he did not want to do it in middle of the hallway where anyone could walk by and hear them.

?I can’t believe she knew about this and she didn’t tell me,? Bill continued to rage. ?Surely she didn’t fall for that ?we’re only trying to protect each other? rubbish you tried to feed Charlie last night,? he said, following Ron into his bedroom. ?That might have flown if you hadn’t consummated it.?

?Oh my God!? Ginny shrieked, covering her eyes and spinning around when she realized Ron was wearing nothing but a towel. ?This is so not something I want to hear,? she moaned. ?I can’t believe you. When Hermione said you’d just barge in on them, I thought she was exaggerating, but... couldn’t you at least let them get dressed first? I mean... eeeewww!?

?He was in the shower,? Bill said. ?By himself,? he added, when Charlie arched an eyebrow. ?Hermione is down in the kitchen helping Mum with breakfast.?

?Ahh. Hold on,? Charlie said, when Ginny tried to make a run for the door. ?Where do you think you’re going? Downstairs to warn Hermione, perhaps??

?Trust me,? his sister replied. ?She doesn’t need me to do that. She’ll be up here in no time.?

As if on cue, there was a loud banging on the door, followed instantly by Hermione?s voice. ?Harry, open the door. Is Ron in there with you, because something’s...Oh,? she said, her entire face blooming with color when Bill threw open the door and she spotted Charlie standing in the center of the room. ?Um, never mind,? she said weakly, understanding exactly why Ron was feeling panicked now.


?Starkers,? Ginny moaned. ?Can I go now??
No!? Bill and Charlie said in unison, just as Hermione stepped into the room, slammed the door behind herself, and Imperturbed it with a swish of her wand. She might not be able to keep Ron?s two eldest brother?s in the dark about certain things any longer, but she was damn sure going to make sure that Fred and George stayed there.

What were you two thinking?? Bill asked Ron, who still hadn?t moved or made the vaguest attempt to put on more than the towel he was wearing.

Obviously they weren?t,? Charlie answered for him. ?No offense, Hermione,? he added. ?I?m sure you?re a perfectly nice girl and I know Ron is crazy about you, but this just insane. You couldn?t possibly be ready for something this??

...permanent,? Bill cut in.

You?re the first girlfriend Ron?s had,? Charlie continued, with what was obviously a rehearsed speech, ?and you?ve only been together for six months.?

Try six years,? Ron shot back defensively, stepping in front of Hermione as if he were trying to protect her from his brother?s words.

Oh please,? Bill said, once he was able to stop goggling at his brother?s ludicrous statement. ?What planet do you live on? Six years my arse.?

And how the hell did you get your hands on not one, but two Lânain talismans to begin with?? Charlie asked. ?If you?ve been skulking around Knockturn Alley...?

He found them at Grimmauld Place,? Ginny sighed, flopping down on her brother?s bed and getting comfortable when she realized Ron was going to use the ?let them rant until they wear themselves out? strategy. Sometimes it really was the best course of action to take, especially when the person raving wasn?t ready to listen to what you had to say just yet, but it tended to take a long time for one Weasley to wind down, let alone two.

Not that it?s any of your business,? Ron added, catching the balled up dressing gown his sister snatched up and tossed at him. ?I wasn?t going to let Mum chuck them out,? he said, taking Ginny?s hint and throwing the dressing gown on over his towel. ?Not when I knew I could use them to protect--?

Not this rubbish again,? Charlie moaned loudly.

It?s not rubbish,? Ron insisted.

Yes, apparently you can use it to hurl family members across the room,? Bill retorted.

I did not!? Ron shouted, clearly offended by the accusation.

I?ll be talking to Tonks about that too, you can bet on that. What was she thinking teaching you how to do something like that??

Will you just show them what you?re talking about so they?ll shut up and leave us alone already?? Ginny said to Ron.

She?s right,? Hermione said, stepping away from Ron and handing her wand off to Harry for safe keeping. ?Let?s just get this over with before your mum gets suspicious. Stun him,? she said to Bill.

What??
?Stun him,? Hermione repeated, looking very much like someone that was being forced to do something she?d rather not do.

?Are you mad??

?Just do it,? Ginny groaned. ?Then you?ll see what--?

?Stupefy,? Charlie cried, drawing his wand while Bill was arguing with them and nailing his baby brother square in the chest with his spell.

None of them was surprised when Ron keeled over. The thing that caught Bill and Charlie off guard was the fact that Hermione fell to the ground as well. But that was nothing compared to the astonishment they both experienced when they both stood back up, Hermione on her own and Ron with a little help from Harry.

?What the hell?? Bill asked, as he watched Ron stand on wobbly feet and sink down on the edge of Harry?s bed, shaking his head as if he were trying to clear it.

?Holy shit.?

?You didn?t do it right,? Bill said to Charlie, but you could tell from the tone of voice he used that he didn?t believe what he was saying.

?You try it then,? Charlie replied, flipping his wand around and offering it to his brother.

?If you hit one of them again without reviving them first, you?ll knock them both out,? Harry said. ?We tried all sorts of combinations, but the results were always the same. Near as we can tell, most spells that effect the body are dispersed between both of them. If you stun Ron, he?ll be more affected, but they?ll both go down.?

?Of course they both get up again as well,? Ginny added. ?That?s something Voldemort and his cronies won?t expect. The only way to knock either of them out for good is to stun them both at the same time...?

?...or hit one of them twice in rapid succession,? Harry finished. ?Of course if you stun Ron and I revive Hermione at the same time the two spells will cancel each other out and nothing happens.?

?I?ve never heard of the Lânain doing any such thing,? Charlie said disbelievingly.

?That?s because it?s not just the Lânain,? Hermione admitted. ?It?s the bond forged by the Lânain working in combination with a Coupling Potion.?

?Oh my God,? Charlie moaned, closing his eyes and sinking down on the edge of Harry?s bed beside his brother. ?This is so much worse than I thought.?

?Or better,? Ron said. ?It all depends on how you?re looking at it.?

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For a moment, neither Bill, nor Charlie knew what to say in response to Ron?s comment. Not only had he used a dodgy artifact, like a Lânain talisman, to tie himself to one of his best friends, he?d confounded the problem by linking himself to her with a Coupling Potion as well. They hadn?t just invested a small bit of their magic in one another as the two brothers originally thought; they?d linked themselves, bodies and soul.
A Coupling Potion? Bill repeated the words in his head in disbelief.

That’s not something I remember being covered in my N.E.W.T classes, he finally said, more to himself than to anyone else in particular. How did you even know how to brew something like that??

Yeah, what the hell is Snape playing at teaching you--?

Please, Ron replied, rolling his eyes. As if we need him when we have Hermione. Oh come on, he stated, when Charlie glanced at Bill and looked even more disturbed than he had the night before when Ron used the Lànain against him. They don?t call her the brightest witch of our age for nothing.?

You know it?s true, he said, when Hermione blushed and he felt her self-consciousness pour into him.

RONALD WEASLEY!? Mrs. Weasley shrieked as his bedroom door unceremoniously flew open, taking everyone in the room by surprise. It better not have been you that Imperturbed this door. What is the meaning of...? she started to say and then stopped short when she realized Ron and Hermione were far from being alone in his bedroom.

Bill?? she said, clearly not expecting to find her eldest son standing in the center of the room, let alone, Ginny, Harry and...Charlie? Oh, Charlie,? she cried happily, all thoughts of Imperturbed bedrooms and snogging teenagers having vanished from her mind.

Way to ruin your surprise, Mum, Charlie said, intentionally shifting the blame for the shielded door onto himself, as he rose up off Ron?s bed and crossed the room to give his mother a quick kiss on the cheek.

When did you get here?? George asked from the hallway, where he and Fred had obviously been lurking in hopes of eavesdropping as Ron and Hermione were told off.

Last night, Charlie answered over their mother?s head as she continued to hug him. Late last night, he amended, going out of his way to explain why the twins hadn?t known he was home. He knew it wouldn?t put them off indefinitely, but he was hoping that at the very least he?d prevent them from asking too many questions until their mother was out of earshot.

Most of you were already asleep, he continued. I was planning on surprising the rest of you at breakfast, but the trip must have taken more out of me than I thought. Did I miss it?? he asked his mother, sounding truly disappointed. Breakfast I mean, because I?ve been dreaming about a hot, home cooked meal for days.?

Of course not, Mrs. Weasley answered, beaming at her second son. I was just coming up to wake your brother and Harry. Oh Charlie, it?s so good to see you, but you really should have let us know you were coming, she scolded, as he ushered her out of Ron?s bedroom. Your father has already left for work. He?ll be so disappointed that he missed you. We?ll send him an owl of course, but he has some??

Some what?? Ginny asked when her mother turned around, glanced back into Ron?s room, and abruptly stopped speaking.

Never you mind, young lady.?

So it?s something to do with the Order then, Ginny said knowingly, her eyes jumping from her mother to Bill, who was just as likely to know what it was about.
Enough, Mrs. Weasley snapped. Downstairs. Now. The lot of you. Or your breakfast will get cold.

Remarkably enough after breakfast was over, Ron managed to avoid his brothers without much trouble. Bill, though obviously reluctant to do so, Flooed to work when he was finished eating, although not without fixing his baby brother with a look that let him know the conversation they'd been having before their mother interrupted was far from over.

The twins, who were their own bosses and set their own hours, opted to stay at the Burrow however, much to Ron's chagrin. Hermione's abrupt departure from the kitchen that morning had obviously alerted Fred and George to the fact that something unusual was afoot, and apparently they weren't completely convinced that Charlie's visit was all there was too it. And it certainly didn't help matters any that Hermione, who had spent most of the morning hidden away in Ginny's bedroom - studying? for her upcoming Apparition test, blushed as soon as Ginny managed to dragged her downstairs again and she spotted Charlie in the kitchen with his mother.

Ginny, dear, Mrs. Weasley said, popping her head into the sitting room before either of the twins had an opportunity to start questioning Hermione. Go upstairs and tell your brother and Harry to come down. I need to speak to them for a moment. And come back down with them, she added, almost as an afterthought, before disappearing back into the kitchen, because I need to speak to you as well.

All right, what gives? Fred asked Charlie, when he entered the room and Hermione immediately ducked around him and followed Mrs. Weasley out of sight.

What are you talking about? Charlie asked nonchalantly, picking up the morning copy of the Daily Prophet and flipping to the sports section as he fell down in the nearest chair.

Why is it that Hermione keeps blushing...?

...and leaves the room, every time you get within five feet of her? George finished.

No idea, Charlie answered, his face now hidden from view behind the paper.

Yeah, right, George shot back. Did you Apparate into the loo this morning and find it already occupied or something? he sniggered, his eyes jumping from Charlie to his twin brother, who was holding his wand over a box of what appeared to be a stationary chocolate frog.

Kneazle got your tongue, eh? Fred chimed in when Charlie didn't respond. Looks like we'll just have to coax it out of Ronnikins then, he said, squirreling his wand away as they listened to the sound of three separate pairs of feet clomping down the stairs.

Oy, Ron! George said, as soon as his brother came into view. What's with your girlfriend and the turnip impersonation? She wouldn't by chance have a sudden interest in dragons, would she?

Huh? Ron said, more than a little caught off guard by the odd questions.

Or maybe it's dragon-keepers she interested in? Fred sniggered.

Hardly, Charlie chortled, closing the Prophet and tossing it on the closest table as Ron cottoned on to what the twins were insinuating and quickly narrowed his eyes.

It's no big deal, Charlie stated, before Ron had a chance to tell the twins to go to hell. But since
you refuse to drop it,? he said, lowering his voice and glancing at the kitchen to make sure their mother wasn?t going to overhear him. ?Ron was in the kitchen last night when I Flooed in, and he wasn?t alone if you catch my meaning. A little embarrassing for all concerned,? Charlie added, as Ron?s face instantly took on a lovely red tinge, ?but we?ll all live.?

?HO!? George shouted.

?Nothing like a little midnight snack, eh Ronnikins?? Fred chuckled.

?You?ll shut up if you know what?s good for you,? Ron growled back.

?I?m really scared now, Fred,? George scoffed. ?What about you??

?Terrified.?

?You?ll be singing a different tune when he tells Hermione what you just called her and she hexes the pair of you,? Ginny said, clearly insulted by the ?midnight snack? reference on Hermione?s behalf. ?Thought so,? she said with some satisfaction, as the twins fell silent for a moment while they each contemplated whether or not they wanted to tempt that fate.

?Well, that makes it official anyway,? George finally chuckled, ignoring the fact that Ron was still scowling at him. ?Every member of the family scared for life.?

?Except Percy,? Harry said without really meaning to say it out loud.

?Git,? Fred and Ron said at the same time.

Percy, had sent a rather impersonal Christmas card to their mother, but it had contained no well wishes or personal comments whatsoever, just a hurried signature. Mrs. Weasley chose to view it as a sign that Percy might be ready to reach out and make amends with his family, but most of her children suspected that it was little more than a form letter of sorts he signed without thinking and sent out to a number of people. If he?d wanted to reach out, he would have delivered it to his father personally at work, but he chose to have a Ministry owl deliver it instead.

?He doesn?t count,? George added.

?Like it or not, he?s still family,? Charlie stated.

?Not,? Fred exclaimed rather loudly so no one would doubt what his preference was.

?All right, you lot,? Mrs. Weasley said, choosing that particular moment to step into the room again. ?I have to go to headquarters for a little while and take care of some things so your father can come home straight from work. Charlie is in charge,? she said, looking directly at Fred and George. ?I?ll be back well before dinner,? she added, glancing around at the rest of them. ?You three are not to set one foot outside this house,? she said to Ron, Harry and Ginny. ?Is that clear? Not for any reason, and that includes Quidditch. I?ve cast a locking charm on the broom shed anyway,? she informed them. ?And don?t think I won?t know if you try and convince one of your brothers or Hermione to break though it. Your lunch is in the kitchen,? she said, glancing around at all of her children one last time and then vanishing from the room with a loud pop.

?Where are you going?? Charlie asked Ron, who waited until everyone else was moving towards the kitchen and tried to slink off towards the staircase instead of following. ?Not hungry, eh? Or perhaps it?s conversation you want to avoid,? he whispered, throwing his arm over his brother?s shoulder and steering him back towards the kitchen. ?Because we?re definitely not finished talking about what you?ve done. But that won?t be happening as long as Fred and George are around, so there is no
need to starve yourself.

?Rotten luck,? Fred sniggered, as Ron took a seat directly opposite from Harry, who had already grabbed a sandwich off the platter in the center of the table and tucked in.

?Corned beef,? Ron groaned, wrinkling his nose up in revulsion and dropping the sandwich he?d grabbed down on his plate uneaten when he realized what it was.

?Here,? Hermione said, snatching her plate of the kitchen counter and leaning over the table to swap it with Ron?s, before taking the seat beside Harry.

?Hey,? George whined, as he stared down at the pair of sandwiches sitting in the middle of his brother?s plate and realized Hermione had made them out of the previous nights left over chicken. ?What about the rest of us. Maybe we?d rather have chicken too.?

?You have two hands don?t you?? Hermione replied, before picking Ron?s discarded corned beef up off her plate and biting into it.

?Yeah,? Ginny agreed. ?If you want something else, go make it yourself.?

?You?ve got two,? George said to Ron, who was looking rather smug and thoroughly pleased with his lunch now. ?Give me one of those.?

?No way,? he replied, throwing his arm out to block his brother?s view and guard his plate at the same time. ?Hermione made these for me, not you.?

?What?? he asked, when he noticed Charlie scowling at him. ?It?s not like I asked her to wait on me or anything,? he said, his ears taking on the same tint as Hermione?s cheeks because they both knew what Charlie was thinking.

?What was that?? Fred asked, when Charlie mumbled something unintelligible under his breath and reached for the platter of sandwiches in the center of the table.

?Nothing,? Charlie insisted, although he continued to watch Ron out of the corner of his eye the entire time they were in the kitchen, waiting to see if he?d order Hermione to do something else for him.

Charlie wasn?t quite sure what to make of the situation just yet. He hadn?t been around Hermione enough to know what to expect from her. If she?d gone out of her way to make something special for Ron to eat as a sign of affection, that was one thing, but if she?d done it because she had a Länain talisman around her neck and Ron expected her to, that was quite another.

Fortunately, Charlie saw no signs of Ron treating his ?wife? as his personal servant at any time during the course of their meal. Of course that didn?t mean Charlie was completely convinced yet. He was definitely going to keep a close eye on them until he got a better handle on what exactly was going on.

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?FRED!?? Ron bellowed at the top of his lungs several hours later, his angry voice reverberated through the house as he chased his brother down the staircase. ?GET YOUR ARSE BACK UP HERE AND FIX HIM RIGHT NOW!?

?Him?? Ginny asked in surprise, dragging her eyes off the groaning staircase and locking them on George, who?d been standing beside Hermione in the sitting room for the past forty minutes, talking
her through the proper way to Apparate while helping her vanish from one side of the room and appear on the other via Side-Along-Apparition.

“You only offered to help Hermione because you wanted to distract her,” she said accusingly. “What have you two done to Harry?” she shouted, jumping out of her chair and glowering at one brother as his identical twin streaked through the room.

“You’re going to fix it,” Ron said, doing an abrupt about face and focusing his attention on George when the kitchen door banged shut, announcing that Fred had made it into the safety of the yard Ron had been forbidden to enter.

“Now hold on,” George protested, vanishing from the spot his brother was bearing down on and materializing on the other side of the room, making sure the sofa was between them for good measure. “I didn’t do it. It wasn’t my idea. It wasn’t even meant for Harry.”

“No,” Ron shouted, his anger kicking up another notch when what he suspected was confirmed. It had been his chocolate frogs the two of them had been eating when Harry abruptly stopped speaking, started croaking, and then vanishing right before Ron’s eyes with a puff and green smoke. “It was supposed to be me,” he cried resentfully.

“Well, yeah,” George admitted without shame, trying hard not to snigger as Charlie entered the room carrying a frog twice the size of Trevor in his hands, “but there’s a reason for that. You’re the only one who has a girlfriend handy to counteract the spell.”

“Harry, I presume?” Charlie asked, holding the frog up in the air.

“What?” Hermione yelped, the shock and horror that had been leaching out of Ron now combining with her own.

“You turned him into a frog?” Ginny shrieked.

“And now you’re telling us that you can’t fix him?” Ron shouted.


“Hermione can still do it,” Fred shouted through the window with a wicked grin, as he was still standing outside and had a wall between himself and his brother.

“Do what?” Ginny demanded.

“Why kiss him of course,” George replied, as if the answer ought to be blatantly obvious. But if the stunned expressions plastered on everyone’s face were any indication, they hadn’t seen it coming. “We got the idea from one of those Muggle fairy stories. You have to kiss the frog if you want him to turn back into Prince Charming. Not that you’ve ever been charming,” he said to Ron. “So there is every chance that even if Hermione did kiss you, you’d remain a frog.”

“NO! No. No. No. No, was all Hermione could think.

“KISS HIM!” Ron shouted indignantly.

“I am NOT kissing a frog,” Hermione finally stated.

“It’s not a frog,” Fred said loudly from behind the closed window, “It’s Harry.”

“He’s still all slimy and I am NOT doing that.”
Oh, but you?ll kiss Ron?? George scoffed. ?That?s even more disturbing, if you ask me.?

You two did this,? Charlie stated, ?so you can fix it.?

I?m not kissing a bloke,? George protested loudly.

So you prefer we chuck Harry in that old tank up in Ron?s room for safekeeping and leave him there until Mum gets home, do you??

Oh for Merlin?s sake, I?ll do it,? Ginny said, her cheeks blooming with color as nearly everyone in the room goggled at her. ?Hand him over,? she said to Charlie, who for a moment appeared to actually prefer his idea of shoving Harry in Ron?s old terrarium, but then he seemed to think better of it and reluctantly handed him to his sister.

Does it matter where I kiss him?? she asked George, who seemed to be stuck somewhere between amused observer and wary big brother for a moment. But he must have decided that watching his sister peck a bloke in frog form was too good of an opportunity to pass up, because he answered her question.

On the mouth of course.?

It?s not funny,? Ron insisted, as he moved forward to stand beside Hermione, who was biting her lip and trying very hard not to crack a smile now. Unfortunately when the Harry-frog started croaking in protest she couldn?t hold it in anymore and hid her face against Ron in hoped of muffling her chuckles.

First person that cracks a Ginny snogged a frog joke dies,? the young redhead hissed, clearly uncomfortable now that there was no turning back and everyone was watching her expectantly.

If that were really me, you wouldn?t seriously leave me like that, would you?? Ron asked Hermione, causing her to snigger even harder as Ginny spun around so her back was facing the group and marched into the kitchen with Harry still struggling to leap out of her hands.

Ginny barely stepped out of the room when there was a loud crack, followed by a brief interval of music that sounded very much like miniature trumpets announcing the return of ?Prince? Harry. This was the final straw for Hermione, who gave up all pretenses and burst into full-blown laughter, made worse when Charlie snapped, ?What?s taking them so damn long?? when neither Ginny or Harry returned from the kitchen straight away.

No, don?t,? Hermione said, latching on to Ron?s arm when he looked like he was about to move towards the kitchen door and investigate. ?They?re embarrassed. We would be too if it had been us. Just leave them alone for a minute. They?ll come back out once we stop laughing.?

You?re the only one laughing,? Ron snapped, which was completely true, although George had a rather large grin on his face. And Fred, well Fred had disappeared from the window, but he walked out of the kitchen door moments later with a completely human Harry, who?s face was so red it rivaled the most vivid Weasley blush.

Sorry about that, mate,? Fred said, sounding remarkably sincere. ?You?re not exactly the test subject I was aiming for,? he confessed, ?but no harm done, right? You appear to be wart free anyway.?

Might want to hop upstairs and check yourself out though,? George advised. ?You shouldn?t have any problems, but if you find anything, let us know. Fred had a wicked case the first time he sampled one of our patented Snog Frogs, but...?
we’ve worked that kink out.

And Fred still has the ointment if you need any.

So, Fred said loudly, clearly trying to steer the topic away from his case of warts and back to what Harry was experiencing. Any other side effects? Got your voice back? Not feeling any sudden cravings for bugs are you? Those’ll pass, if you are. Let’s see your tongue, not sticky is it? For a moment there I thought you might actually be stuck to Ginny when I yanked the two of you apart.

Oh God, Harry moaned, covering his face with both hands and sinking down into the nearest chair as if he hoped it would shallow him whole. He just kissed Ginny Weasley and three quarters of her family knew about it. All right, so technically she kissed him, but he hadn’t pulled away from her when he transformed back into himself and discovered her hands still cupping his face and her lips still pressed firmly against his own.

He continued to kiss Ginny in human form and she hadn’t shrieked, pulled away, slapped him or looked disgusted by it. Okay, so she was more than a little flustered when Fred barged into the kitchen, dragged Harry off her, and shoved him into the sitting room, but she hadn’t pulled away from him on her own. That had to mean something, right?

Wait, a little voice screamed in his head. What did it mean exactly? Could it be possible that Ginny still fancied him a little? Is that why she hadn’t pecked him quickly, then pulled away in revulsion to watch him transform? Was it possible that she continued kissing him because she wanted to kiss him as a human? If Fred hadn’t barged in, would her soft lips still be locked on his? The mere thought of that possibility sent Harry’s heart fluttering out of his chest and into his throat as a wonderful warmth washed over his body. But then he remembered that Ginny had a boyfriend and his heart plummeted to the pit of his stomach, where it promptly began to churn around in a manner that quite literally made him feel ill.

Voice works anyway, George said, mentally checking that possible side effect off a list in his head. All in all, I’d say it appears to be a smashing success.

I’ll show you smashing, Ron barked, still holding a grudge because he had been the intended target.

Oh no, you won’t, Charlie insisted, making it clear that he had no intentions of standing back while Ron chased the twins through the house to extract his revenge.

I never said I’d be the one throttling them, Ron shot back. I’m perfectly happy to sit back and watch Mum do it. And she will, he said, smiling in satisfaction. Come on, Harry, let’s go upstairs and... where did Hermione go??

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Ginny?? Hermione said softly, having nipped into the kitchen to check on her friend while the boys’ attention was focused elsewhere. Are you all right?? she asked, when she spotted Ron’s sister leaning against the table, looking rather embarrassed and completely bewildered by what had just happened.

He kissed me back, Ginny stated, sounding oddly distant.

Did he now?? Hermione asked with a wry smile. Well, that’s good, isn’t it? Being yourself finally seems to be paying off.

Hermione?? Ginny groaned, clearly looking for sympathy, not encouragement.
Well, it’s what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? So was it everything you hoped it would be?

He was a frog, the redhead stated tetchily.

Not the entire time.

What am I going to do? Ginny groaned.

Talking to him about it might not be such a bad place to start, Hermione suggested, but if Ginny’s open mouth and incredulous stare was any indication, that wasn’t exactly what she’d been hoping to hear. Or not, Hermione offered. Although pretending that it didn’t happen or that it didn’t mean something if it did, isn’t going to accomplish anything?

I suppose I could just walk in there, kiss him again, and then stand back and see what he has to say about it, the redhead said sardonically, although deep down there was a part of her that was tempted to do just that. Maybe if her brothers weren’t all standing on the other side of that door with Harry, but they were, damn them.

Unfortunately the kiss Ginny had just shared with the boy she’d worshipped since she was ten years old was all but forgotten when a green flame unexpectedly roared to life the fireplace and a very attractive woman with long, flowing blond hair stepped into the kitchen. Hermione and Ginny were so astonished to find themselves face to face with Fleur Delacour, that neither of them said a word. They just stood there, gaping at her as if they’d been struck dumb by her Veela powers, rather than the nerve it took for her to march into someone else’s house uninvited.

Fleur?? Bill called out her name, even as he materialized in the kitchen with a loud crack. Are you-?

I am ere, she replied immediately, hurrying to his side and latching onto him. I am so relieved zat you are ere. I was just about to explain to your seester et Harmony…?

Her-MY-oh-nee, the two girls corrected her in unison.

Lock the door and all the windows, Bill barked at Ginny, as he hurried over to the fireplace and slammed the lever that would shut the flue, temporarily blocking the house off from the Floo Network. NOW! he shouted.

What’s going on? Charlie said, banging through the door separating the kitchen from the sitting room because he’d heard his brother shouting and was concerned by the tone of his voice. What happened?

Dementors, Bill replied, rushing over to the door leading out into the back yard and locking it himself since Ginny seemed to be rooted to the ground where she stood. On Diagon Alley. I didn’t wait around to see how many there were, he said quickly. Just long enough to shove Fleur into the closest fire, but now that I know she got here safely, I’m going back.

NO! Fleur shrieked, latching onto Bill’s arm again.

We’ve already been over this, Bill shouted at her. My brothers might still be–?

Fred and George are here, Charlie interrupted. They just went upstairs with–?

What is it? Ron asked, running up behind Charlie, who was still standing in the doorway and shoving him out of the way so he, Harry and the twins could enter the room. What’s…wrong? he asked, stopping short in the center of the room and gazing at Fleur for a moment, before shaking his
head as if he were trying to clear it and zeroing in on Hermione, whose fear was surging through him.

?There are Dementors on Diagon Alley,? Ginny answered.

?WHAT!? Harry bellowed, jerking his eyes off Fleur and whipping his wand out of his pocket.

?What about the Ministry?? George asked, as his twin brother spun around and marched out of the room.

?All non-essential personnel are being evac...?

?SHIT!? they all heard Fred swear loudly, seconds before he raced back into the room, the Weasley family clock held firmly between his hands. ?This is not good,? he said, holding it up in the air so the rest of his family could see that each and every one of their hands was pointed at Mortal Peril. ?Even Mum?s is--?

?Mum?s at headquarters,? Ginny moaned. ?You don?t think--?

?Headquarters is probably the safest place any of us could be right now,? Bill cut her off. ?I?m sure Mum is fine.?

?But...? Ginny started to protest, however her brothers ignored her.

?What do you reckon?? Charlie asked Bill. ?We could Floo the four of them to headquarters and then you, Fred and George could--?

?No, Dad said not to use the Floo network,? Bill interjected. ?The Dementors might just be the first stage of a larger attack. It could be Death Eaters next.?

?So Dad?s all right then?? George said. ?You?ve seen him??

?But Ginny,? Charlie mumbled under his breath, venturing a quick glance over at his sister.

?We?ll just have to stick together and do our best to watch out for--?

?You could take Hermione at least,? Charlie argued with Bill. ?She?s had enough practice that Side-Along-Apparition wouldn?t be a prob--?

?NO!? Hermione yelled loudly, the shock and fear that she?d been trying to stomp down erupting into full-blown panic at the thought of being separated from Ron and Harry.

She knew what it was like to spend hours alone, sitting in the dark with no idea of what was going on, and no options but to wait for death to come and claim her. She was not going to be sent off and forced to endure that kind of hell again.

?I?m not going to run off and hide while the rest of you--?

?Hermione,? Ron started to argue.

?I SAID NO!? she bellowed so fiercely that even Bill and Charlie stopped discussing their options and stared at her.

Well, that answers one of my questions anyway, Charlie thought, as he watched Hermione shove Ron away from her and cross her arms in front of her chest as she dug in for a fight. She might be a lot of things, but subservient clearly isn?t one of them.
Hermione was not going to bend on this. Charlie could see it, and if the expression of defeat on his brother?s face was any indication, Ron saw it as well. Of course that didn?t necessarily mean he was done trying.

?But...? he managed to say half heartedly, before Hermione cut him off.

?It isn?t going to matter where I am if they attack you, Ron,? she stated.

Ron, who shut his eyes and visibly deflated at this remark, obviously got the point, as did everyone else in the room that knew their souls were connected.

?You don?t seriously think...? Ginny started to ask, but it was so horrific, she didn?t want to finish the statement for fear of having it confirmed. If a Dementor came after her, at least she?d have the opportunity to fend it off, provided her Patronus was strong enough to outlast it. But to know that it was possible, or even probable, that a Dementor could strip her of her soul without even getting near her... No wonder Hermione looked so pale.

?I don?t know,? Hermione moaned, the fierce determination that had been holding her together, crumpling when the guilt and fear Ron was experiencing pumped into her body and combined with her own. ?I just don?t know. It?s possible,? she said, reaching out for Ron again and leaning against him for both comfort and support.

?What?s possible?? Fred asked, glancing around the room at all the somber and fearful faces. ?Something is going on that I don?t know about??

Harry and Ginny looked at one another, as did Bill and Charlie, but none of them answered the question. Harry did eventually break the strained silence however, when he raised his wand and shouted ?Expecto Patronum!?

?Oh Harry, no,? Hermione moaned, when his silver stag shot out of the tip of his wand, cantered over to her and Ron, lowered it?s antlers, and stood between them and the door like a shimmering sentry.

?I don?t care if they do chuck me out of school,? he said defiantly, knowing exactly what Hermione was about to say. ?I?m not going to just stand here and wait around for them to attack us first.?

?But you didn?t need to be the one to do it,? Hermione scolded. ?I could have--?

?No offense, Hermione,? Harry shot back, ?But you have a hard time fending off a Boggart in Dementor form. Trust me, the real thing is much, much worse. I don?t know about Bill or Charlie, but I know for a fact that the rest of you have never done it. If they want to come into this house, they?re going to have to go through me to do it.?

?Harry is right,? Bill said. ?There?s a vast difference between producing a Patronus in a classroom situation and producing one when you?re face to face with a real Dementor that is sucking all the happiness from the room. You three,? he said, pointing at Ron, Ginny, and Hermione, stick with Harry while the rest of us go outside and--?

?You can?t go out there,? Ginny yelped. ?What if--?

?If they?re going to come,? Charlie said calmly, ?They?ll likely wait until it?s dark. Dementor?s prefer misery and darkness to light and cheer. They might feed off happy thoughts, but they revel in fear. If they leave us to stew in it for a while, so much the better for them. Lock all the doors,? he said, pulling out his wand so he could Apparate outside and throw a few hasty wards up to protect the house. They might not stand up to a full scale attack, but they?d pose a bit of a problem and
provide them with a brief warning if any uninvited guests tried to get too close to the house.

?Turn on all the lights,? Bill added, after Charlie had vanished from the room with a loud crack, ?and stay together until we get back. Fred, Apparate to headquarters and let Mum know that we?re all okay, so she doesn?t worry herself sick. George,? he said, glancing at Ginny briefly, before locking eyes with Fleur, ?stay in here and help Harry if??

Nearly everyone in the kitchen jumped when there was an unmistakable knock on the back door. And as if that weren?t startling enough, the eerie silence that immediately fell over the kitchen was obliterated by the sound of at least two separate people materializing in the center of the room in rapid succession. Fortunately, Harry and Bill, who both had their wands clutched firmly in their hands, happened to notice that one of those people was Arthur Weasley before they started throwing curses in the intruders? direction.

?DAD!? Bill and Ginny called out at nearly the same time. One lowering his wand and the other moving forward to hug her father.

?Isn?t Dumbledore here yet?? Remus Lupin asked, quickly scanning the kitchen and taking a few extra moments to consider Fleur, before allowing his eyes to wander to the silver stag that appeared to be ready to charge through the back door. ?Still as impetuous as ever, I see,? he said to Harry, with a wry smile. ?I don?t suppose it occurred to you that??

?? I might get chucked out of school?? Harry finished for him. ?Yeah, I considered that. For all of ten seconds.??

?Aw well,? Lupin sighed. ?That?s about five more than your father would have given it anyway.? 

?I?m glad you?re all together,? Arthur said. ?You?ve all got your wands?? he asked, watching as Ron jerked his wand out of his back pocket and Ginny and Hermione nodded their heads in agreement, before continuing. ?Good. Now Dumbledore should be here any minute and when he gets... that will be him,? he said, letting go of Ginny?s shoulder and hurrying towards the backdoor when there was a second knock.

?Arthur,? Dumbledore said, giving a deferential nod as he hurried through the door and into the kitchen with one of the rubber boots the Weasley family kept just outside the door clutched in his hand. ?Aw, and Miss Delacour,? he added, upon spotting Fleur, who had moved to stand next to Bill again. ?What an unexpected surprise. Not an altogether unpleasant one,? he said with a smile, ?but I?m afraid there isn?t much time for pleasantries at the moment. Ready to go?? he said, looking at Harry and his friends.

?Go?? Ginny said. ?Go where??

?Headquarters?? Ron said.

?This Portkey,? Dumbledore stated, holding the rubber boot up in the air and dangling it in front of his students, ?will take the four of you straight to Gryffindor Tower.??

?But, what about our--? 

?Don?t worry about your things,? Lupin replied before Ginny could finish. ?We?ll send them along. But you need to hurry now. There are a lot of things that need to be taken care of,? he said, looking directly at Harry, as he was the one that was the most likely to argue, ?but none of us can?t do that until we know you?re safe.??

?But we want to help,? Ron said.
They aren’t going to let us help, Harry informed Ron. If we stay, half the Order will show up to keep us out of trouble. And by us, I mean me. At least if we go back to Hogwarts, those people will be able to go to Diagon Alley and possibly help someone else.

On the count of three then, Dumbledore said, counting as he setting the boot down on the table and stepped away to watch Harry and his friends come forward and grasp the Portkey at the same time.
Chapter 38

Chapter 38:

It hasn’t even been an hour yet, Hermione thought, glancing at Harry’s wrist and reading the time off his watch. *How can that be right?*

It certainly felt like the four of them had been back in Gryffindor Tower longer than an hour. In fact, it felt like they’d been sitting in the common room half the night. And yet despite the way it felt, time hadn’t really progressed to a point where it could be measured in hours yet. It was still slowly dragging by in minutes.

Minutes. That’s all it’s been. Forty-seven minutes since we left the Burrow.

Of course a lot could happen in forty-seven minutes, especially when Dementors, Death Eaters, and possible even Voldemort himself, was involved. Forty-seven minutes was more than enough time for them to wreak havoc. Several people had probably lost their lives by now. Some of them might have even lost their souls, which was even worse when you really stopped to think about it. But the worst thing by far, was knowing that there was a chance that some of the victims could be members of the Weasley family. Most of them were bound to be on Diagon Alley by now and anything could happen to them there.

It was a fear that Hermione knew they all shared, and yet none of them seemed to be willing to voice it. It was almost as if they were all afraid that if they said the words out loud, that would somehow make it happen. So rather than risk accidentally blurting the wrong thing out, all four of them seemed to come to some sort of silent consensus and refrained from speaking as much as possible.

In fact, there hadn’t been more than a handful of words spoken since they’d materialized in the common room, all of which the girls had directed at Harry when he unexpectedly kicked the discarded Portkey into a corner and spun around to storm up the stairwell leading up to his dorm.

In the end, the girls’ words must have sunk in somewhat because Harry had stayed in the common room, although Hermione had no doubt he would have preferred to lock himself in his room and brood alone rather than side by side with the rest of them. That was just the way Harry was. He’d rather suffer on his own as some sort of self imposed penance, than in the company of friends. But Ron and Ginny were his friends, and it was their family that was in danger at the moment, so despite what he might have wanted to do, Harry had put their needs before his own and stayed with them as a show of support.

Ron at least, had taken it that way and Hermione knew for a fact that even though he hadn’t acknowledged the gesture verbally, he was grateful for it. She knew this of course, because she could sense it through their connection. In fact, she’d sensed pretty much everything that Ron had felt since this whole mess started; his anxiety, his anger, the frustration he experienced and the shame that went along with hiding at Hogwarts while the rest of his family was out there trying to make a difference.

Hermione hadn’t been fooled by the fact that the boys had voluntarily returned to school. She knew full well that neither of them had come back because they’d wanted to. Harry had only given in because he realized that if he didn’t, the Order was going to focus the majority of their efforts on protecting him, rather than aiding the people who really needed help.

And Ron? Well, Ron had come back without argument for an entirely different reason and it was
eating him up inside.

Yes, Ron was worried. They were all worried of course, but the anxiety that Ron was experiencing was more intense than what his sister or Harry was feeling at the moment because he wasn’t simply concerned about his family, or the other members of the Order, or even the innocent people caught up in the latest attack. He also had Hermione’s anxieties to contend with thanks to their connection, which made it twice as bad.

She was worried about Harry, who’d been staring morosely into the fire ever since he sat down beside Ginny on the sofa, which meant that he was worried about Harry. He was also worried about himself, which was more than a little disconcerting, and then there was Ginny. And to top it all off, he was worried about Hermione as well, or more precisely, what being connected to him meant for her.

Hermione, of course, knew that Ron was fretting about their connection. It was the only explanation for the guilt and desolation that kept assaulting her. She knew what Ron was thinking, because she was thinking the same thing herself. The only reason they’d taken the Coupling Potion was to protect one another, and while they had accomplished that to a certain extent, they’d also unwittingly put one another at risk, at least where Dementors were concerned. And while that knowledge unnerved them both, in many respects it was worse for Ron, because he was finally starting to realize the extent of the sacrifices he was going to have to make if they continued to maintain their link.

For starters, he was going to have to be less impulsive, which might pose a bit of a problem because it was against his nature. He was used to acting first and dealing with the consequences after the fact. It was easier that way and it worked for him. But now Ron realized that he couldn’t just run off half cocked with Harry, nor could he dive headfirst into a dangerous situation without at least considering what it might mean for Hermione. It wasn’t simply his own life he’d be risking; it could be hers as well. If he did something stupid, and there was a fairly good chance that he would; if messed up the same way he had in the Department of Mysteries while there were Dementors nearby, Hermione would likely suffer the consequences right along with him. So either he was going to have to bow out of the fight when Dementors were present, or he was going to have to sever his link with Hermione, neither of which he wanted to do.

“Don’t,” Hermione said quietly, as she rose out of the chair she’d been sitting in, crossed to Ron’s chair, settled down in his lap, and threw her arms around his neck.

Ron needed a hug, or maybe she was the one that really needed it, she wasn’t exactly sure which one of them needed the physical contact more at this point. All she knew for certain was that the maelstrom of emotions bombarding her had finally reached a point where it had become unbearable. “Whatever you’re thinking about, stop,” she groaned miserably.

“He was right,” Ron said softly after a few moments of silence had elapsed, not realizing that Harry and Ginny had picked up on the anguish in Hermione’s voice and were both watching them now, because his face was buried in Hermione’s hair.

“He was right,” Ron said softly after a few moments of silence had elapsed, not realizing that Harry and Ginny had picked up on the anguish in Hermione’s voice and were both watching them now, because his face was buried in Hermione’s hair.

“What?” Hermione whispered against his neck.

“Snape.”

The smug-arsed, condescending, two-faced git, he added in his head.

But cursing the Potions Master wasn’t going to make him any less right and Ron had no choice but to admit the truth to himself now. He was dependent on their connection, just like Snape said he would be. Hell, dependent wasn’t even a strong enough word to describe it. He was addicted to it.
So much so that he couldn’t stand the thought of severing his link to Hermione, despite the fact that he knew it could put her at risk.

What does that say about me? he wondered. Am I seriously going to jeopardize her soul just because I can’t stand the thought of cutting myself off from the emotional feedback she provides?

Yes, apparently I am, Ron decided, after taking a moment to contemplate what it would be like to go back to the way things had been before they’d forged the connection.

Hermione was part of him now, that was all there was to it. If he cut her off, it would be like cutting out half his heart or intentionally ripping away part of his soul, and somehow the thought of doing that to himself seemed worse than the risk of a Dementor doing it for him.

Besides, Ron told himself, desperate to justify his decision as the guilt started to consume him again, it’s not as if she’ll be at risk all the time. We’ll just have to steer clear of Dementors, that’s all and it’s not like they’re going to attack us here. Not while Dumbledore is around.

“Stop beating yourself up,” Hermione snapped, when the shame Ron was feeling flooded into her yet again. “You’re driving me mad. And I’m not severing the link, so you can stop--”

“I never said I wanted to,” Ron replied defensively.

“You were thinking about it though,” she shot back without missing a beat, shoving Ron’s hands away from herself and springing off his lap. “Were you even going to bother discussing it with me?” she asked, placing one hand on her hip and scowling at him. “Or did you expect me to just sit here and wait with baited breath until you made the decision for me?”

“Here we go,” Ginny whispered to Harry, as the two of them watched Ron bristle.

“How’s that any different than what you’re doing?” Ron shouted back.

“Don’t give me that, rubbish.”

“Did you or did you not just tell me that we weren’t severing the link without discussing it with me? Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Ron said, more to himself than to Hermione, who didn’t seem to know how to respond. “And that’s what’s really bothering you, isn’t it? The fact that you know you can’t force me to maintain the link if I don’t want to.”

“Fine,” Hermione said weakly, shrinking away from Ron as if she’d just been slapped. “If you don’t want to be with me anymore,” she said, blinking back her tears as she continued to inch towards the stairwell leading up to the girls’ dorms, “I’m certainly not going to waste my time trying to change your mind.”

“What the hell did you say that for?” Ginny shouted at her brother, when Hermione spun around and ran up the stairs.

“Shut up Ginny!” Ron snapped, pressing the palm of his hands against his eyes, which were burning, while flopping against the back of his chair with enough force to rock it backwards.

“FUCK!” he shouted, kicking the table in front of himself as the heartache that Hermione was feeling ripped through his body and constricted his heart.

He hadn’t meant to hurt her. All he’d wanted to do was point out how hypocritical she was being and somehow he’d buggered everything up. Big surprise.
“What are you still sitting here for, you gigantic arse?” Ginny said reproachfully. “Get up there and fix things before it’s too late.”

“What do you mean too late?” Ron asked, his stomach plummeting as he repeated his sister’s words. “She knows that’s not what I meant. She’ll get over it.”

“Not if you don’t go after her, she won’t,” his sister said in a disgusted tone of voice.

“But... she’s in the girls’ dorm.”

“So?” Harry asked, staring at Ron incredulously. “It’s not like that’s going to be a problem for you.”

“Oh, right,” Ron said, glancing over at the girls’ stairwell uncomfortable and then focusing on his best mate again. “So you... um... think I should... you know, go up there and...”

“Yeah,” Harry answered, despite the fact Ron had left his question unfinished. “Yeah, I do.”

“But, what if she throws me out or curses me or something?”

“It’s no less than you deserve,” Ginny said, crossing her arms in front of her chest and glaring at her brother. “I’d have done it myself if Hermione wasn’t still connected to you. But just because I can’t jinx you without jinxing her, that doesn’t mean I can’t make you miserable.”

“All right, I’m going,” he said with a sigh, taking a deep breath before standing upright. “But not because you’re threatening me,” he added, as he shuffled towards the staircase Hermione had used.

You couldn’t possibly make me feel any worse than I already do.

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“Looks like it’s just going to be the two of us for the rest of the night,” Harry said, as he watched Ron reach the top of the stairs without a problem and disappear from view.

“Provided she forgives him.”

“She’ll forgive him,” Harry said confidently. “Sooner or later she always does and it’s not as if she can seriously doubt his feeling for her, seeing as how they’re connected and all.”

“That doesn’t stop him from being a prat though. She might not be ready to forgive him for that.”

“Oh come on,” Harry said in his best friend’s defense. “You wouldn’t want her dictating what you could think about any more than I would.”

“True, but still... he could have handled it better.”

“Probably, but this is Ron we’re talking about.”

“Uh huh,” Ginny retorted without thinking. “I’ve seen the way you deal with Parvati and you’re not much better.” It was only after she’d said it that Ginny realized she’d all but admitted that she’d been keeping tabs on Harry’s love life.

“The difference being,” Harry said unabashedly, “that I’m actually trying to put her off me.”

“You are?” the young redhead asked, shocked by the fact that Harry would admit something like that so freely to her. “You mean you’ve been all cranky and acting like a belligerent prat on purpose? Why don’t you just come right out and break up with her then? Wouldn’t that be easier?”
“Well, for starters,” Harry replied, “I never asked her to go out with me in the first place. She just assumed that we were, when we’re not.”

“Oh please,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes at the ceiling.

That had to be just about the lamest excuse she’d ever heard. He’d been snogging Parvati for months now. It didn’t matter if he officially asked her out of not, his actions spoke louder than his words.

“We’re not,” Harry insisted. “Have you ever seen me take her anywhere.”

“You took her to the Room of Requirement.”

“No I didn’t,” he protested. “She followed me.”

“And you tripped while trying to chuck her out and she broke you’re fall with her lips?”

“It’s not like I planned that,” Harry said, shifting on the couch uncomfortable. He hadn’t forgotten the look on Ginny’s face when she caught the two of them together. “She kissed me.”

“You didn’t seem to be objecting all that much when I walked in,” Ginny stated.

He didn’t object when you kissed him either, she reminded herself. And if what he’s saying is true and Parvati really doesn’t mean anything to him after all this time, then that kiss we shared tonight means even less.

That’s just great. WONDERFUL! At least I didn’t get my hopes up.

Ok, so maybe that’s not exactly true, but I didn’t act on it and make a fool out of my self. That’s something at least.

Unfortunately, it was a hollow victory. Yes, Ginny still had her pride, but that didn’t seem like very much at the moment.

Why are we even talking about this? she wondered. Can’t he just go back to staring at the fire in silence? At least then I can pretend that I’m upset about everything else that’s going on and not him and everything else.

“Ginny?”

“What?”

“Are you... all right?”

“Oh yeah, I’m great,” she said sarcastically. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you didn’t answer my question for one.”

“What question?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry said, feeling a bit foolish now.

Are you all right? he repeated his words in his head, silently admonished himself. Half her family is out there fending off Dementors and Merlin knows what else. Of course she’s not all right.

“No, seriously. What was the question?”
“Nothing,” Harry said uncomfortably. It had been hard enough for him to ask the first time. The problem was, he really wanted to know the answer. But in order to find out, he was going to have to ask her again.

Ah, to hell with it.

“I just asked how things were going with you and...” that wanker, “…what’s his name? Daniel?”

“You mean David.”

“Yeah, him,” Harry replied, trying not to let the disdain he felt come through in his voice.

“Why do you ask?” Ginny said, looking at Harry suspiciously.

He wasn’t going to pull the big brother act with her, was he? She had enough brothers already, most of whom were far too willing to do that. She didn’t need another over-protective git breathing down her neck for her own good.

“Just curious,” he replied. “He’s treating you okay, though, right. Cause if he’s not...”

Harry never did get a chance to finish his statement however, because Ginny’s hand had somehow come to rest on his thigh as she threw herself away from the fire and gasped. It was then that Harry noticed that the flames had flared up and taken on a green tinge that could only mean one thing: someone was trying to use the Floo network to gain access to Gryffindor Tower.

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“Well, isn’t this cozy?” George said, as he stepped out of the fireplace and brushed himself off. “You’re not exactly the couple I expected to find snogging in front of the fire.”

“We were talking,” Harry said, denying the accusation immediately.

“Talking, huh?” George asked, his eyes locked on his sister’s hand, which was still clutching Harry’s thigh. “And I suppose Ron and Hermione are ‘talking’ up there?” he said, motioning towards the boys’ dorm with a tilt of his head.

“Actually,” Ginny said, her cheeks taking on a pink hue as she yanked her hand away from Harry and used it to point to the girls’ dormitory instead, “They’re up there, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if they’ve finished rowing and progressed to making up by now.”

“Yeah, right,” George scoffed. “Fine, don’t believe me then.”

“Not to change the subject or anything,” Harry said, sitting up straighter as he stared at George, “but what are you doing here? Did Dumbledore send you? Why? What’s been going on?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, mate,” George said resentfully. “Mum did her level best to keep us out of it. Well, me and Fred anyway,” he amended. “Bill and Charlie Apparated straight to Diagon Alley with Dad and Dumbledore, so she wasn’t able to waylay them or keep them busy performing menial tasks.

Speaking of which, where’s Fred? He’s bound to be finished with his little job in Hogsmeade by now. You didn’t change the password, did you? Because he might have trouble getting into the tower if you did. Maybe you ought to check the map.”
“Er...” Harry stammered. “That’s...um... going to be kind of hard to do, because I sorta loaned it to...”

“You gave our map to someone else?” George asked incredulously. “Who?”

“Hermione, of course,” Ginny replied.

“Hermione? What would she want with... Wait a minute,” George said, his eyes going wide with horror, “she’s not--”

“Using it on her Prefect rounds?” Ginny finished the statement for him. “Oh yeah. But look on the bright side,” she added, when her brother’s mouth fell open. “She caught Malfoy with it and McGonagall confiscated his Invisibility Cloak.”

“All right!” Fred shouted, as the portrait hole swung opened and he stormed into the common room. “What gives? Why couldn’t I get through the bloody tunnel? I had to go all the way back to Honeydukes and walk here in plain sight. It’s a good thing Filch is incompetent, but I had a narrow escape with Peeves.”

“I thought you were going to warn them not to use that tunnel,” Harry said to Ginny.

“Me? I thought Ron was going to do it. It’s his fault,” Ginny stated. “He’s the one that took her down there.”

“You can’t use the Honeydukes tunnel anymore,” Harry said with a sigh. “Hermione got it into her head that Death Eaters were going to use it to sneak into the school, so she’s cursed it. But the good news is--”

“Oh did you hear that?” George said sarcastically to his brother. “Little Miss Power trip has been using the Marauder’s Map to catch rule breakers and now she’s sealing off perfectly good secret tunnels, but there’s good news. Isn’t that a relief? Well,” he demanded, when Harry remained silent. “Let’s have it. What’s the good news?”

“According to Ron, she used some spell that Bill taught her over the summer, so if you can get him down there, he can perform the counter-curse and--”

“Not bloody likely,” Fred groaned. “He’ll just side with her. Those Head-git types all think alike. Speaking of which,” he said, flopping down in the chair Ron had left vacant and throwing his feet up on the table. “Where are the perfect Prefects anyway? If they’re out patrolling the corridors they aren’t doing a very good job of it, are they?”

“Especially if they have the map with them,” George added bitterly.

“The map is upstairs,” Ginny answered. “As are Ron and Hermione.”

“In the girls’ dorm, don’t you know?” George said to his brother sardonically. “Seriously,” he asked Harry. “Where are they really?”

“Because I have a message for them,” Fred added.

“From who?” Ginny asked, clearly skeptical.

“McGonagall,” her brother replied, with a casual shrug of his shoulders. “Who do you think gave me the password to the tower? I’m supposed to tell all three
of you, the Prefects that is,” he said, glancing at Harry, “that if all goes according to plan, the Hogwarts Express will be coming back early. You’re supposed to meet Hagrid in the Entrance Hall tomorrow afternoon and he’ll escort you down to Hogsmeade Station so you can help with ...well, whatever it is you Prefects do.”

“What about Harry?” Ginny asked.

“McGonagall didn’t say,” Fred replied, with another shrug, “so I guess that means you can tag along with the rest of us if you like.”

“So you’re going too?” Harry asked.

“Yup,” George said. “Mum volunteered us to help Lupin and Tonks mind the ickle students on the platform. She’s so transparent,” he complained. “As if there’s going to be any action there.”

“Exactly,” Fred agreed. “The only reason she pawned us off on Lupin, is because she knows Hogwarts is safe.”

“So safe we have to spend all night patrolling the corridors,” George complained.

“Not necessarily,” Fred said with a smirk. “I think Hermione might have been on to something actually. No wait,” he said, when George looked at him as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Just think about it for a minute. Why should we spend all night traipsing down deserted hallways and freezing our arses off, when we can sit here in front of a nice warm fire and monitor the entire castle? If anyone that’s not supposed to be here shows up, we’ll know immediately. It’s brilliant. Even if they’re Polyjuiced, we’ll still know who they really are.”

“That’s how Ron caught Lestrange, isn’t it?” George asked, finally finding an explanation to explain that conundrum.

“Be a dear, Ginny,” Fred said affectionately. “Pop upstairs and get it for us, would ya?”

“No bloody way,” his sister retorted. “I’m not going up there. It’s bad enough knowing that they’ve shagged in my room, which is entirely your fault by the way. If you two hadn’t been Apparating into Ron’s room unannounced every other second,” she ranted. “I’ll never be able to sleep in there again without having nightmares. The mental images are bad enough, thank you. There’s no way in hell I’m going up there and getting an eyeful of the real thing. You want the map, go get it yourself.”

“You’re taking the piss out of us, right?” George scoffed, clearly not buying a word of it.

It might be plausible that Ron’s relationship had progressed that far, but if it had, and that was a big if in George’s mind, there was no way Hermione would consent to do something like that at the Burrow. Not when his mother had expressly forbidden them from being alone together in a room if the door was closed. Ron might routinely disregard their mother’s rules, or attempt to find ways around them, but Hermione wouldn’t dare.

“Is this payback for what we did to Harry or something?” he asked Ginny suspiciously. “You won’t go get the map because you want us to spend the rest of the night wandering around in the cold to get even.”

“Fine, be that way,” Fred said, drawing his wand out of the inside pocket of the cloak he was wearing and pointing it at the stairwell leading up to the girls’ dorm. “Accio Marauder’s Map.”

“She must have Imperturbed her room,” Harry said, shrugging his shoulders when Fred tried to summon the map a second time and nothing happened. “Looks like you’re out of luck.”
“You can’t be serious?” George said in disbelief. “There’s no way Ron could get up there. It can’t be done.”

“If you say so,” Ginny said, rising off the sofa and stretching like a cat that had been curled up in the same position for too long. “But now that I know it’s safe, I’m going to bed. Night,” she said, leaving Harry to deal with any additional questions brothers might have.

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The twins were in a foul mood by the time the sun finally came up. The not sleeping part hadn’t been so bad, but wandering aimlessly through a drafty old castle in the dead of winter was not the way either of them really wanted to spend the night. Especially when there had been a better option that they hadn’t been able to utilize.

It was rather hard not to be a little resentful of the fact that the others were all snug in their beds. Although to be honest, most of their animosity was directed at Ron, who they’d spent the better part of the night silently cursing. If there was even the slightest bit of truth to what Harry and Ginny had claimed, and the fact that Ron hadn’t been in the boys’ dorm when Harry dragged them upstairs strongly suggested that there was, then it was his fault they’d froze their bollocks off. And the fact that Harry had loaned them Ron’s Invisibility Cloak along with his own, was not going to get him off the hook.

Needless to say, the twins made a beeline for Gryffindor Tower when their shift ended at first light. Not simply to get warm, or to get some much needed sleep before the Hogwarts Express arrived later that evening, but because they wanted to be there to catch their brother when he came back from wherever it was he’d been. Whether that was the girls’ dormitory, or some cozy snog spot he and Hermione snuck off to when they didn’t want to be disturbed, still remained to be seen, however. And the truth was, part of them still expected to see Ron amble through the portrait hole with Hermione in tow, despite the fact they’d searched all the better known hidey-holes and quite a few of the lesser known spots as well, including the one behind the mirror on the fourth floor.

But as it was the crack of dawn, and everyone with any sense was still in bed, they had nothing to do but stoke the fire, kick back on the sofa, and wait.

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“Mmmm, not yet,” Ron groaned, tightening his grip on the body he’d spent the better part of the night clinging to when it tried to move away from him and he felt the blankets shift. “It’s too early to get up yet,” he mumbled, hauling Hermione back until she was flush against his chest once more.

“No,” she protested, placing one hand on his shoulder and trying to shove him away.

“Ron,” he whined, burrowing down under the covers, intent on using her bare chest as a pillow. “It’s nice and warm here,” he said, a smile of contentment covering his face when he felt Hermione stop fighting him and bury her hand in his hair. “And I’m exhausted. I know you must be too, because you certainly didn’t get much sleep.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“Yours,” Ron retorted, before darting his tongue out and leisurely running it over the swell of one breast. “See,” he said, when his actions elicited a soft moan of pleasure from her. “You’re insatiable. The smallest touch and you’re all but ready for another go.”

“You’re one to talk,” Hermione shot back, intentionally moving so her thigh slid against the rigid
length of flesh that had been pressing against her. “Didn’t you just claim you were tired?”

“I am,” he sighed happily. “But there’s no rule that says I can’t be tired and still want you at the same time.”

“Maybe if we go downstairs and get something to eat, we’ll have the strength to do something about this,” she teased, rubbing her thigh against him again.

“Or we could just take care of it now,” Ron said rolling them both over, covering her body with his own, and kissing her soundly before she had a chance to object. “And then we can go downstairs,” he murmured against her neck, before dropping a few feather light kisses there, “and you can spend the rest of the morning scrutinizing the Daily Prophet for information about last night.”

“Deal,” Hermione said, closing her eyes and allowing her hands to roam down Ron’s body as he continued to feast on her flesh.

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“Aw, come on love, it’s still early,” the twins heard their brother whine before he even came into view. “Harry and Ginny won’t even be up yet. Let’s go back and have a quick shower before...”

“...we allow the cold realities of war intrude on our morning,” Hermione finished for him as she came into view at the top of the girls’ staircase. “Too late,” she said, feeling Ron emotionally recoil as she put an abrupt halt to the more enjoyable thoughts they’d been distracting themselves with. “A deal is a deal.”

“You certainly know how to ruin the mood,” Ron grumbled to himself, as he began to follow Hermione down to the common room.

“NO BLOODY WAY!” George shouted, taking the couple completely by surprise when he jumped off the sofa and jerked off the Invisibility Cloak he’d been hiding under so he could confront his startled brother.

“How the hell did you turn these things off?” Fred demanding, whipping Harry’s cloak off and materializing at the base of the staircase they were descending.

“No, don’t,” Hermione shouted, but Fred had already mounted the stairs himself to test them out. Unfortunately for all of them, it took her too long to react, and by the time the warning was out, it was already too late. With an earsplitting wail, the staircase collapsed in upon itself and all three of them ended up in a jumbled pile at the bottom.

It took less than a minute for both Harry and Ginny to appear at the top of their respective staircases to investigate what had set off the alarm.

“Idiots,” Ginny said crossly, scowling at her brothers as Ron intentionally placed his knee in the middle of Fred’s back and shoved him to the ground again while he leaned forward to helped Hermione up.

“Can’t you shut that thing off?” Harry shouted, lowering his wand, as he watched Ginny glide down the stone slide, despite the fact she was still wearing her nightgown.

“It’ll shut itself off as soon as this pillock steps away from it,” she said, shoving Fred into the middle of the room the instant she was upright again.

“If she didn’t cast some sort of spell to counteract the stairs,” Fred demanded, as he pointed at
Hermione, “then how did he get up there?”
“What are you two doing here?” Ron demanded.
“Stop trying to change the subject,” George shot back.
“HEY! That’s my Invisibility Cloak,” Ron barked.
“You are so busted,” Fred sniggered. “McGonagall might just decide to strip you of your badges when she finds out about this...”
“...flagrant violation of the rules,” George finished for him, as Ron wrenched the Invisibility Cloak out of his hands.
“Yes,” Fred agrees. “Just think about all those ickle students that look to you to set the example.”
“And a fine example it is,” George said. “Honestly. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t impressed. I didn’t think either of you had it in you.”
“Of course if you tell us how you did it,” Fred said cavalierly, despite the fact Hermione had arched one eyebrow and didn’t look nearly as panicked as he’d have liked, “We might be willing for forget to mention what we’ve just seen.”
“You bloody--”
“Go ahead,” Hermione said, calling Fred’s bluff before Ron could start making threats of his own. “It’ll be worth it just to see the look on your face when she doesn’t react.”
“Nice try,” Fred scoffed. “But I’m not buying it. You’re good, but you’re still new to the game and I’m better at it then you are.”
“You know what,” Hermione said, after taking a moment to weigh her options. “You’re right and I’m sick of playing games. It’s only a matter of time before you find out, so I might as well save myself the trouble of trying to put you off. You want to know how Ron got up those stairs, I’ll tell you. Better yet,” she said, jerking her jumper over her head, “I’ll show you. There,” she said, unbuttoning the top two buttons of her shirt and pulling it open just enough to reveal the silver charm hanging around her neck. “This is how he did it.”

For several long moments there was nothing but silence as both Fred and George gaped at the talisman hanging around Hermione’s neck and everyone else stared at them, waiting for their reaction. The wide eyes and open mouths were expected, the laughter however, was not.

“I take it back,” Fred chortled, standing upright once more and taking in all the startled faces around him. “You’re far better at this than I thought. You even had me going there for a minute.”
“Top-notch distraction,” George added. “It certainly looks like the real thing. I’ll give you that. A very nice bit of transfiguration. Unfortunately for you, we know what Ron gave you for your birthday.”
“We did pick it up for him, after all.”
“What about this one?” Hermione asked, grabbing the hem of Ron’s shirt and shoving it up to reveal his talisman as well. “Did you pick this one up too? And what about the engraving?” she asked, smacking Ron’s hand out of the way when he tried to yank his shirt back down. “Did you have this added?” she asked, flipping the charm over so the words ‘Toujours pur’ became visible.
"I see you do recognize the crest," she said triumphantly, when the twins glanced at the charm again and their eyes nearly bugged out of their heads. "So you know where they came from and that they are, in fact, real."

"No way you two are married," George said, but he sounded far less sure of that fact than he had moments before.

"Way," Ginny said, sounding almost bored.

"Not even Ron would be daft enough to use a real Lànain talisman."

"Haven’t you been paying attention?" Ginny asked. "They didn’t just use one, they used two. But if you still need convincing, Harry can describe the ceremony for you. He witnessed the whole thing."

"Not the entire thing," Ron said instantly, his face and ears beet red. "Just the binding ceremony."

"So you’re betrothed?" George asked.

"Why in the world did you tell them?" Ron asked Hermione, rather than answer his brother’s question.

"They were going to figure it out," she replied. "They’ve been suspicious ever since Charlie found out. It was only a matter of time before--"

"Charlie knows?" Fred said, clearly taken aback by this information, and yet things now made a lot more sense. "And Bill too," he added, as the pieces started sliding into place. "And that’s why Ron’s room was Imperturbed and why Hermione kept blushing every time they were in the same room."

"But, this is excellent," George interjected, a huge smile plastered across his face. "I mean it was going to happen sooner or later anyway," he added, when Ginny and Ron both spun around and gaped at him as if he’d sprouted a second head. "Even Trelawney could see it coming. But sooner is definitely better than later. I can see why you’d keep it from Mum and Dad, but does Lupin know yet?"

"What?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"Of course not," Hermione said at nearly the same time.

"Why do you even care?" Ginny asked suspiciously.

"You don’t know?" George replied. "They don’t know," he added, glancing at his twin bother, who was clearly on the same page now.

"Know what?" Ron asked warily.

"About Sirius’s will," Fred answered. "He left practically everything to Harry, of course, including Grimmauld Place, but you two were mentioned as well. He left you 5000 galleons."

"A piece," George added, as both Harry and Ron’s mouth fell open in surprise. "We overheard Lupin and Dad talking about it. Only it’s in trust until you turn 20 or..."

"...until you get married," Fred finished in a cheery voice. "Which you are, right? So that means that money is now yours free and clear. Do you have any idea what you could do with 10,000 galleons?" he asked Ron.

"Absolutely not!" Hermione scolded, the instant she felt Ron’s excitement surge into herself. "You
are not going to squander that money away on frivolous things like racing brooms and chocolate frog card.”

“Didn’t take you long to start bossing him around like a real wife,” George said to Hermione accusingly.

“She’s been doing that since they met,” Fred reminded his brother.

“Yeah, but now she’s telling him how to spend his money.”

“That’s just because he didn’t have two sickles to rub together before now.”

“True,” George added. “But can you imagine? Spending the rest of your life with someone that sounds just like Mum? Here’s a thought,” he said to Hermione. “You can save your half of the money if that’s what you want and let Ron do what he wants with his half.”

“As in invest it in your joke shop?” Hermione shot back shrewdly. “And what happens if your father gets hurt again while working for the Order and we need that money to help support the rest of your family? Ginny still has two more years of school left to finish after this one. And you still have one,” she said to Ron. “Not to mention three years of--”

“All right, I get it,” he sighed, trying to cut her off before she really got rolling with her lecture. He’d already heard it once before after all. He didn’t really need to hear it again with an audience present.

“Oh my God!” George moaned.

“She IS Mum,” Fred added.

“That’s just wrong.”

“On so many levels.”

“You’re one sick puppy,” George said to his younger brother. “You do realize that, right?”

“Shut up,” Ron moaned, his ears still a lovely shade of red.

“Yeah,” Ginny agreed, touched by the fact that Hermione was prepared to use her own money to help out their family if it ever became necessary. “You’re just jealous because you don’t have anyone around to help you warm your bed. Unless you count that prat,” she added, nodding her head in Fred’s direction.

“We have separate beds, thank you very much,” Fred shot back.

“And we’re more than capable of finding girls to...”

“You know what,” Ginny cut in before George had a chance to finish. “I really don’t want to hear the rest of that statement. Unless you’re prepared to hear about me and...”

“NO!” George, Ron and Harry all objected at the same time, although Harry’s voice had definitely been the loudest.

“So,” the young redhead said to change the subject. “We can tell them about the potion now, right? Maybe even have them try it out?”

“GINNY!”
“What?” she asked completely unabashed as she focus on Hermione’s startled face. “You were going to tell them, right? I mean why wouldn’t you now that they know you’re married an all?”

“What?”

“What potion?”

“Wait, maybe we don’t really want to know.”

“Unless it’s something we can use for the shop. Like a love potion or something to enhance...”

"Is that all blokes ever think about?” Ginny wondered out loud.

"Yes," Hermione answered straight away. "It’s unrelenting. The only time he ever stops is when he’s playing Quidditch. And I’m not exaggerating."

"Yes you are," Ron disagreed. "I think about loads of other things."

"Like what?” Hermione shot back.

"If you’re so smart, why don’t you just tell me?"

"He’s going to be thinking about it a lot more now," George said quietly to his twin and the pair of them startled sniggering.

"You mean once she goes all ‘wife’ on his arse and cuts him off?” Fred whispered back. "Lucky for him, he has his own bed and won’t be forced to sleep down here on this lumpy old sofa."

"That just goes to show what you know," Ron said confidently. "She’s not even mad at me. She was a little miffed at Ginny, but now she’s mostly just irritated with you two. Crack a few more jokes, and she’ll likely let you know that herself."

"How could you possibly know that?” George asked.

"The same way she knows how often blokes think about girls,” Ginny answered.

"They’re connected," Harry explained, when Hermione made a show of giving into the inevitable with a loud sigh and he knew it was okay to explain. "By a Coupling Potion."

"Seriously?"

"Wicked!"

"You do realize what this means?” Fred asked his twin.
"There’s actually is bloke out there that knows how girls think. If we could harness that knowledge and sell it somehow, we’d make a killing."

"Speaking of killing," Ron said with a smirk, "I’d start running if I were you."

"She isn’t going to curse them," Ginny stated. "Not when we need them to test the potion."

"I don’t need them to test anything," Hermione replied tetchily. "I already know that it works."

"But we still need something to compare it too," Ginny argued. Of course what she meant was that she wanted some sort of base line to contrast against Ron and Hermione so she and Harry would know more or less what to expect if they ever took the potion themselves.

"Wait here," she said, turning away from the group and scurrying up the newly formed staircase leading to the girls’ dorm to retrieve the portions of the potion she had stored in her trunk.

"She’s serious, isn’t she?" George asked, as he watched his sister disappear from view.

"Afraid so," Ron answered. "It’s kind of weird at first, but you two will probably get used to it quicker than we did," he added, motioning to Hermione and himself. "And if not, well, eventually it will wear off."

"Of course you don’t have to take it," Hermione interjected. "It’s hardly necessary."

"Sod necessary," George replied. "Bet it’s wicked cool to know what someone else is thinking all the time."

"Feeling," Hermione corrected. "You won’t be able to read each other’s minds with it."

"Close enough," Fred responded.

"So you’ll try it then?" Harry asked, more than a little curious about what a normal version of the potion would do.

"Sure."

"Not so hasty, brother of mine," Fred said with a smirk. "What’s the pay for this little experiment of yours?"

"Nothing," Hermione replied instantly.
"We pay our test subjects," Fred argued. "It’s only fitting that you pay yours."

"You’ll have to take it up with Ginny then," she shot back, "seeing as how you’ll be testing it for her, not me."

"Yeah, right."

"Do whatever you want then," Hermione said with a sigh. "I’m going down to breakfast. You two coming?" she asked, Harry and Ron.

"You go," Harry said to Ron, who he knew would be opposed to Hermione wander around the castle alone. "I still need to get dressed so I’ll wait and come down with Ginny when she’s ready."

"Right," Ron said, nodding his head once in agreement before following Hermione to the portrait hole and holding the Fat Lady’s painting open for her so she could pass through into the hall.

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“Feel any different?” Ginny asked her brothers, after she and Harry watched them prick their fingers, add their blood to the small vial of Coupling Potion she’d given them, and gulp it down in turn.


“Nope.”

“Ron mentioned something about it taking a little while to kick in with him and Hermione,” Harry said. “So we might as well go down to breakfast while we wait. You two coming?” he asked the twins.

“No,” Fred replied. “We nicked some food from the kitchen while we were on patrol.”

“Suit yourselves then.”

“Wait,” Ginny said, latching onto the sleeve of Harry’s shirt to keep him from leaving just yet. "Here," she said, producing a second vial of potion from the back pocket of her jeans, this one with a green hair ribbon tied around it. “I’ve already added my blood to this batch,” she explained, as she handed the small bottle to him. “So you might as well add yours to it now. That way it’ll be ready if we ever need to…”

“Hold on,” Fred objected. “I understand why Harry needs to be protected,” he stated, “but what do you have to do with any of it?” he asked, despite the fact he had a fairly good idea. The two of them had gone to great lengths to explain the intricacies of Hermione’s plan after all. They had however, both failed to mention that Ginny was slated to play a part in it.

“You’re planning on linking yourself to Harry," George stated loudly.

“Obviously.”

“No way.”
“Absolutely not. Mum will kill us if she finds out we knew about this and didn’t stop...”

“Spare me the lecture,” Ginny cut in before her brothers had a chance to gang up on her. “You’re not going to say anything I haven’t already heard and you aren’t going to change my mind.”

“It’s not your mind we have to change,” Fred fired back smugly.

“Yeah,” George agreed. “It’s Harry’s.”

“Except I’ve already added my blood to the potion,” Ginny reminded all three of them, “So unless you want to brew a whole new batch...”

“You did that on purpose just to ensure you got your own way,” Fred said accusingly.

“Yes, well,” she admitted unabashedly, “I learned from the best, after all.”

“Flattery will get you no where.”

“Have either of you ever been possessed by Voldemort?” she shot back, switching to a different tack in an effort to throw her brothers off. “Do you know what it feels like when he’s mucking around in your head and trying to manipulate you? Well, I do,” she stated, not needed to wait for them to respond, as she already knew the answer to her rhetorical questions, “and that makes me the logical choice to act as Harry’s anchor. So are you going to add your blood now, or what?” she asked Harry, who was clutching the vial tightly in his hand.

“Don’t let her bully you,” George stated loudly for Harry’s benefit. “You don’t have to if--”

“Stop trying to put him off with your big brother antics,” Ginny said sternly. “And you accuse me of being the bully,” she muttered to herself. “At least I’m not trying to intimidate him.”

“We weren’t doing anything of the--”

“So you’d prefer he confront Voldemort unprotected then?” she asked, perfectly willing to use guilt to get her way if necessary. “And you’ll explain to Mum why--”

“That isn’t going to work,” George informed her, knowing exactly what it was she was trying to do.

“No more than what you’re doing will work with me,” she stated. “It’s my decision to make; mine and Harry’s, so butt out.”

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“Anyone we know die?” Ron asked Hermione casually, stirring the dregs of his morning cereal while watching her snatch the morning edition of the Daily Prophet away from the delivery owl and promptly spread it out on the table in front of her. “Hermione?” he said, hoping to get her attention as he took the money she’d left lying on the table and paid the owl so it would leave. “Did anyone we know--”

“Yes!” she said loudly, tossing her toast aside and leaning in even closer, her eyes flying across the front page, scanning for names she recognized.

“Who?” he asked, eager to know and at the same time dreading her answer. Surely if it were anyone from his family it wouldn’t have made the front page. The Weasleys weren’t nearly important enough for that. Besides, if it were one of his family members, Hermione would have had a much stronger reaction to the news and since she didn’t, that had to mean that it wasn’t somebody they
“Who was it?” Ron asked again, amazed that he could speak, seeing as how his heart was still lodged somewhere in his throat.

“Amelia Bones,” Hermione replied, quickly skimming the opening paragraphs of the next story, before moving on to the third.

“We don’t know her.”

“Not personally, but Harry does. And this is odd,” she continued, talking to herself, more than to Ron at this point. “Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor was destroyed. How awful. I hope he wasn’t there… and … I don’t believe this,” she exclaimed loudly, after jumping to the final article on the page.

“What?” Ron asked anxiously, because this time whatever it was she’d read had elicited a reaction. A very strong one at that. Shock, fear, and then anger, in that order.

“Actually I do believe it,” she amended, ignoring his question, “but I can’t believe they didn’t see it coming and tighten security.”

“What!”

“He’s already used the same ploy once before. Of course, why not do it again?” she ranted in an exasperated tone of voice. “It worked so fell the first time around. Idiots.”

“Hermione!” Ron yelled, when he realized she wasn’t going to stop her tirade unless he forced her to. “I hate it when you go on and on about things as if I already know what you’re talking about. Now, what the hell happened?” he demanded, wanting to know what had her so on edge. She might be playing it off as if she were disgusted and angry, but Ron knew the truth. Buried beneath her contempt for the Ministry’s ineptitude was fear; fear she was trying to both hide from him and stomp out at the same time.

“Bellatrix Lestrange escaped from Azkaban,” she answered, shoving the paper at him so he could see the heading and scan the article for himself. “Of course she did,” she said loudly, throwing her hands up in disgust. “Because Fudge is an incompetent fool. Harry told him this would happen, but did he listen? No, of course not and now that twisted bitch is...”

“Bugger it all!” Ron shouted, anxiety that had nothing to do with what Hermione was feeling surging to life within him. “That’s just bloody great.”

“Am I hearing things,” Ginny said, as she approached the table behind Harry and took a seat directly across from her brother, “or did Hermione just curse?”

“You will too, when you get a load of this,” Ron said, picking the newspaper up and waving it in the air until his best friend leaned over the table and took it out of his hands.

“Which article are we cursing about?” Ginny asked, as she leaned closer to Harry and scanned the front page with him.

“My guess is that it’s this one,” Harry answered, pointing to the write-up on the prison break. “It was bound to happen sooner or later,” he said, taking the news far better than anyone at the table expected. “The only reason he waited this long was to punish her for getting caught and ruining his plans.”
“How do you know that?” Ginny asked, looking at Harry suspiciously. “I mean do you know it for sure or are you just guessing?”

“He’s still blocking me, if that’s what you want to know,” Harry replied, his eyes glued on the newspaper, rather than the concerned faces of his friends. “But I still know that’s why he waited. That, and because he knew the longer he left her to stew in it, the more worried she’d be that he’d really abandoned her.”

“From what I’ve seen, Lestrange prides herself on being his most loyal supporter. She’ll do just about anything to get back in his good graces and Voldemort knows that. He’s counting on it even. She’s probably more dangerous now, than she was before, because she’ll be eager to make it up to him. I doubt there’s anything she wouldn’t do in order to make that happen.”

“So, what about the people on Diagon Alley?” he asked Hermione, changing the subject so abruptly that Ron’s mouth actually fell open. “Is there a casualty list or anything?”

“What?” Ron asked, as he gaped at his best friend and tried to figure out how he could be so calm about all this. He was still obsessing about the words ‘more dangerous than ever’ and Harry was loading his plate up with food as if he was actually going to eat breakfast.

“You know,” Harry replied, reaching for a platter of bacon, “a list of people that were attacked?”

“Not that I saw,” Hermione answered, recovering enough to respond despite the fact Ron was still gobsmacked beside her. “But I’ve... I only skimmed the front page. The article about the Dementor attacks continues on page three,” she added, unsure if she should try and take the paper away from him and read it herself or let him skim through it first.

In the end she opted to let him keep it. If for no other reason than because she knew that she’d learn a lot about where his head was by the things he read out loud. Once he was finished, she could always re-read the entire paper herself and then she’d know what Harry felt was important and what he didn’t.

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“Ron,” Hermione said softly, as she watched Harry give up the pretense of eating and finally push his nearly full plate away. “Can I borrow Pig?” she asked, tucking the paper under her arm as they followed their best friend’s lead and stood up to accompany him back to Gryffindor Tower. “I want to let Mum and Dad know what’s been going on, but I’ve told them to be wary of strange owls and—”

“You don’t have to ask,” Ron replied, waiting for his sister to rise up from the table and follow Harry to the double doors before moving forward himself.

It only made sense that Hermione would want to warn her parents to be on guard. Just because the most recent attack had been confined to Diagon Alley, that didn’t mean Voldemort didn’t have plans to broaden out, especially now that he had his most fanatical supporter at his beckon call again.

“What’s mine is yours, right?” he added as an afterthought.

“I’m sure Crookshanks will be thrilled to hear that.” Ginny muttered under her breath as the four of them mounted the marble staircase in the Entrance Hall.

“You can use him anytime you want,” Ron continued, ignoring his sister’s comment. Married or not, that cat would never acknowledge him as anything but a rival. Pig however, would be only too happy to serve two masters. “In fact,” he added, “I’ll go up to the Owlery with you if you like and
tell him to stay with your parents for a while.”

I don’t want you going anywhere on your own right now.

“And that way they’ll have an owl handy if they need...” Ron stopped abruptly, managing to catch himself just before the word ‘help’ left his mouth, “...to... eh... send a message to anyone in the Order,” he finished instead.

Smooth, Weasley, Ron admonished himself. As if she didn’t see though that. Way to scare her even more, he added, his stomach flipped in response to the dread his words had caused her to feel.

“Of course he’ll drive them batty,” Ron added, in hopes of lightening the situation a bit. “They don’t have a cage to keep him in, but I suppose they can chuck him in a cupboard or something when he’s especially annoying. Which is all the time, mind you. Are you sure you want to use Pig? Maybe you should send Hedwig instead.”

“Then again,” Ron said, a new thought suddenly occurring to him, “why use either of them when you can just buy an owl of your own?”

An owl, of course, he silently kicked himself. That’s what I should have gotten her for Christmas. Why didn’t I think of this sooner?

“I’m sure Bill wouldn’t mind picking one out for you,” Ron said lightly. “I mean he know about us, so he won’t even question it if I ask him to take the money out of that account you made me open at Gringotts. He can send it straight to your...”

“No,” Hermione protested. “That money is yours.”

“If what Fred and George said is true, you’ll have your own money as soon as we talk to Lupin. You can always pay me back if that’s what you’re worried abo--”

“I don’t need an owl,” Hermione insisted, despite the fact she could feel how strongly Ron disagreed.

He was like a dog that had just discovered a bone and latched on to it. Now that he had a firm hold of it, he wasn’t going to let go, not without a fight. Unfortunately, the fact that he knew that she was about to argue with him about it, just seemed to strengthen his resolve. Hermione could feel him digging in and readying himself even before she said, “Pig’s fine.”

“For now, maybe,” Ron reluctantly agreed, before striking the first blow, “but what about this summer when you don’t have access to the school owls anymore? If you think I’m letting you go back to your parents with no means of communicating during an emergency--”

“I’ll be able to Apparate by then,” she reminded him. “And so will you for that matter. We won’t need to use owls to communicate anymore.”

“There are ways to prevent people from Apparating, you know?” Ron countered. “Dumbledore used an Apparition Ward against them in the Department of Mysteries. What makes you think they won’t do the same thing to us during an attack?”

“I really don’t want to fight with you about this,” Hermione groaned. Obviously Ron was more prepared for this particular battle than she’d suspected, which annoyed her.

“Then don’t,” Harry cut in, before his best mate had a chance to reply. “Drop it.”
“Fine,” Ron agreed, taking not only Harry, but Hermione by surprise. But arguing about it wasn’t going to accomplish what he wanted. She was too stubborn to give in, even if she did know he was right.

“Go ahead and use Hedwig if you’d rather,” Harry added, both because he felt a bit guilty for snapping at his friends and because Hermione was still scowling at him.

“Pig’s smaller,” she eventually answered. “He’ll draw less attention. Provided I can still use him, that is?” she said, looking to Ron to reiterate his offer.

“I already told you that you didn’t have to ask,” he replied. “You’re free to use him any time you like.”

Of course you won’t need to once I write Bill, he thought, purposely falling back to walk behind the girls as they all made their way back to the tower. Still, it’ll be pretty obvious what I’m doing if I asked to borrow Hedwig right now. Best hold off a bit and ask Harry when Hermione’s not around. Even better, Ron thought. I’ll write Bill a quick note while she’s in the Owlery and ask Harry to mail it for me later tonight. Yeah, that’ll work, he decided, and if all goes according to plan, she won’t even know what I’ve done until she goes home for the summer.

Or until her parents surprise her with a letter that’s delivered by an owl they claim to be hers, a more sensible voice warned.

Still, it’ll be too late for her to do anything about it then, he argued with himself. It’s not like she’d actually send it back to Eeylops. Would she? Aw well, I’ll deal with that when it happens. Unless… maybe I can get Bill to convince them to tell Hermione that they bought it for her. She might buy that. A belated Christmas gift or something. Yeah, that could work.

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“Harry? Do me a favor,” Ron said to his best friend, not long after Hermione and his sister left the common room and headed up to the Owlery together.

“Let me guess,” he replied, rolling his eyes behind his glasses and pushing his unfinished transfiguration essay to one side. The fact that the twins were up in the sixth year dorm sleeping had pretty much kept the boys confined to the common room since breakfast, and with it being the last day of peace and quiet they’d have, Harry had opted to use it to his advantage and was now attempting to make a dent the holiday homework he’d been trying to ignore. “You want to borrow Hedwig, right? Do you really think doing something like that behind her back is a good idea?”

“She’s just being pig headed,” Ron argued, tossing the Quidditch magazine he’d been perusing aside and leaning against the back of his chair to stretch. “She knew I was right. That’s why she was so irritated. Besides,” he added, “she said it herself, it’s my money. And since it’s mine, that means I can do whatever I want with it.”

“It’s your funeral, mate.”

“Our funeral,” Ron said hopefully. “I was sorta hoping you’d mail this for me,” he said, producing a folded sheet of parchment from his back pocket. “You don’t have to do it right away or anything,” he added, when Harry’s brow creased.

“Nothing personal, but I’m not sure I want to get in the middle of you—”

“She’ll know that you knew what I was doing and that you didn’t stop me,” Ron interjected. “Even
if I use one of the school owls. So you might as well be hanged for the dragon as the egg, right? Because either way, she’ll likely drag you into it.”

“Wonderful,” Harry said sarcastically.

“I’m right about her needing an owl though,” Ron reiterated. “You know that I am.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not going to do either of us any good.”

In fact, Harry was sure that the fact Ron was right actually did work against him in this case. Hermione didn’t like to be wrong, and she liked it even less when it was rubbed in her face.

“True,” Ron agreed. “And since we’re in for it anyway, we might as well go for broke.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked apprehensively. “I’m not in for anything yet.

“Come on,” Ron answered with a knowing look. “You don’t want them down on the platform tonight anymore than I do. There must be some way we can convince them to stay here and …”

“There is no way in hell you’re going to be able to convince Hermione to shirk her Prefect duties,” Harry said wisely. “Ginny either for that matter. All you’ll do is rile them up if you suggest it.”

“Maybe if we put our heads together we can--”

“No way,” Harry stated, with a vehement shake of his head. “Hermione is one thing. You’ll bear the brunt of that attack, but your sister is quite another. She’ll jump all over you for being overprotective, but when she’s finished with you, she’ll turn on me.”

“Don’t give me that no she won’t look,” he said, in response to Ron’s arched eyebrow. “She yelled at me at my own birthday party, for Merlin’s sake,” he added in an effort to prove his point. “Besides, there’s no way we can win. Not against both of them. Not once they team up against us. And they will.”

“Coward.”

“I prefer to think of it as knowing when to pick my battles,” Harry replied, dipping his quill in his bottle of ink and leaning over his essay once more. “Or at least knowing when I’m about to wage a losing one,” he added. “I’m surprised you haven’t figured that out for yourself by now,” he teased, “considering how many times I’ve seen you pick a fight with Hermione, only to wind up being trounced for your efforts.”

“I beg to differ,” Ron said indignantly. “I won this morning, didn’t I? She knew I was right and backed down.”

“But she was annoyed about it,” Harry reminded him. “You said so yourself. And if she’s annoyed about that, just think about how riled up she’ll get if you start talking about leaving her behind.”

“Look,” Harry said, glancing up from his essay and meeting his best friends stare, “I agree with you. I’d feel much better if they’d both stayed here, but you know as well as I do that they won’t. If we press them on it, all we’ll do is hack them off and if we do that there’s a good chance they’ll team up together and go off on their own, if for no other reason than to prove that they can take care of themselves. We’ll be able to keep a closer eye on them if they’re actually speaking to us, so just don’t say anything stupid, okay?”

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Ron tried to take Harry’s advice, he really did, because deep down he knew that Harry was right. Unfortunately, knowing that Harry was right, didn’t do much to alleviate his anxiety, nor did it suppress the overwhelming need he had to keep Hermione out of harms way. Even so, Ron managed to bite his tongue for most of the afternoon, although not without a great deal of internal struggle.

The problem was that even though he didn’t say anything, Hermione still had a fairly good idea about what Ron was struggling with and rather than take the bull by the horns and confront him, as he would have preferred, she sat back and let him stew. Ron, of course, knew that it was a test of sorts. Hermione wasn’t able to hide her feelings from him any easier than he could hide his from her. He knew that she was on edge herself and he also knew that she was waiting for him to make the first move.

If only she’d bring it up first, Ron thought, glancing down at his watch again, before moving over to the window to scan the grounds for what had to be the fifth time in the past hour.

I know what you’re doing, he grumbled in his head, as he resumed his pacing. I can’t bring it up myself, because you’re waiting for me to do it and if I do, you win. And if I don’t, you get what you want anyway, so you still win.

DAMN IT! But this is more important than who wins, he reminded himself. And I’m buggered either way, so I might as well…

“Ron.” Hermione said his name softly, but he still flinched ever so slightly before turning around to face her. “Can I talk to you in the hall for a minute?”

NOT GOOD! A voice in the back of his head cried in warning. She’s trying to separate you from your backup. Divide and conquer, it’s the oldest trick in the book. First me and then Harry, provided he even puts up a fight after she’s made an example out of me. Don’t let her do it. Say no.

“All about what?” Ron asked, in an effort to stall for time.

“Please,” she said, just as softly and without the slightest bit of anger in her voice or her eyes.

Don’t fall for that, the more strategic side of him protested, when Ron felt Hermione’s need surge into himself and he started moving towards the portrait hole, but it was already too late by then. Hermione fell in behind him and by the time he stopped moving and spun around to face her, they’d already stepped into the hallway and the Fat Lady was staring at them from her gilded frame.

“Let’s go down a bit further,” Hermione said, taking Ron’s hand in her own and pulling him down the corridor until they were far enough away that the Fat Lady wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop without moving to a closer painting.

“Look, Hermione,” Ron started, figuring he might as well get a few words in while he still had the opportunity to speak, “I know what you’re trying to do and—”

Okay, maybe I don’t, he finished in his head, when she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him.

What the hell?

“Nothing’s going to happen,” she whispered against his chest. “Professor McGonagall wouldn’t have asked us to go down to the platform and help out if she thought there was a chance of any serious danger. There will be students everywhere, not the mention teachers, and members of the Order. We’ll all be perfectly fine. But if it makes you feel better,” she said, tightening her grip on him even more. “I promise that I won’t leave your side.”
“Really?” Ron asked in disbelief. “You’re not going to give me the ’I can take care of myself’ speech?”

“I can, you know,” she replied.

“I never said that you couldn’t,” Ron sighed, while mentally kicking himself for bringing that up when she’d been on the verge of negotiating.

“But you still worry,” Hermione said, pulling away and looking him dead in the eye. “I know you think that it’s your responsibility to take care of me.”

“It is,” Ron stated, even as she was still speaking.

“Then it’s just as much my responsibility to take care of you,” she countered, “And I can’t do that if we aren’t together.”

“It’s not the same thing, Hermione,” he argued, pulling her flush against his chest once more.

“It most certainly is,” Hermione insisted. “She went after you too.”

Oh, right, Ron thought. He’d been so worried about what Bellatrix Lestrange being on the loose meant for Hermione’s safety, that he hadn’t given any thought to his own. In fact, he’d all but forgotten that she’d tried to lure him away from Hogwarts. On Voldemort’s orders no less. Not only that, she’d landed herself in prison as a result, which meant she now had a reason to hold a personal grudge against both of them.

DAMN!

“Get a room,” Fred said loudly, as he and his twin brother stepped through the portrait hole and spied their baby brother and his new wife embracing in the hallway.

“I have one, thanks,” Ron retorted, grateful to have something to distract him from where his mind had been going, even if it was only for a moment. “But you two gits were sleeping in it.”

“Yeah well, it’s all yours now,” George countered, “but you’ll have to snog later. Unless you want to keep Hagrid waiting.”

“Hold on a minute,” Ron said, when his sister stepped into the corridor, followed by Harry, who had both the Marauder’s Map and his Invisibility Cloak clutched in his hand.

“I’m not staying here,” Ginny stated, placing a hand on her hip and narrowing her eyes at Ron. “So don’t even bother asking.”

“Then you have to agree to the same thing Hermione did.”

“HO!” George scoffed. “What’s this? You expect us to believe that Hermione actually agreed to follow some daft set of rules you laid down?”

“You don’t have the stones,” Fred added. “And even if you did, there’s no way she’d go for it.”

“Unless what he wants actually make sense,” Hermione said, intentionally allowing the twins to believe that what she’d agreed to do had been Ron’s idea. “But…”

“But what?” Ron asked, his brow creasing as he gave Hermione a pointed look.

“Well, it makes sense for us to work together,” Hermione explained, “but Ginny will probably be
“So?” Ron cut in, before she had a chance to finish. “There’s nothing saying they can’t unload bags in the same car as us. Or in one that’s nearby at least. That’s the deal,” he said to his sister. “Hermione’s agreed not to leave my sight, and you’re going to do the same.”

“Oh I am, am I?” Ginny asked, visibly bristling as her brother told her what to do.

“What Ron’s trying to say,” Hermione interjected before the two siblings had a chance to get into it, “is that none of us, and that includes you, Harry, should be running around Hogsmeade on our own. If we have to separate for some reason, I’ll go with Ron, and you should stick with Harry.”

“Why didn’t he just say that then?” Ginny asked. *It’s not as if I’d have a problem working with Harry.*

“Hold on a minute.”

No, apparently it’s Harry that has the problem working with me, Ginny told herself, both surprised and hurt by how quickly he’d protested.

“Hagrid might not even let me go,” he said after noting the pained expression that briefly flashed across Ginny’s face.

“That’s why you’re bringing the cloak, mate,” George offered, earning a sharp look from Harry for his efforts.

It wasn’t that Harry had a problem sticking close to Ginny. Normally he’d be only too happy to do it. Unfortunately there was a vast difference between keeping an eye on Ginny, and following her and her boyfriend around, especially after they’d been separated for nearly three weeks. Harry didn’t want to think about the two of them greeting each other and making up for lost time, let alone witness it.

Quick, think of another excuse.

“Maybe I should…um… stick with Hermione instead,” he said, shifting his eyes to the floor uncomfortably when he felt the weight of Ginny’s stare on him. “I mean if you two have been fighting,” he added, giving Ron a pointed look, hoping that he’d agree despite the fact he didn’t know what the real problem was, “it might be better if--”

“We’re not fighting.”

Shit.

“Now that that’s all settled,” Fred said impatiently.

“Can we go?” George finished the statement for him.

SHIT! Harry silently cursed his fate again. But try as he might, there was no way he could see around it. Not unless he managed to get Ron aside somehow and explain why it was that he didn’t want to be paired off with Ginny tonight.

Like that’s going to happen.
Chapter 39: Cat and Mouse

Hermione Unleashed

Fortunately things went much smoother at the platform than Harry feared they might. Not being a Prefect himself, he’d waited with Fred and George, while his friends popped into the Prefect’s compartment to receive their instructions. And while Ginny did emerge with David Devane, Harry wasn’t forced to witness any public displays of affection. The prat didn’t even attempt to hold her hand. Although the presence of not one, but four older brothers in the immediate area, as Bill was patrolling the platform with Lupin and Tonks, was likely the cause of that.

Still, the five of them were able to work together, and with the members of the Order available to lend a hand when needed, they had the train unloaded and all of the students tucked safely into the thestral drawn carriages in no time. In fact, it went so efficiently that Harry barely had time to speak to Lupin or Bill, let alone say goodbye before he was forced to jump into one of the carriages himself.

The ride back to Hogwarts was the most difficult part of the evening by far. Ron and Hermione had managed to squeeze into the same carriage Lavender and Parvati were riding in at the last minute. And while Harry was grateful that there hadn’t been enough room for him, he didn’t relish the idea of enduring Devane’s presence any longer than absolutely necessary. It was one of those damned if you do, damned if you don’t situations. And it certainly didn’t help his mood any, knowing that he’d have to endure Parvati the instant he stepped foot in the dinning hall.

“You want to wait for Ron and Hermione?” Ginny asked, jumping down on the ground beside Harry when they reached the castle. “I don’t mind,” she added, glancing down the line of carriages still working their way to up to the double doors.

“No,” Harry said, although truth be told, he would have waited but for one reason, Ron and Hermione were with Parvati, who’d already made it known that she was irritated with him because he hadn’t sought her out on the train. And she was bound to be even more irate now that he’d ditched her to ride back to school with a bunch of fifth years, most of whom he didn’t even know. “They’ll come straight into the Great Hall,” he said, “Ron’s not likely to pass on the feast.

“Can’t say the same for them,” David said, pointing to the left.

“Who?” Ginny asked, turning with Harry to look at the spot David was pointing and seeing nothing.

“That blond Slytherin in your year,” he said to Harry. “You know,” he said, shifting his gaze to Ginny, “the one that a…”

“Malfoy,” Harry hissed under his breath.

“He just ducked around the side of the castle with a couple of friends,” David explained.

“Come on,” Harry insisted. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” David asked when Harry started moving off into the snow, rather than up the steps leading to the doors of the castle.

“After them of course,” Ginny replied. “We’re Prefects,” she said, when David looked surprised.
“So is he,” he argued.

“Fine, stay here,” Harry said. It would be better that way anyway. “And tell Ron and Hermione where we went and who we’re after.”

“Harry’s right,” Ginny said, as she spun around and chased after him. “Just wait for Ron and Hermione,” she said, before she too, vanished around the corner.

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“BUGGER IT ALL!” Ron swore loudly, when Devane told him that they’d spotted Malfoy sneaking off and that Harry and Ginny had decided to follow him. “There’s no one here now,” he said, leaning around the side of the castle and looking in the direction David had indicated.

“They can’t be very far ahead,” Hermione said, grabbing a hold of Ron’s arm and tugging on him. “Come on, we’ll just have to follow their footprints.”

“HEY!” they heard Harry shout, less than three minutes later.

“Why don’t you try picking on someone your own size for a change,” Ginny added in an angry voice, just as Ron, Hermione, and David rounded yet another corner and spotted the two Gryffindors advancing on Malfoy and his friends, who appeared to have a small girl cornered against one of the greenhouse walls.

“Are you volunteering to take her place?” Theodore Nott sneered, as he allowed his eyes to roam up and then down Ginny’s form. “Willing to take on all three of us, are you? Who knows, you might even enjoy it. I certainly will.”

“Over my dead body,” Harry shouted, stepping in front of Ginny to prevent Nott from leering at her any longer.

“Oh, that can definitely be arranged, Potter,” Malfoy laughed, stepping to the right and blocking Emma Creevey’s path when she tried to slip past him. “But there’s an order to things. First the Mudbloods, then the Mudblood lovers.”

“YOU SICK SON OF A BITCH!” Ron bellowed as he ran up behind Harry. “You try it and you’re dead.”

“What’s the matter, Weasel?” Malfoy jeered, as both Harry and David grabbed a hold of Ron and held him back. “Your ears burning? Yeah, I’m sure that Mudblood bitch of yours is right up there at the top of the list.”

“STUPEFY!”

“PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!”

The girls cast their spells at nearly the same time, taking everyone, except perhaps Ron, who was connected to Hermione and therefore knew what she was about to do, by surprise. But unlike Hermione, who remained standing beside Ron and Harry, Ginny was moving forward to get Emma, even as her spell slammed into Goyle and he crashed to the ground in an unconscious lump.

“It’s all right,” she said kindly, intentionally treading on a petrified Malfoy, before wrapping her arm around the shaking girl’s shoulder, and steering her away from the two Slytherins lying on their backs in the snow.
“Expelliarmus,” Harry cried, before Nott even managed to get his wand level.

“You’ll pay for this, Potter,” he jeered, as he watched Harry snatch his wand out of the air and shove it in his back pocket.

“Unlikely,” Harry said. He’d heard that threat so many times from various Slytherins by now, it was actually laughable. “Hermione?” he said, taken off guard when she pushed past him and stalked over to Malfoy. “What are you doing?”

But rather than reply, Hermione melted the snow around the Slytherin Prefect with a flick of her wrist and then used her foot to kick roll him onto his stomach.

What the hell? Harry wondered.

“Ginny,” she said in a voice that was eerily calm, “why don’t you take Emma back to the castle. She doesn’t need to see anymore of this. Harry, give them your Invisibility Cloak.”

“Anymore of what?” Harry asked, even as he yanked his Invisibility Cloak out of his coat pocket and handed it to Ginny.

We’ve done what we needed to do, he thought, as he watched Ginny pull David closer to Emma and herself, before the three of them vanished beneath his cloak. Why not just leave them here and let Nott sort them out?

“If you think I won’t sink down to your level,” Hermione said, ignoring Harry and kneeling in the mud beside Malfoy’s prone body, “to save my friends,” she added in a menacing whisper, “you’re sorely mistaken. And believe me,” she said, placing one hand on the back of Malfoy’s head and intentionally pressing his face into the sludge, “you don’t want me on your level.”

“You’re a one trick pony,” she whispered into Malfoy’s ear, holding him firmly against the ground so he couldn’t breathe, “but unlike you, I know lots of tricks and I don’t need to use an Unforgivable to get rid of you. I can take you out with something as simple as a body bind and a mud puddle and make it look like an accident.”

HOLY SHIT! was all Harry could think as he goggled at his best friend, who’d gone mad right before his very eyes.

“Get off him, you crazy bitch!” Nott shouted, springing forward and reaching for Hermione before Harry had a chance to pull himself together and prevent it. Fortunately the Làénain power was triggered the instant Nott’s hand came into contact with Hermione’s shoulder. Before he could knock her off his friend, there was a blinding flash of light and Nott was hurled away from her with so much force, he didn’t get back up.

“HA!” Ron shouted triumphantly. It was only after he looked back at Hermione that he realized he’d repelled her away from Malfoy as well. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly, as Harry forced his mouth to shut and started to move forward to help her out of the snow drift she’d landed in.

“No, I’m fine,” she said, holding a hand out to stop Harry, as she got to her knees and crawled back over to Draco, who was still face down in the mud.

“Do something,” Harry whispered to Ron, as the two of them watched Hermione resume the position she’d been in before she was so rudely interrupted.

“Why?” the redhead asked.
And that’s when Harry knew. This wasn’t just Hermione. This was Ron working through Hermione, or in tandem with her at the very least. He hadn’t been able to attack Malfoy directly because he’d been restrained, so he’d poured all his anger and his need to lash out into Hermione, and now she was acting on it for him, only in her own special way. Malfoy had just been introduced to the side of Hermione that Dolores Umbridge had been privileged enough to see, just before she was thrown to the Centaurs. Only this time, it she was being driven by Ron’s desire to get even.

“Draco Malfoy,” Hermione taunted. “The boy that slipped on the ice, hit his head and drown in a muddle puddle. Not a very dignified end, is it? Certainly not the way you want to be remembered.”

THIS IS SOOOO NOT GOOD! Harry thought. I can’t believe that I’m going to have to be the voice of reason here and stop her.

“Don’t,” Ron said, latching onto his best friend’s arm, before silently mouthing the words, “She’s bluffing.”

It’s a damn good bluff then, Harry though.

“Are you sure?” he asked, uncertainly.

“Not really, no.”

FUCKING GREAT!

“But it’s exactly what I’ll do if anything happens to that little girl,” Hermione continued, completely ignoring what the boys were saying behind her. “You remember that,” she said, winding her fingers in Malfoy’s sleek blond hair and using it to pull his face out of the muck so he could take a much needed breath, “because if anything happens to Emma, or what’s left of her family, or my family either for that matter, I’m going to hold you personally responsible. I don’t care if it was your father, or his mates, you’re the one I’m coming after,” she threatened, “and you can be damn sure that I’ll get you, before they get me.”

“Finite Incantatem,” Ron said, when Hermione stood up and backed way from Malfoy.

“You filthy Mudblood slag,” Draco sputtered, swiping his arm across the grime on his face even as he sat upright.

“You better shut your mouth,” Ron shouted, “because I’d be only too happy to shut it for you.”

“You’re just as crazy as she is,” he shouted back, whipping his wand out, before rising to his feet, and backing away from the golden trio. “And just as dead,” he mumbled to himself.

But Draco wasn’t foolish enough to try and make good on that threat without back up; backup that wasn’t as incompetent as the useless lumps still lying in the snow.

They deserve to freeze, he decided, before turning tail and scurrying for the closest greenhouse.

“What about these two?” Harry asked, pulling Nott’s wand out of his pocket and tossing it down in the snow.

“FUCK!”

“What is it?” Hermione asked in an urgent tone, spinning around to stare at Ron, who’d scooped the Marauder’s Map up off the ground and was now scowling down at it.
It must have fallen out of my pocket when I pulled my Invisibility Cloak out, Harry thought, just before Ron cursed again even louder.

“WHAT?” Hermione demanded, the panic evident in her voice now. “WHAT’S HAPPENED?”

But rather than wait for an answer, Harry yanked the map out of his best friend’s hand and stared down at it himself.

The first thing that jumped out at him was a dot marked, David Devane about half way between the castle and Hagrid’s hut. The fact that he wasn’t where he was supposed to be wasn’t what drew Harry’s attention, it was the fact that he was alone, and even worse, stationary.

But he was supposed to be with Ginny, Harry told himself. And there is no way she’d just leave him lying in the snow. Not voluntarily, he thought, trying without much success to calm his nerves as he scanned the grounds for Ginny.

“What! Happened!” Hermione shrieked at Ron, who was staring at Harry, his face nearly as pale as the snow on the ground all around them.

“It wasn’t Emma,” he muttered.

“What do you mean?” Hermione demanded.

“I mean that wasn’t Emma Creevey,” Ron yelled.

“Then who was it?”

“Bellatrix Lestrange!” Harry snarled. And then the weight of what he’d just seen came crashing down on top of him. Ginny was alone with Bellatrix Lestrange, and they were both right on the brink of the Forbidden Forest. Even as he stared down at the map and tried to will this not to be happening, their names vanished off the edge of the map.

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“What?” Hermione asked uncertainly, praying that she’d just misunderstood what Harry had said. Although deep down she knew that she hadn’t, because she could feel the panic that was gripping Ron leach into her, even as she spoke.

“It’s Bellatrix Lestrange!” Harry shouted back, angry at himself for being so foolish. He’d allowed himself to be lulled into a false sense of security and let his guard down when they reached the school. He was so stupid. He’d done exactly what Voldemort wanted him to do. He’d followed Malfoy and now the Death Eater’s had Ginny.

“I gave her my Invisibility Cloak,” he cried, as he suddenly realized just how easy he’d made it for the Death Eater to stroll across the grounds with her hostage. Even if Ginny had put up a fight, no one would have seen her. “I gave her my cloak and just sat back while she snatched Ginny right out from under our nose.”

“But you couldn’t have known,” Hermione said weakly, although what she really meant was that she couldn’t have known. She was the one who had told Ginny to take Emma back up to the castle, after all. But that was only because she thought the poor girl had been traumatized enough. She hadn’t wanted her to witness what she was about to do to Malfoy, for fear of frightening her even
more. She was the one that told Harry to give Ginny the Invisibility Cloak. This was all her fault. Ginny was now Voldemort’s prisoner and it was her fault.

“Stop it!” Ron shouted at Hermione, taking both her and Harry by surprise. “You two can play the blame game later,” he said, before spinning around to face the forest. “If we hurry we might be able to--”

“NO!” Hermione shrieked, latching onto Ron’s arm, to hold him in place. “We need to go inside and get help first,” she insisted. “Lestrange wasn’t working alone. She had Malfoy, Nott, and Goyle helping her. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if their fathers aren’t around here somewhere. We have to warn the teachers and--”

“By then it could be too late,” Ron argued, jerking his arm out of her grasp. “If we go now.”

“It’s already too late,” Harry said harshly, cutting Ron and Hermione’s argument off before it even got started. “And Hermione’s right.”

*Voldemort has what he wants. BLOODY BASTARD! But if he’s going to use her as bait, he’ll need to keep her alive, and he’ll take her somewhere close. Probably Hogsmeade. That doesn’t mean he won’t let that bitch torture her though, just like she tortured Hermione.*

FUCK! Harry swore loudly in his head, as Nott’s innuendo replayed in his mind and suddenly took on a much more tangible and ominous meaning. Had that been part of the plan the whole time? Was Ginny actually the target, or would Bellatrix have settled for anyone close to him? But if Voldemort knew how he really felt about Ginny...

SHIT!

“WHAT?” Ron cried in disbelief. This couldn’t be happening. No way would Harry admit defeat and throw his sister to the wolves.

“He said I was right,” Hermione answered.

“FUCKING BASTARD!” Harry swore out of the blue.

*If that son of a bitch lets them touch her, I swear to God…*

“That’s what he wants,” Harry said to himself. “It’s what he expects me to do. This is just like when I thought he had Sirius in the Department of Mysteries.”

“But he does have Ginny.”

“And he wants us to chase after her without thinking,” Harry explained, when Ron’s mouth fell open. “He’s counting on it, so he can spring his trap with nobody else knowing, just like he did last year. I mean think about it. We didn’t know that was Bellatrix. She could have killed me if that’s
what she had wanted. But she didn’t,” he ranted. “She took Ginny as bait, to lure me out, so Voldemort could do it. And all because of that GODDAMNED PROPHECY!”

“But... but the prophecy was destroyed,” Hermione said softly. “He doesn’t know what it said.”

“He knows enough,” Harry said bitterly. “Enough to track me down and try to kill me when I was a baby. He heard part of it, but not all of it. Just enough to know that he has to kill me before I kill him. ‘Neither can live while the other survives’,” he quoted the end of the prophecy under his breath.

“How could you possibly know that?” Hermione asked, after glancing at Ron and seeing that he, too, had heard what Harry mumbled, and was just as stunned by the revelation as she was. “Unless,” she said, narrowing her eyes and studying Harry intently, “you know what the prophecy says.”

“Yeah, I know,” he admitted without ceremony.

There was no point hiding it anymore. He no longer feared his friends’ reaction. Hermione had just made it clear to Malfoy that she was willing to kill if that was what she had to do to protect the people she cared about. Of course she’d been strongly influenced by Ron at the time, but that was beside the point. The point was that if they were willing to do it, they wouldn’t begrudge him for doing the same thing. They wouldn’t think any less of him, or abandon him, if they knew what he had to do; what he had to become.

But they didn’t really understand. Not yet. Harry could tell by the expressions on their faces. They were still several steps behind him and he knew that he was going to have to catch them up to speed if they were going to be able to help him get Ginny back. They had to know what it was they were running into. But he had to do it quickly, because they didn’t have much time; Ginny didn’t have much time. The longer those bastards had her, the more likely they’d do irreparable harm.

“Dumbledore was there when the prophecy was made,” he said quickly, clenching his fists at his sides and struggling to stomp down his rage long enough to explain. “He told me what it said after we destroyed the copy in the Department of Mysteries. ‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...’ ” Harry said, lowering his voice so much that Ron and Hermione had to step closer to him to hear what he was saying. “ ‘Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives’.”

“DAMN!” Ron said, more to himself than to anyone else in particular.

“So you see now what he’s doing?” Harry asked. “He’s using Ginny to draw me away from Hogwarts, because he knows that he has to be the one to kill me before I...”

“Rubbish,” Hermione cut in. “Dead is dead and it doesn’t matter who does it,” she stated. “You said it yourself, Bellatrix could have killed you. And if she had, none of this prophecy bunk would be an issue any longer. She didn’t kill you, because Voldemort wants to do it himself. He wants to do it,
Harry. To prove to himself and to his followers that he’s more powerful than you are, but he’s not the only one that can kill you. Thinking like that could be very, very dangerous. You have to see that the only real power that prophecy has is the power you two give it, because deep down, Voldemort must see that. It only makes sense that he does. He wouldn’t fear Dumbledore any longer if he truly thought you were the only person alive that could defeat him.”

“What are you saying?” Ron asked, goggling at Hermione in disbelief. “That Harry should just sit back and let You-Know-Who come after--”

“Of course not,” she retorted before he could finish. “All I’m saying is that Harry’s fate hasn’t been preordained. It’s not written in the stars somewhere. He still has a choice.”

“Kill or be killed,” Harry said bitterly. Some choice. Although he’s making it much easier for me to choose.

“Look,” he stated irritably. “None of that matters right now. Right now I need you to find Dumbledore and tell him what’s happened,” he said to Hermione. “Tell him that I think... no, tell him that Ron and I are already on our way to Hogsmeade,” he amended.

“What!” she cried in outrage. “You can’t go without me!”

“We won’t,” Harry assured her. “But if Dumbledore thinks we’ve already gone, he won’t waste valuable time trying to prevent us from helping.”

“Voldemort has my Invisibility Cloak, but he doesn’t know about yours,” he said to Ron. “We should be able to use that to our advantage.”

“Ron and I will meet you in Gryffindor Tower,” Harry said to Hermione. “If you take the secret passages, you should be able to beat everyone else back with no problems. Then we can use our brooms to get to Hogsmeade.”

Once I’ve retrieved ‘the power the Dark Lord knows not’.

“Come on,” he said to his friends, before turning away from the forest and bolting in the direction of the double doors that would lead them into the entrance hall of the school.

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Hermione created quite a stir when she barged into the Great Hall, wet and muddy, wand in hand, shouting for Professor Dumbledore, who was mysteriously absent.

*How can he not be here?* she asked herself, staring at his empty chair as she hurried towards the staff table at the end of the hall. *He’s always here when the students arrive. Where is he?*

“Granger,” Snape snarled her name, as she ran up to her head of house. “What is the meaning of
“Professor McGonagall,” she said, ignoring Snape’s comment completely. “I need to speak to Professor Dumbledore. It’s urgent. There are Death Eaters--”

“Wha?” Hagrid, who’d been listening intently along with everyone else in the room, shouted, shoving the table away from himself with so much force it toppled over with a tremendous bang. “Where’s Harry?” he demanded in a booming voice, as he jumped to his feet.

“Harry and Ron went after Ginny,” Hermione lied, as she’d been instructed. “Bellatrix Lestrange dragged her into the Forbidden Forest less than ten minutes ago. Harry thinks she’s taking Ginny to Hogsmeade. He went to try and head her off.”

“Lestrange was here?” Snape asked, as the color drained out of McGonagall’s face.

“YES!”

“And she took Ginny prisoner?” Tonks said next.

“YES!!” Hermione shrieked.

Why are they all still sitting here?

“Malfoy, Nott, and Goyle were helping her. We left Nott and Goyle unconscious outside the greenhouses, but by the time we realized what happened to Ginny, it was already too late. Lestrange had already taken her and... oh God,” Hermione moaned.

David.

“David Devain,” she said urgently, as she suddenly remembered that Ginny hadn’t been alone when she’d walked off with the girl they all thought to be Emma Creevey. “Ginny and David were both with her, but she must have rid herself of him, because Harry only mentioned Ginny being taken. David must still be on the grounds somewhere. You have to find him and--”

“Hagrid,” McGonagall said almost immediately.

“On it,” he said, running for the door with Tonks right behind him.

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“What are you looking for?” Ron asked, as he stood by the open window with his broom and his Invisibility Cloak in hand, while his best friend tore through his trunk, tossing bits of clothing all over the room in the process.
“This,” Harry shouted, finally finding the pair of socks he’d been searching for at the bottom and upending them until the vial that Ginny had given him the night before slid into his waiting hand.

“Is that…”

“The Power the Dark Lord knows not,” Harry replied, yanking the stopper off the bottle and grabbing a knife out of his Potion’s kit. “Ginny’s already added her blood,” he stated, as he dragged the knife across his index finger and squeezed it with his thumb until his blood dropped into the Coupling Potion. “The connection will be one-sided until she drinks it herself,” he added, taking a swig, replacing the stopper, and shoving the vial into his pocket. “But I’ll be linked to her, which should make it easier for us to find her.”

“Let’s go then,” Ron insisted.

“We have to wait for Hermione.”

“No,” the redhead stated, shaking his head adamantly. “Hermione’s not coming.”

“I already promised her that we’d--”

“I don’t give a damn what you promised her,” Ron retorted. “She’s not coming. I can’t be worried about her and Ginny at the same time. Without an Invisibility Cloak, she’ll have no way of getting out of the castle. The teachers will be monitoring all the ways in and out. She’ll be stuck here, where it’s safe.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, clearly torn. The sooner they left the better, and it would be far easier for two of them to hide under a single Invisibility Cloak, especially while on brooms, than it would for three. But on the flip side, he’d promised Hermione that they’d wait, and they needed her. Not just for her brains, but because she acted as the voice of reason in these situations. Or she used to anyway. She hadn’t been very restrained or reasonable with Malfoy. But without her to pull them back and force them to think things through, they’d act on impulse.

Reckless act of stupidity number one, Harry thought, with a sigh. Leaving Hermione behind.

“She’s going to kill us,” he stated, as he grabbed his broom off his bed, mounted it, and flew out the window where Ron was standing, to hover on the other side.

“Don’t worry,” Ron assured him, mounting his own broom and following Harry. “I’ll take the brunt of it,” he added, throwing his Invisibility Cloak over them both once they were side by side in the air.

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“DAMN THEM!” Hermione shrieked, when she reached the boys’ bedroom and confirmed what
she’d already suspected. “THEY LEFT WITHOUT ME!”

She’d realized what Ron was contemplating even as she slipped away from the rest of the students making their way back to Gryffindor Tower and took the shortcuts Harry had suggested. The deluge of guilt she’d experienced as she raced ahead had been enough to clue her in, but she’d held out hope that Harry wouldn’t go along with him.

Apparently not, she fumed, as she stood in the middle of the empty bedroom staring at the open window. *If you think I’m going to just sit here and twiddle my thumbs worrying about the three of you, Ronald Weasley, you’ve got another thing coming.*

Of course she knew that Ron couldn’t read her mind as she berated him. But he could most definitely read her mood, and Hermione knew that he could tell that she was incensed.

If he had a lick of sense, he’d have known I wasn’t going to just roll over and accept this. Where there’s a will, there’s a way, and I’m going to get to Hogsmeade, she vowed, sprinting back downstairs. *And heaven help anyone that gets in my way.*

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“Uh oh,” Ron groaned, standing upright abruptly and turning around to face Harry, now that he’d finished burying both of their brooms in the snow to hide them from view.

“Hacked off, is she?” Harry asked knowingly, when he noted his best friend’s frightened expression.

“That’s putting it mildly,” he replied with a grimace, closing his eyes and making a concerted effort to shove Hermione’s rage, and the anxiety it caused, aside, so he could focus on what he had to do. “So are you picking up anything yet?” he asked, to change the subject.

“I dunno,” Harry answered, closing his eyes and concentrating as hard as he could, hoping to sense something out of the ordinary.

It had been nearly ten minutes since he’d taken the Coupling Potion. They’d flown out of their bedroom window, landed in the woods just outside Hogsmeade, and ditched their brooms already, but he had no idea where to start looking.

How much longer is it going to take? he thought, with a considerable amount of irritation. *I don’t have time for this. Ginny doesn’t have time for this. I have to find her now. Stupid useless potion.*

“How am I supposed to know if what I’m feeling is her or me?” he asked, despite the fact he still wasn’t sensing anything at all.

“I don’t know,” Ron said, shrugging his shoulders. “You just do. It’s a bit harder when you’re both feeling the same thing,” he admitted, after giving it some thought. “Sometimes I still can’t tell the difference, like with what happened with Malfoy. I don’t know if that was her, or me, or both of us. But you’ve been through this with You-Know-Who, right? It’s probably a bit like that. Just don’t fight it,” he suggested. “She must be afraid. Try focusing on that. See if you can figure out what specifically she’s afraid of. That might help us figure out how many of them are with her.”

“It’s not working!” Harry snapped, both agitated and impatient for something concrete to go on. If he could just pick up a strong emotion, any strong emotion that was not his own, at least he’d know Ginny was alive. But the longer he went without sensing her, the stronger the nagging fear deep in the pit of his stomach became.

What if Voldemort really didn’t need her anymore? What if he’d already accomplished what he’d set
out to do? They’d left the safety of Hogwarts, hadn’t they? Maybe that was all he wanted. What if they were already too late? Maybe Bellatrix had snapped and killed Ginny against Voldemort’s orders. She’d tried to kill Hermione after all. And she would have if Voldemort hadn’t intervened and used his snake to stop her.

SHIT!

The not knowing was driving him crazy.

That crazy, fucked up bitch! If she…

“You don’t think she’s unconscious, do you?” Ron asked, pulling Harry back and putting his mind at ease without even realizing it. “Because you won’t be able to pick up anything if she is. I can’t read Hermione if she’s asleep. So if they’ve Stunned her--”

“God, I hope so,” Harry cut him off. “Unconscious is better than dead,” he added, when Ron looked taken aback.

“What do you mean?” Ron asked, the color draining out of his face. “You don’t seriously think she’s..”

“No, no, I’m sure you’re right,” he answered. “She’d put up less of a struggle if she were unconscious. I’m sure that’s what it is. Except,” he added reluctantly, as a new thought occurred to him, “if that were the case, wouldn’t I be unconscious, too, or semi-conscious?” he corrected.

“Not necessarily,” Ron answered straight away. He and Hermione had discussed the probability of Harry and Ginny sharing the effects of spells, so he was prepared for this question. “That was only the standard version of the potion you took and right now the connection is one-sided. It’s bound to be weaker,” he explained. “And Hermione and I didn’t just link our souls. We sort of unintentionally linked our bodies with a two-way Lânain spell. She reckons that’s why we share the effects of certain spells. So that shouldn’t happen with you and Ginny at all, which is good.”

“But if our connection isn’t as strong as yours, maybe she is still conscious and I just can’t sense her,” Harry groaned.

“So much for the element of surprise,” he complained. “But I’m done waiting. I’ll march into the village and do a bloody door-to-door search if it’s the only way to find her. Let’s go.”

“Hold on,” Ron replied, knowing that it would be better for all of them if they spent a little time trying to figure out exactly where they were going, rather than waste even more time searching places needlessly. “Maybe if I check up on Hermione, and describe what I’m doing as I do it, you can copy me,” he suggested. “That might work.” he said, closing his eyes again and taking a deep breath. “Okay, first off, figure out what you’re feeling and then try and shove it aside. Anything that’s left is her.”

“Right,” Harry agreed, despite the fact he had no idea how to really go about doing that. He was too angry to beat it down entirely. It was all he could do to contain it at its current level.

“She’s angry, naturally,” the redhead stated. “I’m-going-to-curse-you-into-oblivion kind of angry. It’s kinda scary actually. And she’s determined, and…” bugger “…confident. That must mean she has some sort of plan in the works. Damn it! She’s not supposed to have a backup plan that I don’t know about.”

“Quit fretting about that and figure out where Hermione is so you can tell me how you did it and I can do it with Ginny,” Harry insisted.
“Right,” Ron said, concentrating really hard. “But the only way to do that is to figure out why she’s feeling what she is. She’s angry at us, but she’s confident. She knows where she’s going and how to go about getting there.”

“Which would be here, by the way,” Harry interjected, when he realized Ron was using his knowledge of how Hermione’s mind worked to make educated guesses about everything else. Was that what he was supposed to do with Ginny? Did he even know how her mind worked most of the time?

“She can’t try Apparition while she’s at Hogwarts, and she can’t get to the entrance that leads to the Shrieking Shack,” Ron said, more to himself than to Harry this time, “because it’s outside. So that only leaves one option.”

“Honeydukes,” they both said in unison.

“Great,” Harry added sardonically. “So we know where Hermione is going to be. We’ll start there and once she’s finished with her lecture, there will be three of us to do those door-to-door searches.”

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“Neville,” Hermione snapped, spotting him near the front of the Gryffindors queuing up outside the Fat Lady’s portrait when she burst through it. “I need your help. Come with me,” she said, latching onto his arm before he had a chance to protest.

“What?” he exclaimed in surprise, when Hermione dragged him back in the direction he’d just come from.

“The Prefects are supposed to help the teachers patrol the halls,” she stated loudly, because she knew that there were several pairs of eyes trained on them, “and Gryffindor is down by three at the moment. I need you to step in for Ron until he gets back.”

“You want me to help you patrol the school?” Neville asked in disbelief.

“You do have your wand, right?” Hermione said, rather than answer his question. “Good,” she added, when he produced it from the inside pocket of his robes. “Come on,” she said, tugging on him again as she started to run, “we need to get down to the third floor.”

“Why? Is that where McGonagall assigned you?”

“No.”

“Then why are we...”

“I’ll explain when we get there.”

“Get where exactly?”

“Just pay attention to where I’m taking you,” she ordered, as they ducked through one of the shortcuts Harry had shown her, before jogging down yet another flight of stairs. “This is really, really important,” Hermione stated, after they’d reached the third floor, and she’d dragged Neville in the direction of the Armor gallery. “I need you to go find McGonagall and bring her back with you.”

“Back where?” Neville asked again, clearly confused. They weren’t anywhere important. They’d run right past the Armor gallery and come to a standstill in the middle of an empty hallway. There was nothing important around, just a statue of a humped-back witch.
“This,” Hermione said, tapping the statue on the nose with her wand and muttering an incantation Neville couldn’t quite make out, “is a secret passage leading directly into Honeydukes. The Death Eaters know about it,” she stated ominously, before he had a chance to interrupt. “If they want to get into Hogwarts, this is the path they’ll most likely choose.”

“I’ve cursed this end of the tunnel,” she said, as Neville peered into the cavern that had been exposed with trepidation. “But the spell has a flaw. It wasn’t designed to keep people from getting in, only to prevent them from getting back out. Anyone can walk through the barrier once. You have to find McGonagall and make sure the teachers guard this passageway.”

“CLOSE IT!” he shouted, as if he expected Death Eaters to come pouring out at any moment.

“I will,” Hermione assured him, “once I’m inside.”

“You can’t...”

“I have to get to Hogsmeade,” she cut him off. “That’s where Harry and Ron are. Like it or not, they’re going to need my help and this tunnel is the only option I have.”

“Hermione, you can’t go in there. It’s too dangerous.”

“Don’t try and stop me, Neville, and don’t try and follow me either,” she warned. “By the time I make it through to the other end, the entire length of this tunnel is going to be filled with curses. I might not be able to stop the Death Eaters entirely, but I wager I can slow them down.”

“Hermione!” Neville protested, as she slid through the narrow opening and disappeared into the darkness.

“Tell McGonagall,” was all she said, before the doorway slid shut, and Neville found himself stranded in the corridor alone.

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Hermione actually managed to make it all the way to Honeydukes before she was challenged. Her one saving grace was that the small band of Death Eaters she discovered in the basement of the sweets shop clearly hadn’t been expecting to meet opposition yet. Two of the three hooded figures actually had their backs turned when she started to emerge. Only one of them, a broad shouldered, brutish looking fellow with blond hair, caught a glimpse of her as she ducked back into the tunnel.

“Come out, come out, whoever you are,” the blond Death Eater taunted in a singsong voice, as he launched himself off the step he’d been sitting on and cautiously approached the trapdoor he’d just seen open.

By the size of the door, he could tell that the opening would be narrow. They’d have to go down single file if they wanted to have a bit of sport and flush the girl out. No doubt she was scurrying back to Hogwarts as quickly as she could.

Technically speaking, the Death Eater knew that they weren’t supposed to enter the tunnel yet. They weren’t all there yet and the Malfoy brat hadn’t given them the all clear signal. But if they allowed the girl to make it back to the school, she’d ruin the little surprise they had planned for the Headmaster and it would all be for naught anyway.

Besides, if they managed to catch her quickly, they could drag her back up to the cellar without anyone noticing that they’d been gone, and then they’d be able to entertain themselves properly while they waited for the go-ahead to sneak into the castle.
“A chase it is then,” the beefy blond jeered, lifting the trapdoor with a wave of his wand while he was several feet away as a precaution. When nothing happened, he inched forward and peered into the hole, as his comrades converged behind him. Only he was surprised to discover that the space below wasn’t exactly dark. Some sort of hieroglyphic symbols were shimmering in the air just past the doorway, casting a faint golden light on the walls of the tunnel. But the light quickly faded, as did the symbols, leaving the space below pitch black once more.

“What the hell was that?”

“What’s the matter, Gibbon?” the blond taunted, shoving the Death Eater that had spoken closer to the opening. “Get your arse down there, unless you’re afraid the little girl might hurt you with her pretty light spell.”

“**EXPPELLIARIMUS!**” Hermione shouted, the instant the first Death Eater dropped into the tunnel. She didn’t want him unconscious, just unarmed. They were in a confined space after all and there wasn’t much room for three grown men to maneuver about. With him standing between her and his friends, she hoped he’d be just one more obstacle in their way.

Of course just because he was unarmed, that didn’t mean he wasn’t still a threat. Never underestimate your opponent. It was a lesson Hermione had learned the hard way in the Department of Mysteries the year before, when she thought she’d bested Dolohov. So she didn’t dare take her eyes off of the Death Eater running at her, not even when she heard one of his friends jump into the tunnel behind him.

“*Stupefy,*” she cried, sending a bolt of red light directly into the first Death Eater’s chest just before he managed to reach her.

So much for my human shield, she thought, jumping backwards to avoid being dragged down with him as he pitched forward.

Unfortunately for Hermione, she wasn’t able to curse two people with the same spell, nor was she quick enough to block the curse racing towards her. She barely had her wand pointed at her second opponent, when his Stunning spell hit home and knocked her off her feet.

“Not much of a chase after all,” she heard the one that had cursed her taunt, as he stepped over his fellow Death Eater to stand over her.

Although why he’d waste his time speaking to someone he thought was unconscious, Hermione didn’t quite understand, unless it was because he liked to hear the sound of his own voice. There was no way he could have known that the effects of his spell had been dispersed between her and someone else. True, she’d been fazed, but she was only pretending to be unconscious.

“But don’t you worry,” he continued, “we’ll still have our fun, you and I. Macnair, get down here and make yourself useful. Revive Gibbon,” he ordered, kneeling beside Hermione’s prone form, “while I see to our guest.”

Even in her groggy state, Hermione realized that it was going to be harder to get past two fully-conscious and armed Death Eaters, let alone three. But once they entered the tunnel, she knew they wouldn’t be able to follow her back out. She’d made sure they’d have to cross through the barrier she’d thrown up, in order to fight her. Once they were this far into the tunnel, there would be no going back for them, at least not the way they’d come. They’d have to make it to the Hogwarts end.
of the tunnel to get out, which would be no mean feat, considering she’d left random curses scattered throughout the entire length of the tunnel, several of which were powerful enough to bring the roof down on top of them if they weren’t paying proper attention.

Hermione, however, still had a shot of getting out at this end of the tunnel. She’d cast the Fortification spell Bill taught her from the inside, and she’d been very careful not to go anywhere near the barrier herself. If she could take the Death Eaters unaware and get past them, she only had to make it back to the trapdoor to be safe.

Of course Harry had to figure out what was going on and use the proper counter curse on Ron before she could do much of anything. She wasn’t strong enough to act on her own just yet. Fortunately that happened almost instantly. She felt the haze lift and her strength return in full measure even as Macnair stepped over the one called Gibbon to see who they’d caught.

Of course the downside to Harry reviving her through Ron was that the boys now knew she was in trouble. She could feel Ron’s level of anxiety increase tenfold, even as Macnair glanced down at her and said, “I recognize this one. That’s Potter’s pet Mudblood.”

THINK! Hermione screamed in her head, because she knew that she didn’t have much time left. If Harry and Ron figured out where she was… if they reached the basement before she managed to get out and came charging down into the tunnel to save her, they’d wind up just as stuck as the Death Eaters were. She simply couldn’t allow that to happen.

“Indeed,” Hermione heard the second Death Eater reply. “That ought to earn us some points with the Dark Lord. You don’t suppose,” he said, standing upright and walking a short ways down the tunnel. “Where there’s one, there could be more,” he stated, using his wand as a torch to light up the expanse of the tunnel.

It’s now or never, Hermione decided. One was still unconscious, one had just walked away and from the sound of his voice had his back turned, and one was standing right in front of her. The odds weren’t going to get any better.

As subtly as she could, Hermione pulled her arm out from under her chest, pointed her wand at the hem of Macnair’s robes, and set them on fire with the same Bluebell Flame Charm she’d used on Snape as a first-year. There was nothing quite like having your clothing spontaneously combust to draw your undivided attention.

Macnair was still trying to stamp it out when Hermione jumped up, shoved him out of her way as he teetered on one foot, and bolted for the trapdoor. Only she stopped as soon as she reached it and rather than climb out, she spun back around to face not one, but two angry-looking adversaries.

“I was going to kill you quickly,” a now flame-free Macnair sneered, his wand out and pointed directly at Hermione’s heart. “But just for that, I’m going to take my time and really enjoy it.”

Great, she thought, where’s Ron when I need him? This is all his fault. If he hadn’t left me behind, I wouldn’t be in this predicament. And he’s going to pay for it too. When I find him, that is. But first, I have to keep these Death Eaters focused on this side of the tunnel so they don’t try and go to Hogwarts. It would be a lot easier to do that if Ron were here though. Spouting off at the mouth is his forte, not mine. Then again, they are Death Eaters. It shouldn’t really be all that hard to taunt them into attacking me.

“I’ll just hold my breath then, shall I?” Hermione said, forcing herself to stand her ground and mock them, when her every instinct was screaming at her to climb into the cellar and leave them to their hole. “Seeing as how you weren’t even competent enough to execute Hagrid’s hippogriff.”
Well, that was even easier than I expected, she thought, as Macnair’s spell raced towards her, only to be absorbed by the invisible wall standing between them.

Hermione wasn’t nearly as surprised as the Death Eaters were. She’d known exactly what was going to happen when she saw the spell coming. Bill had explained it to her when he taught her to cast the spell at Grimmauld Place. It was quite ingenious really, how the Ancient Egyptians had designed this particular enchantment to use the magic any would-be-thief utilized trying to break free to reinforce the barrier keeping him in place. The more spells the Death Eaters threw at it, the stronger the barrier would become, which was why she was still standing there, taunting them.

“You’re dead, you little bitch,” the blond Death Eater swore, when the Cruciatus Curse he sent at her, slammed into the barricade, causing it to shimmer to life briefly, before vanishing yet again. “That shield can’t hold forever,” he said, firing spell after spell at it.

“Perhaps not,” she replied, “but after a few hundred years, I wager it’ll feel that way.”

“AVADA KEDAVRA !” the blond shouted. Evidently he was finished playing around. And even though she was 98% sure that the shield would hold it back, Hermione still jumped out of the way this time.

“That ought to be good for another hundred years or so,” she said, when the ominous green glow was engulfed and replaced by the golden hue of the barricade momentarily becoming visible once more.

“What is that thing?” Macnair asked, glaring at the place the shimmering light had been.

“If you don’t know, I’m certainly not going to tell you,” she forced herself to answer flippantly. “But I will tell you this much,” she added, as if she were doing them a favor, when in reality she was simply trying to unnerve them now. “Unless one of you can Conjure up an Ancient Egyptian, you’re well and truly stuck, because I’ve placed the same curse at the other end of the tunnel and only the caster can walk through it,” she lied.

“We will get out,” the blond vowed, “and when we do…”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Hermione retorted, with far more bravado than she felt. She was going to have to push it even more, if she wanted them to give up on magic and give brute force a try. Only after they tried that, would they believe that they were really stuck. “Lestrange couldn’t hold me. What made you think either of you stood a chance? Bested by a… little girl. That is what you called me, correct? How pathetic. Although I’m really not surprised. I’ve noticed that Voldemort seems to prefer big dumb types that can’t think for themselves. Case in point.”

The final insult was enough to finally get the big brute moving and despite the fact that she’d told him that he wouldn’t be able to get through, the bulky Death Eater either didn’t believing her or he simply didn’t care. He lowered his head and charged the barrier. Hermione didn’t bother waiting around long enough to watch him collide with the impenetrable shield. She turned around even as he was barreling forward and pulled herself into the basement of Honeydukes sweet shop.

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“What the hell?” Fred asked in surprise when he saw his younger brother drop down on his knees in the snow without warning. Ron had been perfectly fine mere moments ago. So fine in fact, he and
Harry had both managed to startle the twins by materializing in the street right in front of them. Of course Fred now knew that it hadn’t been some spectacular feat of underage Apparition without sound. The two of them had been lurking nearby under Ron’s Invisibility Cloak and had seen them approaching.

But this, whatever it was that was happening to Ron, didn’t make any sense. And clearly, he wasn’t the only one that was shocked. Fred didn’t even have to look at George to know that he was just as alarmed and confused; he could actually sense it.

Harry however, seemed to have a leg up on both of the twins, because he didn’t bother questioning what was happening, nor did he waste any time trying to answer Fred. He simply jerked his arm up and pointed his wand right at Ron’s chest, before shouting, “ENNERVATE!”

“BUGGER!” Ron cursed loudly, as Harry lowered his wand and helped him back on his feet.

“How did you know he was Stunned?” George asked, but the question seemed ridiculously stupid in light of his brother’s next statement.

“Those bloody bastards have Hermione,” Ron snarled. “FUCK!”

Of course, the twins both thought at nearly the same time.

Ron hadn’t been cursed with a spell they’d failed to notice, Hermione had. Wherever she was, she’d been captured by Death Eaters and they’d Stunned her. Only, because of the unique bond she shared with Ron, the effects of the spell had been dispersed between both of them.

Their ability to share the effects of certain spells could be very advantageous in a battle situation, but it could also cause a lot of trouble, especially when one of them was alone and surrounded by maniacal killers. They had to get to her before the Death Eaters stopped playing around and started throwing Unforgivables, both for Hermione’s sake as well as Ron’s.

“FUCK!” Ron shouted again, even louder this time. This was precisely the type of situation he’d been trying to avoid and why he’d insisted on leaving Hermione at Hogwarts to begin with. And yet here he was, forced to choose between rescuing his sister and his wife. Either way, he was screwed because it meant he’d have to abandon someone he loved.

“Shit,” Harry swore, more to himself than to anyone in particular. He didn’t want to make this decision anymore than Ron did. But he knew that he had to do it, and quickly, because he could tell from the expression on Ron’s face that he was about to suggest they split up. And while that made sense in theory, a more logical voice in the back of Harry’s mind kept insisting that it would be a mistake. They’d split up in the Department of Mysteries, albeit by accident, and it had nearly been disastrous. They stood a better chance of rescuing both Hermione and Ginny if they stayed together and worked as a group.

“Okay, look,” Harry said resolutely, “I want to go after Ginny just as much as the rest of you,” he stated. “But we don’t know where she is yet. We do know Hermione is at Honeydukes, so it only makes sense to… to… oh God!” he moaned.

“Harry?” George asked, more than a little unnerved by the fact that he’d just seen one of the bravest people he knew turn white as a sheet. “What is it?”

“She’s awake,” Harry muttered under his breath. “Ginny,” he clarified a little louder, closing his eyes and covering his face with one hand so the Weasley brothers wouldn’t see his pained expression. He just had to hope that the panic he was sensing from her wasn’t evident in his voice. “She was
confused, but now she realizes what’s going on and she’s afra…”

“HARRY!” Ron shouted, when his best friend stopped speaking, slapped his hand over his forehead, and cried out in pain.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!” Harry roared at the top of his lungs, taking all three of the Weasleys by surprise. There was so much anger and bitterness in his voice that Ron, who was standing right beside him, actually took a step backward before he realized that Harry wasn’t talking to him. “IF YOU SO MUCH AS TOUCH ONE HAIR ON HER HEAD, YOU’RE DEAD! I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME. YOU DEMENTED FUCK! I KNOW YOU’RE IN MY HEAD! THIS IS BETWEEN YOU AND ME!” he shouted, as if Voldemort were standing right there in front of him. “YOU LEAVE HER OUT OF IT!”

“BLOODY BASTARD!” Harry bellowed, before meeting the wide-eyed stares of his friends. “He cut me off,” he said incredulously. “He’s blocking me again, the coward, but I know where they are. Come on.”

“But…”

“What about Hermione?” Fred asked, clearly torn. Ginny was his baby sister and his first impulse was to go after her, even if it did mean coming face to face with the most evil wizard in all of Britain, but Hermione was practically family as well. No, she was family and she was connected to Ron. Anything the Death Eaters did to her, he’d experience as well. If they started torturing her… Fred shuddered, not wanting to contemplate what would happen then.

“We can’t just leave her,” George said, glancing at Ron quickly, before refocusing his attention on Harry. “Not if you really know where she is. Maybe if we split up. I’ll go with Harry and…”

“Hermione’s not afraid anymore,” Ron stated, causing both the twins to spin around and gape at him. “Not like she was,” he tried to explain. “She’s still on guard, but…”

“The Imperius Curse?” George asked, after sharing a knowing look with his twin brother.

“No, she can throw that off,” Harry stated, impatient to get a move on, but torn himself. Just moments ago he’d been thinking that it only made sense to go after Hermione first, but now that he could feel Ginny’s terror, the need to save her was overwhelming. It was his fault she was in this situation; his fault she was about to be tortured, or worse. He had to get to her before that happened. She wanted him. She needed him. He couldn’t let her down.

But Hermione needs you, too, Harry reminded himself. I never should have left her behind. Now she’s in trouble and that’s my fault as well. DAMN IT!

“Okay,” he said, shoving his guilt aside and focusing all of his attention on Ron. “When you say Hermione’s not afraid anymore, what do you mean? What exactly is she feeling?”

“Smug,” the redhead replied immediately. “She must have gained the upper hand somehow and… oh God,” he groaned, sounding both embarrassed and alarmed at the same time. “I think she might actually be gloating. What the hell is she thinking? All she’s going to do is hack them off and give them time to regroup. GET THE HELL OUT OF THERE!” he shouted, almost as if he thought Hermione could hear him. “Damn it! Harry, I have to--”

“Right. You two go with Ron and help Hermione,” Harry said to the twins, before Ron had a chance to finish.
“What?” Fred yelped in surprise.

“And let you face You-Know-Who on your own?” George added, making it clear that he wasn’t very keen on that idea.

I don’t have time for this, Harry groaned in his head when the twins started arguing. *Ginny needs me now, damn it.*

Deep down Harry knew that it was reckless to run off on his own, but he didn’t really care at this point. Just a few minutes ago he’d been thinking that it would be best if they stayed together, but now that Voldemort had entered his mind and Harry knew for sure that he was walking into a trap without the element of surprise on his side, that didn’t seem like such a good idea. The words, ‘Kill the spare,’ kept echoing in the back of his mind and he knew that was all his friends were to Voldemort.

The people he cared about were just a means to an end and Voldemort didn’t need them anymore. He had what he wanted. He had Ginny to use as bait. Everyone else was expendable now and he wouldn’t hesitate to have his followers kill them if they got in his way.

No, Harry now realized that he had to do this on his own. Voldemort had already killed too many people he cared about. He wasn’t going to march into the Shrieking Shack with three more potential victims in tow. He had to ditch Ginny’s brothers and this was the perfect way to do it.

“You said it yourself,” Harry said to George, “The only way to save both of them is to split up. So you three go get Hermione and I’ll take care of Ginny. Look,” he said irritably, when Ron opened his mouth to argue. “He’s getting angry,” he lied. “He’s tired of waiting and he’ll take it out on her if I don’t go. It’ll be easier this way. I’ll be able to sneak up on him and free Ginny if I’m alone,” he said, even though he knew his excuse was pitifully transparent.

There’s no way I’m going to be able to sneak up on him, Harry told himself, even as he turned away from his friends and ran back into the woods he and Ron had just left before his friends could stop him. *Not with that bastard popping into my head to spy on me.*

But that doesn’t matter. Nothing matters now except getting to Ginny. If I can just get close enough to her to slip her the potion in my pocket, at least then I’ll know that her soul is safe. And once she’s safe I can worry about dealing with Voldemort. But first I have to get to Ginny.
“Hermione!” Ron called out her name, a wave of relief rolling over his entire body when he saw the door leading into Honeydukes open and the familiar head of bushy hair appear on the other side.

“Ronald Weasley!” she hissed in a low tone, stepping forward to stand in the doorway when she heard his voice. “How dare you,” she said, narrowing her eyes and scowling at him as he stepped out of the shadows. “HOW DARE YOU LEAVE ME BEHIND!”

“Whoa,” he replied, holding a hand out in front of himself as if to stop her, while turning around nervously and scanning the street behind them. He hadn’t seen anyone as he approached the sweets shop, but that didn’t mean no one was around. “Shush,” he whispered urgently, moving forward and placing his hands on her shoulders. “Do you want the Death Eaters to hear you?” he asked, pushing Hermione back inside Honeydukes, before stepping over the threshold himself and closing the door.

“Don’t you dare shush me,” Hermione snarled. “Or I might just do to you what I did to them. And don’t touch me either,” she said, slapping his hands away. “If you think pouring your concern and all that relief you’re feeling into me is going to help you, you’re wrong. You’re not going to use our bond to butter me up and get away with what you’ve done. Not this time. I can’t believe you and Harry--”

But Hermione stopped speaking abruptly and looked around as she suddenly realized they were alone. “Where is Harry?” she demanded, the anger she’d felt moments before instantly replaced with dread. “You didn’t,” she said, because the guilt she’d sensed from Ron was more than enough to answer her question. “You left him?” she asked in disbelief. “YOU LEFT HIM ALONE! Oh Ron, how could you?”

“Will you calm down?”

“Calm down?” she asked incredulously. “Calm down? The whole reason we took the potion in the first place was to protect Harry. How are we supposed to do that when neither of us is with him? What were you thinking?”

“Well, if you must know,” Ron shot back, letting his own irritation show, “I was a little preoccupied by the fact that you were under attack. And don’t even try telling me that you weren’t, because I know for a fact that you were. Besides, it’s not like I left him alone or unprotected,” he added defensively. “I gave Fred and George my Invisibility Cloak so they could follow him.”

“Fred and George?”

“That’s right,” Ron said, encouraged by the fact that he’d managed to take her by surprise. “We ran into them just as we were entering the village,” he explained. “They said something about Tonks contacting the Order, and since they were still at the platform with Bill and--”

“So Bill’s here too?”

“Somewhere,” Ron replied. “George mentioned something about Bill and Lupin, but I didn’t catch most of it, seeing as how you chose that particular moment to get us both Stunned,” he said sharply. “And the next thing I know, all hell is breaking loose. One minute Harry’s reviving me, and the next he’s clutching at his scar and shouting at You-Know-Who as if he were standing right there in front of us. Then he said something about knowing where Ginny was and he ran off. What was I
supposed to do?”

“Follow him.”

“And just leave you to the Death Eaters?”

“You didn’t seem to care about leaving me behind earlier,” Hermione said scathingly.

“It’s not the same thing and you know it,” Ron shot back, managing to sound both insulted and angry at the same time. “You were being attacked.”

“And whose fault do you think that is?”

“Yours,” he retorted without missing a beat. “If you had stayed at Hogwarts where it’s safe, none of this would have happened. If you’d just stayed there, I wouldn’t have had to leave Harry at all. But you didn’t bother thinking about that, did you? You took it as a personal slight and risked your life running through a cursed tunnel just so you could have the satisfaction of telling me off.”

“Oh, shut up,” Hermione hissed. “We don’t have time to argue about this now. And just so you know,” she added, pushing past him to get to the door leading outside, “once we’ve got this mess with Ginny sorted out, I’m not talking to you, so we won’t be discussing it then, either.”

“Uh huh,” Ron muttered under his breath, placing one hand on the door and leaning all of his weight against it so she wouldn’t be able to throw it open and leave before he was finished. He had a few questions of his own he wanted answered first. “And that wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that you know I’m right, would it? Which is part of the reason you’re so irritated.”

“Get out of my way.”

“Not until you tell me what you did to those Death Eaters that attacked you. How did you get away?” Ron demanded. “And more importantly, why in the world would you stand around and gloat about it afterward? What if they had attacked you again? You might have been--”

“I was perfectly safe,” Hermione insisted. “Once I used Bill’s spell to trap them down in that tunnel,” she amended.

She couldn’t very well claim that she’d been safe the entire time. He knew better.

“And there’s absolutely no way for them to get back out on this side of the tunnel, so you can stop worrying about that,” she added, assuming that was what Ron was fretting about. “They’ll have to make it all the way to Hogwarts to get out and if Neville has done what I asked him to do, McGonagall and the other teachers will be guarding the exit. They aren’t a threat anymore, so let’s just go and help Harry. What?” she asked, concerned when her explanation didn’t help alleviate his anxiety, but actually caused it to increase. “What is it?”

“Well, that might not be as easy as it sounds.”

“Please tell me,” Hermione said, her own apprehension turning to genuine fear, “that you know where Harry went.”

For a moment, Ron actually considered telling her that he did, but he knew she’d see right through him. A flippant reply like, ‘Into the woods’ would only get him in more trouble.

“I told you that he ran off,” he said defensively.
“And you didn’t bother asking him where he was going?”

“I suppose I could have shouted it at the back of his head,” Ron said sarcastically, “but I didn’t see the point, as he wasn’t about to stop and answer me.”

“RON!”

“Just because I don’t know where he is at this very moment, doesn’t mean I can’t find him,” he replied. “All we have to do is go back where we split up and follow the footprints he left in the snow. So come on,” he said, dropping his hand down to the doorknob before she could start shouting at him again.

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“Shite!” Ron swore, his deep blue eyes going wide when he opened the door and saw three cloaked figures converging on Honeydukes.

“SHITE!” he swore again even louder, stepping backward and colliding with Hermione as he slammed the door of the sweets shop closed and bolted it. But even as he locked the door, Ron realized it wouldn’t be enough to keep the Death Eaters out.

“Bugger it all!” he shouted, jerking his wand out of the back pocket of his jeans. “I knew it was a bad idea to stay here this long.”

“What…”

“Hide. Now,” Ron barked at Hermione before she had a chance to finish her question. They’d seen him, but they hadn’t seen her. If he held his ground and distracted the Death Eaters long enough, she might be able to slip upstairs and sneak out a window or something. Ron just had to buy her enough time to get away.

Hermione, however, refused to cooperate. She obviously had plans of her own and they didn’t include leaving Ron behind. Rather than do as instructed, she merely shook her head and drew her wand. She hadn’t seen what was outside, but she’d felt the fear that had gripped Ron when he looked out and that was more than enough for her.

“Colloportus,” she said, pointing her wand at the door, which immediately sealed with a squelching sound.

That was close, she thought, taking an involuntary step backwards when the door shuddered as someone on the other side threw himself against it.

Unfortunately, there was more than one way to get inside Honeydukes, especially when the people trying to get in had magic at their disposal. Before either of the teenagers even thought to Imperturb the room, two simultaneous cracks announced the arrival of their opponents. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, the wall to the right of the doorway exploded inward at nearly the same time, raining debris down on Ron and hurling Hermione into one of the candy displays in the center of the room.

“Expelliarmus,” the Death Eater closest to Ron shouted, disarming the redhead as he spun around to check on Hermione, who’d cried out in pain.

“Well, well, well.” the second Death Eater jeered, stepping through the remains of the glass jars and sweets that littered the floor to reach Hermione before she regained her wits. “What do we have here?” he laughed, reaching down and jerking her to her feet.
“GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY WIFE!” Ron roared, taking every ounce of anger and all of the loathing churning inside him, and focusing them on the point where the Death Eater’s hand connected with Hermione’s forearm.

To say the hooded figure was repelled would have been an understatement. He was literally hurled across the room with so much force that not only did he collide with the counter where the proprietors sold their wares, but he then flipped up over the top of it and slammed into the shelves of sweets lining the wall.

“Wife?” the Death Eater holding the incensed redhead’s wand asked in disbelief. “Even a despicable blood-traitor like you wouldn’t dare…”

“Oh, but I did,” Ron replied. “And I took a great deal of satisfaction knowing I could take your fucked up talisman and your equally fucked up ritual and use them to protect a Muggleborn.”

But the comment didn’t have the effect Ron hoped it would when he made it. In fact, it didn’t faze the Death Eater at all. He didn’t appear to be insulted or angry; if anything he seemed to find it amusing, because he tossed his head back and laughed.

“You!” Ron growled, his skin crawling when the Death Eater’s hood fell back and he recognized his face from the pictures in the Daily Prophet. “You bloody bastard!” he said, narrowing his eyes and glowering at Dolohov. “Touch her and you’re fucking dead.”

The threat coming from the unarmed teenager caused Dolohov to laugh even harder. “I wouldn’t dream of sullying my hands with filth like that,” he jeered. “Not even after I’ve killed you and nullified the ‘protection’ you can offer her. Although, it would be more entertaining to force you to kill her yourself. Yes, far better this way, I think. Imperio.”

“NO!” the Death Eater that had clambered through the gaping hole in the wall shouted, finally drawing attention to himself. “The girl is important to Potter,” he stated, “which makes her important to the Dark Lord.”

Even with her mind briefly clouded by the spell that had been used on Ron, Hermione recognized Peter Pettigrew the instant he lowered his hood. As did Ron, if the deep-seated sense of betrayal and the loathing that surged into her was any indication.

“It would be unwise to dispose of her,” Wormtail continued.

“We have the blood-traitor to use as leverage,” Dolohov argued, turning away from Ron, whom he wrongly assumed was still completely under his control. “The Mudblood is unnecessary.”

“Somehow, I doubt Lestrange would agree with you on that,” Wormtail countered, with a casual shrug of his shoulders. “She does have a personal score to settle after all. The Dark Lord was not pleased when she let the Mudblood escape. But as long as you’re willing to explain to Bellatrix that you’re the one that has denied her the opportunity to get revenge, then by all means have your fun.”

“NO!” Ron shouted, taking both Death Eaters by surprise when he snatched his wand out of Dolohov’s hand and positioned himself between them and Hermione.

“NO RON, DON’T!” she shrieked, her shrill voice laced with panic as she stopped scanning the debris on the floor for her wand and focused all of her attention on him. “Please,” she begged, tears springing to her eyes when she felt his concern for her well-being pour into herself, confirming what he was about to do.

It was all happening too fast. The love he drew forth was so intense, she actually had to fight it down
before it overwhelmed her and drowned out her desperation. “NO!” she cried, frantic to prevent him from casting the spell he’d badgered her into revealing months before. “I swear to God, I’ll never forgive you.”

“Yes, you will,” Ron stated, forcing himself to keep his eyes on the startled Death Eaters, because he knew if he looked at Hermione now, he wouldn’t be able to go through with his plan.

He wanted to tell her that he loved her one last time, but he knew that he didn’t have time. Not that he’d be able to get the words out, even if he did. And in the end, he knew that it didn’t really matter. Hermione knew that he loved her even without the words. The problem was, she also knew he was going to try and use that same love to save her. He was going to sacrifice himself using the spell she’d taught him and there was no way for her to stop him.

“NOOOOO!” Hermione wailed, as Ron pointed his wand at himself, rather than the figures in front of them and uttered the incantation that normally accompanied the Killing Curse in reverse.

“Arvadek Adava,” the redhead said, focusing all of the love he had inside himself on Hermione as the bolt of white light that came from his wand hit him square in the chest. But the beam of light didn’t stop there. It shot clean through Ron and slammed into Hermione.

The spell didn’t seem to have any visible effect on her however. Unfortunately the same could not be said for Ron, who crashed to the ground before the glow surrounding him dissipated.

Hermione was on her knees and by his side almost instantly, but by that point there was nothing she could do. The talisman that had been hanging around her neck since they’d performed the Lànain ritual in October came loose and fell on the ground between them as if to prove that it was already too late.

“BASTARDS!” Hermione screamed, snatching the wand out of Ron’s limp hand and waving it over the floor she was crouching on, causing the glass and debris around her to float into the air and fly towards the two men standing in front of her.

“HE’S DEAD AND IT’S YOUR FAULT!” she bellowed, scooping her Lànain talisman off the ground and clutching it in her fist, before jerking her tear-stained face up, and locking her angry glower on the pair of Death Eaters. “I’m going to make you pay.”

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It wasn't so much her words, as the look in her eyes when she said them that set off warning bells for Peter Pettigrew. He'd seen that look before in Sirius's eyes and he recognized madness when he saw it. The young woman kneeling on the ground might be bloodied and heartbroken, but she was far from beaten. If anything, she was even more dangerous now than she’d been before, because in her mind she had very little left to lose. Fortunately Peter never had any intentions of confronting her to begin with, so that didn't pose much of a problem for him.

*The same can't be said for Dolohov*, Peter thought, transforming into his rat form, both to avoid the razor-sharp shards of glass flying at his head and to present a smaller target, should Hermione send another spell his way before he managed to slip away. *All that time in Azkaban and still just as arrogant as ever. He still equates goodness with weakness,* Peter thought, scurrying out of the line of
fire as his comrade threw up a hasty shield to protect himself, *but that's his problem, not mine.*

"**SANGUINEM INFERVESCO!**" Hermione bellowed, jabbing her wand at the only person left standing in her way.

The fiery bolt that shot out of her wand and soared towards Dolohov's chest definitely got his attention. The situation he'd found so humorous mere seconds ago abruptly stopped being funny when the little bitch on the floor tried to boil the blood pumping through his veins. Surprise didn't really do justice to what he felt as he was forced to go on the defensive and strengthen his shield. He’d expected something feeble, like a Stunner, or perhaps a Disarming Charm; what he hadn't expected was for her to actually try and kill him.

Technically the Mudblood's curse wasn't the same caliber as an Unforgivable, but it definitely wasn't something that was respectable enough to be taught as part of the curriculum in Dumbledore's pathetic excuse for a school. Neither was the Suffocation Spell she fired at him next.

Perhaps there was some truth to the rumors he'd heard after all. Perhaps Potter wasn't simply trying to dispose of the Dark Lord, so much as replace him. This girl, at least, had delved into spells that skirted the edge of what the establishment considered decent. She'd moved well beyond conventional Defensive Magic.

The problem, for her anyway, was that she was still using curses that could be deflected. Angry as she was, she obviously wasn’t willing to cross the line and use something unstoppable. That would be her downfall, because sooner or later she'd leave him an opening and that was all Dolohov needed.

"No one makes a fool out of me and lives to talk about it," the Death Eater vowed, knowing that neither Voldemort nor Bellatrix would blame him for ending her miserable life now. Important to Potter or not, the Mudblood had sealed her fate the moment she'd attacked him.

But rather than allow his threat to distract her, Hermione simply responded by hurling another curse in his direction, this one designed to dislocate his extremities upon impact.

"**EXTORQUEO!**"

"**AVADA KEDAVRA!**" Dolohov shouted, letting his shield drop when the opportunity he'd been waiting for finally presented itself. Her spell would hurt like hell if it connected with any part of his body, but it would be far from fatal. He'd recover, she would not.

The room immediately took on an ominous green glow as the Unforgivable Curse sped towards Hermione, and yet she didn’t make any sort of attempt to move out of the way.

For a moment Wormtail, who was still watching from a nearby corner, thought she must be so distraught over Weasley's death that she welcomed death herself, but no sooner had the thought occurred to him, than the unexpected happened. The same white light that had surrounded Ron when his spell backfired sprang up around Hermione just before the Killing Curse reached her.
Impossible, Wormtail thought, as he watched the lethal spell collide with the mysterious shield and rebound on its caster. *That's just not possible*, he told himself, as the bolt of green light caught Dolohov square in the chest and he toppled to the ground with a loud thud. *It's not possible to block the Killing Curse*, Peter insisted, scampering through the hole he'd blown into the wall and disappearing in the shadows outside before Hermione had a chance to spot him, and yet I've just seen it happen.

This can only mean one thing, Peter decided, as the shock of what he'd witnessed waned enough for him to think more clearly. *Potter's figured out how he defeated the Dark Lord all those years ago and he's shared that knowledge with his friends. That ought to make things interesting. The question is, can I get away with keeping this information to myself?*

"Mother of Merlin," Tonks swore as she stepped up to the hole that had been blown in the side of Honeydukes and cautiously peered inside the sweets shop to assess the situation. As an Auror she'd been trained to scan a scene and quickly take in details while actively searching for anyone or anything that would pose an immediate threat, but that didn't prepare her for what she encountered. One Death Eater on the ground, clearly dead despite the fact he didn't have a mark on him; the legs of another jutting out from behind the counter on the opposite side of the room; and between the two, in the center of the rubble was the lone survivor, kneeling on the glass-strewn floor, kissing the corpse of Ronald Weasley.

"My God!" Remus Lupin groaned, his voice thick with pain as he stepped up behind the young Auror and took in the scene for himself. "Hermione?" he called out, immediately moving forward when he spotted her among the carnage.

"DAMN YOU!" Hermione shouted, not at Lupin, who she ignored, but at Ron. "BREATHE!" she demanded, as she pulled away from his mouth, placed both of her hands in the center of his chest and pushed down with all her might. "I know you can hear me," she said, letting up for just a moment and then pressing down on his chest again. "So breathe!"

"Hermione!" Lupin said again, only this time his voice was laced with surprise, rather than sorrow.

"What's she doing?" Tonks asked, clearly baffled by Hermione's odd behavior. One second she appeared to be kissing her longtime friend goodbye and the next she was shouting at him and pounding on his chest.

"I know it's hard to accept, but he's gone."

"No, he isn't!" Hermione shouted at Lupin. "He's still here," she insisted, momentarily letting up on Ron's chest, then pressing down on it again. "I can feel him."

"No," Lupin said patiently, assuming she was in shock.
He'd hoped that he'd be able to reason with her if he could engage her in conversation. Unfortunately, that plan didn't have the desired result, because rather than argue with him, Hermione shifted her weight off Ron's chest and snatched up the wand that had been lying beside her knees.

"Contego," she said, throwing up a barrier to prevent the Order members from interfering with her while she was trying to resuscitate her husband.

She knew it wouldn't keep Lupin away indefinitely, especially with Tonks there to help him break through the buffer, but the spell was a lesser-known variation of a Shield Charm that she had stumbled across accidentally, so she hoped its obscurity would buy her a few minutes. And a few minutes was all she’d need if Ron would just cooperate.

"Viscera Pulso," she said, turning her wand on Ron next and pointing it straight at his heart.

"NO!" Lupin shouted, the calm demeanor he'd forced himself to adopt all but forgotten when he realized Hermione was trying to restart Ron's heart with magic.

"You can't do that," he insisted, moving forward until her shield forced him to stop. "I understand how difficult this must be for you, but you have to let him go. Even if you do manage to get his heart beating again, he'll be no better off than a Dementor victim. Trust me, you don't want that."

"No, Remus, wait," Tonks interjected, Hermione's comments about feeling Ron suddenly making sense to her.

Of course, she thought, mentally slapping herself upside the head for taking things at face value when she knew the lengths the couple had gone to in order to protect Harry. She's not barking at all. She can feel him, because they're still linked.

"That's not necessarily true in this case," Tonks said to Lupin. "They're connected by a Coupling Potion. Hermione is anchoring his soul."

"They're what?" Lupin exclaimed loudly, spinning around and gaping at Tonks with a horrified expression on his face. "How could you keep something like that a secret from--"

"SHUT UP!" Hermione shrieked, cutting her former professor off before he could finish his statement. "Just shut up and let me think for a minute. I need to concentrate and I can't do it with you two yammering behind me. I just need to think," she repeated, this time to herself. "Think, damn it," she said, before pinching Ron's nose and bending over to give him another breath.

"Damn you, Ron," she mumbled, as she pulled her mouth away from his and placed her head on his chest to make sure her spell had worked properly. "You knew I wasn't ready to deal with this yet, but you just had to go and play the hero anyway," she admonished, breathing a silent sigh of relief when she heard the rhythmic beating of his heart beneath his chest.

"We could have at least tried to take them on together," she continued, as if Ron was merely lying there injured and was capable of hearing her lecture. “Pettigrew didn’t even put up a fight. All I had
to do was find my wand. This was supposed to be our last resort, not our first, you daft fool.”

“What were you thinking? What was I thinking telling you how to do it? But you just wouldn't let it go. You just kept pestering me until I finally gave in and now look at you. You were so worried that I'd do it first that you jumped the gun and beat me to it.”

“If you think I'm going to thank you, you're wrong. Now stop cowering wherever it is you are and get back in your body and deal with me.”

"This is ridiculous," Lupin muttered, pointing his wand at the young couple on the ground. He suspected that Hermione was rambling in an effort to stave off her grief, but enough was enough. This wasn't a Boggart, Ron was really dead this time and she had to accept that.

"Finite Incantatem," he said, hoping to break through the barrier holding him back. "Are you just going to stand there and do nothing?" he asked Tonks, when his spell penetrated the shield as if it wasn't there at all and struck the floor with no results.

"Pretty much," Tonks replied.

For now anyway, she finished in her head.

Tonks recognized the spell Hermione had used and she knew exactly how to counter it. That particular shield wouldn't let a person through, but it didn't hold magic back. One well-placed Stunner and the barrier would fall right along with Hermione. That just wasn't something she was prepared to do quite yet.

"You can't be serious," Lupin hissed softly. "Look at her, she's bleeding," he said, which was perfectly true. There was a deep gash on Hermione's cheek and another one across her left thigh, not to mention several smaller cuts on her arms, most of which had resulted when she was thrown into the sweet display.

Of course, up until that point, Hermione had been too preoccupied to really notice. In fact, she still wasn't feeling any physical pain, but the comment must have caught her attention, because she looked up.

"Merlin only knows how badly she's wounded," he continued. "She needs our help."

"OF COURSE!" Hermione cried triumphantly when Lupin unwittingly provided her with the inspiration she'd needed. "Why didn't I think of that before"

It's not just our souls; we're connected by blood as well.

“That's it," she said excitedly, setting Ron's wand on the ground and giving him another breath, before picking up a large shard of glass. "Only, which line is it?" she said uncertainly, faltering after she'd snatched up Ron's left hand. "Which one is the life line?" she asked the startled adults, holding her own palm up in the air and looking at them as if she wanted them to point it out.

"What?" Tonks asked, as Lupin's mouth fell open.
"The life line," Hermione repeated impatiently. "Which one is it? Oh forget it," she said, when
neither of the adults answered her quickly enough. "I'll just cut them all. It's not like we haven't done
that before," she muttered to herself, thinking about the talisman she'd hastily shoved in her pocket
before beginning C.P.R. on Ron. "What could it hurt?"

"It's the one on the bottom," Tonks said, earning herself a sharp look from Remus, who clearly didn’t
think it was beneficial to humor Hermione. "Well, it is," she said defensively. "Although," she added
in a more confident voice, "it doesn't really denote the length of a person's life, so I don’t see what
use that will be. The health line may be what you're looking for. Then again, maybe it's not," Tonks
said, when she realized that she'd managed to confuse Hermione even more.

"Health line?" Hermione questioned desperately.

Did we even cover that while I was still in Divinations? she wondered, as she stared down at Ron's
palm. We touched on Palmistry, but I just can't remember. DAMN IT! If I'd known I was going to
need to know this, I might have stuck with it longer.

"To hell with it," she said, placing the sharp end of the glass against Ron's palm, pressing down, and
dragging it over his life line, leaving a thin trail of blood as she went. "I'm cutting them all," she
stated, tracing every line on his hand, before dropping it in her lap, pressing the jagged shard of glass
against her own palm, and doing the same thing to herself.

"I know you can hear me," Hermione said, tossing the bloodstained shard on the ground when she
was finished with it and picking Ron's hand up again. "Listen to the sound of my voice," she said,
pressing her bloody palm against his and linking their fingers. "Use it to find your way back. We're
connected; soul to soul, body to body, blood to blood. If you can find me, you can find yourself.
Now, breathe, damn you. BREATHE!"

"What was that word again?" Hermione asked herself, bending forward and breathing for Ron again,
because he still hadn’t managed to do so on his own.

She'd tried to find information on Resurrection Spells in the Restricted Section of the Library, but she
hadn't had much luck. All she'd managed to find was a few references in passing and a some vague
hints in the form of words that could be partial incantations. But even a partial incantation was better
than nothing at this point. The problem was that her notes were hidden in her dorm room.

If only I'd had more time, Hermione thought, as she desperately tried to remember the words she’d
copied down.

"Excito?" she questioned. "No, that might bring him around if his soul weren't in limbo somewhere,
but that won't restore it to his body. Restituo? No, that's not it, either," she told herself. "It was
something like reverse. Think, damn it. Reverso? No. Reversum?"

"Reverti?" Lupin asked, without realizing that he'd spoken the word out loud.
"THAT’S IT!" Hermione cried, tightening her grip on Ron and pointing his wand at the place where their hands were connected. "Spiritus Reverti!"

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"MERLIN’S BEARD!" Tonks cried, jumping backwards and tripping over a large chunk of wall debris when Ron sucked in a tremendous breath of air on his own. "DID YOU SEE THAT?" she asked excitedly, grabbing Lupin's arm to help break her fall as she pitched sideways. "She did it," Tonks continued, righting herself with Lupin's help and shaking him in excitement. "I was afraid it wasn't going to work, but it actually did. Do you have any idea what this means?"

The Weasleys will spend the rest of their lives visiting a lifeless husk in St. Mungo's, Remus thought, closing his eyes and shaking his head sadly.

"If she can beat the Killing Curse," Tonks continued, mistakenly believing that he needed her to explain, "then Harry can beat it, too. He really can defeat Voldemort."

"No," Lupin disagreed, shaking his head even more adamantly. "She hasn't beaten anything," he argued. "All she's done is…SHIT!" he cursed loudly, when Hermione swayed ever so slightly and keeled over beside Ron. "All she's done is make things worse," he snapped, springing forward to attend to Hermione when she lost consciousness and the shield that had been keeping him back faltered. "We have to get them both back to Hogwarts," Lupin insisted. "There's no telling what kind of damage that spell did to her."

"If it was dangerous why would you tell her the incantation?" Tonks asked anxiously, darting forward to help as Remus Conjured a bandage out of thin air and carefully knelt down on the ground beside Hermione

"I didn't mean to," he admitted, as he quickly wound the strip of cloth around Hermione's bleeding thigh and tied it as tightly as he could. "I don't even remember where I heard that word before," he added. "It just popped into my head."

"And out of your mouth?" Tonks asked, kneeling down to assess Ron's injuries. "That's not like you," she said, when Lupin didn't reply. "I know how much you hate to lose control, but admit it, you got caught up in the moment. You wanted it to work," she stated, reaching for Ron's blood-stained jumper and shoving it up until his chest was bared. "You can pretend to be as logical or as pessimistic as you want, but I know the truth. You wanted her to be right just as much as I did."

"What is that?" Lupin asked, catching a brief glimpse of the silver talisman hanging around the redhead's neck, before Tonks realized what he was looking at and jerked Ron's jumper back down.

"None of this blood is his," she said, choosing to ignore his question the same way he’d ignored her comments. "He has a broken rib or two, but they didn't puncture the skin. All of this," she said, pointing down at the crimson stain in the center of Ron's chest, "must be Hermione's. That's probably
why she lost consciousness. She's going to need a Blood-Replenishing Potion as soon as you get her to Madam Pomfrey."

"And where exactly are you going to be while I'm doing that?" Lupin asked, standing up and pointing his wand down at Hermione. "Mobilicorpus," he said, levitating her off the ground.

"I thought I'd go to the Three Broomsticks and have a drink with Rosmerta," Tonks replied sarcastically. "Honestly," she sighed, "I'm going to continue looking for Harry. Once I help you find a Floo connection that is. My guess is that it's upstairs. It would probably be best if I went up first and had a look around, just in case."

"What happened to sticking with your partner?" Remus asked before the young Auror made it halfway across the room. "Weren't you the one that said we shouldn't take unnecessary risks or run off on our own?" he pressed on, moving forward and bringing Hermione along with him. "The sooner we get these two back to Hogwarts, the sooner we can both go after Harry."

"Fine," Tonks acquiesced, noting the determination in his deep gray eyes.

He's just as stubborn as Sirius, especially when the safety of the people he cares about is an issue. There is no way I'm going to win this.

"But I'm the Auror here," she added out loud, "so I go up first."

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"Don't do this to yourself, Molly. You heard what Remus said."

"He's my son. I'm not going to give up hope just because--"

"There never was much hope," Madam Pomfrey said softly, her voice heavy with regret. "I can only imagine how difficult this must be for you, but I wouldn't be doing you any favors if I allowed you to believe--"

"But his color has improved," Molly Weasley whispered back. "You said so yourself. And he's so warm now," she added, tracing the contours of her son's freckled cheek with the back of her hand as her eyes filled with tears again. "It's like he asleep."

Oh for heaven's sakes, Hermione thought irritably, roused by the two women's mutterings. Don't those two ever get tired of gossiping, she grumbled in her head, assuming that she was in her own bed and the noise that had woken her had come from her dorm mates. What could Harry have possibly done to have Parvati in tears already? She just got back to Hogwarts tonight.

But even as those words formed in Hermione's mind, another thought occurred to her, one that made
her heart race as it plummeted to the pit of her stomach.

Some of us didn’t make it back, an uneasy voice reminded her as memories of Ginny vanishing under Harry’s Invisibility Cloak with a little girl flashed through her mind. Unless, that was just a dream; just another one of those horrible nightmares, she thought, groping for the talisman around her neck to reassure herself as she often did.

"NO!" Hermione cried out, sitting bolt upright in her bed when she discovered that it was missing. "NO!" she screamed again even louder, as her eyes shot open and she realized the darkness surrounding her hadn’t been created by the deep red curtains of her own bed, but the screens Madam Pomfrey used to separate patients in the hospital wing.

This isn’t happening, a stubborn voice protested in the back of Hermione’s mind. But even as part of her tried to deny the truth, the screen on her left parted and Madam Pomfrey’s anxious face appeared.

"No," Hermione said again, tears filling her eyes as she looked at the Healer. "No, it worked," she insisted, shaking her head. "I saw him breathe. It worked. It did," she said, her confusion giving way to anger. "I know it did. What have you done to him?" Hermione said accusingly. "You must have done something, because I can’t feel him anymore. WHERE IS HE? WHERE’S RON! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

"Hermione," Mrs. Weasley called out, her voice riddled with pain as she pushed past Madam Pomfrey and rushed forward to prevent the agitated girl from climbing out of bed.

"It’s not true," Hermione insisted when she saw her own grief mirrored on the older woman’s tear-stained face. "He’s not gone. He can’t be."

"There, there, Miss Granger," the school nurse said, snatching a drinking glass containing some sort of potion off the bedside table and holding it out for Hermione to take. "Drink this and--"

"DON’T CALL ME THAT!" Hermione shrieked, purposely knocking the concoction out of Madame Pomfrey’s hand.

Whatever that glass contained, it wasn’t going to help her. Nothing would.

"Why did I allow people to continue calling me that?" she said, more to herself, than to anyone else. "Why didn’t I use his name? That must have hurt him, but he never said anything. He never let on, not even... No," Hermione said, covering her eyes with both hands and rocking back and forth on her bed as she switched back to denial. "It’s not too late. It’s not, it’s not, it’s not."

"Hermione," Molly said again, sitting down beside the distraught young woman and wrapping her arms around her.

"I want to see him," Hermione hissed, pulling herself together after a few moments had passed. "We’re still married," she said, lowering her hands and leveling her red-rimmed eyes on Madame Pomfrey. "I’m of age and any decisions regarding his health are now mine to make. Not yours, mine!"
And I'm not giving up on him. Period. End of discussion. Now where the hell is my husband?"

“I beg your pardon?” the Healer replied, clearly taken aback by the young woman’s statement. Even so, the startled expression on her face was nothing compared to the astonishment etched across Molly Weasley’s.

“Your… your what?” Ron’s mother stammered, once she managed to pull herself together and form a coherent sentence. “Did she just say…”

“Husband,” Hermione repeated instantly.

“She’s in shock,” Madam Pomfrey said, after both she and Molly glanced at Hermione’s ring finger and found no evidence there to support her outlandish claim. Wishful thinking is what it was. Now that the future she had mapped out had been destroyed, the poor girl was grasping at straws. “Clearly, she doesn’t realize what she’s saying,” the Healer continued, disregarding Hermione as if she were incapable of hearing them due to her overwhelming grief.

“Delusional, am I?” Hermione hissed, throwing the blankets that were covering her out of the way and swinging both legs over the side of the bed before either of the women had a chance to protest. “I suppose the month I spent brewing that potion was just a figment of my imagination. I’ll show you delusional,” she said, jumping out of bed and looking down at her legs in surprise when her bare feet hit the cold stone floor.

“Where are my clothes?” Hermione demanded the instant she realized the only thing she had on was a hospital gown. “You better not have thrown them out,” she added irritably. Her Lánain talisman was in the front pocket of her jeans after all. She was going to need that as soon as Ron was awake. “I need--”

“What you need, Miss Granger,” Madam Pomfrey interrupted, “is to get back into bed this instant.”

“WEASLEY!” Hermione shouted. “I told you that Ron and I are--”

“I’m sure that Mr. Weasley wouldn’t want you to harm yourself,” Madam Pomfrey said, trying a different approach. If reasoning with her didn’t work, perhaps a little guilt would. “The laceration on your thigh was quite deep. It’s liable to reopen if you don’t stay off your feet until you’ve had time to fully recuperate. Mr. Weasley wouldn’t want--”

“I don’t care about myself,” Hermione shot back, reaching for the nearest curtain and pushing it over so she could scan the hospital wing for the familiar head of red hair.

No more than Ron cared about himself. That’s why he was so quick to make the sacrifice, she reflected, her eyes filling with tears again when she spotted another set of screens set up around a bed at the far end of the room.

“Why is he shoved down there all by himself?” Hermione said accusingly. “He should be right here beside me,” she added, darting through the opening she’d created and climbing over the bed closest to hers to avoid walking past Madam Pomfrey.

“Now, really,” the Healer protested as Hermione made a run for it, “I’ve tried to be understanding, but enough is enough. If you don’t get back into bed this instant, I’ll have no choice but to--”

“RON!” Hermione shouted, ignoring Madam Pomfrey entirely. “Wake up,” she said, pushing the screens surrounding his bed out of her way and reaching for him the instant he was in view.

For a moment Molly thought Hermione was going to try shaking him, but almost as soon as her hand
landed on his shoulder, it shifted.

“There,” Hermione said, thrusting her hand under the neckline of Ron’s jumper and latching onto the chain around his neck as the two women descended upon her. “Who’s delusional now?” she said triumphantly, holding the silver charm up for them to see.

“Is that…” Molly said, coming to an abrupt halt beside Madam Pomfrey and gaping at the intricate symbol now on display.

“That’s right,” Hermione responded, before Molly even had a chance to finish.

“YOU PUT A LÀNAIN TALISMAN ON MY SON!”

“Of course I did,” Hermione replied unabashedly. “I wasn’t going to let him control me, without controlling him in return,” she explained. “This way there is no stigma attached to it because we’re even.”

“Even?” Molly asked in disbelief. “EVEN! ARE YOU INSANE? Are you telling me that Ron… that you two… that you… YOU ALLOWED YOURSELF TO BE SHACKLED WITH ONE OF THOSE VILE--”

“IT IS NOT VILE!” Hermione shouted back. “AND I’VE HAD IT UP TO HERE,” she continued, dropping the talisman and raising her hand above her head for emphasis, “WITH PEOPLE TELLING ME THAT IT IS JUST BECAUSE THEY’RE TOO NARROW-MINDED TO UNDERSTAND!”

“It’s not the charm that’s evil,” Hermione said, lowering her voice significantly when Madam Pomfrey gasped and she realized that she was screaming at her mother-in-law. “It’s the intent of the person using it that matters. Ron’s intentions were good, as were mine,” she stated, “and if you refuse to see that, if you insist on believing the worst about your own son, then I’m afraid it’s your prob… I felt that,” Hermione said, stopping mid rant and turning her back on Mrs. Weasley to look at her son.

“Ron?” she questioned, as she felt his confusion give way to apprehension and then relief. “Are you…You can hear us, can’t you?”

“Bloody Hell, Mione,” he grumbled weakly, causing both his mother and Madam Pomfrey to cry out in surprise. “You give a whole new meaning… to the term ‘loud enough to wake the dead’,” he joked in a strained voice.

“OH RON!”

Uh oh, Ron thought, clenching his shut eyes even tighter and bracing himself when he heard his mother shriek his name.

He’d been so focused on the fact that he was alive and that he could hear Hermione’s voice that he hadn’t given any thought to who else might be around. He’d realized that Hermione was screaming at someone, but he’d taken that as a good sign. If she could shout like that, it had to mean she was all right and that was all he really cared about at that particular point in time. That abruptly changed the instant he realized that his mother was present and that she was liable to try and squeeze the life out of him again.

“OW, MUM!” Ron yelped, when Molly threw herself at him and pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. “That… hurts,” he groaned, clutching his left side as the pain that had let him know he was once again in his body increased significantly. “Ow. Gerroff.”
“Oh, Ronnie,” Molly cried, ignoring his protest and kissing him on the cheek several times before moving to his beet red forehead. “My baby boy. You’re all right. It’s a miracle.”

“Get a grip,” Ron moaned in embarrassment, trying unsuccessfully to shove his mother away. “It wasn’t a miracle,” he muttered. “I knew Hermione would be able to…not you too,” he grumbled, giving up on his efforts to dislodge his mother and opening his eyes to look at Hermione, who was standing beside his bed with tears streaming down her face. “Don’t cry,” he said, reaching for her hand when he felt her joy diminish and slowly turn into regret.

Unfortunately the gesture elicited unexpected results and rather than be reassured or take comfort from the contact, as Ron hoped she would, Hermione let out a gigantic sob the instant his fingers entwined with hers. But the anguished cry must have caught his mother’s attention in a way that his pleas hadn’t, because she pulled away to search out the source, and the instant she did, Hermione threw herself on top of him.

AW COME ON NOW! Ron groaned in his head as the air he’d struggled to regain after his mother’s assault was once again forced from his lungs. “Crushing…. me…” he managed to get out between Hermione’s sobs, and yet despite his words, he made no effort to move her.

“You… you daft git,” Hermione hissed into Ron’s ear as his hand slipped up her back and into her hair. “You scared the hell out of me, you prat,” she said, hugging him one last time, then loosening her grip, and pulling away to glower down at him. “What were you thinking?” she demanded, using the hand he wasn’t clutching to wipe away her tears.

“Um.”

“That was supposed to be our last resort, not our first,” she said crossly.

“Last resort?” Madam Pomfrey wondered out loud. “Do you have any idea what they’re talking about?” she asked Molly, who shook her head.

“But--”

“Don’t make excuses,” Hermione said sternly, before Ron had a chance to get more than a solitary word out. “There is no excuse. What if I hadn’t been able to bring you back?”

“But you did,” Ron pointed out quickly.

“But what if I couldn’t? Did you even stop to consider that?”

“But. You. Did.”

“That’s not the point,” Hermione said irritably, glowering again when she felt his bewilderment turn into admiration and then love. “Don’t even go there,” she said, feeling her resolve begin to crumble against her will.

How am I supposed to stay angry with him when he’s thinking about how much he loves me. DAMN HIM!

“The point is,” she said, shoving his affection aside and trying to regain her focus, “I don’t know how I did it.”

“And that matters why?” Ron asked.

“What if I did something wrong?” Hermione shot back incredulously.
“What do you mean wrong?” Molly said urgently, jerking her eyes off the teens and leveling them on Madam Pomfrey. “Poppy?” she beseeched, her voice laced with concern.

“That’s enough,” the Healer said, the panic in Molly’s voice reminding her that she had not just one, but two patients to look after. She couldn’t just stand around gaping like an idiot when she had a job to do. “Back to bed you go,” she said to Hermione, clapping both hands down on her shoulders and physically pulling her off Ron’s bed.

“Why?” Ron asked immediately, his blue eyes going wide and then narrowing quickly as he looked at Hermione closely and realized she was wearing a hospital gown, unlike himself. “What did those bastards do to you?” he demanded, genuinely alarmed now.

“That will be quite enough of that,” Madam Pomfrey scolded. “You will remain calm and in this bed until I return. Is that clear?”

The hell I will, Ron thought, despite the fact he knew his mother would do her level best to make sure that he complied with those instructions.

“Where are you going?” he said anxiously, not to Madam Pomfrey, but to Hermione.

“Nowhere,” she stated, darting out of the Healer’s grasp and jumping on top of the bed closest to his. She wasn’t about to be led back to the partially screened bed in the center of the room when there was a perfectly good bed right here.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Madam Pomfrey sighed in exasperation. “Of all the stubborn…” she muttered under her breath. “I couldn’t possibly give a proper exam with you two—”

“Then don’t.” Ron cut in, taking all of three seconds to decide he’d keep quiet about the pain in his side if it meant avoiding the questions that would accompany a lengthy exam. “I’m fine.”

“Ronald Weasley,” Molly hissed in warning.

“Well, I am,” he replied, jerking his eyes off his mother and locking them on Hermione. As long as I don’t try and breathe too deeply.

“You most certainly are not,” his mother protested. “You nearly died.”

Not nearly , he corrected in his head, but he wisely kept the truth on that matter to himself. If his mother knew what he’d done, she’d go mental. “Tell her that you were overreacting to make your point,” he said to Hermione instead. “Tell her that I’m fine.”

“How would I know that?” she replied.

“Hermione!” Ron whined, hoping that she’d read between the lines and realize what was going to happen if Madam Pomfrey started asking questions. He couldn’t exactly answer them. Not without getting both of them in a boatload of trouble.

Maybe I can distract them, he thought, desperate to find another option when he realized Hermione wasn’t going to help him out. The problem was, the best way to distract them was to ask about Harry and Ginny and despite the fact he genuinely wanted to know if there had been any word on them, the fact that they weren’t in the hospital wing with the rest of his family pretty much answered his question. They weren’t here because they were still missing and if he brought it up now, not only would he upset his mother, he’d upset Hermione as well.

That’s the last thing she needs, he thought, knowing that she already felt responsible for what he’d
done to himself. *I don’t want her feeling guilty about Harry and Ginny as well. That isn’t going to help her or anyone else. Best just to submit to the exam and get it over with. At least then Madam Pomfrey will stop fussing and go away.*

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“I’m sorry you had to find out about us like this,” Hermione said uncomfortably, when Molly maintained her distance and continued to stare at the screens Madam Pomfrey had repositioned around Ron’s bed in order to conduct her exam. “It’s not the way either of us would have chosen for you to~”

“Humph,” Ron’s mother cut in, crossing her arms in front of her chest and looking even more standoffish now than she had when Hermione tried to break the strained silence.

“It’s… it’s not what you think,” Hermione forced herself to continue, despite her discomfort. “We did it because we…we love each other,” she said, blushing a deep scarlet red, “but we also did it to protect one another, and Harry, too, of course. And it worked.”

“Oh really?” Molly replied, her eyes still glued on the screens. “Enlighten me then.”

I wouldn’t want to be accused of being narrow-minded a second time.

“How exactly does putting a Lânain talisman on my son protect Harry?”

“It doesn’t,” Hermione admitted with a sigh, “I was talking about the rest of it, about the Coupling Potion.”

“Coupling Potion?” Molly asked in surprise, turning around to face Hermione, despite her decision to give her the cold-shoulder. “The three of you took a Coupling Potion?”

“No,” Hermione answered the instant she saw the horrified expression on Molly’s face. “Just Ron and myself. A three way connection would have been too overwhelming and we wouldn’t have been able to~”

“To what?” Molly asked, when Hermione stopped short.

“Maintain the link,” she said weakly.

“MR. WEASLEY!” Madam Pomfrey’s shrill voice rang out, as one of the curtains unexpectedly moved aside and Ron came into view. “Get back in your bed this instant,” she barked, but her command fell on deaf ears.

“Leave her alone,” Ron said, glancing at Hermione briefly before rounding on his mother. “Whatever you’re doing, stop it,” he demanded. “Can’t you see you’re upsetting her?”

“It was nothing, really,” Hermione said, hoping to defuse the situation before Ron’s over protective tendencies got him into even more trouble than he was already in.

“Bollocks.”

“Don’t you take that tone with me, young man,” Molly hissed, placing one hand on her hip and scowling so fiercely that Hermione actually cringed.

“Ron, please,” she implored, knowing that he was purposely trying to bring his mother’s wrath down on himself to spare her.
“I’m not a baby anymore, Mum,” he continued, ignoring Hermione’s plea, “despite what you might think. I’m practically of age and I’ll…”

No, don’t say it, Hermione screamed in her head, hoping against hope that her anxiety would be enough to still his tongue.

“…say whatever I want, whenever I want.”

That ought to just about do it, Hermione thought, both grateful and concerned at the same time. *He always knows exactly what buttons to push.*

“You want to be angry at someone,” Ron continued, anxious himself, but doing a relatively good job of keeping that fact hidden, from his mother anyway, “be angry at me. It was my fault anyway, not Hermione’s.”

“So what you’re saying,” Molly said in a voice that was altogether too calm, “is that it was your idea to elope?”

“What?” Ron asked, doing a double take when his mother didn’t respond the way he’d expected.

“What?” he asked again, his heart plummeting when he realized Hermione wasn’t the least bit surprised by the fact that the word ‘elope’ had somehow found its way into the conversation.

**NO BLOODY WAY!** Ron thought, his mouth falling open in disbelief.

“You… you told my mother that we’re… that we’re…”

“Shackled to one another by Lànain talismans?”

**OH GOD!** Ron silently groaned as all the blood drained out of his face.

“She was going to find out anyway,” Hermione said defensively. “I had no choice. I had to be the one in control.”

**CONTROL!** A voice shrieked in the back of Ron’s head, as he groaned and covered his face with both hands. *Control? She told her because she wanted to be in control. Bloody hell, I knew she was a control freak, but that’s… OH GOD! We are sooo dead.*

“What was I supposed to do?” Hermione said in a high pitched voice. “Let them ship you off to St. Mungo’s and lock you away in the Spell Damaged ward. I didn’t know what else to do. When I woke up I couldn’t feel you anymore and I panicked. All I knew for sure was that I had just under two weeks to figure out how to get your soul back in your body and that I wasn’t going to be able to do that at all if you weren’t here.”

“What do you mean ‘back in his body’?” Madam Pomfrey asked in surprise. “Where else would his soul be?”

“Remus was obviously mistaken,” Molly added. “You weren’t hit with a Killing Curse, that much is obvious now.”

“Er…” Ron grumbled, locking eyes with Hermione and discovering that she was just as unsure of how to proceed as he was. “Um…”

To hell with it. I’m in so deep now, it really doesn’t matter.
“…well, actually… I sorta did it to myself.”

“Did what to yourself?” his mother asked anxiously. “You’re not suggesting that you tried to use an Unforgivable and it backfired?”

“Dolohov was going to kill Hermione,” Ron stated, after taking a deep breath and preparing himself for his mother’s impending explosion, “so I… I killed myself to protect her because I knew she’d be able to bring me back,” he finished, unconsciously shrinking backwards as he spoke.

“YOU DID WHAT!”


“Do I look like a bloody Inferius to you?”

“Voldemort did it,” Hermione cut in, “so obviously it is possible. Provided the victim’s soul is anchored to someone else and remains Earthbound. That’s why we took the Coupling Potion,” she added, “to bind our souls and keep them from crossing over. I knew that as long as our bodies were kept alive, we had two weeks to…”

“POPPY!” a voice shouted, as the double doors of the hospital wing burst open with a deafening bang, taking all four of the people inside by surprise. “Quickly, we need a--”

“I told you that you need Hermione, not Madam Pomfrey,” Harry’s voice called out, as both the Healer and Molly ran towards the hallway where the commotion was.

“Oh God,” Hermione groaned, locking eyes with Ron, who unintentionally confirmed her fear by mirroring her feelings. Just like her, he was relieved to hear Harry’s voice, and yet the statement Harry made caused Ron’s blood to run cold. There was only one reason he’d be calling for Hermione right now. Once again, Harry had faced down Lord Voldemort and lived to tell the tale; someone else hadn’t been that lucky.

“It’s Ginny,” Hermione muttered as she watched the color drain out of Ron’s face. “She…she didn’t take the potion,” she moaned, adding guilt to the cocktail of emotions they were both experiencing. “I wouldn’t let her take it. Oh God, this is all my fault. If I’d only…”

“No,” Ron said, shaking his head as if he refused to believe it. “Harry added his blood to the potion and drank it before we left the tower,” he explained as Hermione climbed out of bed. “He thought it would help him track Ginny down, but… but… he took it with him,” Ron added hopefully. “He took it with him so he could give it to Ginny. He told me that he was going to give it to her. So she’ll… she’ll be all right. Won’t she?” he asked, his denial giving way to uncertainty.

“OH MY GOD! CHARLIE!” Molly screamed, instantly drawing the teens full attention back to the door. “What happened?” she shrieked, moving away from the door so her son could stagger into the hospital wing with his father’s help.

No wonder she screamed, Hermione thought, her eyes wide with fear as she saw Ron’s older brother practically topple over on the nearest bed when his father released him. He’s covered in blood.

“It looks worse than it is,” Arthur reassured his wife as he jerked the top sheet off the bed opposite Charlie and quickly wrapped it around his left arm. “He just needs a Blood-Replenishing Potion and then I’ll get him to St. Mungo’s.”

“The hell you will,” Charlie protested, reaching for the makeshift bandage and holding it firmly in place so his father wouldn’t have to.
“It’s just a little bite,” he said to his mother, sitting up straighter and putting on a show of being all right for her benefit. Not that she was buying a word of it. All she had to do was look at his pasty complexion to see that it was a lie.

“No big deal,” Charlie continued, as his mother ran to the bed Hermione had woken up in and hurried back with a bottle in her hand. “You don’t know what bad is until you’ve been bitten by a drag…”

“It wasn’t a dragon,” Arthur reminded him, taking the Blood-Replenishing Potion out of his wife’s shaking hand, popping the top off, and handing the bottle to his son without even bothering to search for a cup.

“Yeah, well,” Charlie said, after taking a swing, “that bloody snake won’t be biting anyone else now, will she? I made sure of that.”

“Snake,” Molly whispered, her eyes the size of saucers. “Not the same snake that…”

“I’m afraid so,” Arthur said, moving forward and wrapping his arm around his wife’s shoulder. “Not to worry though,” he added. “The Healer’s at St. Mungo’s will have him patched up in no time. Now that they know how to counteract the venom, that is.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Charlie stated, his voice getting stronger as the potion kicked in and the color returned to his face. “Not until I know that George is going to be all right.”

“George?” Ron asked, the relief he’d felt when he realized Charlie wasn’t actually near death instantly stomped down by a new wave of fear. “What happened to…”

“What is he talking about, Arthur?” Molly asked in a high pitched voice.

“Quickly, get him inside, Remus,” Madam Pomfrey said as she came bursting into the room, dragging a disheveled Fred along behind her. “You, sit,” she barked, shoving him towards the bed opposite Charlie. “I’ll get back to you after I’ve attended to your brothers.”

“Now you’re sure it was the Killing Curse this time?” she asked Lupin, as he stepping into the room with George floating behind him. “No, not there,” she said, when Lupin answered her question with a somber nod and tried to direct George to the nearest unoccupied bed. “Put him behind the screens,” she ordered, pointing to the bed Hermione had been occupying earlier. “There’s nothing I can do for him now.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN THERE’S NOTHING YOU CAN DO?” Fred shouted as he watched his mother crumble against his father. “We did everything Ginny told us to do. She said he’d be…”

“Ginny?” Molly asked, clutching at Arthur’s shoulder to help support herself. “You found your sister? Is she…”

“She’ll be fine,” Remus assured Molly as he disappeared behind the screens with George. “A bit shaken, but other than that…Tonks thought it would be best to take the two of them straight to Dumbledore’s office. Harry and Ginny that is. Bill went with them,” he added in an effort to alleviate any fears she might have about her remaining family members.

“WHAT ABOUT GEORGE?” Fred shouted.

“MERLIN’S BEARD!” Lupin exclaimed loudly, as he stepped out from behind the curtains and saw Ron standing at the opposite end of the hospital wing beside Hermione, gaping at him in horror. “But you were…”
“HERMIONE!” Fred shouted, when he too looked away from the curtains and saw the couple frozen at the other end of the room. “DO SOMETHING!” he insisted.

“I…. I can’t,” she said as all eyes suddenly landed on her. “He’s not linked to me, he’s linked to you. You’re going to have to do it.”
“Damn it, Bill, will you let go?” Ginny snapped as she tried, and failed, to wrench her arm out of her brother’s grasp. “I’m more than capable of walking to Dumbledore’s office without you carrying me.”

“We both know you won’t make it that far if I let go,” Bill retorted, as he nudged his sister up a flight of stairs and down yet another dimly lit corridor.

“You’re just as worried about George as I am,” she fired back “And don’t give me that ‘Dumbledore needs to know everything that happened right this second’ rubbish. Surely he can wait a few more minutes. Just long enough for us to know if George is going to be…”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, Harry,” Ginny cried out of the blue, spinning around to confront the morose young man trudging along behind her. “Will you stop with the guilt already?” she demanded, when the mere mention of her brother’s name sent him into an emotional tailspin. “It’s bad enough dealing with my own guilt, I can’t take yours too.”

“George knew what he was getting himself into when he--” Tonks started to say.

“If I hear ‘it wasn’t your fault’ one more time,” Ginny snipped, her remorse turning into rage at the situation she’d dragged her friends and family into. “I swear to God,” she continued, getting progressively louder with each word she uttered, “I’M GOING TO SCREAM!”

“Sorry,” she added, pulling herself together when she realized all three of her companions were staring at her oddly. Even Harry, who Ginny knew understood exactly how she felt, seemed taken aback by her outburst.

Of course he’s used to bottling everything up inside, she reflected, which is half the problem.

Now that the immediate danger had passed and he was no longer running on adrenaline, Harry had gone quiet. He hadn’t said a word since Bill and Tonks dragged the two of them away from the hospital wing, but just because he wasn’t speaking didn’t mean he wasn’t thinking about everything that had happened. And the more he replayed the night’s events over in his head, the more he tried to convince himself that everything was his fault, the more unbearable the situation became for Ginny.

Deep down, she knew that Harry didn’t mean to drag her down with him. He just couldn’t help himself. He was like a bottle of corked butterbeer that someone had violently shaken. Just because the skirmish had ended didn’t mean he wasn’t still under a tremendous amount of stress. Sooner or later, something had to give, and since he refused to pop the metaphorical cork and relieve the pressure himself, the emotions churning around inside of him were pouring into Ginny via their newly forged connection.

Unfortunately for Harry, Ginny didn’t cope with things the same way he did. She was a Weasley and when something was bothering her, she blew up. She had no problem venting her frustrations for both of them, not that it made the situation any better in this particular case. Sure, she felt better, but Harry felt worse, which made her feel bad all over again.

“I’m not angry with you,” Ginny said to Harry, when she realized that she was adding to his stress rather than alleviating it.
Not only did I hurt his feelings, but now he feels guilty about me feeling guilty. That’s just bloody great. I can’t even feel what I feel without it affecting him, she told herself. This is horrible. How do Ron and Hermione put up with it?

“It’s not you, it’s…”

“George,” Harry finished, hitting way too close to the mark for Ginny’s liking. She didn’t want anyone to know that she was mentally trying to shift the blame for what happened to her brother off herself and onto him, even if only for a little while. It wasn’t that she seriously believed that it was George’s fault, but pretending that it was made it easier for her to cope. Once George was awake and she knew that he was going to be all right, she’d gladly take the blame and the anger that accompanied it back onto herself. She’d even grovel and apologize in front of her entire family to make amends. But right now, she needed to be angry at someone other than herself.

“Well, he shouldn’t have stepped in the way,” Ginny said, her voice becoming shrill as she went on the defensive. “I mean, what the hell was he thinking?”

“He was trying to protect you,” Bill answered, causing his sister to feel even more desperate.

“It’s not like I asked him to,” Ginny countered immediately. “Do you think I wanted him to take that blasted curse for me? I’d give anything for it to be me lying down there in the hospital wing, but--”

“Well, it’s not,” Tonks cut in, hoping to nip this particular conversation in the bud. Dumbledore was going to need both Harry and Ginny focused, not so wracked with guilt that neither of them could answer his questions. “And it’s a good thing, too,” she continued, moving forward to give the password to the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster’s office, “because according to Fred, Harry was too busy to stop what he was doing and start that whole get-the-heart-pumping thing that you and Hermione did.”

“HERMIONE!” Ginny shrieked, gaping at Tonks in horror. “WHAT DO YOU MEAN, HERMI--”

“Oh God,” Harry moaned at nearly the same time, the dread and remorse he’d been trying to push down for Ginny’s sake roaring to life again with such intensity that it literally knocked the breath right out of her when she felt it.

“No,” he groaned miserably, shutting his eyes and trying not to picture his best friend lying dead in the hospital wing. The problem was, he’d seen Hermione’s boggart with his own eyes; he’d seen Ron lying lifelessly on the ground in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and the image was seared into his mind.

“Hermione,” he said sorrowfully, remembering how distraught she’d been that day, despite the fact she knew it wasn’t real. How could she face her worst fear alone if it had, in fact, become a reality?

I have to get back to the hospital wing, Harry thought, spurred on by Ginny’s desperation. Hermione is going to need me.

“Oh God, it’s my fault,” he groaned as he suddenly remembered that it had been his idea for them to separate. “I never should have left him.”

“Are you…. Are you telling us that Ron’s… He’s not…” Bill stammered, all the color draining out of his face. The thought of losing one brother was bad enough, but two on the same day was unthinkable.

“No. No!” Tonks said urgently when she realized what she’d let slip. She hadn’t meant to tell Harry and Ginny about Ron. Not yet. They already felt bad enough as it was.
“Hermione got him breathing again, just like you did with George,” she explained quickly. “I saw her. Both Remus and I saw her,” she stated again, when Bill glanced over his shoulder as if he were contemplating whether or not he ought to head straight back to the hospital wing. “She did something with their hands. She cut them and said some incantation and just like that, he was breathing again.”

“She used magic?” Harry asked, staring at Tonks intently. The fact that she was flustered disturbed him, but the realization that she hadn’t meant for them to find out made it even worse, because now he wasn’t sure if she was telling them the whole truth or just what she thought they needed to hear. “She didn’t just do it the Muggle way like Ginny did with George? She didn’t just blow into his mouth and push on his chest until he started breathing on his own? Hermione actually used an incantation? She used magic?” he asked again.

“Yes.”

“Bill,” Ginny begged, her large brown eyes glassing over.

“Why were you trying to hide it from us then?” Harry pressed on, his attention still completely focused on Tonks.

“If he’s not dead then why…”

“BILL! Please,” Ginny cried out when Harry said the word ‘dead’ out loud, “We have to go back.”

Shit! Harry thought, wincing slightly as he realized just how close Ginny was to losing it. He’d been so suspicious and worried about Hermione falling apart that he hadn’t given much thought to how the rest of Ron’s family was taking the news. Of course they’d be just as upset as he was, if not more so. Ron wasn’t like a brother to them, he was their brother.

She’s practically hysterical, he told himself, fighting the urge to shove Bill out of the way so he could comfort Ginny himself. *I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, she’s been through so much already, she just can’t take any more,* he thought as he watched Bill wrap his arm around his sister’s shoulder and pull her into a hug.

It’s not fair that everyone expects Ginny to be so strong. She doesn’t have to be here. She shouldn’t have to do this. This is my responsibility, not hers. Ginny should be with her family now, not locked in Dumbledore’s office like some criminal waiting to be interrogated. She didn’t do anything wrong.

“Take Ginny back,” Harry said to Bill, but almost as soon as the words left his mouth, he wished he could take them back. The thought of letting Ginny out of his sight again was not a comfortable one. He’d just gotten her back. He hadn’t even had a chance to tell her how he felt about her, although he suspected she had a fairly good idea thanks to their new connection.

“What if something happens to her? an anxious voice asked in the back of his head.

Bill isn’t going to let anything happen, the more reasonable side of himself replied. *Stop being selfish and paranoid and let her do what she needs to do.*

“I’ll talk to Dumbledore,” Harry stated. “I’ll go straight up to his office and I won’t leave until I’ve told him everything,” he added, when Tonks looked skeptical. “Just take Ginny back,” he said, turning to Bill, “she doesn’t need to--”

“You weren’t with her the entire time,” Tonks cut in, locking her eyes on Bill despite the fact she
was speaking to Harry. “There may be things that Ginny overheard,” she added, shifting her gaze back to Harry when Bill let out an audible sigh, “things she knows that you don’t.”

“She’s right,” Bill said to his sister.

“But…why do we have to do it now?” Ginny whined, although deep down, she already knew the answer to that question.

Dumbledore had to know everything that happened before the Ministry found out. The Aurors had to be in Hogsmeade by now. A Dark Mark hovering over the Shrieking Shack wouldn’t go unnoticed for very long. They’d come to investigate and once they realized all the Death Eaters had fled, they’d be knocking on the doors of the school looking for victims and asking questions. If Dumbledore didn’t have answers to those questions, a lot of people, most of them members of her family, could find themselves in a sticky situation.

“It’ll be all right,” Harry said to Ginny, when he felt her give in and accept the inevitable. “As long as they’re both breathing, Hermione has two weeks to figure out how to call their souls back. And it’s not like she’ll have to do it alone. Dumbledore will help. As soon as we’ve told him what’s happened he’ll help and--”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Harry,” Ginny cut in. “And it might have even helped if you actually believed what you were saying, which you don’t,” she added. “You’re just as worried as I am.”

“The sooner we get it over with, the sooner we can both go back to the hospital wing,” Harry said, trying a different tack.

“Now that I can agree with,” Ginny said, taking a deep breath and pulling away from Bill to approach the statue beside Tonks. “Just give the stupid thing the password already,” she said impatiently.

“I’ll do all the talking,” Harry whispered, stepping closer to Ginny as the stone gargoyle leapt aside and the wall behind him opened to reveal a spiral staircase. “It shouldn’t take very long,” he added, just before Tonks placed her hands on both of their shoulders and nudged them towards the moving steps.

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“Damn,” Tonks muttered under her breath after the four of them reached the top of the spiral staircase and she used the brass knocker hanging in the center of the oak door to announce their arrival. “He must not be back yet,” she whispered to Bill when there was no reply.

They both knew that Dumbledore had left that afternoon, before the students were scheduled to arrive, to deal with ‘Order business’. Although what exactly the nature of that business was, neither of them was privy to. But with everything that had happened since then, Tonks had hoped that someone that did know the specifics would have contacted him and that Dumbledore would have returned by now.

“What do you mean he’s not here?” Ginny asked her brother as he reached out and turned the doorknob to see if the headmaster’s office was locked. “He wasn’t in Hogsmeade, so if he’s not in his office, then where the hell is he? If you think I’m going to just sit in there and wait while George and Ron are--”

“That’s exactly what you’re going to do,” Tonks cut in, pushing the door wide open and motioning
for the teens to move inside the circular room beyond.

“Fat chance,” Ginny fired back, turning away from the doorway and taking all of two steps before her brother used his body to block her retreat.

“Move,” she said, placing both of her hands on Bill’s chest and pushing against him. “I’m going back to the hospital wing. If Dumbledore wants to talk to me when he gets back, he knows where to find me.”

“Tonks is a professor,” Bill reminded his sister, “and she gave you an order.”

“Then she can give me detention for ignoring it. I don’t really care.”

“Did it ever occur to you that Dumbledore might actually be in the hospital wing?” Harry suggested. “I mean if he came back from wherever it was he went and found out what was going on, surely he’d want to check on…”

“HARRY!” Ginny cried in alarm when he unexpectedly slapped his hand over his scar and yelped in pain.

“LEAVE HIM ALONE!” she shouted, stepping in front of Harry as if shielding his body with hers would push Voldemort out of his mind. In the end it wasn’t Ginny’s proximity, but her concern for Harry’s well-being that caused the Dark Lord to stop what he was doing and withdraw. That and the fact that he hadn’t meant for the mental walls he’d erected around his mind to crumble in the first place.

“Is it true?” Harry asked, his green eyes jumping from Bill to Tonks as he continued to rub his scar. “Did Hermione really kill Dolohov?”

“What?” Bill said, one eyebrow arching in surprise. “Of course it’s not true.”

“That’s what Wormtail just told Voldemort,” Harry informed him. “I don’t think that he meant for me to see it though. He was just so angry that he slipped.”

“What exactly did you see?” Tonks pressed. “How many of them were there? Could you tell where they were?”

“I only saw Wormtail. Voldemort was using the Cruciatus on him. He was livid. He didn’t like what Wormtail had to say, so he punished him. And when he lifted the curse, he demanded to know how Dolohov was killed. Wormtail told him ‘the Mudblood’ did it. He said, ‘Dolohov was going to kill her, but Weasley got in the way’. That’s all I heard. When Ginny started worrying about me, he realized that he’d unintentionally let his guard down and he blocked me out again.”

“So is what Wormtail said true?” Harry asked Tonks, because she didn’t seem nearly as surprised by this information as Bill did. “Dolohov killed Ron, so Hermione killed him in return?”

“It’s true that Dolohov is dead,” Tonks admitted. There was no point denying that fact. It would be all over the Prophet come morning. “But there is no evidence to suggest Hermione is responsible,” she continued.

Other than the fact she was the only one left standing, but I’m not mentioning that to anyone other than Dumbledore until I know exactly what DID happen.

“Maybe we should all go back to the hospital wing,” she said, intentionally changing the subject. “You’re probably right,” she said to Harry. “There’s a good chance Dumbledore will go there first
when he returns.”

And if not, I’ll need to do damage control when the Ministry officials show up. If they find out that Hermione is of age, they’ll insist on questioning her themselves. I have to know what really happened before that, so I can tell her what she needs to omit. We can’t have them finding out about that whole Coupling Potion idea of hers. If word of that leaks to the Prophet, it’ll be a disaster.

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“MERLIN’S BEARD!” Lupin exclaimed loudly, as he stepped out from behind the curtains and saw Ron standing at the opposite end of the hospital wing beside Hermione, gaping at him in horror. “But you were…”

“HERMIONE!” Fred shouted, when he too looked away from the curtains and saw the couple frozen at the other end of the room. “DO SOMETHING!” he insisted.

“I… I can’t,” she said as all eyes suddenly landed on her. “He’s not linked to me, he’s linked to you. You’re going to have to do it.”

“ME!” Fred exclaimed in surprise.

“I can’t call him back,” Hermione stated. “You’re the only one that can do that.”

“You and George took that potion?” Molly asked, releasing her husband and advancing on Fred when she found a glimmer of hope to latch onto. “The same one Ron and Hermione took? Well,” she demanded, resisting the urge to reach out and shake her son when he didn’t reply, “are you anchoring his soul or not?”

“What are you all talking about?” Arthur asked, but nobody seemed to hear him.

“ARE YOU OR NOT!” Molly shouted over her husband.

“He is,” Hermione answered, pulling herself together and hurrying past Lupin, who was still staring at Ron in astonishment. “Is he breathing?” she asked Fred before ducking behind the screens to check on George herself. “Did you get his heart beating?” she asked, even as she reached down and felt his pulse. “FRED!” she shrieked, darting back into view when he failed to respond to any of her questions. “Can you still feel George?”

“Not… not like before,” Fred admitted, finally finding his voice. “It’s not… I can’t feel any emotions or anything if that’s what you mean,” he elaborated, closing his eyes and raking his hand through his hair. “It’s…”

“Different,” Hermione finished for him. “Yes, I know. But you can still sense him, right? In your heart of hearts you know he’s still here. You feel him… with you,” she asked. “Even though it’s not the same as it was.”

“I… I’m not sure.”

“Where did you go?” Hermione demanded, turning away from Fred and directing the question at Ron.

“What?” he asked, creasing his brow in confusion.

“When you were dead,” Hermione said, looking at Ron expectantly.
“DEAD!” Charlie shouted, glancing around the room and taking note of the fact that his father was the only one besides himself that seemed genuinely surprised.

“Where did you go?” Hermione said, sounding frazzled. “Could you still feel me? Could you hear what I was saying to you? What about Tonks and Professor Lupin? Could you see or hear them?”

“What’s she talking about?” Charlie asked Lupin when Hermione mentioned his name.

“What are you talking about?” Ron asked a moment later. “I couldn’t see or hear anything. I was dead.”

“You mean you didn’t hear anything I said?” Hermione asked, her voice getting shriller as she truly began to panic. “How is Fred supposed to call George’s soul back if he can’t hear him?”

“I don’t know, maybe I did hear you,” Ron lied, hoping it might calm her down a bit. “I came back, didn’t I?” he added when Hermione looked at him as if she were about to burst into tears. “I just…I don’t remember anything that happened after…well you know,” he said, venturing a quick glance at his father, who had gone white as a sheet.

“Oh God!” Hermione moaned.

“Just do whatever you did with me to George,” Ron said, hoping the comment would come across as encouraging, rather than desperate, which is the way he was starting to feel.

“What if it doesn’t work?” Hermione said, sounding more than a little desperate herself.

What the hell? Ron thought when he felt an all too familiar sensation stirring in the pit of his stomach. \textit{Did I wake up in some sort of alternate universe or something?} he wondered, realizing that the anxiety and doubt he was experiencing was coming from Hermione. She doesn’t get this self-conscious. Not when it comes to using magic. She’s supposed to be the confident one. Okay, so she works herself up and panics a little before exams, he reminded himself, but damn…this is bad. Really, really bad. If she falls apart, George is buggered. Quick, what would she say to me to get me to cast a spell I hadn’t practiced?

“You won’t know if it’ll work unless you try it,” Ron countered, taking himself and Hermione by surprise. “You can’t make things any worse,” he added as an afterthought. “I mean, what’s worse than being alive without a soul? It’s not like we have anything to lose. What?” he asked, when Hermione’s mouth fell open and her apprehension increased significantly.

“Wait just a minute,” Arthur said when there was a lull in the conversation. “Let me get this straight. You,” he said, pointing at Ron, “are claming that you were… dead? And she,” he said, pointing at Hermione, “somehow brought you back to life? That’s not possible, son. You were dreaming or…”

“No,” Remus said weakly, “I don’t think he was,” he added with more conviction. “Tonks and I… we both saw Ron. We didn’t say anything when we ran into you and Charlie because… well, it just wasn’t the right time, but he wasn’t breathing when we reached Honeydukes. Hermione used a Cadence Charm to restart his heart and she kept blowing air into his mouth until he was breathing on his own, the same way Ginny did with George.”

“Cardiopulmonary resuscitation,” Hermione stated. If she could just focus on the part of the plan she understood completely for a few moments, maybe she’d be able to calm herself down. “It’s a Muggle technique used by doctors to… to help bring people back to life,” she said, simplifying her explanation at the last second.

One look at the confusion on the adults’ faces was all it took for her to realize that a long drawn-out
explanation wasn’t going to put their minds at ease. Molly in particular looked like she was about to go into cardiac arrest at the mere mention of Muggle doctors.

“You don’t have to worry,” Hermione promptly assured her mother-in-law. “My parents are both fully trained. I knew what I was doing.”

With the CPR, anyway.

“And I taught both Ron and Ginny how to perform the procedure as well, just in case.”

“In case what?” Arthur asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

“In case one of us was hit by the Killing Curse,” Ron answered. “That is what happened to George, isn’t it?”

“He was trying to push Ginny out of the way,” Fred said somberly. “When Charlie killed You-Know-Who’s snake it distracted him long enough for Harry to slip Ginny the potion. Once the two of them were connected, it hurt him or something. Rodolphus Lestrange tried to kill Ginny to stop them from doing… whatever it was they were doing, but George ducked out from under your Invisibility Cloak and got in the way. He didn’t mean to get hit, he only wanted to shove her aside, but…”

“Hermione will bring him back,” Ron said, confident in Hermione’s abilities despite her misgivings. “You brought me back, didn’t you?” he pointed out, when he felt her trepidation start to increase again. “Just tell Fred what he needs to do. What was the first thing you did to me?” Ron asked, stepping up beside Hermione to offer her a bit of moral support when she froze up.

“I yelled at you.”

“Okay, besides that?” Ron asked.

“Let me think for a second.” Hermione said, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. “It all happened so fast. I got your heart beating again,” she said, replaying the situation over in her head, “but you wouldn’t breathe on your own. So I… I… Professor Lupin said something about blood, so I cut our hands. I used a piece of glass off the floor to cut both of our hands,” Hermione said, more animated now that she had a mental checklist going in her head, “because we’re connected by the blood we added to the potion. I cut the lines on our hands like we did when we performed the Lànain ritual,” she explained. “I was just going to do our life lines, but Tonks mentioned something about a health line, so I cut them all. That’s what you need to do,” she said to Fred. “Someone give him a knife.”

“I don’t know if that’s the best…” Madam Pomfrey started to say. But before she had a chance to finish, Molly had pulled her wand, Conjured a small knife out of thin air, and handed it to her son.

“Cut the lines on George’s hand,” Hermione said to Fred, who looked just as panicked as she felt a few moments ago. “Start at the bottom with his life line and then work your way up. When you’re finished with George, do the same thing to yourself. You and George are connected by blood as well,” she explained. “In fact, your connection should be even stronger than the one I have with Ron, because you’re brothers. Once you’ve cut both of your hands,” Hermione continued, “link them together. That way you’ll be connected, body and soul.”

“What do I do after that?” Fred asked, stepping over to the curtains surrounding his brother’s bed and peering over them uncertainly.

“Call him back,” Hermione replied. “Just… talk to him. I told Ron if he could find me, he could find
himself, because we were connected. Part of me was touching him. My blood was mixing with his. Just talk to George when you’re finished with your hands and I’ll do the rest. But I… I lost my wand in Honeydukes. I used Ron’s, but I don’t know where his is either. I’m going to need a wand.”

“It’s not working,” Fred groaned in frustration. “Why isn’t it working?” he asked, pressing his palm against his twin’s as hard as he could.

“I don’t know,” Hermione admitted, pointing Molly’s wand at George and casting her spell a second time. “Spiritus Reverti!”

“WHY ISN’T IT WORKING!” Fred shouted, his frustration giving way to genuine panic.

“Maybe if you stop yelling at her,” Ron said, stepping forward and placing his arm around Hermione’s shoulder when she staggered backwards, “and tried talking to George like she suggested, it would.”

“Are you all right?” he asked Hermione in a softer tone.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I just… don’t know why it isn’t working. It worked with you,” she said, spinning around and looking at Ron apologetically.

“Are you sure you don’t remember anything? Maybe it was something I said to you that caught your attention,” she continued, despite the fact Ron was shaking his head, “or something I was feeling. Anything at all,” she said, clutching his jumper in desperation, “because we did exactly what I did with you. The only difference is… but, that should have any effect. It wasn’t even part of the plan originally.”

“No, I can’t see where that would have… it must be something else. Something I’m forgetting. If only I’d had time to finish my research. Damn it!” she snapped, allowing her irritation to get the better of her because it was easier to focus on that, than it was to dwell on the fact that she’d failed Ron and his entire family. Unfortunately her anger wasn’t nearly strong enough to drown that knowledge out.

“Do you know what she’s talking about?” Molly asked Ron just before Hermione burst into tears and threw her arms around him.

“I’m sorry,” she moaned against his chest.

“Do you know what the difference she’s talking about is?” Molly continued, although she softened her voice somewhat.

“Why does everyone keep asking me questions like I was standing there watching?” Ron said irritably. “Ask him,” he said, shifting his right hand off Hermione’s back and using it to point at Lupin. “Hermione said that he was there. Not that I remember that. Or anything else. And why aren’t you talking to George?” he snapped at Fred.

“You’re still connected, right?” Charlie asked. “Can’t you just read her mind or something and tell us what the difference she mentioned is?”

“No, I can’t.” Ron retorted, not even trying to keep the exasperation he was feeling out of his voice. He hated it when Hermione started talking about something and then jumped ten steps ahead of where he was and expected him to know what she was on about. But that’s what she did when she was fixated on something she didn’t quite understand or struck by inspiration. There was nothing to
do but wait for her to calm down and explain.

“That’s not how the potion works,” he added, feeling a bit guilty for snapping at his brother just because he didn’t understand how Hermione did things. “I can only sense her emotions and right now she feels like… like a failure,” he finished, his voice waverning ever so slightly.

So just give her a little space and let me calm her down, he finished in his head.

“Remus,” Molly asked hopefully, “do you have any idea what she’s talking about?”

“They did everything that she did with Ron to George,” Lupin whispered back. “The only difference that I can see is that she used Ron’s wand to cast the spell, not yours. But she’s right,” he added. “That shouldn’t make much of a difference, unless you have to use George’s wand to bring him back. But I don’t see why that would be the case.”

“No,” Hermione groaned against Ron. “The talisman,” she said softly. “We linked our magic when we performed the Lànain. I thought that part of the bond was broken when my charm fell off, but maybe it wasn’t. Maybe that’s why it worked with you. Our magic is still partially linked because your charm is still on. But if that’s the case… Fred and George don’t have that kind of connection. The Lànain wasn’t even supposed to be part of the plan, which means it never would have worked the way I had it plotted out.”

“But how can that be? Voldemort put his soul in an entirely new body and he wasn’t magically connected to…oh my God! How could I be so stupid? Of course, he’s magically connected to Harry, and he used Harry’s blood to create his new body. That’s why his soul could enter it.”

“I know this is the way you work things out,” Ron said, when he saw Hermione’s eyes light up and realized that the cogs were moving in her head again, “but I’m really confused here. Wasn’t that the reason we took the potion in the first place? To create a magical connection and protect our souls?”

“Maybe that magical connection isn’t enough,” she said regrettably.

“It is,” a voice chimed in behind the cluster of people surrounding George’s bed. “Or at least it should be,” Dumbledore amended, when everyone in the room spun around and looked at him with relief in their eyes. “I am assuming, of course, that they’ve both tasted your potion before this occurred.”

“Perhaps you’re over-thinking the situation a bit, Miss Granger. That’s something we have in common, I see,” he continued as he moved away from Snape, who appeared to be holding him upright, and took a shaky step towards George’s bed.

“Yes, it’s often difficult to take a step back and see the forest for the trees when one is emotionally involved,” he said, sitting on the edge of the small hospital cot and cupping his right hand, which was wrapped in his robes, before leaning in closer so he could assess his condition. “Fortunately I’ve learned that in many cases, the most obvious course of action is often also the best. Case in point,” he said, sitting upright again and motioning towards the twins’ interlinked hands with his head, “forging a physical connection with the person you are trying to revive. It is the simplest way to transfer the spark of life from one person to another. Any time you’re ready, Mr. Weasley.”

“What?” Ron asked, voicing the question most of his family was pondering. “What do you mean ‘spark of life?’ Hermione never mentioned anything about that.”

“She told you that there would be sacrifices, did she not?” Dumbledore asked, knowing full well that Hermione had. “Sacrifices that needed to be made willingly. Wormtail gave his hand to revive his
master. Your brother,” he said, nodding his head towards Fred again, “will have to give up a portion of his own life force if he intends on reviving his twin.”

“WHAT!” Ron asked again, his eyes wide with fear now.

That’s what Hermione did? She gave up part of her own life to give me one?

“How much of her life?” he demanded. “How much did she give up? Can I give part of it back?”

“What are you talking about, Weasley?” Snape asked, his eyes jumping from Ron to Hermione, who he realized was wearing nothing but a thin hospital gown.

“I think what Mr. Weasley is saying,” Dumbledore said, his own eyes darting to Hermione briefly, before moving back to Ron, “is that Miss Granger has already figured out what to do and has made that sacrifice once herself.”

“But how much of her life did she give up to bring me back?” Ron questioned.

“A mere ember,” Dumbledore replied, calm as ever. “Little more than an hour’s worth I’d imagine,” he added. “Certainly not enough to diminish her lifespan or yours either for that matter, since technically you were still alive. As is your brother,” he said, his gaze shifting to George as he spoke. “You will likely exhaust yourself,” he informed Fred, “but that’s nothing that a good nap won’t cure and fortunately we have plenty of beds for you to choose from. Shall we?” he asked politely. “Assuming you know what incantation you are going to choose.”

“But Hermione…” Fred started.

“Ah, I see the problem now,” Dumbledore said to himself. “Miss Granger cannot provide the spark for your brother, unless she too is linked to him. She tried and failed?” he asked, glancing at the eager faces looking towards him for answers. “Cast your spell, Mr. Weasley, and then perhaps someone would be so kind as to fill me in on what I missed during my absence.”

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“Over there,” Harry heard Madam Pomfrey say just as Bill pushed the doors of the hospital wing open and moved aside so the rest of his party could enter. “Put him in that bed over there.”

“What happened?” Ginny asked as she quickly followed Harry into the room and saw her father and Lupin lowering Fred into the bed beside his twin brother. “What happened to Fred?” she asked, her voice laced with panic when she realized that not only was he unconscious, but bleeding as well. “He was fine when we left him?”

“Merely exhausted,” Dumbledore replied, separating himself from the group of people clustered around her brothers. “Nothing to worry about, I assure you. Although I wouldn’t advice trying to revive him,” he added, as Madam Pomfrey waved her wand over Fred’s outstretched hand and healed his wound, before moving back to George to repeat the process all over again. “He’ll need time to recuperate.”

“What about George?” Charlie asked anxiously, watching his mother hurry across the room and gather his sister in her arms. “Do you think it worked?”

“Only time will tell, I’m afraid,” Dumbledore admitted. “Fortunately your brothers have plenty of that. What they both need now is rest.”

“Both?” Harry questioned almost immediately. “Does that mean Hermione’s figured out how to save
Ron? Where are they?” he demanded, his eyes jumping to the disheveled bed that sat empty at the opposite end of the room. “What did you do with Ron and where is Hermione?” he asked, racking his brain to come up with an explanation to explain why he hadn’t seen her as soon as he entered the hospital wing. Unfortunately all he could think of were negative reasons.

Ron’s dead and she’s fallen apart. Ron’s dead and she refused to let them stuff him in some make-shift morgue all by himself. Ron’s soul is still out there, floating around in limbo with George’s and she’s barricaded herself in the library. Even as we speak, she’s buried behind a mountain of books trying to figure out what to do. Okay, so maybe that option isn’t so bad, Harry decided. At least we’d still have a chance. But if that’s the case, where is Ron? Why isn’t he in one of these beds?

“Is Hermione in the library?” Harry asked, latching on to that idea, despite his doubts. “Does she need help? Because I can go back to Gryffindor tower and get her notes. Obviously I can’t get into her dorm,” he amended as that fact dawned on him, “but I can Summon them or ask somebody else to…”

“That won’t be necessary,” Dumbledore said calmly.

“WHY NOT!” Harry shouted, completely drowning out Hermione, as she tried to get his attention by calling his name. Of course it didn’t help that Molly had chosen the same moment to blubber all over her daughter.

“GINNY!” she cried, hugging her tightly, before shoving her away and scanning her head to toe for any sign of a wound that might need healing. “Oh Ginny, thank goodness. I was so worried,” she said, pulling her close again. “Are you sure you’re all right? Maybe you should lie down.”

“What happened to Fred?” the young redhead asked again, struggling to break free of her mother’s grasp. “And what about Ron and George?”

“HELLO!” Ron said loudly, stepping away from the adults that were clustered around the twins’ beds. “Are you two blind or something?” he asked, grabbing Hermione by the hand and tugging her away from Snape so Harry could see her too. “All right there, mate?” he asked with a lopsided grin when Harry’s mouth fell open.

“Fine,” Harry forced himself to reply, although he sounded anything but. “You?” he asked, still gaping at his friends with a combination of relief and uncertainty plastered across his face.

“Can’t complain,” Ron said in return.

“But…”

“Tonks said you were dead,” Ginny stated, renewing her efforts to get away from her mother as Harry stepped into the room and shifting his gaze to Hermione.

“You didn’t seriously think Hermione was going to let me off that easy?” Ron joked. “Hey!” he yelped, jumping away when Hermione’s elbow dug into his recently healed ribs. “That hurt,” he whined, rubbing the spot with his hand.

“What did Dolohov do to you?” Harry asked Hermione, narrowing his green eyes behind his glasses as he took in her hospital attire.

“How did you…” she started to ask, before Ginny beat her to the punch and answered the unfinished question.
“Pettigrew told Voldemort that you killed him,” Ginny said, successfully shoving her mother’s arms aside when Molly gasped in surprise. “Dolohov that is,” Ginny amended. “He said you killed Dolohov.”

“She did not,” Ron insisted, reaching out and clasping Hermione’s hand again when she flinched and shrank backwards. “The stupid bastard killed himself. Don’t you dare feel guilty about it,” he said, turning around to face Hermione when he felt her bewilderment give way to shame. “He got exactly what he deserved and I’m glad he’s...”

“Not another word,” Tonks said sternly, whipping her wand out and pointing it at the doorway Bill was standing in. “Move,” she barked, flicking her wrist even before he complied, causing the door to slam shut and lock as he stumbled into the room. “We don’t have a lot of time,” she said, turning back around to face Dumbledore. “Scrimgeour will be here soon looking for answers. We need to get our stories straight. The last thing any of us wants is him interrogating this lot,” she said, looking pointedly at Harry.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore agreed.

“You two,” Madam Pomfrey said, points a finger at Ron, who’d made the mistake of crying out in pain, before wagging it in Hermione’s direction. “Back to bed this instant. And you,” she said, reaching for the bottle of Blood-Replenishing Potion as she rounded on Charlie. “Drink,” she insisted, pouring a generous amount into a cup that she Conjured out of thin air and thrusting it into his hand. “I can dress your wounds, but I can’t heal them so you’ll still need to go to St. Mungo’s, and the sooner the better,” she added.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Charlie stated, wrinkling his nose up in disgust as he swilled down the thick medicine as ordered. “Not until I’m sure that my brothers are going to be all right.”

“You most certainly will,” Molly fired back, placing one hand on her hip. “Even if I have to stun you to make sure it happens. And don’t waste your breathe argue with me about it,” she said sternly. “You won’t do your brothers any good if you drop dead out of sheer stubborness. And the same goes for you two,” she snapped, twisting just enough to direct her scowl at her youngest son and his bride. “Do as you were told and return to your beds this instant.”

“Welcome to the family,” Ron whispered to Hermione, holding her in place when she started to do what she’d been told. The fact that his mother had included her in the reprimand had clenched it for him. She might not like the way the two of them had gone about things, but she’d accepted what they’d done.

“Arthur,” Dumbledore said, taking control of the situation, “perhaps it would be best if you used the Floo connection in Poppy’s office to get young Charles to St. Mungo’s. The fewer people here when our new Minister arrives, the better,” he added, shifting his gaze to Bill, before glancing at Remus. “I’d prefer it if he were forced to deal with me,” he explained.

“Right,” Lupin said, moving forward and grabbing Bill by the arm. “There’s nothing more we can do here,” he said, urging Bill to follow his father, who was shoving a rather belligerent Charlie towards the closed door at the opposite end of the room.

“Severus,” Dumbledore continued, as the four men stepped into the other room, “Find Minerva and apprise her of the situation. The longer the two of you can hold Rufus off, the better.”

“She’s probably on the third floor,” Hermione said just as Snape started moving towards the door.
Tonks had secured. “There is a secret passageway behind the statue of the humpbacked witch that leads to the cellar of Honeydukes. I told Neville to take Professor McGonagall there so the teacher’s could guard it. There are at least three Death Eaters trapped inside,” she added, this final bit of information stopping the Potion Master dead in his tracks. “Macnair and two others I’ve never seen before.”

“Well, that will certainly give Scrimgeour something else to focus on,” Tonks said to herself.

“Stop it,” Hermione hissed at Ron, when his mouth fell open and he gaped at her in horror right along with Harry. “I used an ancient Egyptian spell that Bill taught me to seal them inside,” she forced herself to continue, despite the hesitation she was sensing from Ron. “I cursed both sides of the tunnel actually,” she said, “so I wouldn’t advise anyone else go inside unless they want to get stuck as well. Not unless they have Bill with them,” she added as an afterthought. “Provided he’s worked out the counter-curse.”

“You might have mentioned that before Bill left,” Tonks said with a sigh. “I’ll go to St. Mungo’s and retrieve him then, shall I?”

“Not just yet,” Dumbledore replied, stilling the young Auror with a look before refocusing his attention on Snape, who was still standing beside the closed door eyeing Hermione in a calculating manner.

“Do be sure and pass that message along, Severus,” the headmaster instructed. “We wouldn’t want the Minister putting any of his Aurors at risk unnecessarily. Merely guarding both ends of the passageway should suffice at present.”

“Now then,” he added, disregarding his Potions professor and looking straight at Harry. “I’m afraid Tonks is right. We don’t have time to delve into this matter as deeply as I’d like,” he said, sitting down on the edge of the nearest unoccupied bed, “but a brief explanation of what you’ve been up to while I was away would be most helpful.”

“It wasn’t our fault,” Ron said almost immediately, glancing at his mother out of the corner of his eye. “Bellatrix Lestrange snatched Ginny right out from under us. We couldn’t just let her--”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said, cutting Ron off because justifications were not what he was looking for. “Professor Snape has already relayed that portion of the story. What I need to know,” he said, his keen blue eyes still locked on Harry, “is what happened after that. What happened once you reached Hogsmeade? Beginning with how you knew where Voldemort was holding Miss Weasley.”

“He showed me,” Harry replied almost instantly. “He wanted me to know that he had Ginny so I’d come after her, just like I did with Sirius. Only this time I knew for a fact it was true. I knew it was a trap,” Harry admitted, but I didn’t really care, he added in his head.

“When he entered my mind, I realized they were inside the Shrieking Shack, which made sense. He wanted to keep her somewhere close by and no one would pay any attention to sounds coming from that part of the woods. If anyone in the village heard them making a ruckus, they’d just assume it was ghosts and steer clear.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said softly.

It was just two simple words and yet they were more than enough to convey to Harry just how disappointed Dumbledore was with him. Two little words. They hadn’t even been said in anger, but they made Harry feel both foolish and ashamed. He thought he’d been so smart figuring out Voldemort’s plan. He thought that saving Ginny was what really mattered, but maybe he’d been
wrong. Maybe Dumbledore thought it was just as important for him to learn from his past mistakes.

And what did I learn from that whole mess is the Department of Mysteries? Harry rebuked himself. *Not to drag my friends into the traps I’m about to spring? Yeah, that really worked. Ron and George both… they…*

No, he wasn’t going say it. Not even in his head. He didn’t want to think about what happened to them; about what saving Ginny could have cost them and all because he hadn’t wanted to wait.

I know what you’re thinking, Harry thought instead, shifting his eyes off Dumbledore’s face and focusing on the blackened sleeve of the headmaster’s robes as he allowed the guilt to wash over him. *I’m not supposed to spring the trap at all. I’m supposed to be smarter than that. I’m supposed to place as much value on my life as I do the lives of my friends.*

Probably more, he amended. *Dumbledore would want me to place even more value on my life because I’m the bloody ‘chosen one’; the only Wizard in all of Britain that stands a chance of defeating Voldemort once and for all.*

God damned prophecy, Harry silently swore, shifting from one foot to the other and glancing up just long enough to confirm that Dumbledore was still staring at him.

And where will your friends be if you continue to allow the Dark Lord to manipulate you? How safe will they be if your luck runs out and you get yourself killed next time? the look said to Harry, although in all honestly he was reading more into it than was meant to be there.

“So what?” Molly asked, obviously believing that some sort of verbal reprimand was in order, “You decided to keep that information to yourselves rather than share it with your professors? Because clearly, the best course of action would be to mount a rescue operation all on your own,” she said sardonically. “Of all the foolishness…”

“It wasn’t like that,” Ron protested, looking at his feet so he wouldn’t have to meet his mother’s angry gaze. “We sent Hermione to get help and--”

“Only because you wanted to ditch me,” Hermione said, jerking her hand out of Ron’s as if she suddenly remembered that she was supposed to be angry with him.

“It wasn’t just you,” Harry informed her, taking the blame for that decision onto himself despite the fact it had been Ron’s idea. He was responsible for everything else that had happened, he might as well take the blame for all of it. The least he could do was give Ron that much. “I ditched everybody,” he added, “including Ron.”

“Like I said, I knew it was a trap and I didn’t want anyone else I care about getting hurt because of me. It was bad enough that Voldemort was using Ginny to get to me. When I realized where he was holding her, I sent Ron and the twins to help you.”

“Ron said you were in trouble,” Harry elaborated, when Hermione crossed her arms in front of her chest and glared at him. “Don’t look at me like that. I was there when Ron fell over. I know that you were attacked, that they Stunned you.”

“Don’t you dare try and use that as an excuse,” Hermione shot back. “You know perfectly well that you revived me when you used the counter-spell on Ron. Both of you knew that I wasn’t really unconscious. Macnair and his friends didn’t know that though, which is why I was able to get away.”

“Slow down,” Tonks said, trying to make sense of what she’d just heard. She was at a distinct
advantage though, because unlike Molly, she understood the unique way in which Ron and Hermione’s bond worked. She had spent the first week of their holiday helping them sort it out after all, so the part about them sharing the effects of a Stunning spell came as no surprise to her, or Dumbledore either for that matter.

“So what you’re saying is that Harry left you here, so you used that tunnel on the third floor to get to Hogsmeade and you ran into a group of Death Eaters while you were down there?” she asked Hermione?

“No,” Hermione replied. “They were in the cellar, not the tunnel. I had to use myself as bait to get them to come in after me. But I’d already cursed the opening by that point, so I knew once they came down, they wouldn’t be able to get back out unless--”

“You used yourself as bait?” Molly interrupted, horrified by the only part of the explanation that she really understood.

“It was a calculated risk,” Hermione admitted, but that answer did nothing to appease her mother-in-law. “There were only three of them and Ron and I share the effects of most spells,” she added. “So as long as they didn’t use any Unforgivables …”

“Excuse me, you what?” Molly asked in surprise.

“We share the effects of spells,” Hermione repeated. “It has something to do with our dual Lânain bond working in combination with the Coupling Potion, but the point is that when I was Stunned, the spell was divided between both Ron and myself. Neither of us lost consciousness. And since Ron was with Harry, all Harry had to do was revive Ron to revive me as well.”

“This is insane,” Molly stated, her eyes wide with alarm. The world had gone insane around her. Her youngest son was married, by the use of a Lânain talisman no less, and his wife was standing there just as calm as could be, talking about using herself as bait to lure wanted killers into a trap of her own making, because there were only three of them and clearly three didn’t pose a significant risk. How many did it take to be deemed a significant risk by this lot? Four? Six? Ten?

Insanity, Molly decided, that’s what this is. And it all started with Ron catching Bellatrix Lestrange. Now Hermione is hunting Death Eaters and Harry, he’s the worst of the lot. Sneaking off on his own so he can confront You-Know-Who without putting anyone else at risk. All three of them are mad. They’re lucky they aren’t dead, each and every one of them.

Or is it really luck, a voice Molly didn’t really want to listen to asked in the back of her mind, because Ron did get himself killed this time around. But Hermione…

“…brought him back,” she muttered to herself.

“Actually it’s rather useful,” Tonks said in response to Molly’s previous statement. “From a defensive standpoint.”

“They shouldn’t be put in a situation where they need to take a defensive stance to begin with,” Molly argued. “They aren’t members of the Order, they’re just --”

“Maybe they should be,” Tonks cut in, taking everyone except Dumbledore by surprise. “You know how this lot is,” she said, when Molly puffed up and sucked in a deep breath as she prepared to mount her counter attack. “There’s no way they’re going to stay out of things, no matter how much we might like them to. They’ve proved that how many times now? And this whole plan of theirs, besides the chasing down Voldemort on their own bit, was bloody brilliant if you ask me.”
“I mean look at him,” she said, pointing at Ron. “And George,” she added. “George was hit by the Killing Curse and now? Do you understand what this means? The kind of advantage this can give us?”

“Honestly Molly, don’t you think they’d be safer working in combination with the rest of us, rather than on their own? The way it is now, they’re reluctant to reveal anything they know because they’re afraid we’ll put them on the head and lock them in Gryffindor tower for their efforts. Is that what you really want?”

To lock us in the tower? Ron thought, unconsciously stepping backwards as he watched the flush in his mother’s cheeks spread until her entire face was beet red. That’s exactly what she wants. No one talks to Mum like that and Dad’s not here to hold her back or calm her down or anything.

“Actually, I was hit with the Killing Curse too,” Hermione said softly, knocking the wind out of Molly’s sails before she had a chance to explode. “That’s what happened to Dolohov,” she said, sounding far more regretful about it than Ron had. “His own curse rebound on him. I told you that I was going to find a way to block that spell,” she reminded her mother-in-law, who was opening gaping now. “Only Ron did the actual blocking.”

“By sacrificing himself,” Dumbledore said, understanding exactly what Hermione was hinting at. “He gave up his own life to protect hers,” he elaborated, when Molly shifted her wide eyes to him as she searched for answers. “Much the same way Lily gave her life and unwittingly saved Harry’s.”

“It’s ancient magic; magic at its most fundamental level,” Dumbledore explained. “This type of magic cannot be corrupted or manipulated to serve an end other than that which it was intended, so until very recently, it is something that Voldemort has underestimated. The kind of magic of which I speak can only be invoked by genuine, heartfelt actions and is, therefore, of no use to him. But there is power in doing the right thing; power in self-sacrifice; in the very nature of love itself, which Miss Granger very wisely realized.”

“Weasely,” Hermione said softly, but not so softly that the headmaster failed to hear her. “I’m going by Weasley now,” she added uncomfortably, after watching Dumbledore arch one eyebrow momentarily and suppress a smile.

“You are?” Ron sputtered in surprise. “Since when?”

“Since you dropped dead for me.”

“Is that all it took?” he asked, trying to cover his own discomfort with a joke. “It sure beats standing up in front of my entire family and every person they’ve ever met and making a complete berk out of myself.”

“Ronald Weasley,” his mother gasped, completely horrified by his statement. “That is just about the most insensitive thing I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth. You owe it to Hermione to do things correctly. There will be a proper ceremony just as soon as I can arrange it and you will participate without so much as a complaint. Do you hear me, young man?”

“It’s all right, Mrs. Weasley,” Hermione interjected as she felt Ron balk at his mother’s words. “He didn’t mean it the way it sounded,” she assured Molly.

Having a direct link to Ron’s emotions could be a pain at times, but there were definitely benefits as well. Hermione no longer had any doubts as to the sincerity of his feelings for her, so she knew better than to take comments like that to heart. Ron wasn’t interested in a more traditional wedding
ceremony because he was a typical teenage bloke and the idea of being thrust into that type of spot light terrified him. He wouldn’t have even proposed to her properly if she hadn’t insisted on it. If there was an easy way out, Ron was sure to try and take it. It had nothing to do with her.

“It most certainly is not all right,” Molly argued. “What will people think?”

The words ‘who cares’ barely had time to form in Ron’s mind before Hermione’s elbow dug into his side again. They were in enough trouble as it was and clearly she did not want him getting into it with his mother about this.

“It’s none of their business, but if anyone asks,” he said, despite Hermione’s better judgment, “just tell them we eloped. It was good enough for you and Dad.”

“Your parents eloped?” Hermione asked in surprise. “You never told me that?”

“I’d be happy to offer my services,” Dumbledore said to Molly politely. “Anything I can do to help, but perhaps it would be prudent to table this particular discussion for the time being. There are more pressing matters to discuss after-all,” he reminded her.

“Of course,” Molly replied straight away, but not without giving Ron a stern look that let him know she was far from finished with him.

“Now then, Mr. Weasley,” the headmaster asked once he’d managed to steer the conversation back in the appropriate direction, “I’m curious,” he said, turning his keen eyes gaze on Ron. “Did you take the curse that was meant for your wife and protect her in that way, or did you use the counter-spell she mentioned when the two of you discussed this matter at Grimmauld Place?”

“I used the spell,” Ron admitted, albeit reluctantly.

“Fascinating,” Dumbledore said, not even bothering to suppress his smile this time. “And Peter Pettigrew witnessed this, you say?” he asked Harry. “He informed Voldemort in your presence?”

“Not exactly,” Harry replied. “He just told him a few minutes ago. Voldemort was so angry when he found out about Dolohov, he let his mental walls slip. I don’t think he meant for me to see them, but…”

“What exactly did Pettigrew tell him?” Dumbledore asked.

“That Hermione killed Dolohov,” Harry answered straight away. “He said that Dolohov was going to kill her, but Ron got in the way. He made it seem like she did it to avenge him or something.”

“But that’s not what happened,” Tonks said, glancing at Ron and Hermione briefly, before directing her gaze at Dumbledore. “Why would he lie about it?”

“Why indeed?” Dumbledore said cryptically.

“It’s not exactly a lie,” Hermione muttered. “I did use… but I wasn’t seriously trying to kill him,” she said, jumping from one thought to another as she went on the defensive. “I mean I used spells that I knew he’d be able to block. They were a bit dodgy and it’s true, if they’d hit him, I probably wouldn’t have cared at that particular point in time, but I wasn’t seriously trying to kill him. I wasn’t trying to get revenge or anything like that. I just wanted him out of my way.”

“Dodgy spells, but not illegal, right?” Tonks asked, already searching for a way to explain things when the Minister arrived. As the first Auror on the scene and Hogwarts current Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, she was sure to be questioned about any questionable spells her students used.
Naturally the Ministry would want to know where they learned them.

“A blood boiling hex,” Hermione said, shifting her eyes to her bare feet, “and a suffocation spell. But I would have lifted it once he lost consciousness. I just wanted him out of my way.”

“I needed to focus on Ron,” she said, fighting back tears. “I had to breathe for him and I wasn’t going to be able to do that as long as Dolohov was conscious,” she said defensively.

“I wanted him out of the way, but he didn’t have to be dead for that to happen. I suppose I did have a fairly good idea what would happen if he tried to use the Killing Curse against me,” she admitted, shame-faced.

“Which is why you provoked him,” Dumbledore said, nodding his head ever so slightly in understanding.

“She didn’t make him kill himself,” Ron said irritably. He was not happy with the way this conversation was making Hermione feel. She’d already had so much thrown at her, she didn’t need anyone heaping accusations on her right now. Besides, if anyone was to blame for what happened, other than Dolohov himself, Ron knew that it was him. He was the one that cast the spell that protected Hermione in the first place.

“Dolohov could have stunned her,” Ginny interjected. “That’s what Lestrange did. First she stunned David and then me. I barely had time to see it coming.”

“Except for the fact that Dolohov wanted her dead,” Ron insisted. “He wanted her dead from the moment he laid eyes on her. He said as much. Only rather than do it himself, he thought it would be more entertaining to force me to do it. Twisted bastard,” he growled angrily.

“We didn’t use the Imperius against him,” Ron said hotly. “We didn’t force him to do anything and he’s got no one to blame for what happened but himself. Don’t you feel bad just because you defended yourself,” he said to Hermione. “Harry doesn’t feel guilty when he does it, do you mate?”

I haven’t killed anyone, Harry thought, the words ‘either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives’ playing in the back of his mind. Not yet anyway. But I did try and use the Crucius on Bellatrix, so who am I to judge.

“Ron’s right,” he agreed. “Sounds like Dolohov offed himself to me. Besides, it wasn’t just yourself that you were defending, it was Ron as well.”

“What about the other one?” Tonks asked. “The scumbag behind the counter? What spell did you use on him?”

“I did that,” Ron admitted, sounding rather proud of himself. “I might have been unarmed at the time, but I didn’t need my wand once the idiot touched her.”

“You used the Lànain against him?” Tonks persisted.

“You’re damn right I did,” Ron replied, “and I’m not the least bit sorry. It’s why we put the charms on in the first place.”

“Speaking of which,” Hermione said softly, but the rest of her statement went unheard by everyone save Ron, when Dumbledore turned to Harry and asked his next question.

“And you were in the Shrieking Shack while all of this was taking place?”
“I suppose,” Harry replied. “As far as I know, Ron was going to take the twins and go straight to Honeydukes after we split up, only Fred and George… I didn’t see them, but they must have followed me instead. I reckon it took them a while to figure out how to get inside though.”

“And you didn’t have a problem getting inside?” Dumbledore asked.

“The front door was wide open when I arrived,” Harry answered. “Open and unguarded,” he amended. “But it sealed itself the instant I stepped inside.”

“It was similar to what happened in the Department of Mysteries,” he explained. “Voldemort didn’t try and make a move against me until he had me exactly where he wanted me. Maybe they thought it would lull me into a false sense of security if they held back, but just because I didn’t see anyone, that didn’t mean that I was stupid enough to believe no one else was there. I knew they’d show up as soon as I found Ginny. Voldemort likes to toy with people that way.”

“And after you found her?” Dumbledore asked, knowing that he needed to move the story along so he could get Harry out of the hospital wing before the newly appointed Minister showed up.

“I revived her,” Harry answered. “Voldemort left her stunned on the floor, in one of the rooms upstairs, so I revived her, which turned out not to be such a good idea,” he admitted. “All of her emotions came pouring into me at once and… it was bit overwhelming at first.”

“I don’t know where he came from,” Harry admitted, looking around and taking note of the fact, that everyone, even Ron and Hermione who’d been whispering mere moments earlier, was now hanging on his every word, “but I knew when they entered the room because my scar started to burn. And when Ginny realized he was there, she started to…”

“Go ahead and say it,” she said after Harry unexpectedly went silent. “I panicked,” she admitted, “which only made things worse for Harry.”

“You said ‘they’, when ‘they’ entered the room?” Dumbledore pressed on.

“I heard him call one of them Lestrange,” Harry replied, “and there were two others… One of them was a mad looking bloke, but he didn’t stay long and it was rather difficult to focus.”

“What with my scar about to split open and all.”

“Real unkempt looking,” Ginny elaborated, making it clear that she’d paid a bit more attention to the details Harry had missed, “like they just busted him out of Azkaban or something and he hadn’t bothered to bathe or comb his hair. He had these ghastly yellow fingernails.”

“Greyback,” Tonks spat the name out as if it were a curse word.

“Fenrir Greyback?” Ginny asked, some of the color draining out of her cheeks, causing her freckles to stand out in stark comparison. “The werewolf?”

As sheltered as her mother tried to keep her when it came to the cruel details of the war, even Ginny had managed to hear stories about Greyback and what he did to little kids for fun.

“That might explain the comment then.”

“What comment?” Dumbledore asked immediately.

“He muttered something about smelling something or maybe it was someone to the third Death Eater, before pushing him out of the room and dragging him out of sight. I just though he was mental, but now that I think about it,” she added. “It was only a few minutes after that that we heard
“That would be Bill,” Tonks explained. “From what he told me on our way back here, Fred and George were trying to find a more subtle way to get inside the Shrieking Shack when he found them. They didn’t think it was a good idea to risk Apparition. When they told Bill that they’d seen Harry use the front door, he set to work trying to break through the spells that were on it. He blew it completely off its hinges on his fourth try. So much for being subtle.”

“Fortunately Arthur and Charlie were fairly close by at that point and heard him. All five of them were in the thick of things when Remus and I arrived. But the situation started going downhill just when we thought we had them on the ropes.”

“The next thing I knew, Remus was chasing Greyback into the forest, Fred and George were gone, and Charlie had been bitten by the biggest snake I’ve ever seen. Bloody thing came out of nowhere. It went for his neck, but Charlie managed to get his arm in the way just in the nick of time.”

“I have to hand it to him,” Tonks said approvingly. “He’s even quicker now than he was when we were in school. Dropped his wand into his good hand and cut the snakes head clean off even as it was pulling back to strike him again.”

“Charlie killed it?” Dumbledore asked, clearly startled by this news. “He killed Voldemort’s snake? The same one that attacked Arthur last year? You’re sure of that?”

“Unless it can re-grow its head,” Tonks replied, but even as the words left her mouth, her eyes widened a bit. “Wait, it can’t really do that, can it? It’s not going to sprout three more heads or anything, because we just left it there in the woods. I mean it looked pretty dead to me, but…”

“And how did Voldemort react to this?” Dumbledore asked Harry, ignoring Tonks’ questions. “He was monitoring the situation downstairs through the snake, was he not?” he asked with keen interest. “How did he react when the snake was dispatched?”

“He had a right little fit,” Ginny answered. “The Tom Riddle I encountered in that diary didn’t care about anyone or anything but himself,” she stated. “He put on a good show, but that’s all it was, a show. But the way he cried out…”

“As if he were in pain?”

“No,” Ginny said in response to Dumbledore’s question. “Not physical pain anyway. It was more….anguished. The way you would shout if you lost someone….or something,” she amended, “that you really care about.”

Oh, that was smooth, Ginny silently reproached herself as Dumbledore took a few moments to mull this information over. Could you be any more obvious? she thought, blushing because she could feel Harry looking at her and she knew that he had a fairly good idea that she’d been thinking about loosing him, not some great dirty snake.

“Actually,” Harry said, clearing his throat as his own cheeks flushed, “he was angry. He wanted to reach out and strike Charlie again; bite him over and over until he stopped moving, only he couldn’t. It infuriated him and worried him at the same time.”

“But he was worried?” Dumbledore asked, evidently encouraged by this bit of news.

“Definitely,” Harry replied straight away. “But it might not have been because of the snake. I had the coupling potion in my pocket and in those few seconds that he was distracted, I gave it to Ginny. As soon as she drank it, as soon as she completed the connection and linked herself to me, Voldemort
knew something was up. He started shouting at Lestrange, ordering him to kill Ginny and then George appeared out of no where and shoved her aside.”

“Why order someone else to do it?” Tonks asked, creasing her brow as she tried to make sense of this information. “Why warn you? Why not just do it himself before anyone could react?”

“Priori Incantatem,” Dumbledore replied with a knowing smile. “Harry’s wand and Voldemort’s share the same core. You were still armed, I take it?” he asked Harry, who nodded in response.

“If Voldemort had made a move against Miss Weasley himself, he would have had to risk the Priori Incantatem effect and Harry has already proven that his will is stronger. If their wands had been forced to duel one another yet again, there is every chance that Voldemort would have lost.”

“He wouldn’t take that risk unless it was absolutely necessary. He wouldn’t want to place himself in a situation where he might be perceived as the weaker of the two by his followers. By ordering Rodolphus to attack Miss Weasley instead, he put Harry in a position where he’d be forced to choose between defending her or defending himself, and we all know what choice Harry would have made.”

“You do realize that Voldemort would have used that as an opportunity to kill you?”

“But he didn’t,” Ron interrupted, unable to contain himself, “so what happened?”

“George startled us,” Harry said sadly. “All of us,” he amended, “and when Lestrange’s spell hit him instead of Ginny…”

“Let’s just say that none of us took it very well,” Ginny finished.

“And since Ginny was connected to me, she was connected to Voldemort as well, and he wasn’t expecting to actually feel her grief. It threw him.”

“It scared him,” Ginny corrected. “And hurt him at the same time, which frightened him even more.”

“And then there is the fact that Fred was there.”

“Although we still couldn’t see him,” Ginny added. “I heard him cry out though and so did Lestrange. He spun around and summoned the Invisibility Cloak right off Fred, but before he could do anything else, Harry stunned him from behind.”

“Voldemort must have snatched George’s wand up off the floor when I did,” Harry said, “because when I looked back he had this smug look on his face and two wands in his hand. The words were out of his mouth before any of us could react,” he said, “only…it wasn’t a real wand.”

“Surely not,” Molly said, covering her mouth with her hand as her already wide eyes widened a bit more.

“Oh yeah,” Ginny said with a slight smile. “It was one of their fake wands. I don’t know who was more surprise. Harry when he realized he was still alive or Voldemort when the smoking wand in his hand turned him into a gigantic bat.”

“Those transfigurations don’t last very long though,” Harry said. “I had to physically pull Ginny out of the room. It was hard to leave George,” he felt the need to explain as practically everyone stood there goggling at him, “but I knew we didn’t have much time and I had to get both Fred and Ginny out of there.”
“But I thought…” Hermione sputtered. “They told me that… Professor Lupin made it sound like you started breathing for George straight away,” she said, but even as she spoke, Hermione realized that maybe she’d leapt to that conclusion because it was what she wanted to believe. “He was definitely breathing when they brought him in here,” she said, more to ease her own fears than for any other reason. “How long did he go without…”

“Not very long,” Harry assured Hermione before she got ahead of herself and made the situation worse. He knew what it was that she was afraid of and mentioning the word 'brain-damage’ out loud wasn’t going to help anyone. Mrs. Weasley would have a whole litter of kitten and Ginny wouldn’t be very far behind her. There was no reason to worry them just now. The chances of that were slim. George had only gone without air for a minute, possible two.

“We weren’t even half way down the stairs before we ran into Bill and Tonks,” Harry explained, “and there was no way we could keep Ginny from coming back up with us. Both Voldemort and Lestrange were gone by the time we made it back to George,” he said. “Ginny started breathing for him and got his heart beating again almost straight away.”

“Are you sure?” Hermione pressed, despite the fact Harry was giving her his ‘drop it’ look.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Ginny asked, looking from one to the other suspiciously.

“It’s nothing,” Harry replied.

“Liar,” Ginny hissed back. “You’re all agitated and worried she’s going to say something you don’t want us to know. What is it?” she asked again, only this time she directed the question at Hermione.

“It’s no good, Harry,” Hermione said, glancing at Ron out of the corner of her eye. “He can read me even better than she can read you. I’m sure Harry is right,” she said to Ron, who looked as if he were waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Harry just doesn’t want you to worry anyone unnecessarily.”

“But you are worried,” Ron said, “and Harry is too,” he added, looking towards Ginny, who nodded her head in confirmation of this. “So what gives?”

“It’s just that there’s a chance…”

“A really, really small chance,” Harry cut in. “Not even worth mentioning really.”

“…that there could be some…”

“Complications,” Harry practically shouted. “Complications with George,” he reiterated before Hermione could say something even more frightening. “But only if he went without oxygen for too long.”

“What kind of complications?” Molly demanded, turning to Madam Pomfrey, who remained silent.

“How long is too long?” Ginny questioned. “You never mentioned that?” she said to Hermione in a shrill voice.

“I told you that you had to start the breathing straight away,” Hermione argued.

“But how long is too long?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry insisted, “because that’s not the case here. It only took us a minute to get back upstairs.”
“Then why are you all freaked out?” Ginny said accusingly.

“Because you are all freaked out,” Harry fired back, “and I can’t not react to that?”

“Oh,” Ginny said, and then just like that, her doubts turned to suspicion again. “Are you sure that’s all it is?” she asked Harry, who threw his hands up in the air and spun around to face Ron. “I still think you’re hiding…”

“How do you put up with this?” Harry asked Ron, genuinely frustrated now. “There has to be a way to make it stop. Some trick…”

“Afraid not,” Ron informed him, although strictly speaking, that wasn’t exactly the truth. It would stop when one of them fell asleep, but as agitated as they both were, it didn’t look like that was going to happen anytime soon. “Best just get used to it, mate,” Ron suggested, “because you have two weeks of non-stop girly feelings to deal with. If you bust into tears after a couple days I won’t hold it against you, much.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Hermione sighed, shooting a reproaching look at Ron for trying to lighten the mood with an ill-timed joke. “Just take a deep breathe and calm down. Both of you,” she said, glancing at Ginny briefly, before turning back to Harry, who’d covered his face with both hands.

“It’ll probably get worse before it gets better,” she admitted. “The stronger emotion almost always wins out. Just try and ignore it, or better yet,” she said to Harry, “use your Occlumency exercises to push whatever Ginny is feelings aside.”

“WHAT COMPLICATIONS!” Molly shouted. “I’m waking him up,” she said, when no one answered her. “I know you said that we shouldn’t,” she said to Dumbledore, “but I need to know. Unless,” she said, taking two steps forward before second-guessing her decision, “That won’t add to the complications will it?” she asked. “It won’t make them worse?”

“No,” Hermione answered without delay. “We woke Ron up,” she added, blushing slightly as she remembered how they’d woken him up, “even if it was accidental. He doesn’t seem to be any worse off for it. You feel all right, don’t you?” she asked Ron just to be certain.

“I suppose,” he replied, after a moment to think about it. “My chest still hurts,” he admitted, “and I’m knackered, but other than that…”

“So you think it would be all right?” Molly asked Hermione hopefully. “Just for a moment,” she said, shifting her gaze to Dumbledore seeking his permission. “Just long enough to be sure that the spell Fred cast worked.”

“It would be better to let it happen naturally,” Dumbledore stated, “but I understand that as his mother, you’d find it difficult to wait. A few moments,” he relented, after glancing at all the eager faces in the room, “provided those of you that are patients do as Madam Pomfrey asked and return to your beds first,” he said, looking pointedly at Ron and Hermione. “Your brothers are not the only ones that need time to convalesce.”

“Oh, all right,” Hermione muttered under her breath, clearly disgruntled about something. Nevertheless, she allowed Ron to steer her back towards her bed.

But I’m not going to sleep until I get that talisman back, she vowed, and I’m not taking any sleeping potions either.

“And afterwards,” Dumbledore said, as the two teens climbed into their respective beds, “I must insist that those of you that are not patients allow those that are to get their rest.”
“Molly, I’ll need you to go to St. Mungo’s and retrieve Bill. Tell him we need his assistance and ask him to meet us in my office.”

“Tonks, if you’d be so kind as to escort these two back to Gryffindor tower before meeting us,” he said, nodding his head towards Harry and Ginny.

“In the meantime, I’ll head Rufus off before he has a chance to disturb any of the ‘patients’.”

“Now then, about George,” he said, shifting his focus back to the young man lying on a hospital cot a few feet away. “Would you like to wake him?” he asked Molly, “or would you rather Poppy or myself do it?”
“Move,” Harry said, shoving at the students that swarmed around him and Ginny after Tonks gave the Fat Lady the password and pushed the two of them through the portrait hole and into the relative safety of Gryffindor Tower.

“What happened?”

“Was he really here?”

“I thought it was just Death Eaters on the grounds,” a worried voice whispered.

“But we all know whose orders they follow.”

“Yeah, they wouldn’t have come here unless he wasn’t close by.”

“Is it over?” someone else wanted to know.

“Did you see him?” one of the bolder fourth-year girls asked Ginny as she stepped further into the common room. “Did you really see You-Know-Who? Was it awful? I bet it was.”

“You’re so lucky,” the girl’s dark-haired friend added, allowing her eyes to drift to Harry as she spoke. “That you were able to save her,” she explained, after taking note of the incredulous look that appeared on Harry’s face. “Again,” she muttered, shifting her focus back to Ginny and covering the envy in her voice with a bright smile.

“Lucky?” Harry asked, suddenly angry on Ginny’s behalf. Who did that girl think she was saying things like that to his… friend? “Is that what you call it?” he asked contemptuously. “Being used as bait to lure your friends and family into a trap?” he said, his voice so loud now that it easily carried across the common room. “Watching helplessly as your brother takes a…”

“HARRY!” Ginny shouted his name in warning when she realized what he was about to say. She hadn’t expected her rage to get the better of him so quickly and she certainly hadn’t expected it to loosen his tongue. The fact that he’d almost told an entire room full of people about what had happened to George startled her to say the least.

Blurting things out without thinking was a Weasley trait. If it had been her telling Romilda to sod off, that would be different, but Harry had beaten her to it. Harry, who almost always held himself in check and very rarely revealed anything to anyone that he didn’t trust implicitly. And even then, there was no guarantee. Harry was a natural when it came to keeping secrets. He didn’t get flustered and accidentally blurt things out in the heat of the moment. At least, he hadn’t until he’d linked himself to Ginny.

This is my fault, she thought as Harry snapped his mouth shut. I’m influencing him without meaning to. This is soooo not good, she decided, suddenly realizing how easily her lack of inhibitions could get him into trouble.

Hermione warned me about this, she reminded herself. She said that emotions we weren’t used to feeling would hit us like a ton of bricks. And Harry’s definitely not used to how I deal with irritating bints like Romilda Vane. I’m really going to have to watch myself, she thought. For the next two weeks anyway.
Unfortunately, it wasn’t as easy as that. In fact, almost as soon as Ginny managed to rein herself in and get her own emotions under control, Harry’s emotions took center stage and threw her for a loop.

“Thank Merlin,” David Devane said, jumping off one of the study tables in the center of the room and hurrying forward when Harry abruptly stopped speaking. “Ginny, I’m so sorry.”

“What?” she asked, momentarily confused, not so much by David’s statement, which she gave very little thought to, but by the way it made her feel. For reasons Ginny couldn’t understand, the irritation she’d been feeling towards Romilda and her friend suddenly shifted to David and intensified. But before Ginny had a chance to do more than ask herself why she wanted to punch him, she had an answer.

“I had no idea that was really Bellatrix Lestrange until Madam Pomfrey told me,” David continued, unaware that Ginny was no longer paying any attention to him. “If I’d been paying attention, if I’d only realized that something was wrong sooner, I might have been able to…”

Oh my God, Ginny thought, her cheeks flushing when the smoldering anger she’d been feeling ignited and turned into white hot jealousy the instant David touched her on the arm. He’s jealous, she thought, turning around to confront Harry, who immediately stepped away from her and renewed his efforts to push past the crowd of people trying to block him in.

“Get out of my way,” Harry barked at those that were unfortunate enough to be standing in front the staircase he intended to use.

“Wait,” Ginny said, reaching out to grab the back of Harry’s jacket before he could storm off. “Damn it,” she swore when she failed to connect. “Will you just stop,” she said, missing the bewildered expression David wore when she disregarded him and opted to chase Harry down instead.

“You can’t just up and run away from me,” she shouted, knowing that Harry would be able to read between the lines and figure out what she meant. Even if he did succeed in locking himself in his room, as he obviously planned to do, part of her would still be there with him. “And if you think I’m going to let you slink off and brood,” she said, lowering her voice when she managed to break away from the crowd and catch him at the foot of the boys’ stairwell, “then you better think again.”

“Oh, really?” Harry asked, reaching behind his back to pry Ginny’s fingers off his clothing when she latched onto him.

“You know what, forget it,” he said, changing his mind at the last second. This wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have, especially with three-quarters of the occupants in Gryffindor Tower listening in. “I’m going to bed,” he said, moving forward again.

Unbelievable, Ginny thought, her mouth falling open in disbelief when Harry dismissed her yet again. Why does he have to be so bloody infuriating? she asked herself as Harry made a show of stomping up the stairs.

Why can’t you do things that make sense? If you want to be with me, then fight for me, you prat. You’ll take on Voldemort but not some bloke I’m just friends with. What’s the matter with you?

“Coward!” she shouted just as Harry reached the landing at the top of the stairs. It was the worst thing she could think of to say to him at that particular moment and yet it wasn’t nearly harsh enough. She’d wanted to goad Harry into standing his ground and fighting back, but all he did was slow down for a moment before disappearing around the corner.
“I don’t know much of what happened tonight,” David said, slipping up behind Ginny as she grit her teeth and mounted the stairs herself, “but it’s pretty obvious he wants to be left alone.”

“Well, that’s just too damned bad,” she retorted. “We don’t always get what we want,” she said derisively. “I’m through tiptoeing around the great Harry Potter,” Ginny proclaimed, steeling herself for what she knew had to be done.

He’s not getting away that easy. He’s not getting away at all. If he’s too gutless to make a move then I will. I’ve been more than patient, but this is flat-out ridiculous.

“Ginny?” David asked when she disregarded his advice and started up the stairs again. “What are you doing?”

“Something I should have done a long time ago,” she called down before she too, disappeared from view.

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I can do this, Ginny told herself as she stood outside the sixth-year boys’ dormitory and tried to summon her courage. I have to, she amended with an audible sigh. If I don’t he’ll drive me mad. The resentment I can deal with, but the hopelessness he’s wallowing in now is too much. He’s making us both miserable and for no reason.

So stop cowering in the hallway and get on with it, she admonished herself, reaching out for the closed door standing between them. You aren’t going to do either of you any good standing out here.

“Damn it, Harry!” Ginny shouted as she threw open the door and marched into his room with no warning whatsoever. “I’ve had just about enough of this woe-is-me rubbish,” she said, making a conscious effort to push her own feelings ahead of his. She had to focus on how irritated she was with him for forcing her to share his despair. It was the only way she’d be able to get through this. If she allowed herself to feel his pain, to share it, the injustice of it all would come crashing down on top of her and she’d crumble. “I’m not going to spend the next two weeks feeling like shit just because you…”

“Not exactly the Weasley I was expecting,” Seamus said, peering around the curtains of his bed and smirking at Ginny’s obvious surprise.

“What… what are you doing in here?” she sputtered.

“It is my room,” the young Irishman retorted, his grin becoming even wider when he saw her cheeks flush. “What’s your excuse? If you’re looking for your brother, he’s not here,” Seamus teased, “and if he were, he’d tell you to knock before entering. Unless you were hoping to get an eyeful,” he added, unbuttoning his pajama top and throwing it on the floor in what Ginny considered a rather presumptuous display.

“Of you?” she scoffed, putting on a brave face despite her discomfort. “Hardly.”

“Oh that’s right,” Seamus chuckled, snatching a discarded jumper off the back of a chair and throwing it on, “you’re here to shout at Potter. Something about him making you feel like shite.”

“Under different circumstances, I’d stay and watch,” he said, slipping his feet into a pair of trainers and leaning against the post at the end of his bed as he tied them, “but you’re wasting your time. When I asked Potter what happened tonight he growled at me and Imperturbed those curtains,” Seamus said, nodding his head towards Harry’s bed as he stood upright once more.
“He’s in a right foul mood, that one is,” he continued. “Even if you do manage to get him out of there, he isn’t going to be any fun. I, on the other hand would be only too happy to entertain…”

“In your dreams, Finnigan.”

“It’s a date then,” he said, if for no other reason than to see if he could make Ginny blush again. “Although I probably won’t make it to bed for a couple hours,” he added as he headed for the door. “Not until Longbottom comes back from wherever it is Granger took him and tells us everything he knows.”

“Unless,” he said, spinning around to look at Ginny hopefully, “I don’t suppose I can convince you to tell me what’s been going on. No?” he asked when she narrowed her eyes at him. “I didn’t think so, but it was worth a try.”

“Well then,” he said, throwing the door open and stepping into the hall. “Enjoy your row.”

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“FUCK!” Harry shouted at the top of his lungs, heaving his wand at his pillow after using it to cast an Imperturbable Charm on the curtains surrounding his bed so Seamus wouldn’t hear him pitch a fit like a petulant toddler.

“FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK,” he bellowed, feeling foolish for storming out of the common room with everyone watching him. And yet at the same time he was just so angry that there wasn’t much else he could have done.

Other than stand my ground and sucker-punch Devane in his pretty-boy face , Harry thought, closing his eyes and imagining the satisfaction he would have felt when his fist collided with the prefect’s chiseled jaw.

Rather hard to snog when you’re sporting a big fat bloody lip. It certainly would have put a damper on their little reunion. Hell, maybe it is worth going back down after all.

Yeah right, a skeptical little voice piped up in the back of his head. You think Ginny’s irritated with you now, just wait until you’ve attacked her boyfriend. That will really go over well.

It’s bad enough that she knows you’re a possessive, lovesick, arsehole. If she knew the real reason you felt so guilty, if she knew that you’d wished that Bellatrix had maimed Devane, even if it was only for a split second, she’d hate you. And who could blame her.

What kind of a twisted sod wishes something like that on another person, even if they don’t really mean it?

“She’s better off with him,” Harry groaned, flopping down on his mattress and allowing the hopelessness of his situation to wash over him.

At least Devane won’t get her killed. I obviously can’t say the same. Voldemort went after her because of me. Somehow he knew I fancied her, he knew that he could use her against me, that I’d do anything to get her back in one piece.

“FUCKING BASTARD!” Harry shouted, allowing his anger to get the better of him because no one could hear his rants. “He’s out to take away everyone that means anything to me.”

First he murders my parents, then Sirius, then he targets both Ron and Hermione, and now he’s after Ginny. How can I be with her knowing that?
No, she’s better off with that wanker, Harry decided, closing his eyes when they started to burn.

But she doesn’t fancy him, the little voice insisted.

If only he didn’t know the truth. If only he could go back to believing what Hermione had said about Ginny giving up on him was true. But it wasn’t true at all. She might have tried to move on, but she hadn’t given up on him completely. She still had hope. And now that they were connected, now that she knew for a fact that he felt the same way about her, that hope was even stronger. Harry knew that was the real reason she’d been so annoyed with him when he ran off.

It’s not because I’m a jealous prat, he thought with a sigh. It’s because I ducked out on her before we had a chance to sort things out between us.

“She just doesn’t get it,” Harry groaned, allowing his own pain to finally make its way to the surface.

She thinks we’re on the brink of working things out. How can she not realize I’m about to break her heart all over again. And as if that weren’t bad enough, I’m going to have to spend the next two weeks feeling every ounce of pain that I cause her. And she’ll feel every ounce of pain that causes me, which will give her even more false hope.

“This is a bloody nightmare,” he said moments before the unexpected happened.

“What the hell?” Harry asked himself, sitting upright and reaching for his wand when his bed lurched and then lifted off the ground entirely.

“What’s your fucking problem, Finnigan?” he bellowed, lifting the Imperturbable Charm and scrambling through his curtains after his bed unceremoniously slammed into the ground.

“You are,” Ginny shouted back even as Harry realized that Seamus wasn’t responsible for Levitating his bed. “You and that blasted martyr complex of yours. I know what you were doing,” she said, unwilling to give him the opportunity to respond. “You were sitting in there feeling sorry for yourself while you came up with a whole list of reasons we shouldn’t be together.”

“Well, you know what you can do with your bloody list?” she shrieked, lowering her wand, which was still clutched tightly in her hand and advancing on him. “You can shove it straight up your arse,” she said, reaching out and fisting his jumper in her free hand.

“Look, Ginny,” Harry said, taking a deep breath and shaking his head sadly. He could feel her determination coursing into his body, but he refused to let it sway him. If anything, it strengthened his resolve.

Harry knew what he had to do, even if he didn’t really want to do it. But the words, “We can’t be…” were all he managed to get out before Ginny’s lips crushed against his and wiped the rest of his argument right out of his head.

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“Wake up,” a voice hissed in Ron’s ear just before he was violently shaken. “Come on, come on, get up.”

“Whazamatter?” Ron asked groggily when Fred finally managed to rouse him from a deep sleep.

“Ron,” Fred said a bit louder when his brother flopped over and buried his face in his pillow, hoping to fall back asleep.
“What?” he snapped in irritation, rolling his shoulder away from Fred when he started poking at it.

“It’s Hermione,” Fred replied, lowering his voice again.

“Hermione?” Ron questioned, sitting bolt upright in his bed. The urgency in his brother’s voice might not have completely registered with him, but the name he uttered had. “What happened?” he asked, his heart nearly stopping when he turned to check on her and spied her empty bed. “Where is she?” he demanded, quickly scanning the room and throwing off his blankets when he didn’t see her anywhere.

“She’s in the loo,” Fred whispered, glancing nervously at the closed door of the hospital wing’s toilet. “She’s been in there for nearly half an hour,” he added when Ron creased his brow and shot him an incredulous look.

“You woke me up and scared the hell out of me because you need to use the toilet?” Ron said, trying to slow his pounding heart. And yet despite his best efforts, the fear he’d experienced upon waking wouldn’t leave him. If anything, it was worse now that he was completely awake.

“No,” Fred muttered uncomfortably and then fell silent again. “She’s… I think she’s… crying,” he whispered in a voice so low his brother had to strain to hear him.

“Why?” Ron questioned, not that he bothered listening to Fred’s response. Even as the words left his mouth, he turned to his connection with Hermione, hoping to discern the answer himself. Unfortunately it was difficult for him to know if the anxiety gnawing away at him was his or hers or a combination of both. It was so powerful now that it overshadowed nearly everything else, but Ron knew it was entirely possible that he was overreacting. Just because he was worried about Hermione, that didn’t mean anything was seriously wrong. There was a chance that he was just projecting his concern onto her and she’d picked up on it and mirrored it back.

She was perfectly fine when we turned in. *Well, as fine as someone that has given up a portion of their life energy can be,* he told himself in an effort to calm his nerves.

She was in good spirits once we knew that George was all right. A little agitated about her missing talisman, he reminded himself, *but she relaxed as soon as Mum left and Madam Pomfrey returned her clothes. Hell, even I was relieved when she pulled her talisman out of her pocket and demanded that I put it back on her.*

She must have had a nightmare, Ron reasoned, searching for an excuse to explain away both the anxiety he was sensing and the fact that she’d been crying. But as much as he wanted to believe that explanation, deep down he had his doubts.

If she’d had a nightmare, she would have climbed into bed with him, hospital wing or no hospital wing. Hermione had snuck into his dorm room in the middle of the night enough times for Ron to know that. As much as he wanted to believe that the distress he felt was the result of a bad dream, in his gut he suspected it was something else, something even worse.

And so does Fred, Ron thought, scrambling out of bed and hurrying over to the closed door of the toilet. *That’s why he woke me up.*

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“Hermione?” Ron called out her name, cautiously opening the door after knocking twice and getting no response.
Initially he was relieved that she wasn’t actually using the facilities, what with Fred two steps behind him. But that relief vanished the instant he spotted her sitting on the cold stone floor, her knees drawn up to her chest and her face pressed against her thighs.

“Hermione!” he all but shouted, rushing into the small room and kneeling down beside her. “What’s the matter?” he asked, but he got no reply. Not a verbal one anyway.

“I’ll get Madam Pomfrey,” Fred said, turning around to bolt out of the doorway when Hermione hugged her knees even tighter and began to rock.

“NO!” Ron yelled, the resolve in his voice stopping his brother dead in his tracks.

Ron had seen Hermione act like this once before and unlike his brother, he knew that having Madam Pomfrey fuss over her or force potions down her throat wasn’t going to help in the long run. His mother had already tried that approach after the Boggart incident and Hermione still refused to take any type of sleeping potions as a result.

Tough love didn’t work with Hermione. All it did was make her resentful. Ron knew that he was going to have to bring her out of it on his own. What’s more, he was going to have to be subtle about it.

“Let me try and bring her around first,” he said to Fred, before shifting his full attention back to his wife.

“Hermione,” Ron said her name softly, placing his hands on either side of her face and tilting her head up, hoping that the desolation she felt would ease if he could force her to focus on him. Just seeing him had helped calm her down after her run-in with the Boggart, so he reasoned it would work again now. Especially if all of this was the result of some dream she’d had about him being dead.

“Come on, love,” Ron said, reaching out to wipe away the tears that were streaming down her cheeks. “It was just a bad dream,” he said, striving to sound reassuring. “Let’s get you back to bed before you freeze in here.”

“It’ll be cold in Azkaban,” Hermione mumbled after several seconds of strained silence had passed. “Even without the Dementors,” she whispered a few seconds later.

Where the hell did that come from? Ron thought, the confusion he felt vying with her feelings of remorse for the top spot on the emotional roller-coaster they were both riding.

“What’s she talking about?” Fred asked, taken by surprise by her odd statement.

This girl rocking back and forth on the floor raving about Azkaban was not the Hermione he knew and Fred suddenly found himself wishing he was back in his bed. If he was still asleep like George, he’d be blissfully unaware of the fact that his sister-in-law was suffering some sort of nervous breakdown in a toilet.

He didn’t want to witness this. Not just because seeing her vulnerability made him uncomfortable, which it did, or because this wasn’t the kind of situation he could crack jokes about in an effort to ease the tension, but because it flew in the face of the mental image he had of Hermione.

The Hermione in his mind’s eye didn’t fall apart. She was strong and unflappable like his mother. When compelled to, she turned into a fire-breathing shrew that didn’t take guff from anyone. If someone pushed her, she dug in and pushed them right back, often in rather creative and sometimes even vindictive ways. That was one of the things Fred admired most about her actually. It wasn’t
often that he came across a sparring partner that could hold her own against him, let alone best him on occasion.

Whoever did this to her is going to pay, Fred decided, feeling just as protective of Hermione as he would his own sister.

“What’s she talking about?” he asked Ron again, this time with a tinge of anger in his voice. “Who did this to her?”

“I did,” she said softly, making it obvious that she was lucid enough to comprehend what was being said around her, despite the fact she wasn’t making any sense herself. “I lied.”

You had an anxiety attack because you lied? Ron wondered, trying to sort her ramblings out in his head.

“To you,” she said to Ron, “to everyone,” she added, her shame taking center stage and becoming the dominant emotion despite Ron’s bewilderment. “But Dumbledore knows the truth. He saw right through me. Dumbledore knows what I am.”

Mental, Ron thought, but he refrained from saying it out loud because he was afraid she’d withdraw again. One look at the expression on his brother’s face was more than enough for him to know that Fred concurred with that assessment, though.

“You aren’t making any sense, love,” Ron said, making a concerted effort to shove all of Hermione’s negative feelings aside so he could think about how much she meant to him instead. If she could feel how much he loved her, how much he needed her to be all right, it might help her snap out of the morose state she was in.

“You’re exhausted,” he said, placing one arm around Hermione’s shoulders and pulling her close. “What you need now is to get some sleep and clear your head. Things will be better in the morn—”

“Sleeping isn’t going to change what I’ve done,” she snapped, pushing him away.

“What you’ve done?” Ron questioned, making a mental note not to touch her again when he felt a brief flicker of anger through their bond.

“I’ll still be a killer in the cold light of day.”

“A killer!” Fred cried out in surprise, wracking his brain to figure out what the hell Hermione was talking about. Was this all some sort of delusion she was having or had someone actually pushed her that far? “Who’d she kill?”

“No one,” Ron barked, jerking her head up and glowering at his brother. But the response had been so quick, so defensive, that Fred had a sinking suspicion that Hermione wasn’t that delusional after all.

“We’ve already been through this,” Ron muttered, forcing himself to be patient with Hermione when he really wanted to shake some sense into her.

“Yes, and I lied,” she reiterated.

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Ron asked, momentarily allowing his exasperation to get the better of him as he began to comprehend what it was that she really wanted. Beating herself up wasn’t doing it for her. She wanted him to condemn her as well.
Don’t hold your breath because it’s not going to happen.

“What don’t you understand?” Hermione asked, taking the self-recrimination she’d been heaping on herself and redirecting it at Ron in the form of anger, hoping to goad him into saying what she wanted to hear. “I wanted him dead and now he is.”

“I was trying to kill him,” she admitted. “I told all of you I would have lifted my spells if they’d connected, but that was a lie. I wouldn’t have done a blessed thing to help him.”

“I took a man’s life tonight. I should feel bad about that, but all I keep thinking is that if I could go back and change it, I wouldn’t. I’d do it again, given the same situation.”

“Good.”

“What did you just say?” Hermione asked, not only taken aback by Ron’s statement, but the sincerity of it.

“You heard me,” he replied. “I know you want me to tell you you’re a horrible person because you defended yourself, but that’s not going to happen.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I understand perfectly,” Ron retorted. “I just don’t happen to agree with you. You keep saying that you wanted Dolohov dead, but now that he is, you feel bad about it. I don’t. He was a cold-hearted bastard and got what was coming to him.”

“He tortured and murdered countless people, including Mum’s brothers. And those fools in the Ministry let him waltz out of Azkaban, not once, but twice, so he could start doing it all over again. It makes me sick when I think about what they did to Dean and Colin. There’s no way I was going to stand there and let them do the same thing to you.”

“That indifference that you’re feeling guilty about is coming from me, Hermione, not you. And I’m not going to feel bad about it.”

“You don’t really mean that,” she said weakly. “You wouldn’t feel that way if you’d…”

“Seen him take his last breath?” Ron finished.

The hell I wouldn’t.

“…been responsible for his death,” she finished.

“I was responsible. I’m the one that cast the spell that protected you,” he reminded her.

“But I didn’t have to resort to using that protection. I could have tried to incapacitate him, but I didn’t. I tried to kill him,” she said, shamefaced once more.

“Good,” Ron stated again. “It’s exactly what you should have done. We’re at war, Hermione. He was the enemy and he was trying to kill you.”

“No wait,” he amended. “He was trying to make me kill you, because that’s the kind of sick son of a bitch that he was. You can put any kind of spin on it you want, but it wasn’t murder. He’s the one that attacked us. All you did was defend yourself.”

“WAIT!” Fred shouted from the doorway, unable to contain himself any longer. “Are you saying that she…that you… that Dolohov is…’
“Rotting in hell as we speak,” Ron finished, when his brother stopped sputtering and settled for staring at both of them in disbelief instead.

“Ron!” Hermione admonished.

“No, he’s right,” Fred said, managing to take them both by surprise. “Dolohov is a monster. You shouldn’t feel bad about sending him to hell where he belongs. He wouldn’t have felt one ounce of sympathy or remorse after killing you.”

“If you’re worried that those idiots at the Ministry are going to try and chuck you into Azkaban for defending yourself,” Fred added, Hermione’s earlier ramblings suddenly making sense to him, “don’t be. Fudge isn’t in control anymore. He got sacked after the Dementors attacked Diagon Alley. Scrimgeour is Minister now. The former Head of the Auror Department,” he said, giving his brother a pointed look. “Hell, he’ll probably pin a metal on you when he find out. You did him a favor. You did all of us a favor.”

“See,” Ron said, grateful to Fred, not only for the rare show of support, but for getting through to Hermione in a way he hadn’t quite been able to. And while there were no outward signs that what Fred had said was sinking in, Ron knew that it was. She wasn’t feeling nearly as burdened or overwhelmed. She was still doubtful, but at least she’d stopped arguing and started listening.

“Now that you’re feeling better,” he said cautiously, “do you mind if we get off the floor?”

“As long as you promise not to tell Harry about this,” Hermione said, taking Ron’s hand when he offered it and allowing him to help her up.

“Tell Harry about what?” George asked, as he stepped into the open doorway. “Well?” he pressed, when no one answered him. “Is someone going to tell me what all that shouting was about, or am I going to have to guess?”

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Ron wasn’t sure what time it was when he woke up again, but since the hospital wing was quiet and he could feel the warmth of Hermione’s body beside his, he was only too happy to burrow down in his pillow and go back to sleep.

I’m still knackered, so I couldn’t have been asleep all that long, he reasoned, rolling on his side and draping his arm over his wife, who wiggled backwards until she was pressed firmly against him.

Guess she really didn’t need that potion after all, Ron thought, relieved to hear her sigh contentedly in her sleep.

It made him feel good to know his mere presence made Hermione feel secure, even after everything that had just happened. Not just because it stroked his ego and showed him that he was needed, but because he’d genuinely been worried that she would find it difficult to sleep. He’d been so concerned, in fact, that he’d broken down, in front of the twins no less, and all but begged her to take a potion for Dreamless Sleep as he coaxed her back into bed.

Of course she’d refused, even after he reminded her that it wasn’t the type of sleeping potion that would prevent her from waking up. But even after suffering a nervous breakdown, Hermione was still as tenacious as ever and it didn’t take long for Ron to see he was waging a losing battle.

He wisely realized that if he continued to push her, she’d just get irritated with him and refuse the only other means of comfort he had left to offer. So rather than argue with her, Ron gave in and settled for pushing his small hospital bed beside hers so the two of them could sleep together. And
miracl... miracle of miracles, that had actually worked.

So far, he reminded himself, tightening his grip on Hermione and dropping a feather-light kiss on her neck.

It was a small gesture. Not even enough to wake Hermione up, but unbeknownst to Ron, they were being watched. The instant his lips connected with her flesh he was horrified to hear the unmistakable sound of somebody clearing their throat.

Shit! Ron groaned in his head, cringing at the prospect of a fellow student popping into the Hospital Wing to see Madam Pomfrey about some ailment and catching the two of them sleeping together. It’ll be all over school before breakfast, he silently lamented. Why didn’t I put the curtains around us before I fell asleep? Shit! He silently moaned again, taking a deep breath and forcing himself to open his eyes so he could confront whoever it was.

If he was lucky it would be a younger student, preferably a Gryffindor. Someone he could reason with or at least intimidate into keeping their big yap shut. He was a Prefect after all. There had to be a rule somewhere about spreading gossip, and if there wasn’t there should be.

“Mum?” Ron said in surprise, his mouth falling open when he came up on his elbow and spied his mother sitting in a nearby chair, silently knitting. “What are you… What time is it?” he amended.

“It’s still early, dear,” she said softly, lowering her knitting needles and cocking her head towards Fred and George, who were quietly snoring, to remind Ron that he needed to keep his voice down. “But I’m glad you’re awake,” she whispered, gathering up her yarn and leaning down to shove her things in a small bag at her feet.

“Fred told me that Hermione had a bit of a rough night,” Molly said, when her son continued to gape wordlessly at her. “I hate to wake her, but the sooner we leave the better.”

“Leave?” Ron asked, furrowing his brow as he found his voice again. “You mean the sooner we return to Gryffindor Tower?” he asked hopefully.

But even as he said it, the resolve he saw on his mother’s face let him know that wasn’t what she meant at all. Whatever she was about to say, she was expecting him to fight her on it.

“I’m afraid you and Hermione will not be returning to Gryffindor Tower just yet,” Molly said after a few moments of silence had passed.

“Why the hell not?” Ron barked, the jolt of suspicion he felt from Hermione letting him know that she was awake and had heard what his mother had said.

“Don’t take that tone with me, young man,” Molly hissed back. “It’s time you learn that there are consequences for your actions,” she stated. “You have responsibilities now,” she said, glancing at Hermione briefly. “Things that you need to deal with, things that you both need to deal with,” she amended. “And since your courses won’t be starting until next week, you’ll deal with them now.”

“What kind of things?” Ron demanded.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione said, giving up her pretense of sleep and sitting upright beside him. “We’re not going anywhere with you,” she said to Ron’s mother.

Bloody hell, Ron thought, momentarily caught off guard by Hermione’s surly response. He knew that she’d been fighting with his mother earlier, but he’d never expected her to be openly hostile, let alone downright rude.
One look at his mother’s face was all Ron needed to see she was just as startled, although to her credit she masked it quickly. When her disbelief gave way to hurt feelings, she struggled to cover it with an indifferent expression. But it was the fact that she didn’t reply that scared Ron the most. He could count on one hand the number of times he’d seen his mother at a loss for words and still have fingers left over. But when she did find her voice again, it was going to be loud.

This isn’t good, he thought, watching his mother sit back in her chair and stare at Hermione as if she were trying to measure her up. Say something, he scolded himself, knowing that he should step in before all hell broke loose. But what? he wondered. Fortunately, Hermione alleviated the mounting tension herself.

“You’re going to have to prove that you’re really Molly Weasley first,” Hermione said, her eyes riveted on the woman sitting near the foot of their beds as she set her challenge. “We’re not falling for the same trick Ginny did.”

Bloody hell, Ron thought again. The possibility that this might not be his mother had never even occurred to him.

It was ridiculous of course. She was wearing the same clothing she’d been wearing when she went to St. Mungo’s to retrieve Bill and check on Charlie. Obviously this was his mother. Ron was sure of it. Up until the moment she smiled ever so slightly and pulled a wand on them, that is.

“Tonks dropped in while you were sleeping,” Molly said, spinning the wand around so the tip was pointing at herself and holding it out for Hermione to take. “She asked me to give you this,” she added, tossing the wand on the bed when neither of them made a move to retrieve it. “The Aurors found it in Honeydukes.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Hermione said, snatching her wand up quickly. She was more than relieved to have it back, but she wasn’t about to admit it.

“Do you seriously believe I’d allow you to hold me at wandpoint if I was a Death Eater?”

“Perhaps,” Hermione replied, “if you were trying to lull us into a false sense of security. You have to admit, it would be easier to get us off the grounds if we cooperated. Who’s to say you don’t have backup waiting for us outside the gates? How do I know you even got this from Tonks? Death Eaters could have searched Honeydukes before the Aurors arrived. Maybe Wormtail took it with him when he ran away. There’s any number of ways you could have retrieved my wand.”

“Mad-Eye will be pleased to hear that you’ve taken his warnings about ‘constant vigilance’ to heart,” Molly said. “And truthfully, so am I. If only your sister had been so cautious,” she said regretfully, shifting her attention back to Ron.

“Well,” she said, sighing in resignation. “Go ahead,” she prompted. “Ask me a question. Something only I would know the answer to, mind you. And be quick about it. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

“It seems you lot were daft enough to register your wands with the Ministry on the night you entered the Department of Mysteries,” Molly said, before Ron had a chance to even think of an appropriate question. “Fortunately Remus pocketed your wand before bringing you back to Hogwarts,” she said to her son, “but they didn’t stop to search for Hermione’s. When the Aurors found it, they cast Prior Incantato on it to make sure it wasn’t the wand used to kill Dolohov.”

“Not to worry, dear,” Molly said, when Hermione visibly paled. “According to Tonks, the Ministry is still trying to sort out how he managed to kill himself with his own wand. Officially, they’ve listed
the cause of death as accidental. In fact, Kingsley has already leaked it to the Prophet that Dolohov’s wand backfired. On Dumbledore’s orders, of course,” she added.

“No one is looking to blame anything on you,” Molly assured her daughter-in-law. “But the Aurors know that you were in Honeydukes and they have a few inquiries. Just answer their questions as honestly as you can and don’t volunteer any information,” Molly advised.

“Why would they let her go to them at the Ministry?” Fred asked from his bed a short distance away.

“Why didn’t they ask their questions last night?” George added.

“They tried,” Molly confessed, turning around in her chair to scowl at the twins, who’d obviously woken up sometime during the conversation and pretended that they hadn’t so they could eavesdropping, “but Dumbledore refused to allow them to disturb anyone in the hospital wing. He didn’t want anyone to know that you two were in here,” she added.

“And they went for that?” George asked skeptically.

“Yeah,” Fred said suspiciously. “What’s up with that? It sounds like they’re being awful accommodating. I don’t like it. Scrimgeour wants something if you ask me.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

“To suck up to Harry, no doubt,” George added, ignoring his mother’s comment.

“Enough!” Molly said sternly. “Can’t you see that you’re worrying Hermione,” she snapped, without even bothering to look at her daughter-in-law to see if that were true or not.

“If the Minister wants to do us a favor, we aren’t going to argue. If he is being accommodating because he wants Harry’s goodwill, you should count yourselves lucky. If not for his willingness to allow your father to bring Hermione in for questioning when she’s feeling up to it, each and every one of you would have had to explain your part in this mess. Perhaps you’d like to come with us. I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“No,” George replied instantly.

“Thanks for the offer, though,” Fred added quickly. “It’s nice to be included for a change.”

“Still doubt that’s really my mum?” Ron whispered into Hermione’s ear, his own misgivings having long since evaporated. His mother was the only person Ron knew that was capable of browbeating the twins into submission that quickly.

Of course, he now had a whole host of new concerns to worry about. Chief on the list; the fear that Hermione would have another breakdown, this time in front of whomever it was that was questioning her. She was already starting to fret. He’d just have to do his best to try and keep her distracted.

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“Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter must wake up!”

“Wha…” Harry grumbled, stirring from his slumber with a start. Why was Ginny’s voice so unnaturally high and why was she waking him up in the middle of the night?

Unless, he thought with a wry smile, she wants to pick up where we left off. Who needs sleep, he
decided, reaching out with his left hand to feel the spot on his bed where Ginny had fallen asleep, only to find it cold and empty.

Where the hell is she? *Wait!* Harry thought, his eyes snapping open as doubt flooded his mind.

I wasn’t dreaming, was I? he asked himself, his heart plummeting when he didn’t find her in his bed. *There is no way I could have dreamt up a snog like that,* he tried to reassure himself. *Not even my fantasies are that good. Besides, if it had been a dream, we would have done more than snog,* he reasoned. *And I wouldn’t have tried to discourage her.*

Not that you tried very hard, or very long, he reminded himself, his smile becoming even broader as he replayed the night’s events over in his head.

It really had been unbelievable. Harry had always known that Ginny was spirited and that she wasn’t afraid to go after what she wanted, but knowing in no uncertain terms that *he* was what she wanted and that she wasn’t going to be swayed by his excuses had been such an incredible turn on. And thanks to their connection, Ginny quickly realized that and used it to her advantage.

The first few times he managed to surface for air, he’d tried to explain why they shouldn’t be together, but Ginny would have none of it. She cut him off, called him a daft git, and then she kissed him again before he had a chance to respond. How was a bloke supposed to think, let alone win an argument, when the girl he fancied like mad was pressed against him with her tongue shoved down his throat?

No, it definitely wasn’t a dream. But where is she then?

Maybe she had to use the loo.

But why would she wake me up for that? Harry wondered. *Unless she isn’t planning on coming back,* he added as an afterthought.

But that explanation didn’t really make much sense to him either. It wasn’t right. He didn’t know how he knew that, but he did. Something felt off about it. Something felt off in general, actually. Something that Harry couldn’t quite put his finger on and then it dawned on him what it was.

He wasn’t sensing Ginny. He wasn’t picking up anything at all from her and that’s why he felt so uneasy. They hadn’t even been connected for 24 hours and subconsciously he was already starting to rely on their link to monitor Ginny’s well-being. A few short hours ago he’d been cursing their connection and ranting to himself about how irritating it was, and now he was starting to become …

What exactly? he asked himself.

Dependent wasn’t the right word, but it was close. He hadn’t reached the point where he *needed* to sense Ginny in order to function, but he didn’t like being cut off from her either. It made him feel ill-at-ease.

But ill-at-ease he could handle. A little anxiety was fine as long as it didn’t evolve into something stronger. Harry didn’t want to get in so deep that he became paranoid like Ron did when he was cut off from Hermione for a substantial length of time, although he now understood why Ron reacted that way.

The emotional feedback loop created by the Coupling Potion might be frustrating at times, but it was comforting as well. There was security in knowing that the woman you loved was alive and well at any given moment.
Unless she’s asleep, Harry reminded himself. He’d heard Ron grumbling about that enough times to know he wouldn’t be able to sense much when Ginny was asleep.

Which she must be right now, he reasoned, parting the curtains of his bed and glancing at the window just long enough to determine that the sun had barely risen. She must have slipped back to her own room while I was asleep.

“Harry Potter, sir!” a squeaky voice cried out happily. “Harry Potter is awake after all! Dobby was–”

“Dobby?” Harry asked, scanning the floor but failing to see the elf. “What are you doing here?” he whispered, reaching for his glasses, which he’d tossed at his bedside table after falling into his bed with Ginny. But rather than land on his glasses, his hand landed on a bright pink sock, which promptly wiggled.

“Dobby is delivering messages, sir!” the elf squeaked from his perch, snapping his fingers and causing Harry’s glasses to rise off the floor and float to him. “Professor Dumbledore says that he needs Harry Potter, sir. That only Harry Potter can help him with his task, so Dobby volunteered to retrieve him for Professor Dumbledore.”

“Dobby is also to tell Harry Potter that he is not to be worrying about his Wheezys. They will be… ‘well looked after’,” the elf said, after taking a moment to remember the appropriate phrase, “while they are away.”

“Away?” Harry said anxiously. “Ron’s leaving?” he asked, clearly worried in spite of Dobby’s message. “Are they taking him to St. Mungo’s?” he asked, jumping out of bed fully dressed. His trousers were filthy, his shirt was wrinkled, and his shoes were missing entirely, but he didn’t care. “What’s wrong with him?” Harry shouted as he ran for the door.

“Wait,” Harry said to himself, stopping short and spinning around to search for Dobby after he reached the common room. “You said they,” he said, looking impatiently at the staircase, “they will be well looked after.”

“DOBBY!” Harry shouted, when the elf didn’t chase him down the stairs as he expected. “They who?” he demanded, turning to his right when the air beside him cracked and the house-elf materialized out of thin air. “Is it George? Is something wrong with him as well?”

“George?” Dobby repeated, rolling his large green eyes skyward as if momentarily confused. “No, sir,” he answered. “Your Wheezys!” he said, as if that explained everything. “The one that gave Dobby the jumper,” he added when Harry continued to look baffled. “And the one that left the hats for Dobby and Winky! Your Wheezys, sir!”

“Ron and Hermione? But what’s wrong with them?” Harry asked, when Dobby nodded his head.

“Nothing, sir!” the elf assured him. “Dobby has already given his message. Harry Potter is not to worry because there is nothing to worry about.”

“Then why are they leaving?” Harry demanded. “Where are they going? Is Ginny going with them? Is that where she is? Have they already left? When will they be back?”

“Dobby is not knowing how to answer those questions, sir,” the elf said regretfully, his batlike ears drooping as he bowed his head in shame. “Perhaps Harry Potter should ask Professor Dumbledore when he sees him,” Dobby suggested. “But Harry Potter will be needing his shoes first,” the elf said. And no sooner had the words left his mouth, than a pair of trainers appeared on Harry’s feet. He didn’t even have to bend over and tie them because Dobby took care of that as well. “Professor
Dumbledore is waiting for Harry Potter in his office, sir!"

Then he can keep waiting, Harry thought, because I’m going to the Hospital Wing.

But before Harry reached the portrait hole, it opened of its own accord. At least, that’s what he thought until Professor McGonagall stepped through, looking haggard and harried.

“What’s that?” Harry countered, pointing at the painting before changing his mind and jumping to an entirely different topic. “Where are Ron and Hermione going?” he asked, before McGonagall had a chance to do more than open her mouth to reply to his first question. “Is something wrong with them? What about George? Is he…”

“Slow down, Potter,” McGonagall said, holding out one hand in front of herself. “You’re working yourself up over nothing,” she said. “The last I heard, your friends were surprisingly fit, all things considered. They do have a few personal matters to attend to, however,” she said, flicking her wrist so the hovering painting tilted upright to reveal a man sitting in a rather uncomfortable looking chair with an oversized book on his lap.

“Molly and Remus will be taking them to Gringotts to sign some papers,” McGonagall said, using her wand to move the portrait towards the wall at the foot of the boys’ staircase. “And they still need to talk to the Aurors, but they’ll likely be back before you will,” she said, flicking her wrist again and casting a spell to secure the painting in place. “Assuming you’ve agreed to accompany Dumbledore on his recruiting trip, that is.”

“Recruiting trip?” Harry asked in surprise, the new painting all but forgotten.

“Yes,” McGonagall said, sounding just as exhausted as she looked. “I’m afraid Tonks has been recalled to active duty,” she sighed. “Scrimgeour claims he can no longer spare any of his Aurors. Of course that didn’t happen until after Dumbledore refused to allow him to speak with you,” she grumbled “But the fact remains that once again, we find ourselves short one professor.”

“If you plan on accompanying Dumbledore, you had best get going, Potter. Horace doesn’t tend to stay in the same place very long. I’m sure Dumbledore is anxious to get to him before he learns about what happened here last night. If he gets it into his head that Hogwarts has been attacked…”

“Well,” McGonagall said, changing her mind and simplifying her explanation at the last second, “let’s just say it will make it that much harder for Dumbledore to convince him to come out of retirement.”

Why? Who is Horace and why should he care if Voldemort made a move against me last night? Harry wondered, but before he could voice the question the less rational, more emotional side of himself took over.

Who the hell cares? What about Ginny?

“Ginny will go spare if she wakes up and discovers that we’ve all left her,” Harry said to McGonagall, rather than scurry off to the Headmaster’s office as she’d suggested.

“I’m sure Miss Weasley will understand.”

Somehow I doubt that.
“We both took a shot of that Coupling Potion last night,” Harry informed McGonagall, unsure whether or not she was aware of that fact. “If she freaks out, it will likely affect my mood as well. I doubt I’ll be of much use to Dumbledore if that happens.”

How’s it going to look to that Horace bloke when I get all surly and belligerent for no reason? He’ll think I’m mental.

“Perhaps you should let Dumbledore be the judge of that,” the head of Gryffindor House replied rather sternly. “He wouldn’t have asked you to accompany him if he didn’t think you’d be of use. I suggest you keep that information about the Coupling Potion to yourself, however, unless Dumbledore himself decides to reveal it. As for Miss Weasley,” she added, “you leave her to me. I’ll see that she doesn’t ‘freak out’.”

It wasn’t a request, so much as an order and Harry wisely realized that McGonagall wasn’t going to stand around and argue with him about it. He had two choices. He could either leave with Dumbledore immediately or he could stay in the common room and wait for Ginny. He couldn’t do both. And since no one in their right mind would pass up the opportunity to go on a mission with Dumbledore, Ginny included, he threw caution to the wind and made a bee-line for the portrait hole.

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WELL THIS IS JUST BLOODY GREAT! Ginny silently ranted, stomping out of McGonagall’s office with no idea where she was going to go.

Not that it really matters, she lamented, because everywhere I go, people stare at me. And I can’t even hide in the hospital wing because Mum took everyone home with her.

Everyone except me, she fumed. It’s the story of my sodding life. Once again I’ve been left behind for my own bloody good.

“Baby Ginny is safer at Hogwarts,” she muttered sarcastically as she tromped down one corridor and into another at random. “Baby Ginny is too inept to take care of herself,” she continued, mounting a flight of stairs and climbing them without a second thought. “She needs her professors to mind her while her ‘protectors’ are away. Merlin forbid she ever set foot on the grounds again without a chaperone.”

Like it’s my fault I fell into that trap, she thought as she continued to ascend one staircase after another. I’m not the only one Lestrange fooled. We all thought she was Emma. So why am I the only one being punished for it? Harry gets to go off with Dumbledore, Ron and Hermione get to spend the day on Diagon Alley, and what do I get to do? Lock myself in the tower and gaze wistfully out the window while I contemplate what a fool I’ve been. LIKE HELL I WILL!

It’s bloody unfair, that’s what it is.

Unfortunately, as much as Ginny hated her situation, there wasn’t much she could do about it. Her family had already left without her, as had Harry. And while technically speaking, Harry had a legitimate excuse for slipping out in the wee hours of the morning, it still hurt that he hadn’t bothered to say goodbye.

How long does it take to write a note, for Merlin’s sake? Ginny asked herself, unwilling to be appeased by the remorse Harry was currently feeling.

You should feel bad, she thought, despite the fact she knew that he couldn’t hear her thoughts. But
he didn’t need to hear her words to know that she was irritated with him. She was irritated with all of them; her mother, her brothers, Harry, Hermione, everyone that had left her behind.

They could have made an effort, Ginny grumbled. One of them could have written a note telling me what was going on. They didn’t have to leave it to McGonagall to summon me to her office after breakfast so she could lecture me about how I was going to have to be responsible and act maturely while everyone was gone.

And what a joy it was eating by myself with everybody whispering and pointing at me. It’s like first year all over again, only worse. At least I was only the girl who was possessed by You-Know-Who back then. Merlin only knows what they’re saying behind my back now. I wouldn’t be surprised if some daft git starts spreading it around that Voldemort took me because he wants me to be his ‘pure-blood’ queen. People will believe anything, no matter how ridiculous it is, she thought with a sigh.

And you better get used to it, she reminded herself. Because people are going to talk about you as long as you’re close to Harry. Just like they talked about Cho, Ginny thought, rounding a corner and practically colliding with the last person she expected to meet in the upper recesses of the school.

“You,” was all Draco Malfoy managed to get out before Ginny recovered from her shock and reacted.

“BASTARD!” she shouted, after hitting him with the strongest Bat-Bogey Hex she could produce. “You’re going to wish that Voldemort had finished me off by the time I’m through with you,” she hissed, perfectly happy to take her aggravation out on him. He was the reason she’d been taken prisoner to begin with. If he hadn’t been tormenting Emma….

No, Bellatrix, Ginny reminded herself, after using a Leg Locker Curse to throw Malfoy off balance so it would be that much harder for him to fight back. Not that the gigantic bat attacking his face wasn’t distracting enough, but why take the risk. It was Bellatrix.

“YOU KNEW!” she shrieked, more irate now than ever. “FURNUCULUS! You twisted, scheming, SON OF A BITCH! YOU KNEW WHAT SHE WAS GOING TO DO WITH ME!”

Of course Malfoy had known who the little girl really was. Ginny hadn’t given it much thought before now because she’d been preoccupied fuming about Harry and her family ditching her, but it made perfect sense now.

Bellatrix was his aunt. Malfoy must have known that she was only pretending to be Emma in order to lure one of them into her trap. That’s why he’d been so cocky, despite the fact he and his slimy Slytherin friends had been outnumbered. He was in on it from the start.

That settled it. Malfoy wasn’t going to wish that she was dead. By the time Ginny was finished with him, he was going to wish that he was.

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“You’re sure you were on the seventh floor when you ran into him?” Harry asked Ginny suspiciously several hours later. Not that he doubted her. It was Malfoy’s motives that were in question, at least in Harry’s mind.

He’d known that Ginny had been in some sort of scuffle while he was away. Thanks to their connection Harry had known the instant it had happened. Just like he’d known that she’d walked away from it unscathed. It was the only explanation he’d been able to come up with to explain why Ginny had been consumed by anger and loathing, and yet felt so satisfied at the same time.
Obviously she’d cursed the hell out of someone.

Of course, Harry hadn’t been happy when he learned she’d been dueling with Malfoy. Not just because it was unexpected, (he’d assumed she’d been fighting with Parvati), but because Malfoy was dangerous. He rarely did anything on his own and it was sheer dumb luck that Ginny happened to get the jump on him. It could have just as easily been her on the ground covered in hexes, or worse.

What was he even doing skulking around on the seventh floor? Harry wondered. The Aurors should have hauled him off to Azkaban where he belongs. At the very least he should have been confined to the dungeons until Dumbledore came back and expelled him. Snape obviously let him off scot-free.

Yeah, there’s a surprise, Harry thought sarcastically. But what was Malfoy doing on the seventh floor? he asked himself again. Either he was hoping to sneak into Gryffindor Tower, he decided, or else he was trying to get into the Room of Requirement, but why?

“You’re sure that…”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Ginny snapped in exasperation. “I’ve only told you that I’m sure four bloody times. Unless there is another tapestry of trolls doing ballet somewhere in the castle, we were on the seventh floor. And no,” she said, before Harry could ask his next question again, “I don’t know what he was doing. I didn’t stop to ask and frankly I don’t care.”

Well, I do.

“And what about the little girl you mentioned?” Harry asked. “The one that interrupted you?”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I don’t know where she came from. I didn’t even know she was there until she started screaming.”

“But she definitely knew Malfoy?” Harry persisted, despite the fact he already knew the answer to this question as well. Ginny had gone over all of this with him several times by this point.

“She called him by his first name, so that must mean that she’s a Slytherin. Why would they be meeting on the seventh floor? You don’t think they were going to use the Room of Requirement to…”

“She was ten,” Ginny shouted, wrinkling her nose up in revulsion at the mere thought of Draco taking advantage of a little girl, even if she was a Slytherin.

“All right, she was twelve,” she amended when Harry didn’t buy her exaggeration. And small wonder, seeing as how you had to be eleven before you could enroll at Hogwarts. “Thirteen at most,” Ginny continued. “But she was definitely too young to be doing anything like that with the likes of him.”

“Why else would he hook up with some girl outside the Room of Requirement?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Ginny reiterated. Just thinking about Draco was making her angry all over again. She hadn’t had nearly enough time to make him suffer before she’d been interrupted. “I don’t want to talk about him anymore,” she stated. “Let’s talk about something else. What are you going to say to Parvati?”

“Nothing,” Harry said irritable. That was a sore subject with him and as far as he was concerned Ginny should have known not to bring it up. He never asked Parvati to be his girlfriend, so he didn’t see any reason to go out of his way and break up with her.
Besides, she obviously knew the score. Why else would she call Ginny a slag and run off in tears when he stormed into the common room late in the evening and asked Neville where Ginny was?

“Okay, so what’s the new Defense teacher like?” Ginny asked, changing the subject yet again.

“He’s a Slytherin.”

“Harry,” Ginny groaned, throwing herself against the back of the sofa they were sitting on together.

Was he daft? He had to know he was driving her insane with all his questions and his suspicion. Couldn’t he just drop his whole ‘I know those scheming Slytherins are up to no good’ obsession for ten minutes and enjoy the fact that everyone else had gone to bed and they finally had the common room to themselves?

“What?” he asked when she rolled her eyes at him.

“No more talking, that’s what,” Ginny replied. “I’m tired of feeling angry and suspicious. Let’s stop obsessing about Malfoy and focus on something more pleasant for a while,” she said, reaching for his hand.

“Oh my God,” Ginny said, fighting the urge to giggle when Harry’s cheeks flushed. “You’re embarrassed.”

“I am not,” Harry protested, but his face became substantially darker when she called him on his feelings.

Damned connection, he thought.

Okay, so maybe he had a hard time getting the ball rolling when it came to things like that. He’d never actually initiated a snog before. The girls he’d been with had always been the aggressors, Ginny included. And now that Harry knew she was waiting for him to make a move, maybe he was a little embarrassed, but throwing it in his face and laughing about it wasn’t going to help.

“That’s sweet.”

Oh God. Neither was that. Didn’t she realize how emasculating that was? He didn’t want to be sweet, he wanted to be-- What? he asked himself. In control and irresistible.

He wanted to get caught up in the moment and be swept away by the passion again. Or was that what Ginny wanted?

But then why would she be glaring at me like that?

“You’re not going to give me more of that rubbish about how we can’t be together because it’s not safe, are you?” Ginny said, pursing her lips ever so slightly.

Thanks for reminding me, Harry thought with a sigh, his stomach flipping as the reality of the situation set back in. “Look, Ginny.”

“No, you look,” she retorted. “I know you fancy me and you know that I fancy you, so stop dancing around it and admit what’s really bothering you. You think that my being with you will make me a target.”

“It will,” Harry said, disillusioned and resentful about how unfair his life was at the same time.
“Bollocks!” Ginny countered. “I’m always going to be a target, you daft git. We weren’t dating yesterday, but that didn’t stop Voldemort from taking me,” she reminded him. “You didn’t even know I existed when I was a first-year,” she continued, having planned her lecture out while he was away with Dumbledore, “but that didn’t stop him from possessing me. That had absolutely nothing to do with you and everything to do with me,” Ginny said as Harry opened his mouth to argue and then closed it again.

That’s true. I barely even knew her when Malfoy slipped her that diary.

“I’m a target because I’m a Weasley. My whole family is on those scumbags’ hit list, not just because we’re close to you, but because of who we are and what we believe in. You could drop dead tomorrow and that wouldn’t change. They’d still come after us.”

“Yeah, but…”

“Just like they went after my family the last time Voldemort was trying to take over everything,” Ginny said over him. “Death Eaters didn’t kill my uncles because they were close to you.”

“They were members of the Order,” Harry countered, which means they were associating with my parents, he finished in his head.

“My point exactly,” Ginny said. “My entire family is in the Order, or at least we will be soon enough.”

“You are not going to join the…”

“You’re not my mum, Harry. Apparently, you don’t even want to be my boyfriend,” Ginny said overdramatically, “and even if you were, it wouldn’t give you the right to tell me what I can and cannot do.”

“Although if you were,” she added purposely, “I might listen to you more and I’d definitely have to take your feelings on the matter seriously.”

“Are you for real?” Harry asked, staring at Ginny incredulously. “You’re seriously trying to blackmail me into…”

“Blackmail?” Ginny asked, doing a convincing job of sounding offended. “Would I do something like that?” she asked innocently.

Apparently.

“Is it working?” she asked, although she could tell by the way Harry’s resolve was crumbling that it was.

Damn it, he swore when he realized how encouraged she was feeling.

“I think it is,” Ginny said with a triumphant smile, inching closer to him. “You might as well concede the point now. You know how stubborn we Weasleys can be when we want something. I’ve waited too long for this to happen to give up now,” she said, pressing herself against him and purposely invading his personal space. “Especially now that I know you don’t really want me to give up. Stop trying to be noble and do something selfish for a change.”

“You don’t fight fair,” Harry said, closing his eyes so he wouldn’t have to stare at her luscious lips; lips that had nearly devoured him the night before.
“That’s something you learn quickly when you have six brothers,” Ginny whispered into his ear. “If I fought fair,” she said, brushing her lips against his neck and smiling to herself when she felt him shiver, “I’d never win.”

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“Come on, Hermione,” an all too familiar voice said as the portrait hole burst open nearly an hour later, “at least have a look before you make up your mind.”

I’m so fucking dead, Harry thought, his eyes snapping open in horror as he heard his best friends enter the same room he was snogging in. *This is sooooo not the way I wanted Ron to find out,* he groaned, tightening his grip on Ginny, who was sprawled out on top of him, to prevent her from doing something stupid, like sitting upright and calling attention to them. *Maybe we’ll get lucky and they won’t see us. Please God, don’t let him see us.*

“Looking isn’t going to change anything,” Hermione replied, oblivious to the fact she had an audience. “You can’t move into that room. You need to stay with Harry.”

What’s she talking about? Harry wondered, more than a little surprised to hear his name pop up in the middle of Ron and Hermione’s disagreement. He was only momentarily distracted, however. He had more important things to worry about at the moment.

“Yeah, but you…”

“But nothing,” she interrupted. “It’s late Ron and you need to get some rest. Let’s just go to bed. We can discuss it in the morning.”

YES! Harry shouted in his mind, silently willing his friends to leave. *Go to bed. You can row about whatever this is later.*

“Just because I need to stay with Harry, that doesn’t mean you can’t move in there,” Ron countered, obviously unwilling to put their argument on hold. “What harm is there in looking?”

“I don’t want to look,” Hermione grumbled, turning her back on him and moving towards the girls’ staircase. “Not right now,” she said, ascending the first few steps. “I want to go to bed.”

“Well, I want to look and you owe me after what happened at the Burrow tonight.”

Harry would have groaned out loud at his best mate’s stupidity if not for the fact it would give him away. As it was, he had to place his hand over Ginny’s mouth and shake his head in warning when he felt her take personal offense at the comment on Hermione’s behalf.

“I BEG YOUR PARDON!” Hermione shouted, her voice getting shriller as she stomped back into the common room.

Obviously Ginny isn’t the only one that took that personally.

“What exactly is it that you think I owe you?” she hissed, advancing on Ron, who wisely stepped away from her. “It’s not *my* fault *your* mother invited my parents over for dinner. I’m not the one that used the Lanain against my father. That was you.”

No way! Harry thought, nearly as astonished as Ginny was by that tidbit of information. *He used the Lanain on her dad? No wonder Hermione’s so hacked off.*

“How was I supposed to know it was your dad?” Ron countered. “He was leaning over you when I
walked in and you were all freaked out. I was trying to protect you.”

“And I owe you for that?”

“Not like that,” Ron backtracked, suddenly realizing why Hermione was so upset with him. He hadn’t meant to offend her, he just wanted to keep her in the same room as him so they could discuss McGonagall’s offer.

“It’s what you said.”

“Just because I want you to look at the room with me, that doesn’t mean I want to break it in or anything. I wasn’t demanding or even suggesting that you owed me a shag.”

“That’s how it sounded.”

“Well, it’s not how I meant it,” Ron snapped back, on the defensive now and irritated about it.

“How did you mean it then?” Hermione demanded.

Don’t answer that, Harry thought, silently willing Ron not to respond because he sensed a trap. Or maybe it was Ginny that sensed Ron’s impending doom and he was just reading her. Either way, he suspected that Hermione’s inquiry was really one of those questions that girls came up with that didn’t actually have a correct answer. No matter what Ron said, he’d dig himself in deeper and when their fight got loud enough, Harry knew someone would come downstairs to investigate things and spot him.

That’s all I need, he thought, a fully enraged Ron to find me hiding on the sofa with Ginny covering me like a blanket. I won’t even be able to fend off the blows in my current position. He’ll mop the floor with me before I even have a chance to stand up.

“I just thought it would be nice if you had a room of your own,” Ron said, jumping to the same conclusion Harry had and sidestepping Hermione’s loaded question. “You know, a quiet place where you can study anytime you wanted. Somewhere you don’t have to put up with giggling roommates who pester you to turn out the lights while you’re trying to read.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that you wouldn’t barge in and ‘pester’ me at all hours of the night?”

“Not if you don’t want me to,” Ron said, sounding rather hurt by her accusation.

“Um hum,” Hermione said, clearly not falling for his innocent act. She knew perfectly well why Ron wanted her to move into the married students’ quarters. The arousal that accompanied his randy thoughts had already given him away. He didn’t care if she had a quiet place to study. He just wanted a private room so they could shag anytime he wanted.

“You have to admit that occasionally it would be nice to spend the night together without three other people sleeping in the same room,” he said once he realized she wasn’t buying his more altruistic explanations. “But I certainly wouldn’t try and force myself on you if that’s what you’re insinuating,” he added, and this time Hermione knew that the pain in his voice was genuine.

“No, of course not,” she replied, her aggravation evaporating almost immediately. She hadn’t been serious when she questioned Ron’s self-control; she’d just been irritated with him for trying to hide his ulterior motives. “I’m sorry,” Hermione added for good measure. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. It’s just…”

“Whatever,” Ron said, turning his back on her and opting to stare at the portrait that McGonagall had
hung at the bottom of the boys’ stairwell instead.

“I don’t care what you say,” he added a few moments later. “I’m going to have a look at that
couple’s room and if it has a bigger bed and a private bath, I might just move into it myself.”

“You can’t.”

“Sure I can,” Ron countered. “I’ll just give Harry the password and he can come downstairs and get
me anytime he wants. It’s not as if he’ll have to worry about walking in on you,” he added, “seeing
as how you don’t want to use the room yourself.”

“That portrait isn’t going to open for Harry,” Hermione argued. “And even if it did…”

“Why should some old painting care if our best mate wants into our room?” Ron shot back before
she had a chance to finish. “The Fat Lady let Sirius into Gryffindor Tower,” he reminded her, “and
he wasn’t even a student.”

“The difference being that the common room doesn’t have the same degree of security,” Hermione
replied rather haughtily.

“Think about it, Ron,” she continued. “If it were that easy to get inside, half the couples in the school
would be sucking up to us and asking for the password. When was the last time you heard of a
married couple attending Hogwarts?”

“That room hasn’t been used for a hundred years. They were a lot stricter about that type of thing
back then. They would have taken precautions to make sure private rooms were not abused. I
wouldn’t be surprised if there are spells protecting the entrance, just like there are spells protecting
the girls’ dormitories,” she reminded him. “I’m telling you, Harry isn’t going to be able to walk right
in anytime he wants.”

“I suppose you read all about it in *Hogwarts: A History*,” Ron sighed. Well, so much for that bright
idea.

“No, its common sense,” Hermione retorted, crossing her arms in front of her chest and glowering at
her husband when he went out of his way to belittle her favorite book.

“Well, I’m still going to have a look,” Ron said, moving towards the painting again. “I can’t believe
you aren’t even curious,” he added, glancing at Hermione over his shoulder as he approached the
boys’ staircase.

“Wait, I get it,” he said out of the blue, reading Hermione’s mood, rather than her body language and
facial expression. “You are curious; you’re just being stubborn about it to make your point.”

“Come on, love,” he said out of the blue, reading Hermione’s mood, rather than her body language and
facial expression. “You are curious; you’re just being stubborn about it to make your point.”

“Come on, love,” he said, encouraged enough to turn completely around and face her again when
she didn’t zing him with a scathing reply. “I said I was sorry about the whole ‘you owe me thing,
Come with me,’” he implored. “No one knows we’re back yet, so they won’t miss us if we spend
the night together. I promise I won’t try and take advantage of you,” he added for good measure.

“Oh, all right,” Hermione sighed, knowing that she wasn’t going to get a moment’s peace until she
relented. When Ron really wanted something, he had a way of being so persistent and so annoying
about it, that she almost always gave in.

*I might as well make it sooner, rather than later. Besides, she thought, moving towards the center of
the room so she could cut in front of the fireplace and meet Ron at the concealed doorway, it might
be nice to spend the night togeth...*
“Of course, I won’t object if you try and take advantage of me,” Ron added with a cheeky grin. “What?” he asked when his comment didn’t elicit the response he’d expected.

“What’s the matter?” he asked when Hermione gasped and he felt her jolt of surprise.

“N...nothing,” she said, staring at Harry with wide eyes as he frantically shook his head and silently begged her not to give him away.

“Then why did you…” Ron began, moving towards Hermione to see what had her so flustered.

“I’m sure it’s not what it looks like,” she said after Ron had spotted Harry for himself and fell silent.

“It’s exactly what it looks like,” Ginny replied, pushing Harry’s hand away from her mouth and sitting upright until she was straddling him. “Not that it’s any of your business,” she said, glaring pointedly at her brother.

ARE YOU INSANE! Harry shouted at Ginny in his head.

Didn’t she realize Ron was going to snap out of his stupor and beat him to a bloody pulp any second? Why was she purposely throwing fuel on the fire?

“You two…” was all Ron said before he jerked his eyes away from the sofa and locked them on Hermione to make sure they were actually looking at the same thing. He had to be sure, because while she was mildly surprised by what they had just encountered, she was no where near as gobsmacked as he was. If anything, now that the initial shock had worn off, she was pleased.

“So you… you broke up with Parvati then?” Hermione asked, watching as Harry started pushing at Ginny, urging her to get off him so he could stand up and defend himself.

That certainly settles the matter of where I’m going to sleep, she thought as Harry opened his mouth to reply, only to shut it again and focus his undivided attention on Ron. I’m not about to spend the next few weeks listening to Lavender and Parvati badmouth Harry, nor am I going to have them glaring at me all hours of the day and night. I’m going to pack my trunk first thing in the morning and move into that private room. Who cares if everyone knows that Ron and I are married a few days early. They’re going to figure it out as soon as classes resume and the Professors start calling me Mrs. Weasley. What’s a few extra days of whispers and sniggers going to hurt?

“Harry, you did break up with Parvati, right?” Hermione asked again when he didn’t respond to her previous inquiry.

“HE BETTER HAVE!” Ron bellowed. It was one thing for Harry to snog his sister because he fancied her, quite another for him to do it if he was going to continue snogging somebody else.

“How long have you two been dating?”

“Dating?” Ron repeated, running his hand through his hair and sinking into the closest chair as the enormity of situation hit him.

My sister and my best friend are dating, he thought, uncertain of how to take this news.

On the one hand there was part of him that had secretly been hoping this would happen. He knew Harry and more importantly, he trusted Harry. At least as far a bloke could trust another bloke where his baby sister was concerned. Harry was a stand up kind of guy with a martyr complex a mile long. Ron had always assumed that he’d put Ginny’s needs before his own and that’s what he wanted for her. She should be with someone that cared enough about her to do anything it took to keep her safe.
But could she ever really be safe with Harry?

That’s the real question, Ron thought regretfully.

Things had been so much easier when he’d only had to worry about the intentions of the randy wankers queuing up to date his sister. Truth be told, he didn’t want to know about his best friend’s randy intentions.

He wasn’t foolish enough to believe he didn’t have any, but this was Harry he was talking about. Despite the position he’d just found them in, Ron was still confident that Harry would never willingly do anything to hurt Ginny or knowingly place her in danger. Unfortunately the same couldn’t be said about the mass murderers that were after him.

Ruddy bastards!

“Ron,” Hermione said his name in warning, moving forward and placing her hand on his shoulder when she realized his uncertainty was turning into anger.

“Is that why they took Ginny?” he asked, ignoring Hermione and locking his eyes on Harry instead. “Because the two of you have been…”

“No!” Harry shouted, shaking his head in an adamant denial. “We’re not…”

Shit! he swore, when Ginny ‘humphed’ at him in irritation.

“I mean we haven’t been… dating,” he amended. “Before now that is,” he added, hoping to appease Ginny, who was silently seething. “It just happened. Tonight actually, it just happened tonight. Not that anything really happened,” Harry babbled. He didn’t want Ron to get the wrong idea and think they’d been on the verge of shagging. “We just snogged is all. We aren’t going to maintain our connection or anything like that.”

“Well, I should hope not,” Hermione cut in, earning herself a scathing look from her sister-in-law for her efforts. Not that she backed down in the slightest. “You don’t want to be connected to Voldemort any longer than you have to be,” she said to Ginny rather sternly.

“Do me a favor and spare me the lecture,” the young redhead retorted.

“You’re sure that isn’t why he took her?” Ron pressed Harry, ignoring the two girls entirely, “because that is why he took Hermione. He thought that she was your girlfriend and he wanted to use her against you. That bitch, Lestrange, admitted it.”

“SHUT UP, RON!” Ginny shrieked, realizing just how deeply her brother’s accusations had wounded Harry. But it wasn’t the crushing guilt that scared her, it was the uncertainty Harry was feeling. All that time she’d spent convincing him that he wasn’t responsible for what had just happened to her and for what? So her overprotective prat of a brother could swoop in and make Harry doubt his decision to be with her.

DAMN HIM! she swore, glaring daggers at her Ron.

“Mind your own bloody business!”

“This is his business,” Harry mumbled to Ginny’s absolute horror.

“He’s just worried about--” Hermione added before being cut off.
“BOLLOCKS!” Ginny shouted angrily. She’d expected Ron to give her a hard time, but not Hermione.

“You didn’t see me trying to interfere when you and Ron got together,” she snapped at her sister-in-law. “I kept your ruddy secrets and even went along when you decided to perform the Lànain, despite the fact I thought you were both daft,” she added for good measure.

“You owe me,” she said, pointing a finger at her brother and purposely throwing his own words back in his face. “So I don’t want to hear another word about this from you. It’s my decision to make, not yours.”

Where’ve I heard that before, Ron thought, nearly as surprised as Hermione was when he realized how unaffected he was by Ginny’s dramatics. A few months ago he would have taken offense at her indignant comments and become confrontational himself, but what was the bloody point? Nothing he said was going to change her mind. He might be able to change Harry’s, but not Ginny’s. She was every bit as stubborn as his wife.

I’m not going to be able to keep Ginny out of this mess, Ron realized. Not if she’s dead set on throwing herself in the middle of it. I already tried that with Hermione and failed miserably. Leaving her at Hogwarts didn’t keep her safe. She damn near got herself killed trying to get to Hogsmeade on her own. Ginny won’t be any different. If I try and get in her way, she’ll just sneak around behind my back and make it that much harder for me to keep an eye on her. At least this way Harry can help me look after her. And maybe she can even help us look after him.

Yes, having Ginny closer would definitely have some merits, not that Ron was going to admit that to her. He might mention a few of them to Harry later on, but not to Ginny. The last thing he wanted was for her to think that she’d won, because she hadn’t.

Just because he had his own reasons for wanting the two of them to be together, that didn’t mean Ron was going to back down from his sister’s challenge either. She’d all but dared him to continue arguing with her and it wasn’t in his nature to let that sort of challenge go unanswered. Of course that didn’t mean he had to play by Ginny’s rules. Why push the buttons she expected him to push when she had so many different buttons to choose from?

“Don’t you mean that it’s yours and Harry’s decision?” Ron asked Ginny, knowing full well that it would aggravate her.

She knew that Harry was the weak link in her plan. She had to have his cooperation in order for it to succeed and he wasn’t nearly as defiant as she was. Harry was actually reasonable, at times, and then there was that martyr complex of his to contend with. If Ron wanted to work that to his advantage, he probably could and would.

“Or am I forbidden to speak to him as well?” he continued, just to add insult to injury.

“SOD OFF, YOU GREAT PRAT!”

“She’s rather temperamental, mate,” Ron said, cracking a smile for the first time since he’d discovered Harry hiding on the sofa. “You failed to mention that when we were talking about the bird you fancied. Not that I don’t appreciate the allure of a spirited woman,” he said, glancing at Hermione briefly before turning back to Harry to continue with his ribbing. “But are you sure that you want to saddle yourself with a girl like that when there are much more agreeable ones around?”

“Very funny,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes at Ron’s attempt to lighten the mood.
“That’s it?” Harry asked in disbelief. “You aren’t going to kill me?”

“Put you out of your misery, you mean?” Ron sniggered. “Is it that bad already?”

“Ron, stop it,” Hermione scolded, settling down on the arm of her husband’s chair and swatting him lightly on the arm.

“You’re such an arse,” Ginny grumbled.

“So, you and Ginny, eh?” Ron asked with a smirk. “That ought to be interesting.”

“I’m more interested in why you’d use the Lànain on Hermione’s dad,” Harry retorted, smiling ever so slightly himself.

“Aw, heard that did you?” the redhead groaned. “Talk about a bloody nightmare. First Mum invited them over for dinner and fails to mention it until the last minute and then I walked in on Hermione’s dad waking her up and …well, I sorta over reacted,” he admitted.

“There’s a surprise,” Ginny muttered, plopping down on the couch and crossing her arms in front of her chest to show her displeasure. She couldn’t exactly storm off to her room. Not without proving her brother right. Besides, she wanted to hear the rest of his story.

“It was an accident of course,” Ron continued, “but try explaining that to Mum. She went completely mental and forced me to explain the Lànain to both of Hermione’s parents.”

“So they know that you two are…” Harry started to ask.

“Married,” Hermione finished the question for him.

“Oh, yeah!” Ron answered for her. “Did I mention it was a nightmare?”

“Ron!” Hermione admonished.

“Well, it was. Given the choice between that or being tied to a chair and forced to watch those two snog the day away,” he said, tilting his head towards Harry and Ginny, “I’d take the snog.”

“Actually I spent most of the day in Ipswich with Dumbledore,” Harry admitted. “I guess your mum didn’t tell you,” he added, when Ron’s mouth fell open in surprise.

“Seriously?” Ron asked excitedly, leaning forward in his chair.

“You mean Dumbledore took you with him on some sort of mission for the Order?” Hermione asked incredulously.

“Nothing that exciting,” Harry sighed.

“But you were with Dumbledore,” Ron said, clearly not believing that it hadn’t been exciting.

“Yeah, recruiting some stodgy old professor to replace Tonks.”

“What happened to Tonks?” Hermione asked, her voice laced with concern.

“Recalled to active duty,” Ginny answered. “You didn’t see her at the Auror offices then?”

“No,” Ron replied. “Shacklebolt did all the questioning. If you could call it that,” he added. “Mostly he just told us what they thought happened and we agreed with him. Who are we to argue with
Aurors, right? So what’s the new DADA teacher like?”

“Apparently he’s a bit of a collector,” Harry replied. “So you better watch out,” he warned Hermione, who promptly wrinkled her brow in confusion. “According to Dumbledore he has a tendency to pick favorite students and gather them around him so he can claim that he’s responsible for their future successes or something. All he seemed to want to talk about when Dumbledore left us alone was the influential people he used to rub elbows with. That and my mum,” Harry added as an afterthought. “She must have made quite an impression, because he went on and on about how she was his favorite.”

“It must have been nice to talk about her with someone that knew her so well,” Hermione said.

“Not really,” Harry replied. “He didn’t tell me anything about her that I didn’t already know.”

“That’s too bad.”

“So what you’re saying is that he’s a pompous windbag?” Ron asked. “Oh well, I suppose it could be worse.”

“Did I forget to mention that he was head of Slytherin before he retired,” Harry said, knowing full well how Ron was going to react.

“What?” the redhead shouted, practically jumping out of his chair in outrage. “A Slytherin teaching us Defense Against the Dart Arts? Is Dumbledore mad? We can’t have a Slytherin teaching us a subject as important as Defense. This blows,” Ron stated loudly, but he settled back into his chair when no one else joined in his rant.

“Unfortunately there’s not much we can do about it,” Harry finally said. “He’s bound to be better than Umbridge.”

“That troll,” Ginny muttered.

“That’s something, right?” Harry asked, repressing the urge to smile again now that the world had righted itself. Ron was outraged, not with him but by the prospect of their favorite subject being taught by a Slytherin. Hermione was looking reproachful. And Ginny was … well, she was pouting a bit, but even that didn’t really bother him. Things were as they should be. He was with his friends; the people he cared about most in the world and there was nowhere else he’d rather be.

~FINI~

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